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From Rumour to Holocaust Icon

*The Historical Trajectories
of the Holocaust Soap Myth¹*

Abstract

This article explores the historical trajectory of the Holocaust soap myth – one of the most persistent, controversial, and symbolically loaded atrocity narratives to emerge from the Second World War. Drawing on recent scholarship and primary sources, it traces the legend’s genealogy from its roots in World War I propaganda to its global diffusion as wartime rumour and propaganda after the Holocaust, up to the Nuremberg Trials. The central claim – that the Nazis produced soap from the bodies of murdered Jews – proved both factually dubious and emotionally powerful, shaping post-war remembrance, denial, and antisemitic folklore in complex ways. Using the lens of interpretive anthropology and discourse analysis, the article argues that the soap legend must be understood not simply in terms of whether it was true or false but rather as a shifting cultural form. It functioned as a response to the disappearance of the dead, a vessel for unresolved grief, a potent symbol of industrialised murder, and, in recent decades, a target of hate speech. By mapping its evolving meanings, this study offers new insight into how atrocity stories, rumours circulate, how myths can endure.

In memory of P. Gy.

On 4 April 2025, a peculiar incident occurred on a quiet afternoon in Rakamaz, a small town in northeastern Hungary, which before the Holocaust had a thriving Jewish community and has remained an important pilgrimage destination.² In front of the grocery store, activists from the recently established opposition party had set up a booth as part of their “Voice of the Nation” referendum campaign. Their presence, however, was met with sudden hostility. Without warning, a woman drove her car slowly but steadily into the booth, pushing it aside. In a video recording posted online, we can hear a brief but revealing exchange between the driver and one of the activists: “What was that? Are you try-

1 This paper forms part of my postdoctoral project, supported generously by the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies and currently by the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah. The project aims to produce a comprehensive, multidisciplinary monograph on this exceptionally complex historical phenomenon. Some of the aspects addressed in this paper will be developed further and published at a later stage.

2 Telex. “Akkor szappan lenne belőled’ – mondta a Fidesz-szimpatizáns, majd autójával eltolta a Tiszások asztalát”, *Telex*, 4 April 2025, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2025/04/04/akkor-szappan-lenne-beloled-mondta-a-fidesz-szimpatizans-majd-autojaval-eltolta-a-tizasok-asztalat>.

ing to run me over?” asks the activist. The woman responded, “If I wanted to, you’d be soap already!”³ This form of political action, on both the physical and verbal level, was not innocent; the latter invoked the so-called soap myth, whereby representatives of the canvassing political party were implicitly and maliciously labeled as Jewish. This surprising contemporary example of the “soap myth” highlights its disturbing prevalence in antisemitic speech and folklore in Hungary. However, this encounter was not an isolated case. Similar incidents have been repeatedly documented since the post-war period,⁴ forming part of a broader pattern that has appeared in many other countries as well.⁵ This raises the question of how such a meaning became attached to “soap”, and where this association originated.

The roots of these shocking cases reach back into the discursive and symbolic legacies of a First World War atrocity propaganda publication called the “German Corpse Factory” and its *resurgent popularity* after the war. However, the soap myth is more directly linked to the Second World War and the Holocaust, when rumours, hearsay, and even jokes circulated about the machinery of Nazi extermination.⁶ One of the most enduring rumours associated with the soap myth circulated in German-occupied territories during the war, particularly from 1942, the beginning of the Final Solution, onward. As a collective phenomenon, the claims provoked fear and horror among the persecuted Jewry and the occupied populations. Those claims soon reached the public sphere of the Allied countries and continued to unsettle wider audiences in the post-World War II period as well.

It first emerged that the German industry was producing soap from the corpses (fat) of murdered Jews. Among the persecuted, a belief later emerged that soaps bearing the inscription “RIF” stood for “pure Jewish fat” (*Reines Israelitisches Fett* or *Reines Jüdisches Fett*), which served as proof of the soap’s alleged origins. This interpretation, however, was based on a misunderstanding.

3 The growing interest in former Jewish sites led to increased visits to tzaddik tombs, creating tensions with the locals due to the emerging presence of Orthodox Jewry. Nikolett Drotár and Gábor Kozma, “A New Element of Tourism in North-Eastern Part of Hungary – Steps to Attract Jewish Pilgrims to Tokaj-Hegyalja Region”, *Folia Geographica* 63, no. 1 (2021): 19–39.

4 “Azt hitte 1944-et írunk ...” *Világ*, 28 August 1948, 4; Gábor Szántó T. “Jog, hogyha van ...” (A Bodrogi-dosszié). I. rész”, *Szombat*, 1 January 1990, 13–14.

5 Similar incidents have been documented in Austria, Argentina, and Germany. In Austria, soap was in many cases sent to Simon Wiesenthal as a direct and menacing antisemitic threat. In Argentina in the 2000s, football fans targeted a club stereotypically labeled as “Jewish”, throwing bars of soap at players entering the pitch. Raanan Rein, “Fútbol, etnicidad y otredad: el Club Atlético Atlanta de Buenos Aires”, *Iberoamericana* 6 (2013): 72–73; Isabella Fischli, “Das Wiener Wiesenthal Institut für Holocaust-Studien – eine Chance für Österreichs schwierigen Gang in die Eigene Geschichte”. *Die Gemeinde*, 1 August 2006, 51.; SWA/1/1/2404/01/Löhr Wolfgang Adolf.

6 Lawrence Douglas, “The Shrunken Head of Buchenwald: Icons of Atrocity at Nuremberg”, *Representations* 63 (1998): 39–64; Monika Tomkiewicz and Piotr Semków, *Soap from Human Fat: The Case of Professor Spinner*, trans. Garth James Burge and Monika Sarnowska-Burge (Róža Wiatrów, 2013); Mark Jacobson, *The Lampshade: A Holocaust Detective Story from Buchenwald to New Orleans* (Simon & Schuster, 2011); Willem de Haan, *Tango of Death: The Creation of a Holocaust Legend* (Brill, 2022).

In fact, the acronym referred to the Reichsstelle für Industrielle Fettversorgung (Reich Office for Industrial Fat Supply), a Nazi economic administration agency established in 1934.⁷ Nonetheless, the deportees often treated these soaps as if they contained the remains of the persecuted and took soaps from the camps or other sites and kept or donated them to their Jewish communities after the war. Post-war Jewish communities, particularly in Hungary and Romania – as well as other countries, also collected soaps, which they buried in cemeteries ritually as an early form of remembrance for the victims.⁸

Ultimately, Holocaust survivors and their descendants played an important role in preserving the memory of the soaps.⁹ However, the story has moved beyond the memory of groups of survivors. The origin of the “soap” gained worldwide notoriety during a post-war investigation in Poland, and then at the Nuremberg trials against Nazi war criminals – via the journalists and correspondents from all over the world who were there reporting on the trial. The myth spread widely in the post-war years and resurfaced from time to time during the Cold War era – for example, in testimony hearings at the Eichmann trial – and various forms of cultural representation have also played a significant role in the broader recognition and persistence of the soap myth (in wide range of depictions from popular art, such as comics, to its appearance in literary texts, and finally to the myth’s appearance in historical exhibitions and artistic depictions of the soaps).

Up to the present, the historiography of the “soap myth” – shaped decisively by Joachim Neander – has focused primarily on tracing the historical origins of the “soap myth”, concentrating on specific episodes in its development and seeking to debunk the legend.¹⁰ One of the aims was to clarify the basis of the legend and

7 It was responsible for supervising the production and distribution of fats and oils throughout the Reich, and its products were promoted as technological innovations of the regime. See Anne, Berg: *Empire of Rags and Bone* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 161–183.

8 Survivors who emigrated also held symbolic burials in Israel, the United States, and other countries. While many survivors preserved the soap privately, some later donated it to Holocaust or Jewish museums. Joachim Neander, “Symbolically Burying the Six Million: Post-War Soap Burial in Romania, Bulgaria and Brazil”, *Human Remains and Violence* 2, no. 1 (2016): 23–40.

9 It is also illustrated by numerous testimonies and oral history interviews. See for example the Video History Archives – Shoah Foundation or the Fortunoff Video Archive. But it also resurfaced in post-war testimonies such as in the collection of the Hungarian Jewish relief organisation DEGOB (National Committee for Attending Deportees).

10 Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret* (Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 82, 219; Ralph Klein, “Der Wille zur Reinheit: Antisemitismus und hygienischer Furor”, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 7 (2002): 602–621; Joachim Neander, “The Danzig Soap Case: Facts and Legends around ‘Professor Spanner’ and the Danzig Anatomic Institute 1944–1945”, *German Studies Review* 1 (2006): 63–86; Joachim Neander, “Seife aus Judenfett: Zur Wirkungsgeschichte einer zeitgenössischen Sage”, *Fabula* 46 (2005): 241–256; Joachim Neander, “Symbolically Burying the Six Million: Post-War Soap Burial in Romania, Bulgaria and Brazil”, *Human Remains and Violence* 1 (2016): 23–40; Olga Kartashova, “The Soap Myth of the Holocaust: The Old Story and The New Speculations”, ed. Menahems Barkahans (Shamir Society, 2016), 234–244; Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (Plume, 1994); Daniel Panneton, “The Soap Myth: A Holocaust Artifact in a Post-Truth Era”, *Literary Review of Canada* 4 (2019), accessed 18 February 2023, <https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2019/05/the-soap-myth>.

thereby regain authority over the discourse, as the myth became a key reference point for Holocaust revisionism and denial in various countries (France, Great Britain, the United States). Nevertheless, despite post-war laboratory tests confirming that the RIF soaps contained no human remains, and despite being challenged by expert historians,¹¹ the myth continued to “write itself forward”. Many relied and continue to rely on its supposed factuality across national, generational, and cultural boundaries – far beyond the communities directly affected by the Holocaust. In this way, the soap (narrative) eventually became, to use Oren Baruch Stier’s term, one of the icons of the Holocaust.¹²

The aim of this article is not to verify the myth’s truth or falsehood; it is to uncover the sociocultural meaning and discursive function it held in changing historical contexts and among different agents – above all, as a collective response to the tragedy of the Second World War and the Holocaust. For this reason, the article uses approaches from rumour theory, historical anthropology, Holocaust Studies, and beyond, engaging with existing scholarship on the subject. It draws – whenever possible – on contemporaneous sources, albeit these are scattered both geographically and in terms of their type – official documents, newspaper reports, and ego-documents – in order to reconstruct the “virality” and migration of the rumour during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. Given the very nature and diffusion of the myth, however, such a historical reconstruction can never be entirely complete.¹³

Ultimately, the focus on the rumour and “myth” of the soap also forms part of a broader research agenda concerned with what *could* have been known about the extermination process during the war, and how meaning was constructed and perceived by various agents, primarily those being persecuted, but also by groups in Allied countries trying to navigate the “fog of war”.¹⁴ Among

11 Yehuda Bauer, “On the Soap Allegations”, *Jerusalem Post*, 9 May 1990.

12 Oren Baruch Stier defines Holocaust icons as “symbols that have come to represent the Holocaust in encapsulated form – those that summarise complex narratives of the Shoah, simplifying, condensing, and distilling these narratives and producing meanings for cultural consumption: I call these symbols Holocaust icons”. Oren Baruch Stier, *Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 2.

13 Although the soap myth is a modern construct, it is no exaggeration to suggest that some of its elements have archaic or folk origins and are rooted in the popular antisemitic imagination. These ancient, ritualistic, and demonising ideas were partly incorporated into the modern and later Nazi racist fantasy world, contributing to the formation and spread of the myth. In the case of popular antisemitic stereotypes, the role of hygiene and physical contamination associated with the Jewish body is particularly prominent, as Andrei Oișteanu details in his book *Inventing the Jew: Antisemitic Stereotypes in Romanian and Other Central-East European Cultures* (University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 66–70. Alain Dundes also examines this issue in two of his books, adopting a folkloristic and psychoanalytical approach: *From Game to War and Other Psychoanalytic Essays on Folklore* (University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 92–115; and *Life Is Like a Chicken Coop Ladder: A Study of German National Character Through Folklore* (Wayne State University Press, 1984), 126–129.

14 Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret*; Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* (Michael Joseph, 1981); Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1994); Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews* (Harvard University Press, 2013); Michael Fleming, *Auschwitz, the Allies and Censorship of the Holocaust* (Cambridge

these groups, false and distorted information circulated intentionally and unintentionally. Regarding knowledge about the Nazi extermination of Jews during the war – its production, circulation, and limits – hearsay, rumour, and the purported “fact” of the soap story functioned as ways of describing and imagining the machinery of extermination.

This article draws on the historical anthropology tradition inspired by Clifford Geertz.¹⁵ The Geertzian approach views culture as a system structured by its own internal symbolic logic and coherence. This framework is particularly applicable given that the “soap rumour” and the “myth” was a collective phenomenon (“collective imagination”, as Marc Bloch called it)¹⁶ that was interpreted – and often revised (denied) – in different ways by various agents simultaneously. Some of these agents can be identified – journalists, historians, officials, and prosecutors. However, the principal creators and disseminators of the narrative – everyday rumourmongers – remained largely unknown, be they persecuted individuals who recorded the rumours in their ego documents or anonymous actors who picked up on the rumour. In this regard, Hans Joachim Neubauer’s characterisation of the nature of rumour is illuminating: “Rumours are paradoxical. ... Yet a rumour is also an up-to-date piece of information that circulates in a group in the medium of hearsay or some other, related form of communication; what everyone says is not necessarily a rumour.” Neubauer concludes, “Rumours are quotations with a loophole: it is impossible to determine who is being quoted or who originally set them in motion.”¹⁷

In addition, the collective meaning-making aspect of the soap “myth” is not the only relevant issue; its non-linear, partly cyclical transformations over time is also important as it moves from rumour to propaganda, to purported “historical fact”, and ultimately to “myth”. Accordingly, this article is also influenced by the microhistory of historical myths, as it examines the various historical and semantic layers of the “myth” – its “morphology” – as understood by Carlo Ginzburg.¹⁸ This includes the story’s pos-

University Press, 2014); Zohar Segev, *The World Jewish Congress during the Holocaust* (De Gruyter, 2014); Michael Fleming, “Disseminating News of the Holocaust: Polish Jewish Representatives and Journalists”, *Zeszyty Naukowe PUNO* 5 (2017): 73–91.

15 Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”, in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973), 3–30; Marshall Sahlins, *The Island of History* (The University of Chicago Press 1985), 143–156; Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (Basic Books, 2009), 13–16. Dan Stone, “Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History”, *Dapim: Studies on the Shoah* 1 (2009): 53.

16 Marc Bloch, “Reflections of a Historian on the False News of the War”, trans. James P. Holoka, *Michigan War Studies Review* 7 (2013), 4.

17 Hans Joachim Neubauer, *The Rumor: A Cultural History*, trans. Christian Braun (Free Association Press, 1999), 3.

18 See Carlo Ginzburg, “Medals and Shells: On Morphology and History, Once Again”, *Critical Inquiry* 2 (2019): 380–395; Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), vii–xx; Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath*. Trans. Raymond Rosenthal (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 266–267.

sible origins in the First World War (the so-called “German Corpse Factory”), its resurgence during the Second World War (“soap made from Jewish fat”), and its “universal version” in the form of “human soap” during the Nuremberg Trials – a pivotal moment in the dissemination of the myth and in the long-term formation of its memory.

Historical Traces of the Myth: The British “German Corpse Factory”

In folktales and literary works, the idea of “turning someone into soap” persisted, evoking horrific fantasies of primordial punishment, such as sinners being boiled in a cauldron – a familiar motif from depictions of hell. However, the idea of using corpses for industrial purposes became closely associated with modernisation and mechanised killing.¹⁹ The most important historical precedent of the soap myth dates back to the First World War in the form of the “German Corpse Factory”, which has already been analysed as an emblematic case in numerous studies of wartime propaganda.²⁰ The war transformed the nature and scale of warfare and marked the emergence of modern wartime propaganda as a significant force. On both sides of the trenches, propaganda frequently emphasised real or imagined enemy atrocities, producing what came to be known as “atrocities stories”.²¹ Accordingly, from the outset of the war, rumours began to circulate widely in Britain that the German military leadership was desecrating its own dead by transporting corpses in bundles and burning them in mass incinerators to hide the true scale of the casualties.

Among these rumours, the “corpse factory” stood out. It originated from a misunderstanding. The German newspaper *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* used the term “*Kadaververwertungsanstalt*”, which is commonly found in military jargon and refers to a processing facility for deceased animals behind the front line. However, the British press misinterpreted this term, introducing the concept of the “German Corpse Factory”. First, in April 1917, *The Times* (London) picked up on this and relayed it to the British public, which gave rise to a series of sensational articles – especially in newspapers owned by media magnate Lord Northcliffe. According to these reports, the Germans not only showed indifference to their soldiers’ lives on the battlefield but also failed to grant them

19 We could mention here, for example, economic historian Karl Polanyi’s metaphor for the industrial revolution, which shattered previous ways of life and “ground people into a mass”, i.e., the analogy of the “Satanic mill”. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Beacon Press, 2001), 33–42.

20 Stephan Badsey, *The German Corpse Factory: A Study in First World War Propaganda* (Heliion & Company, 2019); Joachim Neander, *The German Corpse Factory: The Master Hoax of British Propaganda in the First World War* (Universaar, 2013); Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

21 Celia M. Kingsbury, *For Home and Country: World War I Propaganda on the Home Front* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 67.

dignity in death. This was a violation of both the laws of war and treaties and fundamental human values. Simultaneously, it served to reinforce the common propaganda image of Germans as “Beasty Huns”.²²

In short, the story of the corpse factory became an atrocity story. Yet according to Stephan Badsey – contrary to scholars like Joachim Neander – the story was not created by the British Ministry of Information. Rather, it emerged as a kind of urban myth sustained solely by Lord Northcliffe’s media outlets. The propaganda campaign ended even before the war did. However, without its taboo-breaking character and the brutal conditions of trench warfare on the Western Front – particularly in Belgium – the story would likely not have stood out among other atrocity reports.

In any case, the story backfired. The allegations reached the German authorities, who responded with counter-propaganda, claiming that the Allies were fabricating stories about the German people in order to incite hatred. After Germany’s defeat, this counter-narrative took on a new life: it was used to delegitimise the “unjust” peace treaty, particularly the “shameful” clause that required Germany to pay reparations for the atrocities committed by its army against Belgian soldiers and civilians. Consequently, for many Germans, the corpse factory story became a symbol of Allied hypocrisy, and was invoked to cast doubt on other allegations of German war crimes. This revisionist logic was simple: if the corpse factory was a lie, so were the rest of the charges. This same reasoning, based on the legal principle *Falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*, later appeared in works and politics centered on Holocaust denial.

British propaganda efforts had not only been subject to criticism stemming from Germany but also in Britain itself, but for different reasons – political as well as emotional – as it was viewed as an obstacle to reconciliation after a devastating war (only in 1925 was the falsity of the accusation acknowledged by British officials).²³ One of the most vocal critics of wartime propaganda was British politician Arthur Ponsonby, who devoted a full chapter to the myth in his influential book *Falsehood in War-Time* (1928). The book was a great success and was translated into many languages, and it was especially well received in Germany, where it later served as anti-Allied propaganda.²⁴ The emerging public distrust toward “atrocity propaganda”, combined with the government’s cautious response to the new atrocities had far-reaching consequences on the eve of World War II. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this false story reached the public of the countries directly involved in the war, as well as in other

22 M. L. Sanders and Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War, 1914–1918* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), 62.

23 Badsey, *The German Corpse Factory*, 309.

24 Arthur Ponsonby, *Falsehood in War-Time: Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated Throughout the Nations During the Great War* (George Allen & Unwin, 1928), 102–114.

countries affected by the conflict. It remained present in the public imagination, stretching from the interwar period to the outbreak of the new world war. Even if it could have been forgotten, German and later Nazi propaganda took pains to ensure it was not.

The Two Faces of “Atrocity Propaganda” at the Onset of War

On the eve of the Second World War, British authorities hesitated to highlight Nazi atrocities against Jews, fearing it might provoke excessive sympathy or appear politically biased, as David Cesarani noted.²⁵ Officials also distrusted Jewish sources, viewing their reports as exaggerated – a stance closely linked to British imperial interests and the political situation in Palestine. Following the Arab revolt in Palestine (1936–1939), Britain issued a White Paper in May 1939 severely restricting Jewish immigration for five years, regulating land transfers, and proposing an independent Palestinian state within a decade. In October 1939, the British government issued another type of White Paper as part of its anti-German propaganda campaign. While it referenced concentration camps and briefly acknowledged the suffering of Polish Jews, officials deliberately downplayed this latter aspect. As Tony Kushner notes in *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination*, the British government feared that highlighting Jewish suffering might provoke public skepticism, recalling the discredited “atrocity propaganda” of World War I.²⁶ Joanne Reilly likewise argues that the lingering impact of the “corpse factory” atrocity story led many to dismiss early reports of Nazi crimes as exaggerated.²⁷

As the war progressed from 1942 onward, the increasing number of reports about Jewish persecution reaching the British Foreign Office were also met with skepticism. Reports such as the Riegner Telegram, transmitted by the World Jewish Congress, along with information from other sources, were explicitly treated with caution (this skepticism was one of the reasons the telegram’s contents were disseminated first in the United States). As a senior officer of the Foreign Office remarked regarding the soap rumour, “until corroborative evidence is forthcoming, I think it should be treated with the greatest reserve. (Almost a similar report has been quoted in books written about the last war).”²⁸ Such comparisons to First World War atrocity propaganda again fos-

25 David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of Jews 1933–1949* (St. Martin’s Press, 2016), 287–293.

26 Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1994), 123–127.

27 Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp* (Routledge, 1998), 53–55.

28 John P. Fox, “The Jewish Factor in British War Crimes Policy in 1942”, *The English Historical Review* 362 (1977): 94.

tered a climate in which new information was systematically discounted. In this context, the discrediting of Holocaust-related reports – combined with broader patterns of wartime skepticism – contributed decisively to the failure to grasp the scale of mass murder unfolding in German-occupied territories from 1939 onward. Fearing incredulity, reality itself became somehow invisible.

Meanwhile, at the outset of the Second World War, the Nazi regime's primary enemy was Great Britain. Alongside the aerial war and strategic bombings – including the civilian terror campaign known as the Blitz – Joseph Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda waged an intense propaganda war aimed at demoralising the British population and discrediting the British Broadcasting Company.²⁹ According to Ralph Klein and Joachim Neander, it was as part of this propaganda war that the First World War “German Corpse Factory” narrative was reframed as the story of a “Human Soap Factory”, articulated in strikingly naturalistic and precise terms as the production of “soap from corpse fat”.³⁰ This newly rearticulated propaganda possibly appeared first in the December 1939 edition of the *Westdeutscher Beobachter*, the Nazi Party's regional newspaper, in an article titled “Hun Soap from Corpse Fat: How Britain Created Hatred and Disgust Toward Germany during the World War”. The author of the article accused the British of having fabricated the earlier soap story to stir up anti-German sentiment.³¹ As the war continued, the motif periodically resurfaced in the Axis press, where conspiratorial rhetoric portrayed Allied atrocity claims as Jewish fabrications or directly contested accusations produced by the Allied press.³² This recycled propaganda also found its way into Nazi-era cinema, for example, in a propaganda film directed by Phil Jutzi (known for his first 1931 adaptation of Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*).

After the Nazi takeover, Jutzi directed several propaganda films including *Schwätzer oder Kerle?* in 1941. The film opens with a decadent banquet scene while a housemaid and a Hitler Youth boy whisper in the hallway about the country's current peril. Then it cuts to a smoky London office, where a BBC staff member confronts a group of people, criticising them for failing to produce effective anti-Nazi propaganda despite generous funding. As a reaction to the accusation, the scene ends with a cynical exchange among them: “Let's just tell them something new every day until they go mad. Best if they make soap from corpses and shoot Nazi leaders. Stop it with the old nonsense, it's all been done already.

29 Graham Smyth, “Nazi ‘Black’ Propaganda to Britain: Secret Radio Stations and British Renegades”, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 2 (2024): 261–281.

30 Klein, “Der Wille zur Reinheit”, 613.

31 “Hunnen-Seife aus Leichenfett. Wie England im Weltkrieg Haß und Abscheu gegen Deutschland erzeugte ...”, *Westdeutscher Beobachter*, 17 December 1939, quoted in Klein, “Der Wille zur Reinheit”, 613; Neander, *The German Corpse Factory* (Universaar, 2019), 311.

32 “Unverschämte Greuellügen”, *Vorarlberger Volksbote*, 29 January 1941.

No one believes us. That's why we need to come up with something new." The BBC propagandists – portrayed in antisemitic visual codes – are unmistakably “Jewish”.³³ The film thus presents the soap narrative, among other propaganda, as a *Jewish fabrication* devised by émigrés collaborating with the British to defame Germany. Horribly, this scene was filmed in 1941, just as the Nazis were launching real genocidal campaigns across Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltics – what Patrick Desbois later termed the “Holocaust by Bullets”. The film was ultimately swept away by history and was never released. Presumably, it contained a reference to the alliance between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, which seemed to be on the verge of collapse at the very moment the film was produced due to the German military offensive launched against the Soviets on 22 June 1941.

The Soap Rumor in the Context of the Final Solution

With the onset of the Final Solution in the spring of 1942 – when mass extermination began in the death camps – various types of rumours circulated in the German-occupied territories concerning the machinery of Nazi extermination. At a time when precise knowledge about the operation of gas chambers and crematoria was not yet fully established even among key actors in the Nazi hierarchy, the SS simultaneously manipulated and concealed information from both the persecuted and the outside world (sensitive to public opinion, there was also a fight against rumours considered “horror propaganda” [*Gräuelpropaganda*], a term heavily used in World War I to refer to the Lord Northcliff publications).³⁴ Among the information circulating was the rumour claiming that the Nazi regime was producing soap from the corpses of murdered Jews, thereby modifying the earlier propaganda narrative and giving it new meaning. However, alongside other beliefs, the rumour escaped from Nazi-occupied territories and came to the attention of Allied publicists. In the course of its transnational circulation, it was repeatedly reinterpreted and mediated by diverse actors – from the perpetrators and persecuted to Allied organisations and the Soviet press – via various intermediaries such as escaped survivors, members of the Polish underground, and even a German industrialist. However, what follows is not intended as a complete history of the rumour's trajectory under German occupation, and such a reconstruction would be, in any case, impossible – since we can only trace the story through the surviving contemporaneous sources.

33 Jeffrey Harff, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 50–92.

34 Amos Goldberg, “Rumor Culture among Warsaw Jews under Nazi Occupation: A World of Catastrophe Reenchanted”, *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 3 (2016): 91–125; Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (Pan Books, 2000), 49, 394.

Among the early documented references to the soap rumour was a German security report from Žilina.³⁵ The Slovak city was an important hub in the deportation of Slovak Jewry in fascist Slovakia helmed by Jozef Tiso. The recorded statements that the German Security Service (SD) attributed to a local lawyer and politician in the Slovak State, Dr Robert Kubiš.³⁶ This occurred when the concentration camp in Žilina was preparing for the deportation of Slovak Jewry, which took place between 27 March 1942 and 15 June 1942 – during the same period mass exterminations were taking place in Chełmno and in Bełżec, not far from Soviet territory.³⁷ The SD secret report addressed the wave of conversions among Slovak Jewry and it suggested that these conversions were driven by growing fears of deportation to Ukraine – a possibility that, according to the report, was already widely known among Jews at the time. The report attributed the spread of deportation rumours also to local actors, particularly Robert Kubis, who criticised the deportations. It then concluded in a markedly malicious tone: “The latter wept like a small child over the cruel fate that was to befall the Jews, and declared that in Ukraine soap was being boiled from the fat Jews, while the thin Jews were being turned into artificial fertilizer.”³⁸ This appears to be the first documented account of the soap rumour in which deported Jews were identified as the victims of the alleged production of soap.³⁹ It should also be noted that this rumour may have been disseminated by the perpetrators themselves; however, no direct evidence from contemporaneous sources confirms this.

While such reports capture the rumour from the perspective of the authorities, its circulation was even more widespread among the persecuted populations, particularly in the ghettos of occupied Poland, where a once-thriving literary culture had been decimated and access to reliable information was dramatically constrained, leaving oral transmission as the primary means of communication.⁴⁰ In the seminal article by Amos Goldberg focusing on the rumour culture of the Warsaw ghetto, he notes that “ru-

35 Vanda Rajcan, “Žilina”, in Geoffrey P. Megargee and Joseph Robert White, eds., *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, vol. 3 (Indiana University Press, 2025), 889.

36 See more on Robert Kubis: Mariana Hausleitner, Souzana Hazan, Barbara Hutzelmann, *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945. Band 13: Slowakei, Rumänien, Bulgarien* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018), 257.

37 Tragically, not long after the arrival, most of the deportees from Slovakia were sent to Auschwitz and to Majdanek, where they had been murdered.

38 National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Records of the Reichsführer-SS and Chief of the German Police, Microfilm Publication T-175, Roll 584, frame 319. See also Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New Haven Yale University Press, 2003), 779.

39 The reference to Ukraine may reflect a geographical misunderstanding – one that reappears in later personal accounts – possibly pointing instead to Bełżec, located near the border between occupied Poland and the Soviet Union.

40 Amos Goldberg, “The History of the Jews in the Ghettos: A Cultural Perspective”, in *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, ed. Dan Stone (Berghahn, 2012); Amos Goldberg, “Rumor Culture among Warsaw Jews under Nazi Occupation: A World of Catastrophe Reenchanted”, *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 3 (2016): 91–125.

mors flourish in a community under imagined or real threat, whose members experience isolation, loss of normal social contacts, fear.”⁴¹ Under these circumstances, the interpretation and meaning-making of reality unfolded through what Goldberg calls a peculiar “hermeneutical and semiotic procedure”, expressed in the circulation of rumours. Many of these rumours can be traced through the personal writings of the persecuted, who documented them either explicitly as rumours or quite often as established facts. Among these, Goldberg distinguishes between two types of rumours: “redemptive” and “catastrophic”.⁴² In the first case, moments of extreme crisis gave rise to the “belief that by acting or imagining, Jews could influence a reality that was in fact entirely controlled by the Germans”. At the same time, the opposite was also present: catastrophic rumours covering the uncertain future.

As early as February–March 1942, news of the exterminations in Chełmno and Bełżec⁴³ began to circulate in the Warsaw Ghetto (during this period, deportations from Łódź ghetto to Chełmno were followed in March by the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto and the deportation of its inhabitants to Bełżec). Amid uncertainty and reports of unbelievable, horrific events, another rumour emerged concerning the exterminations at Bełżec, which were said to have been carried out using a special “electronic device”.⁴⁴ This motif also appeared in the first report on the camp in April 1942, though it was treated as an “assumption” – similar to gas-sing and other methods as well, but like the soap rumour, it, too, found its way to Allied countries and appeared in official documents and newspapers, as we will see (notably, it did not appear in diaries or private letters written during this period). However, the imagined mechanics of this killing method closely resembled those of the gas chamber, the operation of which was not yet fully understood at the time.

Rumors circulating among the persecuted did not remain confined to Jewish communities alone. They also reached the surrounding Polish population due to the climate of fear and repression caused by the German occupation. According to Raul Hilberg, another secret SS report dated 1 October 1942, noted that a rumour of soap circulated among the Polish population in the Lublin district.⁴⁵ This occurred a couple of months after the de-

41 Goldberg, “Rumor Culture among Warsaw Jews under Nazi Occupation”, 94.

42 Ibid., 99.

43 The camp initially functioned as a forced labor camp, then it was the first of the three extermination camps (Sobibor, Treblinka) established as part of Aktion Reinhardt, where gas chambers were used from February 1942 on. (Chełmno was also established at this time, but there the deportees were killed with gas trucks and mass executions by bullet.) The mass graves were excavated as part of Aktion 1005, the bodies were burned, and finally the entire camp was liquidated entirely. It is estimated that over a period of ten months, the Nazis murdered some 600,000 Jews. Walter Laquer and Judith Taylor, eds., *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* (Yale University Press, 2001), 178; Chris Webb, *The Belzec Death: Camp History, Biographies, Remembrance* (ibidem press, 2016).

44 The report reached the Polish Government in exile already in April 1942 thanks to the Polish resistance. Webb, *The Belzec Death*, 129–131.

45 Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 547.

portations from the Lublin Ghetto (17 March–April 1942), which the German administration referred to as *Aussiedlung* (re-settlement).⁴⁶ Furthermore, the German plan was to establish a German district in the Lublin area, a process that began with a razzia on 1 October 1942. According to this report, the Poles were afraid that they would also be subject to the same type of “re-settlement”, which in the end resulted in Jews being “killed and their fat was used to make soap”, as paraphrased by Hilberg; that is, the same image of extermination resurfaced. Not long after the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto, another major operation began, starting in June 1942: Aktion 1005. This was a secret SS operation to exhume mass graves and destroy evidence of earlier mass shootings carried out by the Einsatzgruppen within the framework of Aktion Reinhardt, yet despite the secrecy around the plan, information about it nevertheless began to emerge. In the meantime, the Nazi leadership was not only aware of the rumours circulating in Poland; Nazi leaders were also conscious that information about the Final Solution was leaking out of occupied territories and reaching Allies.⁴⁷

On 24 November 1942, Rabbi *Stephen S. Wise*, head of the World Jewish Congress, held a press conference in New York, and announced that a campaign of annihilation targeting four million Jews was underway in Poland and that a mobilisation campaign against it had begun. Wise also claimed that the Nazis were *exhuming corpses to use the remains for various industrial purposes*.⁴⁸ “There is evidence”, he said, “from reliable persons with knowledge of atrocities, that the Nazis are rendering Jewish corpses into fat, soap, and lubricants.” The following day, these statements appeared in *The New York Times* – and in other outlets – in a short article titled “Himmler Program Kills Polish Jews”.⁴⁹ These claims were based on the so-called *Riegner Telegram* and other reports collected by the World Jewish Congress during the summer of 1942, followed by another telegram in the beginning of 1943.⁵⁰ Next day, a new article published in *The New York Times* repeated and expanded on Wise’s claims.⁵¹ The article cited Dr Ignacy Szwarzbart, a Jewish member of the Polish National Assembly-in-exile, an important figure involved in the collection and

46 The German word for deportation was euphemistically rendered as “re-settlement” (*Aussiedlung*). Its Yiddish variation *Oysiedlung* was widely used in the ghettos and even decades after the war in Yiddish circles, as Hannah-Polin Gay observed as a “verbal trace of the genocide”. Hannah Pollin-Galay, *Occupied Words: What the Holocaust Did to Yiddish* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024), 129.

47 Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 547, 1033.

48 German historian, Andrej Angrick, in his book on Aktion 1005, argued that Dr Wise was especially interested in the fate of the dead bodies in the Nazi machinery and struggled to reconcile reports of mass incineration with religious expectations because Jewish law (*halakha*) strictly forbids cremation. Andrej Angrick, “Aktion 1005”: *Spurenbeseitigung von NS-Massenverbrechen 1942–1945* (Wallstein, 2018), 790–791; Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 547, 1033.

49 Wise gets confirmation, *The New York Times*, 25 November 1942, 10.

50 Zohar Segev, *The World Jewish Congress during the Holocaust* (De Gruyter, 2014), 32.

51 Michael Fleming, *Auschwitz, the Allies and Censorship of the Holocaust* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 109–112.

dissemination of news about what was happening in the General Government (large parts of occupied Poland).⁵² The article described several aspects of the *Endlösung* such as gassings, and it also contained misunderstandings about deportations and methods of extermination. Citing a “government report”, the article also described mass killings by electrocution at Bełżec; this report was identified as *The Extermination of Polish Jews*, an official document produced by the Polish government-in-exile made public on 10 December 1942.⁵³ Although this claim was false, as explained earlier, it continued to circulate. Wise’s reference to soap production alongside electrocution in Bełżec signified that these rumours could be linked and that they migrated together. For a variety of reasons, including the scarcity and often contradictory nature of available information from the Polish government-in-exile, the WJC, and other news outlets, the BBC also became involved in interpreting and disseminating these rumours.

The increasing international circulation of these reports did not go unnoticed by the Nazi leadership. Just days before Wise’s press conference, a 20 November 1942 letter suggests that Heinrich Himmler himself was made aware of the World Jewish Congress’s efforts to gather and publicise information on the mass killings.⁵⁴ In the letter, Himmler gave a direct command – formulated in characteristically bureaucratic/euphemistic language – to Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller. In the opening of the missive, Himmler refers to someone identified as “Dr. Wise” and to what he describes as a “traveling rumour” (*Gerüchte*) accompanying the mass deportation of Jews (“*großen Auswanderungsbewegung der Juden*”) and reports of their deaths. At the same time, he instructs Müller to intensify the complete destruction of all corpses and material traces of the killings within the framework of Aktion 1005.⁵⁵ However, while it is highly probable that Himmler referred to Rabbi Stephan Wise in this letter, there is some uncertainty as to whether he also referred to the soap rumour here.⁵⁶

The rumour, obviously, was not only discussed in official reports and international press coverage; it also appeared in the personal writings of those directly affected by the unfolding catastrophe. The circulation of the soap rumour among the perse-

52 Michael Fleming, “Disseminating News of the Holocaust: Polish Jewish Representatives and Journalists”, *Zeszyty Naukowe PUNO* 5 (2017): 73–91.

53 Joshua D. Zimmerman, *The Polish Underground and the Jews, 1939–1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 181–184.

54 Zentrale Stelle Ludwigsburg Slg. USA Heft: Nr. 3 Bild Nr. 583.

55 As Andrej Angrick has noted, one revealing episode connected to Aktion 1005 illustrates how survivors associated the horrific act of exhuming and removing human remains with the image of soap made from them. The SS operation could not be carried out in its entirety for several reasons. A group of survivors from the Tarnopol region believed that during the partially successful exhumations, the remains had in fact been destroyed and that RIF soap had been produced from the unearthed bodies. In 1947, this group erected a memorial in New York to the deceased, where they also buried a bar of soap.

56 Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 1203; Dirk Rupnow, *Vernichten und Erinnern: Spuren nationalsozialistischer Gedächtnispolitik* (Wallenstein, 2005), 56; Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution* (Knopf, 1991), 6.

cuted is also reflected in ego documents, early testimonies, and even in language itself. In these sources, it appears as a harrowing image or imagined representation of mass extermination, often associated with a specific locality – most frequently the death camp Bełżec. Through letters, the persecuted sought to inform family members about the tragic fate of fellow Jews – a fate they themselves were confronting. One such example is a so-called letter of the Shoah, dated 13 April 1943 – the writer’s final letter before she perished – in which the author refers to the impending deportations and mass extermination, mentioning in particular the use of “electric current” and the production of “soap and chemical fertilizers” from the victims:

I forgot to tell you that from June his operation was called a resettlement to Polesie. People travelled in good wagons, 100 people on each one without bread or water, [treated] worse than cattle. A few days later they arrived in Bełżec. (if you have a map of Poland, you’ll find it above Rawa-Ruska), where they were killed with an electric shock, to then be processed into soap and synthetic fertilizer. I’m sure you can’t believe what I’m writing, you must be convinced there’s something wrong with my head, but no, it’s all true.⁵⁷

The normalisation and everyday character of this belief is also evident in the diary of Chajka Klinger, a former member of the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement and a resistance fighter in Będzin and Warsaw. What follows appeared as an epilogue to the wartime diary she wrote between 1941–1943, but this section of the diary may have been smuggled out of occupied Poland already in 1944.⁵⁸ Referring to the previous year she wrote jokingly: “We acquired weapons and became cynical. Cynicism made us disbelieve. We walked past a soap store display and someone said: ‘This is my grandmother here – but they’ll make me into toilet soap because I’m younger and fatter.’ If you heard that – wouldn’t you think the heart had turned to stone?”⁵⁹

Importantly, language itself functioned as a “verbal trace of the genocide” and as a key conservator of the soap rumour. During the German occupation, a distinctive internal language developed in the harsh conditions of ghettos and concentration camps that was shaped by both German and Yiddish expressions. As Hannah Pollin-Galay has eloquently described in her book *Occupied Words*, this linguistic formation has been termed later as *Khurbn Yiddish*.⁶⁰ This language blurred the line between reality and imagination, between fact and fear. Such expressions were documented during and after the war and appeared in the publi-

57 Hulda Pooryles’s letter has been republished in two different volumes. Here I follow the translation of the letter by K.-P. Friedrich et al. *Poland: General Government August 1941–1945*, (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024), DOK. 226 section; Tony Wasserman, ed., *Last Letters from the Shoah*, trans. Batsheva Pomerantz (Devora-Yad Vashem, 2004), 331.

58 Chajka Klinger, *I Am Writing These Words to You: The Original Diaries, Będzin 1943*, ed. Avihu Ronen, trans. Anna Brzostowska and Jerzy Giebułtowski (Yad Vashem, 2017), 7–25.

59 Klinger, *I Am Writing These Words to You*, 188.

60 Pollin-Galay, *Occupied Words*, 129–133.

cations of post-war Jewish commissions edited by Israel Kaplan or historian Nachman Blumenthal.⁶¹ Here, however, I refer only to a special term possibly collected after the war through a questionnaire disseminated by Israel Kaplan. In his Yiddish lexicon, Kaplan included the term *na szmelc*, used by both Jews and Poles and derived from the German *schmelzen* (to melt), referring to those destined for death “to be melted into soap”.⁶²

Meanwhile the rumour had continued to spread outside war-torn Europe through survivors and ended up in *testimonies and rabbinic notes*. Israeli historian Abraham Fuchs, who studied rabbinic sources from the wartime and immediate post-war periods – including personal notes and responsa – cited the writings of Meir Schwartzman, a Canadian rabbi from Winnipeg who was originally from Poland. Writing in 1942–1943 (5703), Schwartzman already referred to the extermination process, mentioning gas chambers and the alleged use of human fat for soap and lubricants for German weaponry. Drawing on biblical imagery – likely echoing the Book of Lamentations recited when mourning Tisha b’Av⁶³ (the destruction of the Jerusalem temple) – he described the victims as those who had perished by “sword and famine”, invoking a traditional scriptural language of catastrophe.⁶⁴ The claims also appeared in the testimony of a Polish student from Warsaw recorded the same year in Palestine by Rabbi Moshe Prager, the founder of the Ganzach Kiddush Hashem archive. The survivor recalled that prisoners at the Janowska-Lviv camp used foul-smelling soap also believed to have been made at Bełżec from the fat of murdered Jews.

By 1943, as the Nazi extermination machinery advanced and the regime simultaneously sought to erase the traces of genocide, more details about events in the German-occupied territories became public. These revelations provoked protests in Allied countries, yet attempts to intervene – such as those discussed at the so-called Bermuda Conference – ultimately failed.⁶⁵ In a different part of occupied Europe, the soap motif surfaced in France in the context of reports about mass killings in Soviet and neighbouring territories. It appeared in the clandestine newspaper *J'accuse*.

61 The periodical *Fun letstn churbn* was founded and edited by Israel Kaplan and published by the *Jüdische Historische Kommission* (Central Historical Commission) in Munich. Several of these accounts based on testimonies or reports explicitly refer to the claim that soap had been made from Jewish victims which show again that this narrative of Nazi extermination machinery was ubiquitous among the persecuted Jewry in occupied Poland. Laura Jockusch, ed., *Khurbn-Forschung: Documents on Early Holocaust Research in Postwar Poland*. (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022); Frank Beer and Markus Roth, ed., *Von der letzten Zerstörung. Die Zeitschrift “Fun letstn churbn” der Jüdischen Historischen Kommission in München 1946–1948* (Metropol, 2021).

62 Israel Kaplan “Folklor”, in Beer and Roth, *Von der letzten Zerstörung*, 969; Israel Kaplan, *The Voice of the Ghetto* (Yad Vashem, 2013), 118.

63 It gradually became an important occasion for the commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust. See J. J. Schacter, “Holocaust Commemoration and Tish’a be-Av: The Debate over ‘Yom Ha-Sho’a’”, *Tradition* 2 (2008): 164–197.

64 Abraham Fuchs, *השואה במקורות רבניים: שו”ת ודרשות* (The Holocaust in rabbinic sources: Responsa and sermons) (Self-published, 1995), 363.

65 Michael Fleming, *Auschwitz, the Allies and Censorship of the Holocaust* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 62.

Journal de lutte contre le racisme, published in February 1943 by the antifascist resistance network Organe du Mouvement National contre le Racisme in Occupation Nord, an organisation led primarily by communist Jews. In the issue, which summarised major events and different forms of protest and denunciation directed against Nazi crimes, the newspaper presented a series of reports on atrocities committed against Jews – from the murder of thousands in Minsk (Belarus) to the allegation that Jewish corpses were being turned into soap – under the headline “The Corpses of Jews Sent to Soap Factories of the Reich”. The article claimed that the information presented derived from “a Gestapo officer in Paris”, asserting that “thousands of Jewish corpses were being used by the Germans as raw material for soap production”. The allegation was further reinforced by a reference to the Soviet Information Bureau, which reportedly declared that “German barbarians were delivering the corpses of murdered Jews en masse to the soap factories of the Reich”.

Accordingly, it is not surprising that a narrative based on the soap rumour related to crimes taking place on the Eastern front began to surface.⁶⁶ This was especially true in the Soviet Union starting in 1943,⁶⁷ as the Red Army advanced and unearthed the crimes committed by the Nazi occupiers that had been intensively covered in some Soviet press outlets.⁶⁸ In the summer of 1943, Ilya Ehrenburg, serving as a war correspondent, published several articles in the Red Army newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star) about the horrific crimes committed by the Germans, including the extermination of Jews, while also collecting documentation for the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Around the same time,

66 It is plausible that fears of Nazi exterminatory intentions – specifically the belief that victims would be turned into soap – also circulated in the occupied Soviet territories among the population, a phenomenon also noted by Karel C. Berkhoff in his study of wartime Ukraine: *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 83, 259. An article published in 1942 in *Volksstimme*, the official daily newspaper of the NSDAP in the Oberdonau district, discussed the devastation left behind by the Soviets in the heavy industrial regions of Ukraine and the rebuilding efforts deemed necessary, while also commenting on local perceptions of the German occupiers. The author noted that German authorities encountered “the most insane ideas and rumours spread by Soviet atrocity and hate propaganda, which is still having an effect and seeping through”, including the claim: “In Germany, they would be turned into soap” (In Deutschland würden sie zu Seife verarbeitet). Dr. Amen Fellner, “Die Ukraine arbeitet für den Sieg!” *Volksstimme*, 16 November 1942, 1–2.

67 Karol Cornelis Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda during World War II* (Harvard University Press, 2012); David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (Rutgers University Press, 2011); David Shneer, *Grief. The Biography of a Holocaust Photograph* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Robert W. Thurston and Bernd Bonwetsch, eds., *The People’s War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union* (University of Illinois Press, 2000).

68 The famous Yiddish writer David Bergelson, who during the war wrote extensively in the Jewish Antifascist Committee’s newspaper *Eynikayt*. In one of his essays from January 1943, Bergelson sarcastically portrayed a German soldier labelled as “everyday German” (it is unknown whether he was a real person or not) who possessed a “Jewish soap”: “Helmut’s memory is exceptionally poor./Helmut is asked where he got his soap. Helmut answers coldly, ‘Over there./’From a soap factory?/’Of course.’ One really wants Helmut to talk more precisely about the process that takes place there in the ‘factory’ where bodies of dead Jews are brought and converted into soap. But Helmut has little knowledge of these processes.”

another correspondent, Vasily Grossman, described the Eastern Front as “Ukraine without Jews”, illuminating the scale of the massacres in a region that had one of the largest Jewish populations in Europe prior to the war.⁶⁹ In the issue of *Krasnaya Zvezda* from 4 July 1943, Ehrenburg wrote about the alleged production of soap from human bodies – among other crimes, framing his argument around the cruelty of the Germans and the modern, dehumanising character of science:⁷⁰

There are “scientific laboratories” where Hitlerite “scientists” conduct experiments on living people. Until recently they conducted experiments on Jews. Now the Germans have exterminated the Jews, and they conduct experiments on Ukrainians. What do these ‘experiments’ amount to? To poisoning with various gases; to pumping blood out of children in order to transfuse it to German soldiers; to forced insemination; to sterilization. There is also a laboratory engaged in experiments on producing soap from human fat. The German will not only kill – he will also extract profit from the corpse. I would not be surprised if soon in Berlin they register a “Joint-Stock Company for the manufacture of soap from the corpses of Ukrainians”.⁷¹

This claim was repeated after the war by the Soviets, but rather than Jews, the story addressed the Ukrainian population or Soviet prisoners of war. Meanwhile, in the summer of 1943, Solomon Mikhoels, the chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, and the poet Itzik Feffer, also a member of the committee, were commissioned by the Soviet leadership to undertake a tour of Allied countries – most notably the United States – in order to strengthen antifascist alliances and encourage Western decision-makers to open a second European front against the Third Reich. During this tour, the delegation met with political leaders and intellectuals, including Albert Einstein, and with representatives of Jewish organisations, disseminating information about developments on the front and emphasising the tragic fate of European Jewry. The Soviet representatives also participated in large public rallies, the most notable of which was attended by approximately 45,000 people. According to several accounts, Mikhoels reportedly displayed a piece of “Jewish soap” during the tour as a horrific illustration of what was happening to European Jewry.⁷²

69 Alexandra Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century* (Books, 2019), 123.

70 Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, 129.

71 Ilya Ehrenburg, “Velikij i nyegazimij”, *Krasznaja Zvezda*, 4 July 1943, 3. This claim, yet in a different form, also became part of the famous *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry* commissioned by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee on which Ehrenburg had been working together with Vasily Grossman from 1943 onward, resurfacing in a testimony of a Jewish survivor who identified it as “Jewish soap” connected to Bežec. Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*, trans. and ed. David Patterson (Routledge, 2017), 123.

72 Gérard Israel, *The Jews in Russia*, trans. Sanford L. Chernoff (St. Martin’s Press, 1975), 18; B. Z. Goldberg, *The Jewish Problem in the Soviet Union: An Analysis and a Solution* (Crown Publishers, 1961), 53; Jeffrey Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage* (Indiana University Press, 2000), 231.

The Soap Rumor in the “Last Phase” of the Holocaust and the Emergence of an Anti-Soviet Narrative

In the later phase of the war, during the final, catastrophic deportations of Hungarian Jewry, the soap rumour appears to have come to the attention of both the persecuted and segments of the broader population, as reflected in wartime diaries in Hungary. Despite the arrival of numerous reports in Hungary – including the Vrba–Wetzler Auschwitz report, which reached Jewish leaders in April 1944 – knowledge of the systematic extermination awaiting Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz, the principal destination of the deportations, remained limited prior to the transports.⁷³ Nevertheless, better-informed segments of Hungarian society soon became at least partially aware of the fate of the deportees – owing both to knowledge circulating in informal networks and to BBC programming people could listen to clandestinely, as Gergely Kunt has shown in his book *Az Auschwitz-kód* (The Auschwitz Code).⁷⁴ In the context of the deportations, and in response to reports by the BBC and other news outlets about the mass killing of Hungarian deportees, the allegation of “soap factories in Debrecen turning Jews into soap” was publicly denounced, ridiculed, and dismissed as absurd.⁷⁵

On the issue of what people knew, Kunt cites the diary of István Zimándi, a monk from the Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré who, unlike many Christian diary writers Kunt encountered in his research, reflected on the fate of Hungarian Jewry extensively – mostly not in an empathetic manner. Almost a month after the last deportation train departed for Auschwitz at the end of July, Zimándi wrote in an entry dated 23 August:

No one knows anything for certain about the fate of the Jews who were transported abroad. Various horror stories are circulating: the thin ones [Jews] were turned into fertilizer, the fat ones into soap. Others say that in Poland, they were herded into chambers and killed with poison gas, etc. Official circles did not inform the nation about the actual facts, and the newspapers remained silent even about the fact itself.⁷⁶

However, in an entry written a couple of months later, Zimándi again referred to soapmaking in a joking and ironic manner while describing a brief encounter with a friend amid the attacks of the Red Army: “‘See you at the soap factory in Kiev! I hope I’ll be turned into soap,’ I say. Sz. Pali looks at me: ‘More likely fertilizer – bones have more weight!’”⁷⁷ It is not surprising that a Catholic

73 Zoltán Tibori Szabó, “The Auschwitz Reports: Who Got Them, and When?” In *The Auschwitz Reports and the Holocaust in Hungary*, ed. Randolph L. Braham and William J. Vander Heuvel (Columbia University Press, 2011), 85–120.

74 Gergely Kunt, *Az Auschwitz-kód* (Jaffa, 2025), 104, 208–220.

75 *Ibid.*, 104.

76 Pius István Zimándi, *Egy év története naplójegyzetekben* (Magvető, 2015), 110.

77 Zimándi, *Egy év története naplójegyzetekben*, 229–230.

monk feared the approaching Soviet military, as anti-Soviet clerical propaganda had long depicted the Soviets as barbaric and atheistic enemies who would not hesitate to persecute or kill members of the clergy. (During the siege of Budapest, for example, on 11 February 1945, the Arrow Cross Party newspaper illustrated its anti-Soviet rhetoric with an image portraying Russians producing soap from the clergy).

The widespread circulation of the soap rumour among the Hungarian public is also suggested by another front-page article published in November 1944 in the Arrow Cross newspaper *Soproni Hírek*. In it, a party representative addressing the “Jewish question” sought to again banalise the deportation of Hungarian Jews from the countryside, remarking that the deportees “of course, are not made into soap, but they do have to work – and they do work”.⁷⁸

Among the persecuted, the soap rumour also resurfaced. At the end of 1944, Jenő Heltai, the well-known interwar writer and humorist of Jewish origin living in war-torn Budapest, recorded his experience of persecution and the final months of the siege in his diary. Like Zimándi, he had begun keeping this diary following the German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944. Amid the sounds of fighting in the streets, Heltai described a visit from friends and relatives on 26 December 1944, during which the connection between extermination and soap surfaced as a subject of unsettling laughter: “Machine guns are firing, revolver shots are ringing out. The three depraved girls, Vera, Márta II, and the fake Bözsike, were here. They laughed a lot, even about how old Jews were being turned into soap in Germany. But perhaps this was also the fate of Vera’s grandfather! The Russians are said to be already at Széll Kálmán Square.”⁷⁹

All of these examples from the war demonstrate that the soap rumour circulated simultaneously among the persecuted as a terrifying image of extermination; within Allied reportage as part of their fragmented and uncertain knowledge about Nazi crimes; and in Axis propaganda, where it could be dismissed or redirected against the Allies. In this sense, its wartime trajectory reveals a process of continuous reinterpretation shaped by the war and incomplete information. Yet the rumour did not disappear when the conflict ended. On the contrary, precisely because of its powerful imagery and its circulation in different contexts, it remained a potent narrative in the immediate post-war period – indeed, it was a symbol awaiting further reinterpretation and “canonisation” in memory and public discourse.

78 *Soproni Hírlap*, 23 November 1944, 1.

79 Jenő Heltai, *A négy fal között. Naplótöredékek 1944–1945* (Magvető, 2014), 296.

*The Investigation of the “Soap Factory” and
Its Aftermath in the Nuremberg Courtroom*

Immediately after the war, a disturbing and influential interpretation of the origin of the soaps emerged in Poland. It was largely shaped by an investigation conducted by the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce) at the *Gdańsk Anatomical Institute*. The investigation claimed that under the auspices of the renowned pathologist Professor Rudolf Spanner, the *Gdańsk* laboratory had used human remains – supposedly from the nearby Stutthof camp – to produce soap-like substances in spring and summer of 1944. This supposition relied primarily on witness testimonies (the reliability of the chief witness testimony, Zygmunt Mazur was questionable, as later research determined) and the remains of a significant number of human carcasses at the site, though only small quantities of soap-like (“by-product”) substances were found. Nevertheless, the forensic team concluded – wrongly – that soap production using human remains had occurred. These conclusions became the basis for formal accusations, which named Professor Rudolf Spanner, the director of the institute, as the main perpetrator.⁸⁰ The horrific scenery and the determination of the commission caused a major scandal in Poland, and information about the investigation had already been disseminated in the newspapers globally thanks to the Polish and Soviet press. The investigation was also heavily documented visually by photographers and a film crew. Then, the evidence and associated documentation (the film footage was later used in several Soviet documentaries) ended up being presented at the Nuremberg trials by the prosecutors almost a year after the conclusion of the investigation, on 19 February 1946.⁸¹

Besides the official investigative report, an influential short story also contributed to the dissemination of the “soap factory” narrative and to the enduring association of Rudolf Spanner with it. It was written by the prominent Polish writer and political activist – and member of the investigating commission, Zofia Nałkowska (1884–1954), who published the story under the title “Rudolf Spanner” in her 1946 short story collection *Medaliony* (Medallions). In this rendering, the narrator explains in a matter-of-fact style what she had witnessed in the institute and what she heard from the alleged accomplices during the commission hearings. The piece presents the functioning of the “soap factory”, based on the commission’s on- and off-site testimonies, as a kind of forensic report from the crime scene, corpses piled upon one another, severed heads lying in orderly rows, the ghastly transformation of bodies taking place in cauldrons.⁸² Nałkowska’s short

80 During the trial, however, Spanner was *acquitted* of all charges and later *denazified*.

81 Tomkiewicz and Semków, *Soap from Human Fat*.

82 Arkadiusz Morawiec, “Deconstructing a Myth: Soap from Human (Jewish) Fat. Remarks on the Margins of Zofia Nałkowska’s Short Story ‘Professor Spanner’”. Originally published in

story became an “irrefutable testimony” and represented the bestial acts the Nazis committed on the soil of occupied Poland. Her account quickly gained prominence, especially in Poland, where it was placed on the school curriculum as required reading (a status it retains to this day).

Generally, the work of the International Military Tribunal (IMT), was, in various ways, unprecedented. Both the Americans and the Soviets sought to frame and influence it to serve their own aims. The United States imagined it as an education tool to showcase the triumph of Western values and democracy. The Soviets – following the model of earlier war crime trials – envisioned a “show trial” that would reveal to the world the crimes committed against them and the immense sacrifices the Soviet people made to win the war.⁸³ Alongside existing criminal categories – such as war crimes – the trial included two new categories of crimes that had not yet been applied in an international court: crimes against peace (aggressive war) and crimes against humanity.⁸⁴

The presentation of evidence followed Robert Jackson’s idea that, rather than relying on “untrustworthy” witness testimonies, the focus should be on Nazi perpetrator documents. However, on 13 December 1945, the monotony of reading such documents abruptly stopped when the American prosecutor presented Ilsa Koch’s tattooed skins and the infamous “shrunken head”, both of which were from Buchenwald and were labeled by historian Lawrence Douglas as “icons of atavism”.⁸⁵ Douglas analysed the presentation of this evidence during the trial and pointed out that Jackson and the American legal team had interpreted it within a civilisational framework. Accordingly, Nazi acts were viewed as barbaric and “savage” crimes, and only the law could provide protection against them. However, there was a contradiction embedded within this argument, summed up by Douglas as follows: “For just as civilization rescues law by serving as the source of the legal code at Nuremberg, law, in turn, serves as the protector of civilization.”⁸⁶ So, the soap cases brought to the court by the Soviets could be included in the civilisational argument – which had been compromised by barbaric Nazi crimes – but from a different direction: the dehumanising character of technical modernity and its spirit.

The Soviet indictment focused primarily on documents that included official records of the atrocities of the Einsatzgruppen and a position paper on the Jewish genocide and material evidence attesting to German atrocities committed against the “peaceful So-

Polish as “Coś z niczego? ‘Profesor Spanner’ (raz jeszcze)”, *Narracje o Zagładzie*, no. 2 (2016): 133–149.

83 Francine Hirsch, *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg. A New History of the International Military Tribunal after World War II* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 10.

84 Victor Barbat, “Staging Justice at the Nuremberg Trial”, in *Seeking Accountability for Nazi and War Crimes in East and Central Europe A People’s Justice?*, ed. Eric Le Bourhis, Irina Tcherneva, and Vanessa Voisin (Rochester University Press, 2022), 106–145.

85 Douglas, “The Shrunken Head of Buchenwald”, 42.

86 *Ibid.*, 46.

viet population” on the Eastern Front and in the Soviet Union proper.⁸⁷ This was supported by photographs and film footage that recorded Nazi brutality (both the Soviet and the American sides screened four films each), as well as the testimony of seven witnesses.⁸⁸ All of this served to sustain the indictment for crimes against humanity.

Thus on 19 February 1946 – despite the reservations of the British judges, who were not convinced of the reliability of the evidence – the Soviet prosecutors, led by Deputy Prosecutor Lev Nikolaevich Smirnov, presented, among other materials, evidence intended to support the existence of “human soap” (the production of soap) to serve as proof of the mass murder committed against the Polish and Soviet peoples, of German barbarism, and of the “cannibalistic theories of German fascism”⁸⁹ (without mentioning the Jewish background of victims).⁹⁰ To this end, and as the final evidence presented that day (other evidence presented that day included proof related to mass executions in occupied Poland, the gas chambers at Auschwitz, so-called gas vans, and the killing operations in Majdanek), the prosecution submitted several kinds of evidence to the court, which were introduced by Smirnov: “I have already pointed out that the principal method used to remove traces was the cremation of corpses; but those same rationally minded SS engineers who created the gas chambers and the death-dealing motor-cars began to devise methods for the complete destruction of human bodies which not only obliterated the traces of the crimes, but could also be used for the production of certain goods.”⁹¹ The items submitted into evidence included the soaps themselves under number of Exhibit USSR-393 – two jars displayed under glass – and various documents on the alleged facts on and presumed procedures for soap production; and, at the very end of the day, a nearly hour-long film titled *Film Documents on the Atrocities Committed by the German Fascist Invaders* (Kinodokumenty o zverstvakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov).⁹²

The film was based on footage shot by the Red Army during the war in various locations, and it was originally intended to serve both as propaganda to encourage the Soviet population to fight

87 Hirsch, *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg*, 29, 358–359.

88 *Ibid.*, 216. The Nuremberg trials were the first time photographs and films were used as material evidence in an international court. Sylvie Lindeperg, *La batailles des Images* (Payot, 2025).

89 Douglas, “The Shrunken Head of Buchenwald”, 53.

90 Tomkiewicz and Semków, *Soap from Human Fat*; Douglas, “The Shrunken Head of Buchenwald”, 53–57.

91 See the records of the International Military Tribunal, accessed 20 November 2025, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/02-19-46.asp>.

92 Comparing the Soviet film to its American counterpart, entitled *Nazi Concentration Camps*, Jeff Hicks argues that it is far less accurate and less nuanced in its portrayal of what we now refer to as the Holocaust. As he stated: “The Soviet film [...] restates the genocidal nature of the Nazi regime, whereas *Nazi Concentration Camps* focuses on that regime’s aggressive militarism and repression of political opponents.” Hicks, Jeff, *First Films of the Holocaust Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–1946* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 192.

and as evidentiary material against German perpetrators. In the courtroom, the film was used to “inform” the public about the scale of crimes committed against the Soviet population and to strengthen the case against the defendants. The film contained particularly harrowing sequences depicting mass graves and large-scale exhumations in Soviet territories, often focusing on individual victims, including children, or surviving relatives – sometimes identified by name. These scenes drew viewers immediately into an emotional confrontation with the evidence and fostered a powerful sense of identification with the victims or their relatives. The film included sequences filmed at the extermination camps in Majdanek and Auschwitz and also mentioned Zyklon-B gas chambers and crematoria. Because the film intentionally lacked a voiceover, the screening was accompanied by the prosecutor’s commentary, which carefully established the interpretive frame. Shortly before the end of the film, scenes from the so-called “soap factory” in Danzig were shown. At that moment, Smirnov held up two jars of “human soap” as exhibits.⁹³ It is not surprising that according to a contemporary account, the nearly hour-long screening was followed by complete silence.⁹⁴

After the hearing, the soap myth gained wider recognition and this trial was an important milestone for establishing the soap myth, and it even played an important role in canonising other legends that were later refuted (such as the so-called “death tango” and the “lampshades” made of human skin). However, the “soap accusation” directed against Nazi war criminals was not confined to Soviet prosecutors and propaganda nor the International Military Tribunal. Just one year after, in 1947 during the fourth of the post-war Nuremberg trials – Nuremberg Trials IV (United States v. Pohl et al.) – mounted against Oswald Pohl (sentenced to death) and other high-ranking SS officials from the former economic administration of the Nazi state, the SS-Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt (WVHA), the issue of soap production appeared in the prosecution’s opening statement.⁹⁵ During the trial, the SS and the WVHA were charged with participation in the “systematic and relentless annihilation of the Jewish people”, and within this context of the extermination process, allegations concerning soap production were explicitly raised by US prosecutor James M. McHaney in his opening statement delivered on 8 April 1947:

93 The Soviet team, led by the wartime cameraman and director Roman Karmen, also documented the trial and produced the documentary *Judgment of the Nations* (originally *Sud narodov*), which was distributed widely, including in the United States. The film captures, among other moments, the scene in which Smirnov presented the soaps to the judges. Thanks to the use of portable cameras, the footage is characterised by closer, more intimate shots, resulting in a heightened dramatic effect in contrast to the more distant visual style of the American courtroom recordings.

94 Hirsch, *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg*, 231.

95 See K. J. Heller, *The Nuremberg Military Tribunals and the origins of International Criminal Law* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 56–58.

Extermination centers similar to Auschwitz existed at Treblinka, Majdanek, Bełżec, and Sobibor in the vicinity of Lublin. There the procedure was the same. The victims were stripped of their clothes, money and valuables. The hair of the women was cut off, later to be manufacture into mattresses. ... An attempt was even made to manufacture soap from the fatty parts of the bodies, while the ashes remaining after cremation were used for fertilizer.⁹⁶

Here – unlike in the Soviet proceedings – the accusation explicitly framed soap production as part of the genocidal practices of the Nazi regime, emphasising economic exploitation as an integral dimension of mass murder.

Conclusion

As a final note, it is worth recalling that not long after the events in the Nuremberg courtroom on 19 February 1946, news about the alleged “origins of the soap” spread rapidly. While some reports focused on the shocking claims made during the trial, in countries such as Hungary and Romania, a different pattern emerged in March 1946: the issue of human soap production developed into something resembling a moral panic. Calls were made for official investigations, and Jewish communities began collecting RIF soaps for ritual burials – which actually took place a wide range of localities.⁹⁷ In the meantime, in Poland, the trajectory was different as Monika Tomkiewicz and Piotr Semków pointed out. While the press initially focused intensively on the “Danzig Soap Factory” case from 1945 onwards, and the Polish press also covered the Nuremberg Trials extensively, only one article referred to the “soap from human fat” until the end of February 1946, and the topic quickly disappeared from public discourse thereafter, and interest in it subsided.⁹⁸

At the same time, the onset of the Cold War soon reshaped the broader memory of the Second World War, including the Holocaust. This did not mean that the myth disappeared entirely; rather, it resurfaced repeatedly in connection with particular events – such as the Eichmann trial – and within shifting political and cultural contexts.

This study, rather than seeking to verify the rumour’s truth or falsehood, has aimed to interpret its changing meanings across different contexts, above all as a response to the war and the un-

96 See the records of the Nuremberg Military Tribunals, accessed 28 April 2026, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/open4.asp>.

97 It is important to note that the specific association of the soap myth with RIF soap appears to have been a later development. It likely emerged only during the final phase of the Holocaust or in the early post-war years. Contemporaneous accounts – including Soviet reports – did not refer to the alleged products as “RIF soap”. Rather, the connection seems to have appeared retrospectively, when the earlier wartime rumours were linked to this particular type of soap and incorporated into emerging forms of Holocaust memory.

98 Tomkiewicz – Semków, *Professor Rudolf Spanner*, 100.

precedented crimes committed by Nazi Germany. The soap narrative can thus be understood as a dense historical fabric in which real, material elements coexist with constructions of collective imagination. This article has therefore attempted to trace this multifaceted phenomenon – appearing at different moments as rumour, propaganda, and alleged historical fact – across time and space, relying as closely as possible on available contemporaneous sources. The examples discussed demonstrate both the power of this narrative and its capacity to shift in meaning – coexisting as a specifically “Jewish soap” narrative and as a more universal antifascist “symbol”. They also reveal the peculiar nature of atrocity narratives: stories that could be dismissed as implausible while simultaneously hinting at, or even concealing, real crimes. Even when the claim itself was not factually accurate, the rumour shaped how people imagined and interpreted the monstrous violence of the war. In this sense, as Hans-Joachim Neubauer suggests, imagination and rumour can themselves “make history”.

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