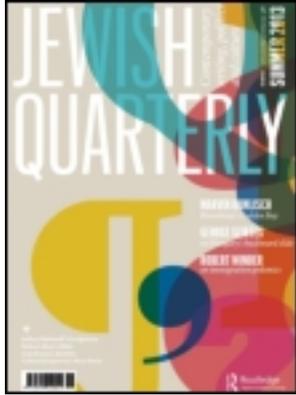


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SANITISATION TO SANITY: THE HOLOCAUST IN SOVIET CULTURE



First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938-1946

by *Jeremy Hicks*

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH PRESS • 2013

I Saw It: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah (with translation of major works)

by *Maxim D. Shrayer*

ACADEMIC STUDIES PRESS • 2013

The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe

by *Olga Gershenson*

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS • 2013

Review by *Anna Shternshis*

Between 2.5 and 3 million Jews lost their lives to the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, yet no museums have been built at the sites of destruction. Moreover, in official commemorations of the victims of the war, Jews were referred to as “peaceful Soviet citizens.” However, new academic studies—including those reviewed here—reveal that, despite strong pressure from party officials, Soviet Jewish intellectuals, especially war veterans, insisted on discussing the killing of Jews that took place in the Soviet Union.

In a situation when popular memory of the Holocaust was strong, and the opportunities for its expression limited, the artistic works that managed to navigate through censorship laid the foundations of late Soviet Jewish culture. Their authors constantly pushed the limits of acceptable language about Jewish suffering during the war. The significance of the works that they produced lies beyond their artistic value, for they represent the historical, social and cultural capital of Soviet Jewry.

In the past few years, scholars have started to turn their attention to Soviet-produced literature, photography and film on the topic of the Holocaust. Their motivation varies, but many of them believe that a close reading of these works will break the pattern of ascribing to Soviet Jews a “thin culture”—based on feeling, memory and shared experiences—as opposed to “thick culture”, manifested in language, religion, customs, foods, dress, music and ethnic neighbourhoods.

Recent studies by David Shneer and Harriet Murav have begun the conversation about treating such genres as Soviet Yiddish wartime writing and photography documenting the Holocaust as expressions of Soviet Jewish identity. The three books under review continue this line of thought. They analyse Soviet films on the Holocaust, dealing with works created from the 1930s to 1946 (Hicks) and from the 1930s to the 1980s (Gershenson); and the wartime works by the outspoken Jewish-Russian poet Ilya Selvinsky (Shrayer).

Jeremy Hicks contends that Soviet filmmakers “Sovietized” the story of the Holocaust with the aim of inciting vengeance. In order to strengthen their films’ universal appeal, these film-makers tended to downplay the Jewish nationality of victims. As a result, the western world regarded such films as Soviet propaganda. Even after the knowledge of the Holocaust became widespread, the propaganda content of early Soviet documentaries and films on the topic masked the significance of the information recorded in them. Hicks argues, too, that the films incorporated rare and valuable personal evidence of the atrocities, and his book seeks to identify and analyse these testimonies, from

both historical and aesthetic perspectives.

Chapter One focuses on *Professor Mamlok* (1938), a Soviet film adaptation of the play by the German communist writer Friedrich Wolf. Hicks does not spend much time discussing the content of the film, but jumps immediately into the story of its international reception, showing how it met with significant resistance in the West. Nevertheless, Hicks argues, this film may have saved thousands of lives, as Soviet Jews saw it as a warning about the Nazis' treatment of Jews.

¶

In his second chapter, Hicks turns to Soviet newsreels produced soon after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. It was in these that the term, "peaceful Soviet citizens", was introduced to identify Jewish victims. Even when showing dead victims, the camera would be angled in such a way as to conceal as much as possible their yellow bands (which identified them as Jews). The device of presenting Jewish victims as indistinguishable from other civilians continued throughout Soviet newsreel coverage of the war, including the Holocaust.

Similarly, in another film considered by Hicks—the Oscar winning documentary, *Defeat of the Germans near Moscow* (1943)—the accounts of atrocities against civilians, graphically illustrated with still shots of corpses, did not mention the ethnicity of the victims. Hicks also examines rare feature films that included Jewish characters, such as the Alma-Ata Film Studio-produced *A Priceless Head* (1942), which tells the story of a Polish woman's dilemma over whether or not to betray a Jewish anti-Fascist for food. Soviet critics did not believe that it was possible for a mother to choose to save the life of a child over the common good, and thus deemed the film "non-believable". Jeremy Hicks agrees with Ilya Altman, who suggests that Jews among the audiences for such films learned from them that Nazis did target Jews, and also that Jews were not supposed to speak about it.

This was the reason, perhaps, why the David Bergelson's script, *I Want To Live*, never made it to the screen, as its subject was life on a Jewish collective farm during Nazi occupation. Another film, *Secretary of the Regional Party Committee*, removed the Jewish characters, irrespective of the fact that it damaged the plot. Most films that included story-lines about wartime violence said nothing about the plight of Jews. Even when Aleksandr Dovzhenko, the godfather of the Soviet cinema, set out to portray crimes against civilians, Jews among them, he was unable to break the censorship rules. In his famous, *The Battle for Our Soviet Ukraine* (1943), he showed Drobitsky Yar, the massacre site near Kharkov where 14,000 people (mostly Jews) were shot, but did not identify the victims as Jews.

The lack of identification of the mass graves as Jewish led western viewers to associate the

Holocaust with Polish concentration camps and not with the Holocaust by bullets that took place in the Soviet Union. Even in the cinematic depictions of the liberations of Majdanek and Auschwitz, to which Hicks devotes a chapter, the fact that the victims were Jewish was deliberately erased. As the Cold War unfolded, these Soviet films became doomed to obscurity as the American story of the Holocaust gained momentum.

One question Hicks does not address in this otherwise solid study is why the identification of Jews as Jews would weaken the Soviet vengeance propaganda. Could it have been that the German antisemitic policies during the invasion, including that of exterminating Jews, found popular support, and needed to be counteracted by presenting victims as Soviet citizens, rather than Jews? After 1943, highlighting Jewish victims could potentially have undermined the gathering strength of, and support for, the Soviet anti-German response. Overall, it is clear that early Soviet films featuring the Shoah were not concerned with the commemoration of victims.

Maxim Shrayer's study of Ilya Selvinsky's Holocaust poetry reveals that Selvinsky had quite a different agenda. Born in Crimea to a Krymchak (Crimean Jewish) family, Selvinsky was an accomplished poet and writer who made his name before the war, and was shocked to see his home-town destroyed, and dead Jews (barely) buried in a ditch in the village of Bagerovo, near Kerch.

In response to seeing the bodies of around seven thousand people, many women and children among them, who had been shot in cold blood, he wrote the poem, *I Saw It*. Published in 1942 in a major Soviet newspaper and then widely circulated in other Soviet media, the poem became one of the first to condemn Nazi atrocities against Jewish civilians. Like the cinematographers described by Hicks, Selvinsky adhered to a number of rules in portraying Jewish victims. First, he listed them among other nationalities, especially Russians, who were killed. Second, he emphasised their humanity, the universal nature of their suffering, rather than the reason for their slaughter. But he subtly broke the rules by managing to indicate that Jewish civilians were killed at a greater rate than non-Jews.

In a beautifully written chapter, Shrayer reconstructs the process of creating *I Saw It*, complete with memoirs by Selvinsky himself, his contemporaries, his friends and family members. Shrayer also provides a close textual reading of the poem, noting the influences of Pushkin, Pasternak and biblical texts and its own status as a masterpiece. But far from receiving praise or public acknowledgement, Selvinsky was punished. He found himself being increasingly isolated, both from battle-fronts and from his colleagues. In desperation, he composed a number of poems glorifying Stalin—work that Shrayer refers to as representing the low point in

'In order to strengthen their films' universal appeal, these film-makers tended to downplay the Jewish nationality of victims'

Selvinsky's career.

After Stalin's death, Selvinsky remained in obscurity. His contemporaries, including the Soviet poet Boris Slutsky, condemned him for attacking Pasternak and glorifying Stalin. His Shoah poetry went unnoticed in the West in the same way that Soviet Holocaust newsreels were neglected. He is too Soviet for the West, and too Jewish for the Soviet Union.

In order to write Selvinsky's story, Shroyer traveled to Krym, examined the sites (many still do not have memorials noting the Jewish victims), met Selvinsky's daughter and examined archives. As a result, he has drawn a complex, tragic portrait of a remarkably talented person, who misunderstood the nature of the Soviet power by believing that he belonged to the Soviet family. Soviet rejection of the need to acknowledge the Jewish dead, along with the decision to marginalise him, came as a surprise, and undermined him professionally and personally. Selvinsky never achieved the recognition that he deserved during his lifetime. Now, however, thanks to the thorough research and fine work of Maxim Shroyer—who also translated and published the full texts of Selvinsky's poems—Selvinsky's work is now firmly established within the canon of Holocaust literature.



Of the three books under review, Olga Gershenson's *The Phantom Holocaust* is the most ambitious in scope, most dramatic, and most connected to the present. At times, it reads like a captivating film script, with twists and turns, dramatic reunions, and unexpected happy endings. Most of these flow from Gershenson's recovery of a buried script of the 1961 film, *Gott mit unz*, as well as finding its author, Grigory Kanovich, and, most astonishingly, a young producer willing to give the script a new life.

Her quest to discover released and non-released Soviet movies about the Holocaust revealed that the inclusion of a "Jewish theme" in a Soviet film—even if the scene is cut out later—had devastating consequences for the director. Like Hicks, Gershenson begins her story in the 1930s, with the early anti-Fascist Soviet films produced in the Moscow Film studio. Also like Hicks, she focuses on *Professor Mamlok* but, unlike Hicks, pays very close attention to the movie's scenes and characters. Gershenson argues that the film criticised Soviet realities of the Great Terror to the same extent (if not more) as it did German antisemitism, yet she echoes Hicks's view that the film might have been successful in warning Soviet Jews about the dangers of the German policies.

Gershenson also discusses *Oppenheim Family*, a film starring Solomon Mikhoels, a star of the Moscow State Yiddish theatre. Although

this is an anti-Fascist film, Mikhoels portrays a stereotypically negative Jewish character who collaborates with the Fascist regime. In her analysis of Jewish images in early Soviet films, Gershenson talks of the "sanitised" depiction of Jews in these films, their Jewishness signalled by profession, education, (usually bespectacled) appearance and humanism.

During the early 1960s, what seemed to be sanitised in the 1930s becomes the only possible expression of Jewish culture. Gershenson delights in a few exceptions, such as *You are Not an Orphan* (1962) produced by the Uzbek Film Studio, and *Ordinary Fascism* (1965), directed by Mikhail Romm. Three hours long, the latter chronicles instances of Nazi destruction and does not avoid Jewish subject matter. Despite this, it was granted a release. The story of how this was possible involves spies, intrigues, clever manipulation and a little luck. It uncovers the mechanisms of the Soviet censorship machine, and outlines the limitations of its powers. It also testifies to Gershenson's tremendous powers of research.

As for Grigory Kanovich and *Gott mit unz*, Gershenson tracks down the author in Israel, interviews him in Lithuania and finds a filmmaker to produce the film in present-day Moscow. *Stalemate*, another script written for the Lithuanian film studio, represents another happy ending. Gershenson describes in detail how screen-writers managed to negotiate their way through the mazes of censorship.

She does not idealise her subjects and repeatedly acknowledges that the skills of an archeologist are required to discern the Jewish motifs in some films. Some who depicted Jewish heroism did not make their characters Jewish, even in a "sanitised" way. One such, the writer and director Sergei Kolosov, insisted in an interview in 2008 that characters could be accurately rendered on screen without being portrayed as Jews. Gershenson has performed a great service by searching out the traces of Jewish characters in Soviet war films—her "phantoms"—and rescuing the films themselves from obscurity.

Taken together, these three books give cause for optimism. They all leave room for further research, in essence ensuring the future of the field of Soviet Jewish studies. They might also help to ensure that Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish identity will no longer be called "thin" and that the intellectuals who risked everything to tell the truth about the destruction of Jews in the Soviet Union will be remembered as courageous leaders rather than "sanitised" Jews. —JQ

Anna Shternshis is the Al and Malka Green Professor of Yiddish Studies, University of Toronto. She is the author of 'Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923 - 1939' (2006) and 'Jewish Daily Life under Stalin: Living, Loving and Working in the Soviet Union' (forthcoming).

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