

# **S:I.M.O.N.**

**SHOAH:  
INTERVENTION.  
METHODS.  
DOCUMENTATION.**

## S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON.

S:I.M.O.N. is the open-access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI). It is committed to immediate open access for academic work. S:I.M.O.N. serves as a forum for discussion of various methodological approaches. The journal especially wishes to strengthen the exchange between researchers from different scientific communities and to integrate both the Jewish history and the history of the Holocaust into the different 'national' narratives. It also lays a special emphasis on memory studies and the analysis of politics of memory. The journal operates under the Creative Commons Licence CC-BY-NC-ND (Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives). The copyright of all articles remains with the author of the article. The copyright of the layout and design of articles remains with S:I.M.O.N. Articles can be submitted in German or English.

S:I.M.O.N. ist das Open-Access-E-Journal des Wiener Wiesenthal Instituts für Holocaust-Studien (VWI). Es setzt sich für einen sofortigen offenen Zugang zur wissenschaftlichen Arbeit ein. S:I.M.O.N. dient als Diskussionsforum für verschiedene methodische Ansätze. Die Zeitschrift möchte insbesondere den Austausch zwischen ForscherInnen aus unterschiedlichen Forschungszusammenhängen stärken und sowohl die jüdische Geschichte als auch die Geschichte des Holocaust in die verschiedenen „nationalen“ Erzählungen integrieren. Ein besonderer Schwerpunkt liegt auch auf Ansätzen der Memory Studies und der Analyse der Geschichtspolitik. Die Zeitschrift arbeitet unter der Creative Commons-Lizenz CC-BY-NC-ND. Das Urheberrecht aller Artikel verbleibt beim Autor des Artikels. Das Urheberrecht für das Layout und die Gestaltung von Artikeln bleibt bei S:I.M.O.N. Artikel können in deutscher oder englischer Sprache eingereicht werden.

Vol. 13 (2026) No. 1

<https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126>

With Assistance from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.  
Supported by the German Federal Ministry of Finance.



PUBLISHER | MEDIENINHABER & HERAUSGEBER  
Wiener Wiesenthal Institut für Holocaust-Studien (VWI)  
Forschung – Dokumentation – Vermittlung  
A-1010 Wien, Rabensteig 3, Österreich

CONTACT | KONTAKT  
[simon@vwi.ac.at](mailto:simon@vwi.ac.at)

EDITORIAL TEAM | REDAKTION  
Editor-in-chief | Chefredaktion: Éva Kovács (VWI)  
Editors|RedakteurInnen: Raul Cârstocea (University of Leicester), Zuzanna Dziuban (Technische Universität Berlin), Michal Frankl (Leibniz-Institut für Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Europa [GWZO]), Marianne Windsperger (VWI)  
Webmaster: Bálint Kovács  
Copy Editor (English) | Lektor (Englisch): Emily Gioielli  
Copy Editor (German) | Lektorin (Deutsch): Marianne Windsperger  
Production editor: Teresa Preis  
Layout of PDF | Grafiker: Hans Ljung  
Open Access Assistant | Open-Access-Assistentin: Barbara Grzelak

INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC ADVISORY BOARD |  
INTERNATIONALER WISSENSCHAFTLICHER BEIRAT  
Nanci Adler (Instituut voor Oorlogs-, Holocaust- en Genocidestudies – NIOD, Amsterdam)  
Natalia Aleksiu (University of Florida, Gainesville)  
Tim C. Cole (University of Bristol)  
Elisabeth Gallas (Leibniz-Institut für jüdische Geschichte und Kultur – Simon Dubnow, Leipzig)  
Jürgen Matthäus (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington)  
Nadège Ragaru (Sciences Po, Paris)  
Dirk Rupnow (Universität Innsbruck)  
David Silberklang (Yad Vashem – Internationale Holocaust-Gedenkstätte, Jerusalem)

ISSN: 2408-9192

The publication was supported by the initiative KOALA (Konsortiale Open Access Lösungen Aufbauen), which is organised at the SLUB Dresden.

The Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) is funded by:

 Federal Ministry  
Education, Science  
and Research

 Federal Chancellery

 **Stadt  
Wien** | Kultur

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### ARTICLES

- Lóránt Bódi  
**From Rumour to Holocaust Icon** 4  
*The Historical Trajectories of the Holocaust Soap Myth*
- Markéta Bajgerová Verly  
**One Past, Two Histories** 35  
*Exhibiting the Shanghai Jewish Refugees in China and Austria. A Comparative Perspective*
- Anastasia Felscher  
**Holocaust Trauma and Jewish Voices in Soviet Jewish Samizdat Periodicals** 60
- Vlasta Kordová  
**The Logic of the Objective Enemy** 93  
*Jews, Martial Law, and Nazi Security Policy in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia*
- Roma Sendyka  
**The Dispersed Holocaust** 117  
*Pluralising Research on the Violent Past in Eastern Europe*

### DATA & DOCUMENTATION

- Attila Novák  
**“A Convinced Anti-Communist and Rabid Zionist”** 137  
*Simon Wiesenthal through the Lens of Hungarian State Security Service Reports during the Kádár Era*

### INTERVIEW

- Interview with Florine Miez & Anna Wolfinger  
**“I Want to Talk About the Truth That was There”** 167  
*The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial 1963–1965*

Lóránt Bódi

# From Rumour to Holocaust Icon

## *The Historical Trajectories of the Holocaust Soap Myth<sup>1</sup>*

### 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.<sup>2</sup> 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!”<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> forming part of a broader pattern that has appeared in many other countries as well.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, Holocaust survivors and their descendants played an important role in preserving the memory of the soaps.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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”.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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)<sup>16</sup> 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.”<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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”.<sup>21</sup> 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”.<sup>22</sup>

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).<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

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).”<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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”.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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”.<sup>33</sup> 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).<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> 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.”<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> 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.”<sup>41</sup> 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”.<sup>42</sup> 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 Bełżec<sup>43</sup> 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”.<sup>44</sup> This motif also appeared in the first report on the camp in April 1942, though it was treated as an “assumption” – similar to gasing 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.<sup>45</sup> 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).<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup>

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*.<sup>48</sup> “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”.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup> Next day, a new article published in *The New York Times* repeated and expanded on Wise’s claims.<sup>51</sup> 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).<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup>

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.<sup>57</sup>

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.<sup>58</sup> 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?”<sup>59</sup>

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*.<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> 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”.<sup>62</sup>

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’Av<sup>63</sup> (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.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup> This was especially true in the Soviet Union starting in 1943,<sup>67</sup> as the Red Army advanced and unearthed the crimes committed by the Nazi occupiers that had been intensively covered in some Soviet press outlets.<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup> 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:<sup>70</sup>

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”.<sup>71</sup>

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.<sup>72</sup>

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 Belżec. 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.<sup>73</sup> 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).<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup>

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.<sup>76</sup>

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!’”<sup>77</sup> 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”.<sup>78</sup>

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.”<sup>79</sup>

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.<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup>

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.<sup>82</sup> 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.<sup>83</sup> 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.<sup>84</sup>

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”.<sup>85</sup> 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.”<sup>86</sup> 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.<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup> 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”<sup>89</sup> (without mentioning the Jewish background of victims).<sup>90</sup> 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.”<sup>91</sup> 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).<sup>92</sup>

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.<sup>93</sup> It is not surprising that according to a contemporary account, the nearly hour-long screening was followed by complete silence.<sup>94</sup>

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.<sup>95</sup> 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.<sup>96</sup>

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.<sup>97</sup> 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.<sup>98</sup>

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”.

## Bibliography

- Badsey, Stephan. *The German Corpse Factory: A Study in First World War Propaganda*. Helion & Company, 2019.
- Barbat, Victor. "Staging Justice at the Nuremberg Trial". In *Seeking Accountability for Nazi and War Crimes in East and Central Europe: A People's Justice?*, edited by Eric Le Bourhis, Irina Tcherneva, and Vanessa Voisin. Rochester University Press, 2022.
- Bauer, Yehuda. "On the Soap Allegations". *Jerusalem Post*, 9 May 1990.
- Beer, Frank, and Markus Roth, eds. *Von der letzten Zerstörung. Die Zeitschrift 'Fun letstn churbn' der Jüdischen Historischen Kommission in München 1946–1948*. Metropol, 2021.
- Berg, Anne. *Empire of Rags and Bone: Waste and War in Germany*. Oxford University Press, 2024.
- Berkhoff, Karel C. *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Berkhoff, Karol Cornelis. *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda during World War II*. Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Bloch, Marc. "Reflections of a Historian on the False News of the War". Translated by James P. Holoka. *Michigan War Studies Review* 7 (2013): 1–11.
- Cesarani, David. *Final Solution: The Fate of Jews 1933–1949*. St. Martin's Press, 2016.
- Darnton, Robert. *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. Basic Books, 2009.
- Douglas, Lawrence. "The Shrunken Head of Buchenwald: Icons of Atrocity at Nuremberg". *Representations* 63 (1998): 39–64.
- Drotár, Nikolett, 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.
- Ehrenburg, Ilja. "Velikij i nyegaszimij". *Krasznaja Zvezda*, 4 July 1943, 3.
- Ehrenburg, Ilya, and Vasily Grossman. *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*. Translated and edited by David Patterson. Routledge, 2017.
- Fischli, Isabella. "Das Wiener Wiesenthal Institut für Holocaust-Studien – eine Chance für Österreichs schwierigen Gang in die Eigene Geschichte". *Die Gemeinde*, 1 August 2006, 51.
- Fleming, Michael. *Auschwitz, the Allies and Censorship of the Holocaust*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Fleming, Michael. "Disseminating News of the Holocaust: Polish Jewish Representatives and Journalists". *Zeszyty Naukowe PUNO* 5 (2017), 73–91.
- Fox, John P. "The Jewish Factor in British War Crimes Policy in 1942". *English Historical Review* 362 (1977): 80–106.
- Friedrich, K.-P., et al. *Poland: General Government August 1941–1945*. De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024.
- Fuchs, Abraham. *השואה במקורות רבניים: שו"ת ודרשות* [The Holocaust in rabbinic sources: Responsa and sermons]. Self-published, 1995.

- Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture". In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Basic Books, 1973.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. "Medals and Shells: On Morphology and History, Once Again". *Critical Inquiry* 2 (2019): 380–395.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. Translated by John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Goldberg, Amos. "Rumor Culture among Warsaw Jews under Nazi Occupation: A World of Catastrophe Reenchanted". *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 3 (2016): 91–125.
- Goldberg, Amos. "The History of the Jews in the Ghettos: A Cultural Perspective". In *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, edited by Dan Stone. Berghahn, 2012.
- Goldberg, B. Z. *The Jewish Problem in the Soviet Union. An Analysis and a Solution*. Crown Publishers, 1961, 53.
- Gregory, Adrian. *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Harff, Jeffrey. *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust*. Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Hausleitner, Mariana, Souza Hazan, and Barbara Hutzelmann. *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945. Band 13: Slowakei, Rumänien, Bulgarien*. De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018.
- Heller, K. J. *The Nuremberg Military Tribunals and the Origins of International Criminal Law*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Heltai Jenő. *A négy fal között. Naplótöredékek 1944–1945*. Magvető, 2014.
- Hicks, Jeff. *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–1946*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012.
- Hilberg, Raul. *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Yale University Press, 2003.
- Hirsch, Francine. *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg: A New History of the International Military Tribunal after World War II*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Israel, Gérard. *The Jews in Russia*. Translated by Sanford L. Chernoff. St. Martin's Press, 1975, 18.
- Jacobson, Mark. *The Lampshade: A Holocaust Detective Story from Buchenwald to New Orleans*. Simon & Schuster, 2011.
- Jockusch, Laura, ed. *Khurbn-Forschung: Documents on Early Holocaust Research in Postwar Poland*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022.
- Kaplan, Israel. "Folklor". In *Von der letzten Zerstörung. Die Zeitschrift "Fun letstn churbn" der Jüdischen Historischen Kommission in München 1946–1948*, edited by Frank Beer and Markus Roth. Metropol, 2021.
- Kaplan, Israel. *The Voice of the Ghetto*. Yad Vashem, 2013.
- Kartashova, Olga. "The Soap Myth of the Holocaust: The Old Story and The New Speculations". Edited by Menahems Barkahans. Shamir Society, 2016.

- Kingsbury, Celia M. *For Home and Country: World War I Propaganda on the Home Front*. University of Nebraska Press, 2010, 67.
- Klein, Ralph. "Der Wille zur Reinheit: Antisemitismus und hygienischer Furor". *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 7 (2002): 602–621.
- Klinger, Chajka. *I Am Writing These Words to You: The Original Diaries, Będzin 1943*. Edited by Avihu Ronen. Translated by Anna Brzostowska and Jerzy Giebułtowski. Moresheit; Givat Haviva; Yad Vashem, 2017.
- Kunt, Gergely. *Az Auschwitz-kód [The Auschwitz code]*. Jaffa, 2025.
- Kushner, Tony. *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1994.
- Laqueur, Walter. *The Terrible Secret*. Little, Brown and Company, 1980.
- Laqueur, Walter, and Judith Taylor, eds. *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*. Yale University Press, 2001.
- Lindeperg, Sylvie. *La batailles des Images*. Payot, 2025.
- Lipstadt, Deborah. *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. Plume, 1994.
- Neander, Joachim. "The Danzig Soap Case: Facts and Legends around 'Professor Spanner' and the Danzig Anatomic Institute 1944–1945". *German Studies Review* 1 (2006): 63–86.
- Neander, Joachim. *The German Corpse Factory: The Master Hoax of British Propaganda in the First World War*. Universaar, 2013.
- Neander, Joachim. "Seife aus Judenfett: Zur Wirkungsgeschichte einer zeitgenössischen Sage". *Fabula* 46 (2005): 241–256.
- Neander, Joachim. "Symbolically Burying the Six Million: Post-War Soap Burial in Romania, Bulgaria and Brazil". *Human Remains and Violence* 2, no. 1 (2016): 23–40.
- Neubauer, Hans Joachim. *The Rumor: A Cultural History*. Translated by Christian Braun. Free Association Press, 1999.
- Panneton, Daniel. "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>.
- Polanyi, Karl. *The Great Transformation*. Beacon Press, 2001.
- Pollin-Galay, Hannah. *Occupied Words: What the Holocaust Did to Yiddish*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024.
- Ponsonby, Arthur. *Falsehood in War-Time: Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated Throughout the Nations During the Great War*. George Allen & Unwin, 1928.
- Popoff, Alexandra. *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*. Yale University Press, 2019.
- Rajcan, Vanda. "Žilina". In *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos: Volume 3*, edited by Geoffrey P. Megargee and Joseph Robert White. Indiana University Press, 2025.
- Reilly, Joanne. *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp*. Routledge, 1998.
- Rein, Raanan. "Fútbol, etnicidad y otredad: el Club Atlético Atlanta de Buenos Aires". *Iberoamericana* 6 (2013), 65–78.
- Rupnow, Dirk. *Vernichten und Erinnern: Spuren nationalsozialistischer Gedächtnispolitik*. Wallenstein, 2005.

- Sahlins, Marshall. *The Island of History*. University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Sanders, M. L., and Philip M. Taylor. *British Propaganda during the First World War, 1914–1918*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1987.
- Schacter, J. J. “Holocaust Commemoration and Tish’a be-Av: The Debate over ‘Yom Ha-Sho’a’”. *Tradition* 2 (2008): 164–197.
- Segev, Zohar. *The World Jewish Congress during the Holocaust*. De Gruyter, 2014.
- Shneer, David. *Grief: The Biography of a Holocaust Photograph*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Shneer, David. *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust*. Rutgers University Press, 2011.
- Smyth, Graham. “Nazi ‘Black’ Propaganda to Britain: Secret Radio Stations and British Renegades”. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 2 (2024): 261–281.
- Stier, Oren Baruch. *Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory*. Rutgers University Press, 2015.
- Szabó, Zoltán Tibori. “The Auschwitz Reports: Who Got Them, and When?” In *The Auschwitz Reports and the Holocaust in Hungary*, edited by Randolph L. Braham and William J. Vander Heuvel, 85–120. Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Szántó T. Gábor. “‘Jog, hogyha van ...’ (A Bodrogi-dosszié). I. rész”. *Szombat*, 1 January 1990, 13–14.
- Telex. “‘Akkor szappan lenne belőled’ – mondta a Fidesz-szimpatizáns, majd autójával eltolta a Tizasok asztalát”. *Telex*, 4 April 2025.
- Tomkiewicz, Monika, and Piotr Semków. *Soap from Human Fat: The Case of Professor Spanner*. Translated by Garth James Burge and Monika Sarnowska-Burge. Róża Wiatrów, 2013.
- Veidlinger, Jeffrey. *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*. Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Wasserman, Tony, ed. *Last Letters from the Shoah*. Translated by Batsheva Pomerantz. Devora–Yad Vashem, 2004.
- Webb, Chris. *The Bełżec Death Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance*. ibidem press, 2016.
- Zimándi Pius István. *Egy év története naplójegyzetekben*. Magvető, 2015.
- Zimmerman, Joshua D. *The Polish Underground and the Jews, 1939–1945*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

**Lóránt Bódi**, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah and an Honorary Research Associate at the University of Jewish Studies in Budapest. His research interests focus on the social and cultural history of the Holocaust and its memory. His first book, *Sebre tett kézzel: Újrakezdés, emlékezet és populáris képzelet a vészorszak után* [With Wounded Hands: New Beginning, Memory, and Popular Imagination after the Holocaust], was published in 2026.

Email: [lorant.bodi87@gmail.com](mailto:lorant.bodi87@gmail.com)

Quotation: Lóránt Bódi, From Rumour to Holocaust Icon. The Historical Trajectories of the Holocaust Soap Myth, in *S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation*. 13 (2026) 1, 4–34.

[https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126/art\\_bodi](https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126/art_bodi)

S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 13 (2026) 1 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126>

This article is licensed under the following Creative Commons License: CC-BY-SA (Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives).

Markéta Bajgerová Verly

## One Past, Two Histories

*Exhibiting the Shanghai Jewish Refugees in China and Austria. A Comparative Perspective*

---

### Abstract

Many museums around the World launched exhibitions on the topic of Shanghai Jewish refugees in the past few years, putting the history of 20,000 Jews who fled to Shanghai 1933–1941 on display. Though connected in topic, the exhibitions do not present a unified historical account. This paper puts into a comparative perspective two Shanghai Jewish Refugees history exhibitions that opened in 2020: the temporary exhibit titled “Little Vienna in Shanghai” by the Jewish Museum in Vienna and the reworked permanent exhibition of the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum in Shanghai. The two exhibits present diametrically different versions of the experience of the European Jewry in the Shanghai exile, the former addressing the challenges that awaited the refugees in the city, the latter romanticising the situation and claiming utopian harmony between the Chinese and the Jews. While analysing how each exhibition curates the history of Jewish exile in Shanghai, the paper points out not only the obvious differences between their narratives but the common overlaps in shared absences and lack of historical contextualisation of the complex reality of wartime Shanghai. Ultimately, the comparison serves as a reflection that the much discussed “globalisation of memory” does not necessarily entail pluralisation or an increased inclusion of perspectives; it can equally produce parallel, partial narratives shaped by national and/or institutional imperatives.

---

Irene Eber’s collection of primary sources relating to Jewish exile in Shanghai, which at its peak included as many as 20,000 refugees from Europe, opens with two quotes from Jewish women who found themselves in the city of Shanghai in 1941. The first quote comes from the diary of Shoshana Kahan, in which she noted: “What a disgusting city Shanghai is ... Now I understand the terrible letters we received from those who had the misfortune to be sent here. A dirty disgusting city.” Eber immediately follows up this quote with another voice, that of Annemarie Pordes, who, when asked about Shanghai, reminisced: “it was impossible not to love it at first sight.”<sup>1</sup> Eber chose to start the introduction to her book with these two quotes to illustrate the varying impressions incoming refugees had of the city. But these contrasting perspectives also serve as a remarkably effective entry point for analysing the memorialisation of the Jewish refugee experience in

---

1 Irene Eber, *Voices from Shanghai: Jewish Exiles in Wartime China* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1.

Shanghai since, as this article explains, many of the exhibitions related to the topic held around the world tend to oscillate between these two interpretations of wartime Shanghai.

Hardly any topic in Holocaust Studies has experienced such a boom in interest across the disciplinary spectrum as the history of Jewish refugees in Shanghai. While in the past, the history of the 20,000 refugees who fled to Shanghai was present mostly on the fringes of exile debates, in recent years it has gained momentum both in academic circles and in public memory. Museums across the world have been active participants in this new development, with exhibitions devoted to the Jewish flight to Shanghai popping up simultaneously in diverse locations. In 2020, as a part of this wave, two exhibitions devoted to Jewish refugees in Shanghai opened simultaneously in the two cities closest to this exile history: Vienna and Shanghai. The Jewish Museum Vienna launched a temporary exhibit entitled *Little Vienna in Shanghai* in October 2020. A few months later, the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum in Shanghai opened to the public after two years of renovations; its new permanent exhibition transformed the site – which previously had been a local site of scattered memory – into a highly structured space with major political significance. Though both exhibitions addressed the same topics, they could not be more different, and here, the parallel with the two quotes listed above becomes apparent: whereas Annemarie Pordes’s quote fittingly describes the approach of the museum in China, Shoshana Kahan’s account of seeing the city as a place of struggle is reminiscent of the “Shanghai” that emerges from the Viennese exhibition.

However, unlike the two women’s perspectives, the museum exhibitions are not individual and deeply subjective. The interpretation of history they display is shaped by their mnemonic, political, and institutional contexts. This article draws on observational field trips to both institutions and interviews with curators and on the testimony collections of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies and materials housed in the David and Fela Shapell Family Collections at the Conservation and Research Center of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). Conceptually borrowing from multidisciplinary studies on memory politics<sup>2</sup> and museum studies,<sup>3</sup> the analysis that follows uses a com-

2 Timothy G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* (Routledge, 2001); Aleida Assmann, “Cultural Memory”, in *Social Trauma – An Interdisciplinary Textbook*, ed. Andreas Hamburger, Camellia Hancheva, and Vamik D. Volkan (Springer Publishing, 2021), 25–26; Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures”, *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 3 (1999): 333–348, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00083>; Wang Zheng, *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict: Historical Memory as a Variable* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Duncan Bell, ed., *Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship Between Past and Present* (Springer, 2006); Cindy Minarova-Banjac, “Collective Memory and Forgetting: A Theoretical Discussion”, *CEWCES Research Paper*, no. 16 (2018): 3–39; Nicole Maurantonio, “The Politics of Memory”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, ed. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Oxford University Press, 2017), 244–258.

3 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (Routledge, 1995); Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Berg, 2007);

parative perspective to unpack the multilevel politics of these two exhibits. It focuses not only on the obvious differences in the content and the curation style of the two museums but – (arguably) even more revealing – on the similarities between the strategies both exhibitions use to exclude parts of this complex history to construct their respective interpretations of the historical experience of exile in wartime China.

### *The Global Boom in the History of the Shanghai Refugees*

Recent years have seen booming interest in the history of Shanghai as place of wartime exile, and the two exhibitions analysed here are part of this cross-disciplinary and transnational surge both as outcomes and as driving forces behind this development. There are multiple factors that have contributed to the expansion of this field of inquiry. The first involves academic discussions and debates in which the topic of the Holocaust in Asia has become more prominent over the past decade. To provide one anecdotal example, the USHMM organised a research workshop entitled “The Holocaust and Asia: Refugees, Memory, and Material Culture” in 2022, during which more than half of the seventeen speakers focused on the topic of Shanghai.<sup>4</sup> But this trend is more broadly confirmed by the myriad works published in the past few years on the history of Jewish refugees in Shanghai and on other topics related to the Holocaust in the wider Indo-Pacific region.<sup>5</sup>

The recent enthusiasm for studying the Holocaust in East Asia should be read alongside ongoing debates on the so-called globalisation and universalisation of memory, which focus on traveling mnemonic tropes in terms of memory practices, content-level inclusions of international topics unrelated to domestic developments, or in normative terms of expanding the existing human

---

Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (Rutgers University Press, 2018); Sharon Macdonald, ed., *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture* (Routledge, 1998); Denise Ho, “博物馆Museum”, in *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, ed. Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere (ANU Press, 2019), 141–148; Kirk A. Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2014); Marzia Varutti, *Museums in China: The Politics of Representation after Mao* (Boydell Press, 2014).

4 US Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The Holocaust and Asia: Refugees, Memory, and Material Culture,” accessed 5 January 2025, <https://www.ushmm.org/research/opportunities-for-academics/conferences-and-workshops/research-workshop-program/holocaust-and-asia>.

5 See Guang Pan, *A Study of Jewish Refugees in China (1933–1945): History, Theories and the Chinese Pattern* (Springer, 2019); Bei Gao, *Shanghai Sanctuary: Chinese and Japanese Policy Toward European Jewish Refugees During World War II* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Steve Hochstadt, *Exodus to Shanghai: Stories of Escape from the Third Reich* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); Kevin Ostoyich and Yun Xia, *The History of the Shanghai Jews New Pathways of Research* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2022); Rotem Kowner and Xu Xin, “The Jews in Shanghai: The Emergence, Fall and Resurgence of East Asia’s Largest Jewish Community”, in *Jewish Communities in Modern Asia: Their Rise, Demise and Resurgence*, ed. Rotem Kowner (Cambridge University Press, 2023), to name just a few.

rights regime.<sup>6</sup> Though these discussions should be approached critically, their formation and the traction they have been gaining in ever-evolving scholarship has expanded the scope of Holocaust studies to include geographical regions once marginalised in research on topics related to exile. However, concurrent developments have been unfolding in the wider Northeast Asian space and, importantly, within Chinese domestic politics, which I regard as equally, if not decisively, contributing to the recent attention paid to the history of Jewish refugees in Shanghai.

Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the domestic reading of the much-politicised history of the Second World War in China has undergone a dramatic transformation. Standing at the forefront of the Chinese Communist Party's legitimisation campaign since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the narrative of the Second World War (referred to as the War of Resistance against Japan, the Anti-Japanese War, or the World Anti-Fascist War in China) under Xi Jinping has been deployed to reflect China's aspiration to consolidate its global great power status.<sup>7</sup> Mnemonically, this has entailed moving away from a previously all-encompassing victim framework in which China's wartime suffering is highlighted, and instead focusing on China as a member of the Allies, and thus, first and foremost, a victor in the Second World War. To drive this narrative home, the memorialisation process, on the one hand, involved moving away from a focus on atrocity and instead promoting the conflict as a story of triumph and the origin point of China's "rejuvenation".<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, and absolutely key for the analysis here, this turn has involved the internationalisation of China's wartime narrative. Whereas previously the narrative primarily focused on the domestic resistance struggle, thus echoing the concerns of the Chinese leadership, in the Xi Jinping Era, the narrative began to incorporate a strong international perspective. This shift is evidenced both in the positioning of the conflict in China within the wider "World War II narrative frame" – which has included the increased incorporation of other theaters of the conflict into official state discourse – and in China's official engagement with transnational memory movements.<sup>9</sup> Internationalising the Sec-

- 6 Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Berg, 2007); Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Memory and the Holocaust in the Global Age* (Temple University Press, 2005); Dan Diner, *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse: Über Geltung und Wirkung des Holocaust* (V&R, 2007); Ljiljana Radonić, "The Holocaust Template – Memorial Museums in Hungary, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina", *Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva: časopis za politologiju* 15, no. 1 (2018): 131–154, <https://doi.org/10.20901/an.15.06>.
- 7 Mark R. Frost, Edward Vickers, and Daniel Schumacher, *Remembering Asia's World War Two* (Routledge, 2019).
- 8 Vincent K. L. Chang, "Recalling Victory, Recounting Greatness: Second World War Remembrance in Xi Jinping's China", *The China Quarterly* 248, no. 1 (2021): 1152–1173, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741021000497>; Vincent K. L. Chang, "Exemplifying National Unity and Victory in Local State Museums: Chongqing and the New Paradigm of World War II Memory in China", *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 138 (2022): 977–992, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2031004>.
- 9 Rana Mitter, *China's China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Harvard University Press, 2020).

ond World War came to be understood as essential for advancing the foreign policy of the Xi Jinping Era, and as a result, Shanghai as a wartime refuge for European Jewry entered the dominant narrative of World War II in China.<sup>10</sup>

Among other things, these developments resulted in China playing a more active role in promoting this particular history abroad and through the United Nations, a topic that will be addressed in more detail in the next section.<sup>11</sup> As a case in point, the Shanghai Jewish Refugees History Museum became an active contributor to international discussions on Holocaust education, as exemplified by its participation in the 2012 UNESCO expert meeting,<sup>12</sup> and the museum curated several traveling exhibitions which have been displayed in overseas contexts such as the United States,<sup>13</sup> Germany,<sup>14</sup> and Israel.<sup>15</sup> This engagement and outreach has contributed to raising awareness of the topic among academics, museums, and the public in many other countries.

At the same time, another East Asian country – Japan – began signaling its interest in the topic of Jewish exile. The issue of Jewish refugees and their fate in Shanghai recently became another contentious area in the long-lasting, tense Sino-Japanese mnemonic rivalry, with both countries competing over the role of “Asian Schindler”.<sup>16</sup> In 2015, perhaps as a response to the successful inclusion of documents related to the Nanjing Massacre that China submitted to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 2014,<sup>17</sup> Japan began to prepare its own submission of documents related to Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat who issued transit visas for Jews escaping Lithuania during the war.<sup>18</sup> Though many of those who escaped would journey first to Kobe, Japan, they eventually were forced to relocate to Shanghai, where they

10 Markéta Bajgerová Verly, “The Internationalization of Museums of the Chinese War of Resistance in the Xi Era: China as a ‘Guarantor of Peace’ and ‘Rescuer of Jews’”, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 39, no. 3 (2025): 473–491, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcaf038>.

11 Vincent K. L. Chang, “China’s New Historical Statecraft: Reviving the Second World War for National Rejuvenation”, *International Affairs* 98, no. 3 (2022): 1053–1069, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia021>.

12 Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, “UNESCO Expert Meeting: Holocaust Education in a Global Context,” 3 May 2012, <https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/info/1261/7922.htm>.

13 Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, “Tour Exhibition in Los Angeles in 2013”, 12 February 2014, <https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/info/1161/7842.htm>; Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, “Tour Exhibition in Chicago in 2013”, 11 February 2014, <https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/info/1161/7852.htm>.

14 Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, “Tour Exhibition in Germany”, 5 August 2011, <https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/info/1161/9133.htm>.

15 Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, “The Exhibition on Jewish Refugees & Shanghai Opened in Haifa”, 4 May 2012, <https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/info/1161/7892.htm>.

16 Rotem Kowner, “A Holocaust Paragon of Virtue’s Rise to Fame: The Transnational Commemoration of the Japanese Diplomat Sugihara Chiune and Its Divergent National Motives”, *American Historical Review* 12, no 1 (2023): 31–63, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhad139>.

17 “UNESCO Receives Chinese bid for listing of Nanjing Documents”, *Global Times*, 12 June 2014, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/daily-specials/unesco-listing-of-nanjing-documents/index.html>.

18 Jewish (Litvak) Community of Lithuania, “UNESCO Plans to List Sugihara on Memory of the World Registry”, 26 June 2015, <https://www.lzb.lt/en/2015/06/26/unesco-plans-to-list-sugihara-on-memory-of-the-world-registry/>.

were interned in the so-called Designated Area for Stateless Refugees.<sup>19</sup>

The timing of Shanghai's increasing prominence in China's wartime history is not coincidental, particularly as China began promoting the figure of Ho Fengshan, the Chinese Consul General in Vienna who helped issue exit visas to several thousands of Austrian Jews.<sup>20</sup> The elevation of Ho Fengshan as a key figure in the history of the Holocaust in the Chinese context has therefore also contributed to the ongoing boom in works, exhibitions, and debates on the fate of the 20,000 Jewish refugees who fled Europe and made their way to Shanghai. All of these developments advanced the issue not only mnemonically but also politically. The two exhibitions at the center of this article stem directly from this context and not only serve as interesting examples of how a historical issue becomes entangled in different institutional and national political milieus but also demonstrate how exhibitions actively participate in the political process of "globalising" memory.

### *Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum as an Arena for China's Foreign Policy*

To illustrate how recent the inclusion of the Holocaust in official Chinese discourse is, a useful example can be found in the institutional archives of the USHMM's Shapell Center. In 1999, the USHMM was preparing a temporary exhibition entitled *Flight and Rescue*, and as a part of the curatorial process, the museum staff contacted the Chinese authorities in Shanghai to secure permission to borrow objects for this exhibit. That there was little interest in the topic of Jewish exile in China at that time was clear from the email exchanges between USHMM staff in Washington, DC and the employee who traveled to Shanghai to secure a menorah to display in the exhibit from the municipal authorities of the coastal city. In their correspondence with their colleagues back in the United States, the USHMM employee in Shanghai repeatedly voiced frustration about their communications with local Chinese representatives not only regarding their disinterest in the topic but also in terms of the municipality's inability to locate the objects in their collections and archives. In an email that revealed their exasperation, the employee recommended reaching out to Japanese authorities, claiming that "in Japan, there seems to be an interest in the Holocaust (unlike in China)".<sup>21</sup> This small

19 Eber, *Voices from Shanghai*, 17.

20 "Chinese Schindler' Honored in San Francisco", *Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in San Francisco*, 2 April 2014, [https://sanfrancisco.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/lqyw/201404/t20140402\\_9531892.htm](https://sanfrancisco.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/lqyw/201404/t20140402_9531892.htm).

21 Quoted from an internal letter found in the Exhibitions Division: Records Relating to Developing the "Flight and Rescue" Exhibition, 1998–1999, Accession Nos. 2002.145 & 2003.124, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC.

glimpse into the preparations for this exhibit demonstrates that Chinese officials did not view the topic of Jewish refugees in Shanghai as important at the turn of the millennium, a position that stands in stark contrast to the vast attention representatives of both Shanghai and China as a whole place on the topic today.

The Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum (SJRM) opened in 2007 in the Hongkou district of Shanghai, a place where most of the Jewish refugees spent the war. In the early years of mass arrivals, starting in the early 1930s, the refugees lived in the neighbourhood as residents, building up the core of their exile community. Later, the Hongkou area became the site of their confinement as in 1941, it was transformed into a Japanese-administrated ghetto, officially referred to by the Japanese as a “designated area for stateless refugees”.<sup>22</sup> In the post-war years, the district was transformed into an urban residential area until the early 2000s, when the renovation of the Ohel Moshe synagogue (originally constructed in 1927), the centerpiece of the future memorial site, began. The opening of the museum in 2007 was then followed up by several additional renewal projects in adjacent areas (such as White Horse Inn, renovated in 2014), and in 2014, the museum unveiled a monument comprising a sculpture group depicting the refugees and a wall of names, and a museum exhibition. But overall, the exhibitions displayed in these earlier phases of the museum were narrower in scope and often had a thematic focus. When I first visited the museum in 2019, there were two temporary exhibits on display: one entitled *Anne Frank: A History for Today*, and the other entitled *Exhibition in Memory of Jacob Rosenfeld*, both of which were small in terms of both the space allotted and the amount of material presented.

In 2020, the scattered patchwork of different exhibits changed dramatically as the museum underwent a large-scale expansion and restructuring, the major outcome of which was a newly unified permanent exhibition.<sup>23</sup> The stark differences between the new exhibition and earlier iterations of the museum are immediately apparent when entering the new exhibit: the visitor encounters technologically advanced audio-visual elements and curatorial gimmicks, something Arleen Ionescu describes as the museum’s transformation into an “experiential museum,” as the exhibit starts on an ascending staircase with a historical timeline which leads into a short introductory movie that serves as a prologue to the exhibition.<sup>24</sup> All this suggests that a massive increase in funding is making these installations possible. Besides the apparent affluence of the institution, another spectacle communicating high-level interest in the topic is visible at the bottom of

22 Pan Guang, *A Study of Jewish Refugees in China (1933–1945): History, Theories and the Chinese Pattern* (Springer, 2019).

23 Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, “Introduction of the Museum”, accessed 1 January 2026, [https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/About\\_Us/About\\_the\\_Museum.htm](https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/About_Us/About_the_Museum.htm).

24 Arleen Ionescu, “Toward a Memorial Ethics of Hope? Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum”, *Memory Studies* (2025), 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980251359580>.

the staircase. The first content a visitor sees upon entry is an embellished gold slogan that covers an entire wall: “Work Together to Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind”, a feature also noted by Edward Vickers in his analysis of the site.<sup>25</sup> As has been widely covered in scholarship on China’s international politics in the Xi Jinping Era, “Community with a Shared Future for Mankind” (人类命运共同体; Pinyin: *renlei mingyun gongtongti*) has been one of the defining concepts of Xi’s foreign policy and thought, and it is associated with China’s proactive and increasingly assertive great power politics.<sup>26</sup> That the Shanghai Jewish Refugees History Museum exhibition opens with this statement is a clear message that this history should be viewed as directly connected to high-stakes national and international politics.

Before turning to the content of the exhibition, a discussion of the target audience is necessary. Unlike most museums in the People’s Republic of China devoted to historical topics related to World War II, the SJRM is *not* primarily aimed at domestic audiences. Rather, the museum openly asserts that it is intended for international visitors. This is apparent already when purchasing a ticket as visitors are required to present a passport for statistical (and identification) purposes. This process comes full circle in the inner courtyard of the memorial complex, which the visitor enters after finishing their tour of the exhibit. In addition to the commemorative wall of names and sculpture, the courtyard includes a collection of national flags representing the nationalities of people who have visited the museum over the years. The museum proudly declares that its visitors come from 120 countries, further elucidating institution’s ambition to make a global impact.<sup>27</sup>

A specific but key segment of this international audience are high-level diplomatic envoys who make official visits to the museum as part of their itineraries; for example, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the museum in 2013.<sup>28</sup> The political charge of the museum completes the full curatorial circle as these official visits themselves become part of the exhibition. The penultimate section of the permanent exhibition entitled “Towards a Shared Future” (again, a direct allusion to Xi Jinping’s concept of a “Community with a Shared Future for Man-

25 Edward Vickers, “Celebrating the Humane Superpower: Chinese Nationalism, the Holocaust and Transnational Heritage Politics at Shanghai’s Jewish Refugees Museum”, *Holocaust Studies* 29, no. 4 (2022): 574, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2022.2116543>.

26 Angela Poh and Mingjian Li, “A China in Transition: The Rhetoric and Substance of Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping”, *Asian Security* 13, no. 2 (2017): 84–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2017.1286163>; Camilla T. N. Sørensen, “The Significance of Xi Jinping’s ‘Chinese Dream’ for Chinese Foreign Policy: From ‘Tao Guang Yang Hui’ to ‘Fen Fa You Wei’”, *Journal of China and International Relations* 3, no. 1 (2015): 53–73, <https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.jcir.v3i1.1146>; Xiaochun Zhao, “In Pursuit of a Community of Shared Future: China’s Global Activism in Perspective”, *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2018): 23–37, <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740018500082>.

27 Yi Zheng, “The Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum’s Permanent Exhibition”, *Museum Worlds* 10, no. 10 (2022): 282.

28 “Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu salutes ‘haven’ of Shanghai”, *South China Morning Post*, 7 May 2013, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1232285/israeli-leader-netanyahu-visits-shanghais-old-jewish-ghetto>.

kind”) puts on display photographs of dignitaries and the objects they have gifted to the museum; after viewing these artifacts, the visitor is led into the final room – the figurative climax of the high-level diplomatic purpose of the museum. There, the visitor encounters a video made by the Consulate General of Israel in Shanghai to mark the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the normalisation of Sino-Israeli relations in 2012; the film also was shown at the opening of the museum’s first expansion in 2015, which was also the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II.<sup>29</sup> Entitled “Thank you, Shanghai”, the one-minute video opens with Holocaust survivors and their families holding signs communicating their gratitude to Shanghai for serving as a wartime refuge; this is followed up with a series of everyday scenes from Israel featuring the sign “谢谢” (Pinyin: *xiè xiè*; English: thank you) included in an astonishing variety of objects (on a sign attached to the front bumper of a moving tractor, written in sunscreen on the back of a topless woman lying on a beach, or fashioned with pieces of red pepper on top of two pizzas in a picnic basket – to name just a few examples). The highlight of this spectacle is an intervention by Benjamin Netanyahu, who appears on screen and declares: “We are eternally grateful, and we will never forget. Thank you.” This scene not only serves as the film’s conclusion; it is the final scene of the entire permanent exhibition.

This tone of gratitude and Sino-Israeli cooperation is not limited to the final sections of the museum; it is, in fact, the main theme running throughout the entire exhibition.<sup>30</sup> Starting with the introductory video, the permanent exhibition advances a narrative of China heroically “rescuing” Jewish refugees despite its own suffering at the hands of fascism and the Japanese occupation; it twists historical realities to present the space of refuge carved out in wartime Shanghai as an example of China’s international moral and historical protagonism. Both Yi Zheng<sup>31</sup> and Arleen Ionescu<sup>32</sup> observe that though the Holocaust itself features as a backdrop for this drama, the narrative of the museum does not focus on suffering but rather on “hope”, “warmth”, and “international cooperation”. When suffering is addressed (apart from a small section devoted to the Holocaust in Europe and, more specifically, Auschwitz-Birkenau), it is presented as a shared Jewish-Chinese experience, as both groups are regarded by the museum as victims of global fascism. The museum also promotes a vision of cooperation stemming from the mutually recognised victimhood of European Jews and the Chinese under Japanese occupation.

This dominant message of “cooperation” is advanced through the strategic deployment of topics that emphasise the harmonious

29 Li Xueqing, “Israel Presents a Moving Tribute to Shanghai”, *China Daily*, 9 September 2015, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015victoryanniv/2015-09/05/content\\_21819977.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015victoryanniv/2015-09/05/content_21819977.htm).

30 Zheng, *The Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum’s Permanent Exhibition*, 282.

31 *Ibid.*, 283.

32 Ionescu, “Toward a Memorial Ethics of Hope?” 1–18.

cohabitation of the Jewish refugees and Chinese locals, such as a section retelling a “romantic story of Chinese-Jewish marriage”, or a “memory of fearless cooperation”. Furthermore, this “harmonious” narrative is supported by decontextualised quotes from interviews with some of the survivors, which are visually enlarged and placed in highly visible locations in upper sections of tableaux. One quotation reads, “... Jews have great interest in family life, like the Chinese”, which is positioned as a titular statement in section entitled “Starting a New Life”; another statement: “Chinese were not prejudiced against Jews” – a quote from survivor Manfred Gabler – is the only information visitors encounter from Gabler’s testimony in that section about his experience in Shanghai.

The narrative of cooperation is further strengthened through artistic objects and artifacts. For example, the exhibition features a diorama sculpture of two boys – one Chinese and one Jewish – playing with firecrackers (famously an ancient Chinese invention) in front of the entrance to a traditional Chinese house. What progresses this historical narrative further are dramatic oil paintings of scenes of Sino-Jewish friendship or cooperation in the face of their joint suffering under Japanese occupation and the Allied bombings of the Hongkou district. The exhibit’s penultimate section entitled “Special Feelings for China” communicates to visitors that “the experience of taking refuge in Shanghai made Jewish refugees feel grateful for China, which saved their lives”, concentrating on refugees who remained in Shanghai after the war. This display directly leads into the aforementioned final room, where contemporary diplomatic visits become extensions of these “special feelings”.

It is necessary to explicate that compared to historical research, primary sources, and survivor testimonies in their entirety, the version of history presented in the Chinese exhibition is at best selective and at worst misleading. First, the overall conceptualisation of the history of Jewish refugees in Shanghai as a story driven exclusively by Chinese protagonism is questionable. When the first wave of Jewish refugees from Europe began arriving in 1933, Shanghai was one of the most administratively complex cities in the World. The city was defined by its multi-colonised character; throughout the violent second half of nineteenth century, Shanghai was fractured into several units run by different administrative authorities. The city was one of the ports forcefully “opened” to the Western powers for trade following the First Opium War, after which it was divided into the British and US-run International Settlement, the French concession governed directly from Paris, and the Chinese parts of the city run by the Kuomintang (Nationalist) government – which had been engaged in a brutal civil war with the Chinese Communist Party since 1927.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, though the Chinese – meaning the Nationalist

33 Non Arkaraprasertkul, “Power, Politics, and the Making of Shanghai”, *Journal of Planning History* 9, no. 4 (2010), 232–259, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538513210382384>.

- authorities were active at the municipal level of politics, 1930s Shanghai was not a fully Chinese city in the bureaucratic sense. This multinational structure makes it necessary to clarify that Shanghai did *not* have a “no visa” policy; this point, as Eber points out, is a common “mistaken assumption.”<sup>34</sup> Rather, due to the complex bureaucratic structure of Shanghai, visa checks were arbitrary, and this created a window of opportunity for those seeking to enter the city, including those escaping from Europe.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the direct link the exhibition draws between the current Chinese government and Shanghai as a refuge for people fleeing ethnic and racial persecution is an oversimplification of an exceptionally complicated context.

There are many other historical misconceptions presented, including the inflated emphasis on the few individuals who remained in Shanghai after the war; out of the almost 20,000 refugees, less than ten per cent remained in the city after Shanghai’s liberation in 1945 as the city<sup>36</sup> - indeed, the whole country - plunged into a full-scale civil war that was only temporarily paused in 1936 to fight the Japanese invasion.<sup>37</sup> Most strikingly, however, to claim the relationship between the Chinese and the Jews was one of harmonious cohabitation - and to curate a full exhibition around it - means misinterpreting the testimonies of the survivors and the historical context overall. When in 1941 the Japanese forced the Jewish refugees into a “Designated Area for Stateless Refugees”, better known as the “Shanghai ghetto”, thousands of Jews from different parts of Europe were confined to a 2.5-square-kilometer area together with thousands of local Chinese residents.<sup>38</sup> Though there were anecdotal cases of solidarity and exchange amid severe hardship in wartime Shanghai, the full-length testimonies of Holocaust survivors reveal limited contact and tensions between the Chinese and the Europeans. Eva P., one of the survivors whose testimony is preserved in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, describes her family’s interactions with locals as characterised by initial distrust and suspicion: “It wasn’t so much, from the Chinese, anti-semitism as anti-white, anti-foreigner”, an account that destabilises the harmonious image projected by the museum.<sup>39</sup> Eva P.’s testimony offers a first-hand perspective on an issue also identified by Vickers, namely, that for the Chinese who were motivated by nationalism, the Jewish refugees represented yet another group of Western, white “imperialists” among the already established Eu-

34 Eber, *Voices from Shanghai*, 9.

35 *Ibid.*, 9–10.

36 Vickers, *Celebrating the Humane Superpower*, 571.

37 Hans van de Ven, *China at War: Triumph and Tragedy in the Emergence of the New China* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

38 Christian Henriot, “Shanghai and the Experience of War: The Fate of Refugees”, *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no 2 (2006): 230, <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00355414v1>.

39 Eva P. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-1677), Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University Library, New Haven, CT (hereafter Fortunoff Video Archive).

ropean populations present in Shanghai – a sentiment fueled by the invasion and occupation of Chinese territories by colonial powers starting in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> The testimony of Lisa B., then, goes further, revealing how mutual prejudice and class impacted Chinese-Jewish interactions:

Here I was surrounded by totally different people, who didn't speak the language I spoke, I never learned Chinese, and I don't remember my first reaction to it. You know it was theirs, and I knew they were different. I mean there was no question they were different. They were also treated differently, there were whites and there were, you know, Chinese. I hate to say it, but this was an imperialist city when I first got there.<sup>41</sup>

She later continues to share that her family, during their first years in China, had a Chinese domestic helper (阿妈; Pinyin: *Ama*) who also helped to care for the children. An *Ama* was a local figure frequently present in the testimonies of survivors, particularly those who experienced exile as children or youths. In addition to demonstrating the complex interpersonal relations between Lisa B.'s Jewish family and the Chinese residents, however, this personal account also reveals the significant role played by class in Chinese-Jewish interactions and the tensions between these groups – an issue addressed in a large number of testimonies related to Shanghai preserved in the Fortunoff Archive. When refugees were forced to relocate to the “designated area”, they were forced to move into a neighborhood where some of the poorest Chinese families in the city resided.<sup>42</sup> For many of the refugees, this represented another socioeconomic blow, exasperating the tensions and culture shock they experienced after fleeing Europe. In an illustrative incident, Lisa B. recalls a situation in which her father, enraged by a Chinese rickshaw bearer's request for a payment higher than the one to which they had previously agreed, pulled out a whip and “went after him”.<sup>43</sup>

The objective of this brief engagement with some of the testimonies of those who escaped to Shanghai is not to suggest that these statements, in contrast to the exhibition, provide a full and complete account of the historical reality of Hongkou between 1939 and 1945. Rather, it shows how engaging more deeply with the existing testimonies paints a far more complex portrait than the one displayed in the SJRM. Moreover, it also demonstrates the lengths to which the museum in Shanghai went to simplify these testimonies and sources to curate an astonishingly clear, linear, and one-dimensional image of Shanghai as a safe haven and place of ethnic and racial harmony between the Chinese and Jews – a version largely removed from the historical reality of wartime Shanghai.

40 Vickers, *Celebrating the Humane Superpower*, 571.

41 Lisa B. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-2894), Fortunoff Video Archive.

42 Henriot, *Shanghai and the Experience of War*, 219.

43 Lisa B. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-2894), Fortunoff Video Archive.

However, it would be a mistake to see the newly revamped exhibition as stemming from an effort to present a part of the city's history in all its "authentic" complexity. The leadership of the PRC, since its establishment in 1949, has viewed Chinese historical museums as what Denise Ho calls "a political classroom".<sup>44</sup> The SJRM exhibition, like most of the World War II museums in contemporary China, is designed to drive China's strategic objectives, in this instance, those related to foreign policy. After its 2020 opening in Hongkou, the impact of the exhibition has reached far beyond its home. A condensed traveling version of the exhibition was developed, and in 2023, it arrived in New York City, where it was presented under the title, *Shanghai, Former Homeland – Jewish Refugees and Shanghai*,<sup>45</sup> fulfilling the policy objectives of the Chinese state on an international stage.

*"Little Vienna in Shanghai": The Benefits and Pitfalls of an Exclusively Refugee Perspective*

The temporary exhibit "Little Vienna in Shanghai" presented by the Jewish Museum Vienna between October 2020 and June 2021 acts as a symbolic counterpole to the permanent exhibition in Shanghai in terms of its narrative. Part of the recent international boom of the topic, the exhibition came into being as a follow-up to an exhibition on Shanghai refugees in the United States attended by Danielle Spera, the then-director of the Vienna Jewish Museum and co-curator of the 2020–2021 exhibit.<sup>46</sup> In many ways, it is astonishing that it is only as a part of the recent interest in the topic that a temporary exhibit appeared in Vienna given that an estimated 6,000 persons who found refuge in Shanghai came from Austria. Some of the families and their descendants still live in Vienna, and the exhibition heavily relied on the stories of survivors and the photographs and objects they donated for the exhibit. The exhibition clearly foregrounded Austrian refugees' experiences, and its content consistently followed this line. This orientation was particularly striking when it came to the personal objects families donated, including items that traveled with the families when they fled Austria for Shanghai, remained with them throughout the war years and in the ghetto, and then journeyed back to Vienna. Some of these artifacts represented a cultural link to Europe, such as a bust of Beethoven brought by Fritz Hungerleider; other artifacts were everyday items such as a wooden rolling pin for dough. The objects donated by the families also included items acquired in Shanghai, such as a set of mah-

44 Ho, "博物馆Museum", 142.

45 Hongkou Shanghai City Government, "Jewish Refugees and Shanghai Exhibition Held in New York", 9 August 2023, <https://www.shhk.gov.cn/English/006002/006002001/20230809/7df159f7-edfc-4080-8d23-a690ee056c32.html>.

46 Florida Holocaust Museum, "Jewish Refugees in Shanghai", accessed 1 January 2026, <https://www.thefhm.org/exhibits/jewish-refugees-in-shanghai/>.

jong tiles previously owned by Oscar Rosenzweig, which is now integrated into the permanent exhibition of the museum. These artifacts, like the personal stories of their owners, were given in-depth treatment by the curators, and they played an important role in shaping the exhibition's narrative as the visitor encounters the affective links between the material objects and the personal stories of their owners.

The description of the "Shanghai refuge" in the Viennese museum was diametrically opposed to that of its institutional counterpart in China. The Jewish Museum Vienna emphasised that Shanghai was the last resort for refugees not only because of the worldwide closure of borders to immigrants and refugees but also due to incoming refugees' fears about adverse conditions in China. Here Edward Vickers's remark is telling when he suggests that for European Jews, "preferred destinations did not include 'poor and under-developed' China".<sup>47</sup> This sentiment was apparent in some of the testimonies included in the exhibit: "We would have loved to go to England or Czechoslovakia, but then we ended up going to that terribly uncertain Shanghai", shared Hans Ranzenhofer in one of the video testimonies. The exhibition, largely building on survivor accounts, depicted Shanghai as a place of struggle and hardship, and it constructed a narrative of community resilience in extremely difficult circumstances. This narrative thread is explicitly advanced in statements such as, "the new absence from home posed great challenges to most refugees", and the "life in Shanghai was extremely difficult for Jewish women and men", but was also communicated through the visual depictions of Shanghai. The exhibition's version of "Shanghai" implied distance and unfamiliarity and was painted as a place of immense poverty and poor sanitation. This was an image advanced through the choice of historical photographs depicting the city and its inhabitants included in the exhibit; photographs circling an enlarged historical map of Shanghai focused on scenes of what the exhibition describes as "beggar boys", unhoused people in alleys, and many depictions of rickshaws and Chinese "coolies".

It is particularly revealing, then, that the exhibition positioned the rickshaw as an icon of Shanghai and that the museum used a photo of Edith Grauaug seated in a rickshaw as the promotional image for the posters for the exhibition hung around Vienna and printed in related publications. Moreover, the exhibition itself opened with an object - a pedicab - that was curated not as a standard historical object but as a photo prop whereby visitors could take a photograph, recreating the promotional image. This cycle-rickshaw is not a historical artifact related to the Jewish refugees in Shanghai; it was obtained solely for the purpose of the exhibition and had no verifiable relation to Shanghai, China, or the precise historical period covered in the exhibition. It is important to note, however, that pedicabs and pulled rickshaws fre-

47 Vickers, *Celebrating the Humane Superpower*, 570.

quented Shanghai streets in the 1930s in great numbers; it has been estimated that around 60,000 rickshaws operated in the city before the full-scale Japanese invasion in 1937.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, such conveyances are neither exclusively Shanghainese or broadly Chinese; rickshaws are thought to have originated in Japan, and in contemporary China they have a rather negative, or at least contested, connotation. As Edward Rhoads suggests, in the 1930s, “the rickshaw came increasingly to epitomize human exploitation for socially conscious Chinese.”<sup>49</sup> Regarded as symbols of colonial oppression, they were banned by the communists soon after they proclaimed the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, before becoming what some scholars refer to as “self-orientalising” tools to drive tourism in more recent years.<sup>50</sup>

Given the complex history of the rickshaw, it is important to note that its position as an icon of Jewish refugeedom in Shanghai is not merely a figment of the curators’ imagination. Rather, following the traditional historiography of the refugees in Shanghai, it largely emerged from memoirs penned by survivors in which the rickshaw routinely features as a visual marker of their Shanghai exile.<sup>51</sup> Emilia Rydel, in her analysis of one Anka Voticky’s memoirs, identifies how the Chinese appear in Voticky’s account of her experience in Shanghai through the archetypes of “*amah*”, “rickshaw driver”, and “coolies”.<sup>52</sup> Offering a postcolonial reading of the “Jew-Chinese” dynamics of what she refers to as “coexistence on the margins”, Rydel raises a critical point that Voticky’s narrative renders the figure of the Chinese as an “invisible other”. This memoir, Rydel argues, gives readers insight into how the Chinese are represented as discriminated subjects in colonial discourses while the memoir reproduces the very same framing as the Chinese remain confined in social and class repertoires most commonly associated with the orientalist stereotype of the “Chinese servant” in the context of prewar Shanghai.<sup>53</sup>

48 Edward J. M. Rhoads, “Cycles of Cathay: A History of the Bicycle in China”, *Transfers* 2, no. 2 (2012): 95–120, <https://doi.org/10.3167/trans.2012.020207>.

49 Rhoads, “Cycles of Cathay”, 100. Also discussed in David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (University of California Press, 1989), 35–36.

50 See, for example, Greg (“Fritz”) Umbach and Dan Wishnoff, “Strategic Self-Orientalism: Urban Planning Policies and the Shaping of New York City’s Chinatown, 1950–2005”, *Journal of Planning History* 7, no. 3 (2008): 214–238, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538513207313915>; Henry Sze Hang Choi, “Projecting images of China: Star House as a Shopping Centre between Red China and Self-orientalism, 1960s–1970s”, *China Perspectives* 140 (2025): 31–40, <https://doi.org/10.4000/13ptf>.

51 Emilia Rydel, “Perspektywa poskolonialna w badaniach nad diasporą żydowską. Żyd-Chińczyk we wspomnieniach Anki Votickiej”, *Adeptus* 11 (2018): 1–21, <https://www.cceel.com/search/article-detail?id=680196>.

52 *Ibid.*, 17–18.

53 *Ibid.*, 18. References to “orientalism” are here refer to the conscious and unconscious framing of the “Orient” as the subordinated “other”, as conceptualised by Edward W. Said. See Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978). Also notable are the European discussions of China during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which fully reflect the political force of “orientalism”. As argued by Bodo Wiethoff, the debates at the time that constructed China as “inferior” to Europe were deeply influenced by imperialist European ambitions in the area and the principles of social Darwinism. See Bodo Wiethoff, *Introduction to Chinese History from Ancient Times to 1912* (Routledge, 1976), 9–18.

In a similar fashion, Gao Bei offered a critical reading of the historiography of the Shanghai ghetto, pointing out the eurocentrism of the extant literature, which led to a felt absence of the Chinese in the story despite this story unfolding in wartime China.<sup>54</sup> Building on the thematic markers dominant in many of the works on Shanghai refugees, the Viennese exhibition reproduced the perspective of both survivors and the traditional Europe-focused historiography, with the Chinese perspective relegated to a predefined and peripheral role. Though resonant with the refugee perspective, this approach blurs the complexity of power relations among Shanghai's diverse population in the 1930s and 1940s and, by extension, the history of exile in the city.

Furthermore, though in line with many of the subjective accounts of survivors, the interpretation of Shanghai as a place of exceptional poverty and severely compromised hygiene is only a partial representation of the historical reality. In the 1920s and 1930s, Shanghai was a global, cosmopolitan metropolis with expanding entrepreneurial affluence and a flowering cultural scene not solely attributable to its international (non-Chinese) population.<sup>55</sup> Chinese entrepreneurs, bankers, and industrialists rose alongside foreign capital, creating a new urban Chinese middle class. As for the infrastructural and sanitary conditions refugees encountered in Shanghai, it is also important to address how the war affected the city. The Japanese invasion, which began with a skirmish in January 1932 and ended with the full-scale invasion of the country in 1937, further complicated conditions in the city by destroying parts of it and generating waves of intra-metropolitan refugees, adding to the various refugee groups that poured into Shanghai following the many violent conflicts in Chinese territory and in the broader region since nineteenth century, including the Russo-Japanese War, the Russian Civil War, and the 1931 Japanese colonial conquest of Manchuria.<sup>56</sup> All of these factors made Shanghai a distinctive space in which incoming wartime refugees from Europe found themselves, and it shaped their experiences to a significant extent – not only negatively. After all, the cosmopolitan character of the city meant that a minority cultural hub was commonplace and diasporic life and “Little Vienna” could quickly flourish. Yet, this fuller, more complex picture of the city was missing from the exhibition's main narrative.

A particular issue of framing comes to the fore with regard to the representation of Japan in the exhibit. While there is a note about Japan's total takeover of Shanghai in 1941 and the subsequent establishment of the ghetto, imperial Japan's role as an ag-

54 Gao, *Shanghai Sanctuary*, 7.

55 Jane Zheng, Sabrina P. Y. Zhang, Zhen Fan, Hui Lin, and Yuen-Sang Leung, “Rediscovering Shanghai Modern: Chinese Cosmopolitanism and the Urban Art Scene, 1912–1948”, *Urban History* 51, no. 1 (2024): 198–232, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S096392682200027X>.

56 Taoyu Yang and Hongquan Han, “When a Global War Befell a Global City: Recent Historiography on Wartime Shanghai,” *Journal of Chinese Military History* 10, no. 2 (2021): 129–151, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22127453-bja10008>.

gressor and a brutal occupier is never fully explicated. Although the Japanese occupiers treated Jewish refugees relatively benevolently (that is, arbitrary harassment, sporadic violence, and structural repression of confinement in a ghetto), the same could not be said of their brutal treatment of the Chinese inhabitants of the ghetto, who faced acts ranging from public humiliation to arbitrary killings.<sup>57</sup> Gerald L. rather vividly recalls this aspect of the experience in his testimony preserved in the Fortunoff archives:

The Japanese were sort of very nice to kids; as a matter of fact, I have picture of a Japanese soldier and I in 1941 ... My stepmother's brother was a dentist, and he had a lot of Japanese patients, and he was able to stay out of the district longer than anyone else, and I visited him always. The Japanese always brought candy and things like that, so they were pretty nice to us ... Not so nice to the Chinese. As a matter of fact, they were pretty vicious ... The Chinese had to bow to the Japanese soldiers, and if they didn't bow, they would kill them ... We didn't have to bow.<sup>58</sup>

This dimension of the refugee experience in occupied Shanghai remains unsettlingly absent from the exhibition mounted in Vienna, particularly in the section entitled "Japan", which displays some of the Japanese cultural items the refugees purchased as "souvenirs" in the same space as the items related to China in order to illustrate the "the coexistence of the Chinese and Japanese cultures". In this way, the curators excluded the necessary clarification that the "coexistence" of the two Asian cultures at the time was not so much the result of an organic and equal multicultural exchange but the consequence of Japan's brutal colonial and wartime occupation of China. In sum, while the curators of the exhibition went to great lengths to present the perspective of the Viennese refugees in Shanghai, when it came to the description of "exile" itself, a more complete historical contextualisation fell by the wayside.

### *The Comparison: Common Curatorial Practices, Narrative Coherence, and Selective Memory*

From several angles, the two exhibitions could not be more different. Whereas the museum in Shanghai emphasises the role of Shanghai as a safe harbor and site of Sino-Jewish cooperation, the exhibit in Vienna advanced an image of Shanghai as a last resort and a site of immense hardship. However, instead of focusing on the many differences between these two interpretations, which are already apparent in the preceding discussion, in the following pages I want to focus on elements the exhibitions share.

57 Henriot, *Shanghai and the Experience of War*, 236.

58 Gerald L. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-1908), Fortunoff Video Archive.

Though the content itself differs considerably, common themes emerge as a result of the ways the core narratives of both exhibitions are constructed and curated. Both include a section that presents the vibrant community life of the refugees in a rather analogous manner, introducing the variety of diasporic activities the refugees organised including schools, sports clubs, musical and artistic groups, and print media. In both exhibitions, this section features the marriages that took place in wartime Shanghai, providing a useful illustration of how each institution utilised the same trope – in this case, community life – to drive its respective historical narrative. In the Chinese museum, the focus is on Chinese-Jewish marriages, which are employed as a trope to illustrate the harmonious coexistence of the two communities. In the Jewish Museum Vienna, marriages between Austrian Jews living in exile were highlighted to exemplify the flourishing of the diasporic community and its cohesion as a sign of resilience despite the challenging circumstances. While intentionally emphasising different couples, their treatment of marriage offers an apt illustration of how the two museums selected similar themes to develop their respective discourses.

This leads to the most obvious similarity between the two exhibitions: the consistency and clarity of the narratives and their objectives. The Shanghai Jewish Refugees History Museum presents a history focused on Sinocentric protagonism, with Chinese Shanghai representing a welcoming safe harbor despite its own suffering under foreign occupation. The roles are clearly defined, with China cast as the rescuer, the refugees as China's honored and grateful guests, and the Japanese authorities as the antagonists. In the case of the Jewish Museum Vienna, the main protagonists and drivers of the narrative of resilience are the Jewish refugees themselves, with Shanghai serving as the unfamiliar and challenging environment in which the refugees resiliently persevered against all odds. The chief commonality of these two discursive trajectories is not what is included but what is missing, as both offer little room to deviate from the set path. Both exhibitions stay clear of perspectives that do not fit their defined narratives – even though such views are present in numerous survivor testimonies and other primary sources related to Jewish life in Shanghai. In a way, the exhibitions function as opposites; each is missing aspects provided by its counterpart and all that is in between, presenting clear but only partial versions of the historical experience of Jewish exile in wartime China.<sup>59</sup>

The one theme most strikingly absent from both exhibitions is the complexity of relations between the local Chinese population and the Jewish refugees. Although the Chinese museum addresses the relationship, as discussed earlier, it only does so through a

59 It is important to point out that there were no established contacts between the two institutions during the period the exhibitions were under construction, which was not entirely intentional as the curation of both exhibitions was significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, which also limited the potential for nuanced exchanges.

hyperbolic emphasis on documented occasions of solidarity and humane exchange that conform to the ethos of “shared victimhood under global fascism”. Any of the conflicts and tensions arising from mutual distrust generated by, on the Chinese locals’ part, the association of European Jews with foreign “imperialists” and by, on the refugees’ part, the “otherness” the Shanghai locals, who serve as embodied everyday reminders of their escape, are entirely missing from the Shanghai exhibit. Any insight into such complex relations between the diverse groups in Shanghai is also missing from the exhibition in Vienna, which relegates the complex Shanghai context to the margins. Neither institution attempted to explore the nuances of social dynamics in the occupied city even though it is precisely through those interactions that we can catch glimpses of the multifaceted human experience of significant historical events.

The testimony of Eva P., cited earlier, revealed the distrust that existed between the Jewish refugees and Chinese locals, but if you listen further, that same testimony also pointed the way toward acceptance:

The Chinese were by and large indifferent at first ... Up until that point, a white man, they have never really ... You know, especially the class that we were living with, the coolies, the servants, you know, to be in such proximity. To find out they were very human, too. So that changed things.<sup>60</sup>

It is arguably these kinds of accounts that offer a window into the complexity and the gray areas wartime Shanghai signified for its diverse inhabitants. However, for the museum in Shanghai, this complexity, though resulting in positive exchange, could still challenge its claim of harmony. Similarly, in the case of the Jewish Museum in Vienna, integrating the Chinese perspective could risk decentralising the Jewish refugees from the story of Shanghai.

### *Conclusion*

While emerging from the same global surge of interest in the exile of European Jewish refugees in Shanghai, the exhibitions of the Shanghai Jewish Refugees History Museum and the Jewish Museum Vienna articulate strikingly divergent narratives while addressing the same historical episode, the former foregrounding Shanghai as a space of rescue, harmony, and the Chinese nation’s moral leadership, and the latter presenting the city as a refuge of last resort, one that was marked by hardship, dislocation, and resilience. Rather than positioning one exhibition as more “accurate” than the other, this comparative perspective highlights above all how knowledge is produced through absence as much as presence. The museum in Shanghai steers clear of ad-

60 Eva P. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-1677), Fortunoff Video Archive.

dressing conflicts between the Chinese and the Jewish refugees in Hongkou, thereby avoiding the potential questions they could raise concerning the claim of racial and ethnic harmony presented by the exhibition. The exhibition in Vienna largely bypasses Chinese perspectives altogether, relegating them to the margins and remaining focused on a narrative of resilience that stems almost solely from the perspective of European Jewish refugees in Shanghai.

It would be, however, a mistake to claim that the lack of complexity on the issue of Jewish exile in Asia is a phenomenon specific to these two institutions. Leaving out aspects that carry the risk of unsettling the dominant narrative presented in an exhibition is a routine practice used in many different contexts not only to maintain the clarity of the desired message but also to amplify it. However, the tactical omissions discussed here serve as a reminder that it is important to approach historical exhibitions with the knowledge that they often present only one perspective out of many – a collection of fragments that form a more complete portrait of a historical experience only when viewed together.

## Bibliography

### Archival Sources

#### *Fortunoff Video Archive*

- Eva P. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-1677). Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. Yale University Library, New Haven, CT.
- Gerald L. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-1908). Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. Yale University Library, New Haven, CT.
- Lisa B. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-2894). Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. Yale University Library, New Haven, CT.

#### *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

- Exhibitions Division: Records Relating to Developing the “Flight and Rescue” Exhibition, 1998–1999, Accession Nos. 2002.145 & 2003.124, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC.

### Scholarship

- Arkaraprasertkul, Non. “Power, Politics, and the Making of Shanghai”. *Journal of Planning History* 9, no. 4 (2010): 232–259. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15385132103823>.
- Ashplant, Timothy G., Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper. *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*. Routledge, 2001.
- Assmann, Aleida. “Cultural Memory”. In *Social Trauma – An Interdisciplinary Textbook*, edited by Andreas Hamburger, Camellia Hancheva, and Vamik D. Volkan. Springer Publishing, 2021.
- Bell, Duncan, ed., *Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship Between Past and Present*. Springer, 2006.
- Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. Routledge, 1995.
- Chang, Vincent K. L. “China’s New Historical Statecraft: Reviving the Second World War for National Rejuvenation”. *International Affairs* 98, no. 3 (2022): 1053–1069. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia021>.
- Chang, Vincent K. L. “Exemplifying National Unity and Victory in Local State Museums: Chongqing and the New Paradigm of World War II Memory in China”. *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 138 (2022): 977–992. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2031004>.
- Chang, Vincent K. L. “Recalling Victory, Recounting Greatness: Second World War Remembrance in Xi Jinping’s China”. *The China Quarterly* 248, no. 1 (2021): 1152–1173. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741021000497>.
- “‘Chinese Schindler’ Honored in San Francisco”. *Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in San Francisco*, 2 April 2014. [https://sanfrancisco.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/lqyw/201404/t20140402\\_9531892.htm](https://sanfrancisco.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/lqyw/201404/t20140402_9531892.htm)
- Choi, Henry Sze Hang. “Projecting images of China: Star House as a Shopping Centre between Red China and Self-orientalism, 1960s–1970s”. *China Perspectives* 140 (2025): 31–40. <https://doi.org/10.4000/13ptf>.
- Denton, Kirk A. *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China*. University of Hawai’i Press, 2014.

- Diner, Dan. *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse: Über Geltung und Wirkung des Holocaust*. V&R, 2007.
- Eber, Irene. *Voices from Shanghai: Jewish Exiles in Wartime China*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Florida Holocaust Museum “Jewish Refugees in Shanghai”. Accessed 1 January 2026. <https://www.thefhm.org/exhibits/jewish-refugees-in-shanghai/>.
- Frost, Mark R., Edward Vickers, and Daniel Schumacher. *Remembering Asia’s World War Two*. Routledge, 2019.
- Gao, Bei. *Shanghai Sanctuary: Chinese and Japanese Policy Toward European Jewish Refugees During World War II*. Oxford University Press: 2023.
- Henriot, Christian. “Shanghai and the Experience of War: The Fate of Refugees”. *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no 2 (2006): 217-248. <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00355414v1>.
- Ho, Denise Y. “博物馆Museum.” In *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, edited by Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere. ANU Press, 2019.
- Hochstadt, Steve. *Exodus to Shanghai: Stories of Escape from the Third Reich*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.
- Hongkou Shanghai City Government. “Jewish Refugees and Shanghai Exhibition Held in New York”. 9 August 2023. <https://www.shhk.gov.cn/English/006002/006002001/20230809/7df159f7-edfc-4080-8d23-a690ee056c32.html>.
- Ionescu, Arleen. “Toward a Memorial Ethics of Hope? Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum”, *Memory Studies* (2025), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698025135958>.
- “Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu salutes ‘haven’ of Shanghai”. *South China Morning Post*, 7 May 2013. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1232285/israeli-leader-netanyahu-visits-shanghais-old-jewish-ghetto>.
- Jewish (Litvak) Community of Lithuania. “UNESCO Plans to List Sugihara on Memory of the World Registry”. 26 June 2015. <https://www.lzb.lt/en/2015/06/26/unesco-plans-to-list-sugihara-on-memory-of-the-world-registry/>.
- Kowner, Rotem. “A Holocaust Paragon of Virtue’s Rise to Fame: The Transnational Commemoration of the Japanese Diplomat Sugihara Chiune and Its Divergent National Motives”. *The American Historical Review* 12, no 1 (2023): 31–63. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhad139>.
- Kowner, Rotem, and Xu Xin. “The Jews in Shanghai: The Emergence, Fall and Resurgence of East Asia’s Largest Jewish Community”. In *Jewish Communities in Modern Asia: Their Rise, Demise and Resurgence*, edited by Rotem Kowner. Cambridge University Press, 2023.
- Levy, Daniel, and Natan Sznajder. *Memory and the Holocaust in the Global Age*. Temple University Press, 2005.
- Macdonald, Sharon, ed., *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*. Routledge, 1998.
- Maurantonio, Nicole. “The Politics of Memory.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, edited by Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. Oxford University Press, 2017.

- Minarova-Banjac, Cindy. "Collective Memory and Forgetting: A Theoretical Discussion". *CEWCES Research Paper*, no. 16 (2018): 3-39.
- Mitter, Rana. *China's China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism*. Harvard University Press, 2020.
- Olick, Jeffrey K. "Collective Memory: The Two Cultures." *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 3 (1999): 333-348. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00083>.
- Ostoyich, Ken, and Yun Xia. *The History of the Shanghai Jews New Pathways of Research*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2022.
- Pan, Guang. *A Study of Jewish Refugees in China (1933-1945): History, Theories and the Chinese Pattern*. Springer, 2019.
- Poh, Angela, and Mingjian Li. "A China in Transition: The Rhetoric and Substance of Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping". *Asian Security* 13, no. 2 (2017): 84-97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2017.1286163>.
- Radonić, Ljiljana, "The Holocaust Template – Memorial Museums in Hungary, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina", *Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva: časopis za politologiju* 15, no. 1 (2018): 131-154. <https://doi.org/10.20901/an.15.06>.
- Rhoads, Edward J. M. "Cycles of Cathay: A History of the Bicycle in China". *Transfers* 2, no. 2 (2012): 95-120. <https://doi.org/10.3167/trans.2012.020207>.
- Rydell, Emilia. "Perspektywa poskolonialna w badaniach nad diasporą żydowską. Żyd-Chińczyk we wspomnieniach Anki Votickiej". *Adeptus* 11 (2018): 1-21. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=680196>.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum. "The Exhibition on Jewish Refugees & Shanghai Opened in Haifa". 4 May 2012. <https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/info/1161/7892.htm>.
- Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum. "Introduction of the Museum". Accessed 1 January 2026. [https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/About\\_Us/About\\_the\\_Museum.htm](https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/About_Us/About_the_Museum.htm).
- Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum. "Tour Exhibition in Chicago in 2013". 11 February 2014. <https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/info/1161/7852.htm>.
- Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum. "Tour Exhibition in Germany". 5 August 2011. <https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/info/1161/9133.htm>.
- Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum. "Tour Exhibition in Los Angeles in 2013". 12 February 2014. <https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/info/1161/7842.htm>.
- Sodaro, Amy. *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*. Rutgers University Press, 2018.
- Sørensen, Camilla T. N. "The Significance of Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream' for Chinese Foreign Policy: From 'Tao Guang Yang Hui' to 'Fen Fa You Wei'". *Journal of China and International Relations* 3, no. 1 (2015): 53-73. <https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.jcir.v3i1.1146>.
- Strand, David. *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s*. University of California Press, 1989.
- Umbach, Greg ("Fritz"), and Dan Wishnoff. "Strategic Self-Orientalism: Urban Planning Policies and the Shaping of New York City's Chinatown, 1950-2005". *Journal of Planning History* 7, no. 3 (2008): 214-238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538513207313915>.

- “UNESCO Expert Meeting: Holocaust Education in a Global Context”. *Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum*, 3 May 2012. <https://www.shhkjrm.com/en/info/1261/7922.htm>.
- “UNESCO Receives Chinese bid for listing of Nanjing Documents”. *Global Times*, 12 June 2014. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/daily-specials/unesco-listing-of-nanjing-documents/index.html>.
- US Holocaust Memorial Museum. “The Holocaust and Asia: Refugees, Memory, and Material Culture”. Accessed 5 January 2025. <https://www.ushmm.org/research/opportunities-for-academics/conferences-and-workshops/research-workshop-program/holocaust-and-asia>.
- van de Ven, Hans. *China at War: Triumph and Tragedy in the Emergence of the New China*. Harvard University Press, 2018.
- Varutti, Marzia. *Museums in China: The Politics of Representation after Mao*. Boydell Press, 2014.
- Verly, Markéta Bajgerová. “The Internationalization of Museums of the Chinese War of Resistance in the Xi Era: China as a ‘Guarantor of Peace’ and ‘Rescuer of Jews’”. *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 39, no. 3 (2025): 473–491. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcaf038>.
- Vickers, Edward. “Celebrating the Humane Superpower: Chinese Nationalism, the Holocaust and Transnational Heritage Politics at Shanghai’s Jewish Refugees Museum”. *Holocaust Studies* 29, no. 4 (2022): 566–587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2022.2116543>.
- Wiethoff, Bodo. *Introduction to Chinese History from Ancient Times to 1912*. Routledge, 1976.
- Williams, Paul. *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*. Berg, 2007.
- Xueqing, Li. “Israel Presents a Moving Tribute to Shanghai”. *China Daily*, 9 September 2015. [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015victoryanniv/2015-09/05/content\\_21819977.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015victoryanniv/2015-09/05/content_21819977.htm).
- Yang, Taoyu, and Hongquan Han. “When a Global War Befell a Global City: Recent Historiography on Wartime Shanghai”. *Journal of Chinese Military History* 10, no. 2 (2021): 129–151. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22127453-bja10008>.
- Zhao, Xiaochun. “In Pursuit of a Community of Shared Future: China’s Global Activism in Perspective”. *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2018): 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740018500082>.
- Zheng, Jane, Sabrina P. Y. Zhang, Zhen Fan, Hui Lin, and Yuen-Sang Leung. “Rediscovering Shanghai Modern: Chinese Cosmopolitanism and the Urban Art Scene, 1912–1948”. *Urban History* 51, no. 1 (2024): 198–232. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S096392682200027X>.
- Zheng, Wang. *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict: Historical Memory as a Variable*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Zheng, Yi. “The Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum’s Permanent Exhibition”. *Museum Worlds* 10, no. 10 (2022): 282–285.

**Markéta Bajgerová Verly** is a political scientist based at the Institute for Culture Studies at the Austrian Academy of Sciences currently leading a post-doctoral research project titled “Globalization of Forgetting? Politics of Oblivion and Domestic State Violence in Transnational Comparative Perspective”. Previously, she was a Junior Fellow at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, where she researched contemporary memory politics regarding Jewish Refugees in wartime Shanghai. In 2025 she obtained her PhD from the University of Vienna focusing on World War II museums in People’s Republic of China conducted within the ERC project “Globalized Memorial Museums”. She holds an MA degree in China Studies (Politics and International Relations) from Peking University and an undergraduate degree from the University of Glasgow in Politics and History. Email: [marketa.bajgerovaverly@oeaw.ac.at](mailto:marketa.bajgerovaverly@oeaw.ac.at)

Quotation: Markéta Bajgerová Verly, One Past, Two Histories. Exhibiting the Shanghai Jewish Refugees in China and Austria. A Comparative Perspective, in S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 13 (2026) 1, 35–59.

[https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126/art\\_bajgerova](https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126/art_bajgerova)

S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 13 (2026) 1| <https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126>

This article is licensed under the following Creative Commons License: CC-BY-SA (Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives).

Anastasia Felcher

# Holocaust Trauma and Jewish Voices in Soviet Jewish Samizdat Periodicals

## Abstract

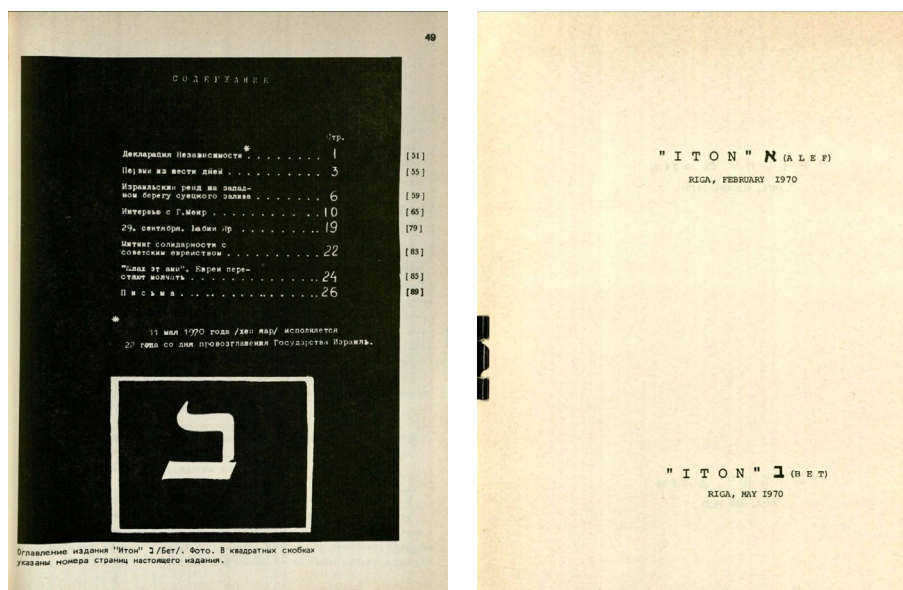
For Jews living in the Soviet Union after World War II, Holocaust trauma was very often a personal, family, and communal matter. Starting in the mid-1960s, a cohort of Soviet Jews turned to uncensored spheres of knowledge production and began discussing the Holocaust in samizdat. In the 1970s and 1980s, Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals came to the fore. While Soviet samizdat is a widely researched phenomenon, these periodicals – found in libraries and archives scattered across the world and partially reprinted and distributed from Jerusalem during the Cold War – require more in-depth study. This article sheds light on the importance of memory work among Jewish dissidents and refuseniks<sup>1</sup> in the Soviet Union and beyond as reflected in the pages of these periodicals. It asks how, despite not prioritising the Holocaust as a central topic of interest, these samizdat periodicals became a platform for expressing grief related to wartime losses and the silencing of Holocaust memory in official Soviet discourse.

The very first Soviet Jewish samizdat periodical, the historical and literary journal entitled *Iton*,<sup>2</sup> featured an article that discussed the painful quest to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Published clandestinely in Riga in 1970, the article appeared in the journal's second (and last) issue, “ב” or “Bet” (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> This uncensored periodical marked a significant shift in the Soviet Jewish movement, a phenomenon that had begun a few years earlier. This movement was a complex one, much like the Soviet dissident movement as a whole. While some

1 The term refusenik is used to define a person who was denied permission by the government to emigrate, especially during the Cold War. Most widely used in relation to exit visas that the Jews in the USSR failed to obtain from authorities in their attempt to immigrate to Israel and other countries.

2 The title of this samizdat journal originated from the Hebrew noun *יומון*, which means “newspaper”. About the journal, see Ann Komaromi, “Jewish Samizdat – Dissident Texts and the Dynamics of the Jewish Revival in the Soviet Union”, in *The Jewish Movement in the Soviet Union*, ed. Yaacov Ro'i (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012), 275, 286; Gal Beckerman, *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 123–124, and a reference page of the Project of the Study of Dissidence and Samizdat at the University of Toronto, accessed 19 May 2025, <https://samizdat.library.utoronto.ca/content/iton>.

3 “September 29, 1969.” Originally published in *Iton*, issue “Bet” (1970); republished in the series *Yevrei i yevreyskiy narod. Yevreyskiy samizdat (Evreiskii samizdat)* (Jews and Jewish people. Jewish samizdat) by the Center for the Research and Documentation of Eastern European Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: *Evreiskii samizdat* 1 (1974): 79–83.



**Figure 1. On the right: a page in *Evreiskii samizdat*, vol. 1 (1974) that copied the original table of contents of *Iton*, no. 2 (“ $\beth$ ” or “Bet”) from 1970. The page numbers beyond the black frame indicate *Evreiskii samizdat*’s pagination. On the left: a subtitle page of *Evreiskii samizdat*, vol. 1 (1974) that announced that the issue contains two reprinted issues of *Iton* from 1970.**

**Credit: Library collection of the Blinken OSA Archivum at Central European University (CEU) in Budapest.**

of its members clearly embraced a political agenda in their activism, others saw themselves as defenders of democratic rights, emphasising legalist claims.<sup>4</sup> From 1970 on, the movement leaned toward consolidation wherever possible. Publishing an article that addressed the struggle for the right to publicly remember victims of the Holocaust in *Iton* indicates that for the authors and editors of Soviet Jewish samizdat, memory was not a subject that was avoided. In a detailed manner, the article reconstructed the actions of the militia and secret services in Kyiv that worked to prevent an unsanctioned gathering of about two hundred residents of the Ukrainian capital. Jews and non-Jews alike, these people assembled at Babyn Yar in September 1969.

In late September 1969, three years after an earlier unsanctioned meeting in 1966 – the first documented mass gathering at the site that brought together Jewish and Ukrainian activists,<sup>5</sup> hundreds of Kyivans assembled at Babyn Yar. This occurred two years after Israel claimed victory in the Six-Day war and just a year after Soviet tanks rolled into Prague. Tension filled the air at the atrocity site. The samizdat article in *Iton* described law en-

4 See Benjamin Nathans, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement* (Princeton University Press, 2024).

5 Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, “A Paradigm-Changing Day: The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Babyn Yar and Ukrainian-Jewish Relations”, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 38, no. 3/4 (2021): 233–235.

forcement agents cordoning off those participating in the unauthorized gathering. This was supposed to prevent people from laying wreaths in the form of the Star of David. The cordon was also supposed to separate them from the hundreds of persons taking part in a *sanctioned* rally at the same site, primarily non-Jews. As the story goes, one of the young people behind the cordon, presumably of Jewish origin, asked in despair why the Jews were being prevented from commemorating their victims. He reminded the militia that other Kyiv residents were allowed to light candles in churches and cemeteries in memory of their dead. Allegedly, he received the following answer: “We don’t live on your land, you live on ours.”<sup>6</sup>

This was a very telling answer. It reflected the way the authors and editors of Soviet Jewish samizdat wrote about the Holocaust in unsanctioned publications in order to convince readers to emigrate from the Soviet Union. Jews living in the Soviet Union under General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev did not need a reminder that they were unwelcome in the place they called home. Yet reminding them about the Soviet state’s violation of their right to remember, in addition to its failure to respect other human rights, targeted one of the most profound problems readers of Jewish samizdat had with their troubled homeland.

Soviet samizdat, or “self-publication”, refers to producing and distributing uncensored writings of various kinds in the Soviet Union after World War II.<sup>7</sup> Samizdat texts included petitions, political statements, reports, open letters, and appeals written and signed by numerous individuals and groups facing persecution. Works of fiction, non-fiction, and academic texts that would have been otherwise censored in the Soviet Union, also circulated in samizdat. Various nonconformist groups had their own samizdat, such as those associated with music, religion, or nationalism (Jewish samizdat falls into the last category).

In the Soviet Union, the late Stalinist years were marred by antisemitic campaigns, the most notorious of which were directed against the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and the “Doctors’ Plot”.<sup>8</sup> Due to the pervasive homegrown antisemitism that accompanied the entire Cold War, Soviet Jews faced multiple challenges in their everyday, professional, and social lives. In such circum-

6 “September 29, 1969”, 81.

7 Due to samizdat being a transnational phenomenon that thrived both in the Soviet Union and in the countries of the Eastern Bloc, there are multiple definitions. In her latest book, Ann Komaromi defines Soviet samizdat as an “uncensored, grassroots system of self-publishing found in the USSR after Iosif Stalin and until perestroika”. Ann Komaromi, *Soviet Samizdat: Imagining a New Society* (Cornell University Press, 2022), 1. In this article, instead, I focus not on matters related to production and circulation of uncensored texts and their various forms but on the content. I refer to both Soviet Jewish political samizdat and the body of academic and literary texts that were published in samizdat periodicals and later republished in Jerusalem as part of the *Evreiskii samizdat* series.

8 On the antisemitic campaigns of late Stalinist years, see Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 170–181; Arno Lustiger and Roman Brackman, *Stalin and the Jews: The Red Book: The Tragedy of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and the Soviet Jews* (Enigma, 2003), 195–218.

stances, trying to formulate and express an ethnic and religious identity was fraught with tension.<sup>9</sup> The emergence of Jewish samizdat and its maturation is closely linked to the history of the Jewish movement in the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> One of the objectives of this movement, Jewish emigration from the country in the 1960s through the early 1990s, was both the topic of Jewish samizdat and the reason for its constant transformation. The editors of samizdat periodicals were often looking for their replacements as the campaign for emigration progressed.<sup>11</sup> Soviet Jewish samizdat included texts written by Jews for Jewish readers about Jewish related topics. Books, pamphlets, journals, and other materials were among these. Before such periodicals took center stage in the 1970s and 1980s, these nonconformist political and cultural-literary works on Jewish topics were (non-systematically) created starting in the late 1940s. According to Stefani Hoffman, Jewish samizdat served multiple functions including encouraging Jews to immigrate to Israel promptly; awakening Jewish consciousness so that Jews could make an informed decision about where to leave; preserving hope for those whose application to exit visa were turned away; and fostering a positive view of Jewish identity.<sup>12</sup>

In earlier decades, the main type of samizdat texts that circulated among Soviet Jews were uncensored literary texts by Jewish authors. These included books, articles, essays, memoirs, drawings, poems, and short stories.<sup>13</sup> Jewish political samizdat began its ascent in the 1960s, and later on, it became heavily preoccupied with the topic of emigration. The “*politiki*” branch of the Soviet Jewish movement also generated and distributed petitions. These petitions were typewritten or copied by hand, and they comprised letters to officials and international organisations that detailed incidents of discrimination against Jews and referenced declarations in support of fellow dissidents, official responses to complaints, and calls to readers abroad.<sup>14</sup> Jewish cultural-liter-

9 See Zvi Gitelman, “The Evolution of Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union”, in *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*, ed. Yaacov Ro’i and Avi Beker (NYU Press, 1991), 3–26.

10 See Yaacov Ro’i, “Strategy and Tactics”, in Ro’i, *The Jewish Movement in the Soviet Union*, 70–73.

11 See Larissa Remennick, “Soviet Jews between Conformism, Dissent and Emigration”, *Jewish Culture and History* 26, no. 1 (2025): 31–48; Robert O. Freedman, *Soviet Jewry in the 1980s: The Politics of Anti-Semitism and Emigration and the Dynamics of Resettlement* (Duke University Press, 1989), and other works.

12 Stefani Hoffmann, “Jewish Samizdat and the Rise of Jewish National Consciousness”, in Ro’i and Beker, *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*, 108.

13 One of the most influential texts of this kind is *Exodus*, a historical novel by American writer Leon Uris. See Hoffmann, “Jewish Samizdat”, 91–92.

14 Soviet Jewish political samizdat was widely republished not only in *Evreiskii samizdat* but also by the other series published in Jerusalem including *Jews and Jewish People: Petitions, Letters and Appeals from Soviet Jews*, which collected material between 1968 to 1978 and were published between 1973 and 1980. Other ways of making the petitions available for international audiences was having them published in one of the bulletins compiled, edited, and circulated by Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty (RFE/RL): “Sobranie dokumentov samizdata” (“Collected Documents of Samizdat”, 1972–1978) and “Materialy samizdata” (“Materials of Samizdat”, 1968–1991), digitised by the Blinken OSA Archivum. See the materials on their website.



**Figure 2. Volumes of the *Evreiskii samizdat* sub-series.**  
**Credit: Library collection of the Blinken OSA Archivum in Budapest, Hungary, photographed by Anastasia Felcher.**

ary samizdat (produced by the “*kul'turniki*” branch of the movement), emerged in the 1970s, and it was mostly concerned with Jewish identity and culture. Both the political and cultural branches had their own samizdat periodicals. In 1970, the above-mentioned periodical *Iton* marked the beginning of two decades in the Soviet Union during which about twenty titles were produced, each of which produced a different number of issues. This corpus of samizdat totaled more than a hundred issues; some samizdat only published a single issue, while others were published relatively regularly for almost a decade.<sup>15</sup>

Starting in 1974, thanks to the direct intervention of Israel, a number of issues of various Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals became available to a much larger international reading public than when they were originally published (Fig. 2). The Hebrew University of Jerusalem launched a series, *Jews and Jewish People*, which included several sub-series, such as *Evreskii samizdat* (Jewish samizdat). This sub-series reprinted in full or in part a significant number of original Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals. The sub-series comprised twenty-seven volumes published between 1974 and 1992 by the Center for Documentation and Research on East European Jewry. The editors of *Evreiskii samizdat* carefully selected different Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals for reprint. However, the editorial strategy behind the selection of materials is unclear and generally requires more research. Targeted readers had the opportunity to access these reprinted mate-

15 Yaacov Ro'i, “Samizdat”, *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2010, <https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/87>. A total of 118 original issues of various Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals were published throughout the 1970s and 1980s. See Komaromi, “Jewish Samizdat”, 286–287.

rials after only a relatively short delay, and the reprinted texts enjoyed a much larger circulation than the originals. *Evreiskii samizdat* reprints also helped both Soviet Jews and readers abroad become informed about the flexibility of the Jewish movement in the Soviet Union. As Ann Komaromi points out, the aforementioned series published in Jerusalem has largely determined the way researchers interpret the phenomenon of Jewish samizdat, especially its periodicals, up to the present.<sup>16</sup> The seeming integrity of the series and its wider accessibility compared to the limited circulation and availability of the originals heavily contributed to the series' prominence in the existing scholarship.<sup>17</sup>

In the analysis that follows, I engage in a close reading of the Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals reprinted by the *Evreiskii samizdat* sub-series, especially those pieces that discuss the historical and contemporary persecution of Jews in the Soviet Union and beyond. How frequently and in what context was this persecution (as well as past violence) mentioned in relation to other subjects? Beyond the content, this close reading presupposes paying close attention to matters of style. My objective is to understand whether the authors who contributed to samizdat periodicals were in dialogue with authors of other important writings on the Holocaust at the time – rare Soviet works and those from beyond the Iron Curtain. These writings, although not numerous and subject to censorship, circulated in the Soviet Union parallel to underground publishing.<sup>18</sup> Finally, this article explores to what extent the authors who contributed to Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals were aware of Holocaust memory culture beyond the Iron Curtain, and if they were, did they contribute to this international phenomenon deliberately or not?

16 Komaromi, "Jewish Samizdat", 302–303.

17 It is far more common to find the *Evreiskii samizdat* series in libraries across the world than the original Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals, which one may find in selected archives, and which were, until recently, rarely digitised. In the 2020s, the situation changed dramatically. For instance, the Wende Museum in Culver City, California digitised the Alexander Smukler Collection and made it available to the public. Then, the Center for Jewish History in New York invested in digitising their collection, which included exceptionally rich material on the US movement to support Soviet Jewry. This included some samizdat pieces smuggled from the Soviet Union. Finally, under the auspices of the New York-based Blavatnik Archive, a separate web portal was launched which had accumulated digitised archival material from partner institutions, such as Soviet Jewish samizdat under the title "Refuseniks and Activists". In Europe, the archive at the Research Center for East European Studies in Bremen, which holds one of the largest collections of dissidents' inventories, made their catalog available online. In Budapest, the Blinken OSA Archivum digitised parts of its samizdat collection, which includes Soviet Jewish political samizdat items, mostly petitions, that were occasionally cited in the original periodicals of the "politiki" branch.

18 These included, among others, novels by Masha Rol'nikaite and the diary of Anne Frank. See Arkadi Zeltser, "The Cold War and Holocaust Memorialization in Soviet Publications of the 1960s", in *Holocaust Memory and the Cold War: Remembering across the Iron Curtain*, ed. Anna Koch and Stephan Stach (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024): 93–94, 111–112; Gennady Estraiikh, *Jews in the Soviet Union: A History*, vol. 5, *After Stalin 1953–1967* (NYU Press, 2023), 242–249; and Anja Tippner, "Conflicting Memories, Conflicting Stories: Masha Rol'nikaite's Novel and the Soviet Culture of Holocaust Remembrance", *East European Jewish Affairs* 48, no. 3 (2018): 372–390.

### *Re-Defining the Field*

A close reading of Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals seeks to draw a more nuanced picture of how underground publications mobilised their audience in and beyond the Soviet Union. As mentioned above, Soviet samizdat has attracted international scholarly attention, as well as the attention of dissident movements, for decades. However, there has been far less academic interest in Soviet Jewish samizdat. The straightforward ideological objectives of these underground periodicals has made analysing them challenging. More recent historiography has addressed themes and genres of Soviet Jewish samizdat, including periodicals, and the circumstances and personalities behind its production. This broadly corresponds to the objective of analysing the entirety of Soviet samizdat as a networked system of knowledge production. Scholars have tended to be more interested in the practical aspects of how these networks functioned rather than on the contents of these unofficially circulating texts.

Scholars have examined the ways uncensored texts were produced and disseminated under the conditions of persecution, searches, exile, and threats of imprisonment. Writers (authors of samizdat texts), editors, and activists (signatories of petitions and open letters) still hold the spotlight in terms of Soviet samizdat research. At the same time, new historiography pays close attention to other, equally significant subjects such as the typists, distributors, custodians, and – not least – the readers of samizdat or the intended audience(s) of uncensored texts.<sup>19</sup> Apart from requiring more research on the production and distribution of Soviet Jewish samizdat, the question of readership remains. By understanding the degree to which Soviet Jews were exposed to samizdat periodicals, we may better understand how much their eventual decision about emigration was conditioned by the search for self-determination and whether such publications triggered emigration.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it is important to understand how samizdat texts were collected, preserved, catalogued, and disseminated by politically aligned research institutions and archives beyond the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, such as those

19 Komaromi, *Soviet Samizdat*, 7–14; Josephine von Zitzewitz, *The Culture of Samizdat: Literature and Underground Networks in the Late Soviet Union* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 8–19.

20 Stephanie Hoffman demonstrated that among those Soviet Jews who managed to emigrate to Israel from the post-war Soviet Union, the high number were involved in either reading or producing samizdat. See Hoffman, “Jewish Samizdat”, 88–89. Yet, while samizdat occupied the niche for making politically nonconformist literature available for the (limited) readership in the Soviet Union, other texts that passed the censors had hidden agendas “engrained”, as Marat Grinberg demonstrated in his book *The Soviet Jewish Bookshelf: Jewish Culture and Identity Between the Lines* (Brandeis University Press, 2022). I am grateful to the participants in the seminar “Art and Literature of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union United States Holocaust Memorial Museum” at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) (Washington, DC, 21–29 August 2023) for introducing me to Grinberg’s work.

in Munich and Bremen.<sup>21</sup> By approaching samizdat as a complex network of production operating on several continents, new historiography also looks at these entanglements on a transnational scale.<sup>22</sup>

Seeking ways to come to terms with the trauma was important to many Soviet Jews. Analysing how Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals addressed the difficult past allows us to better understand the mechanisms of memory mobilisation in the unofficial cultural and political milieu of the last two decades of the Soviet Union's existence. This related not only to Soviet Jews but to the millions of people around the world who supported their cause abroad.<sup>23</sup> In line with a concept of postmemory introduced by Marianne Hirsch, one can argue that the periodicals under study contributed to shaping how descendants internalised the trauma of the Holocaust in their homeland. Yet, understanding the transnational networks involved in disseminating these periodicals and their patterns of using historical material for political purposes is essential for reading this samizdat with a critical eye; so is understanding present-day, worldwide archival policies and politics related to this material.

The antisemitism that took hold in the Soviet Union in the late Stalinist years played a key role in the interactions between Jews and the post-World War II Soviet state; but Jews also retained some (restricted) agency in this system.<sup>24</sup> Reading Soviet Jewish samizdat helps us better understand the post-war Jewish experience(s) in the Soviet Union as well as Soviet dissent more broadly.<sup>25</sup> However, the question remains, to what extent this kind of source can help us deconstruct a rather problematic term: "Soviet Jews". Earlier, some researchers approached the concept cautiously because of its association with Russian-assimilated Jews and for its use as an umbrella term that does not accurately reflect the experience of the diverse groups of Jews living under Soviet control.<sup>26</sup> Researchers today urge a deeper exploration of

21 Von Zitewitz, *The Culture of Samizdat*, 7–8; Ksenya, Kiebusinski, "Samizdat and Dissident Archives: Trends in Their Acquisition, Preservation, and Access in North American Repositories", *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 13, no. 1 (2012): 3–25; Olga Zaslavskaya, "From Dispersed to Distributed Archives: The Past and the Present of Samizdat Material", *Poetics Today* 29, no. 4 (2008): 680–703; Ann Komaromi, "The Bremen Archive", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2024): 803–814.

22 Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov, "Introduction: Samizdat and Tamizdat Entangled Phenomena?" in *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism*, ed. Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov (Berghahn Books, 2013), 8–12.

23 For a better understanding of the transnational entanglements and diplomatic dimensions of the Soviet Jewish movement as well as the role of samizdat in these engagements, see Beckerman, *When They Come for Us*, 23–29; Shaul Kelner, *A Cold War Exodus: How American Activists Mobilized to Free Soviet Jews* (NYU Press, 2024), 6–12.

24 Diana Dumitru, "From Friends to Enemies?: The Soviet State and Its Jews in the Aftermath of the Holocaust", in *Jewish Lives under Communism: New Perspectives*, ed. Kateřina Čapková and Kamil Kijek (Rutgers University Press, 2022), 80–82; Estraiikh, *Jews in the Soviet Union*, 117.

25 Nathans, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause*, 234–235.

26 Interestingly, in his testimony, Alexander Voronel, one of the leading activists of the Jewish movement in the Soviet Union and a founder of a Moscow-based samizdat periodical *Jews in the Soviet Union* (1972–80), critically defined Soviet Jews as those "who had be-

the interactions between the Soviet state and its Jewish citizens. These interactions were not defined only by persecution and discrimination, as political samizdat tries to convince us, and we are now more equipped to comprehend the agency of local Jewish groups and individuals. The same is true for researching Jewish underground culture in the Soviet Union due to the introduction of new (archival) material and closer attention to the broader sociocultural context.<sup>27</sup> To further understand the Jewish experience under communism in both the Soviet Union and the countries of the Socialist Bloc, new historiography demands that we engage with documents from regional depositories and rely on sources held not in official archives but by communities or individuals.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, recent historiography offers compelling evidence that grassroots Holocaust memorialisation took place in many locations across the Soviet Union despite constraints and under the threat of persecution by the authorities. Jews built memorials to the deceased, sometimes with names written in Hebrew, Yiddish, and occasionally featuring the Star of David.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, in various contexts, readers of the Soviet censored media and official publications could learn about the Holocaust either by “reading between the lines” or acquiring information from translated sources that originated in other Eastern Bloc countries.<sup>30</sup> In addition to samizdat, the discourse of Holocaust memorialisation could be seen infrequently in some Soviet newspapers, including the official Soviet Yiddish paper *Sovetsch Heymland*.<sup>31</sup>

As I demonstrate below, for many authors who appeared on the pages of Jewish samizdat, including its periodicals, the Holocaust was primarily associated with one particular ravine in Kyiv: Babyn Yar. By looking critically into the content of Jewish samizdat periodicals, this article adds to the ongoing discussion about interpreting the history and memory of the notorious ravine. Beyond the official Soviet memory canon, this site on the north outskirts of Kyiv where 33,771 Jews were shot over the course of three late September days in 1941 became a symbol of the Holo-

---

come deeply rooted in Soviet cultural and social life which they had been an integral part of for several generations” as opposed to Baltic, Bessarabian, Georgian, Mountain, and Bukharan Jews. See Alexander Voronel, “Jewish Samizdat”, in Ro’i and Beker, *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*, 259. On Soviet Jewish identity, see also Larissa Remennick, “Soviet Jews between Conformism, Dissent and Emigration”, 34–39.

27 Klavdia Smola, “Jewish Underground Culture in the Soviet Union”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture*, ed. Mark Lipovetsky, Maria Engström, Tomáš Glanc, Ilya Kujuk, and Klavdia Smola (Oxford University Press, 2024), 436–440.

28 Kateřina Čapková, Kamil Kijek, and Stephan Stach, “Introduction”, in Čapková and Kijek, *Jewish Lives under Communism: New Perspectives*, 3.

29 Arkadi Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory: Holocaust Monuments in the Soviet Union* (Yad Vashem, International Institute for Holocaust Research, 2018), 266–274.

30 Zeltser, “The Cold War and Holocaust Memorialization”, 93–95.

31 Miriam Schultz, “‘We Pledge, as if it Was the Highest Sanctum, to Preserve the Memory’”. *Sovetish Heymland*, Facets of Holocaust Commemoration in the Soviet Union and the Cold War”, in *Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism: Remembering the Holocaust in State-Socialist Eastern Europe*, ed. Kata Bohus, Peter Hallama, and Stephan Stach (Central European University Press, 2022), 254.

caust in the Soviet Union a decade before the first Jewish samizdat periodical was published on a clandestine printing machine in Riga. Starting in the early 1960s, memory activism made the notorious Kyiv site the centerpiece of Jewish memory and political mobilisation and transnational recognition. During the Cold War, international expert attention had been focused on Babyn Yar as a contested site of memory since the mid-1960s.<sup>32</sup> Scholarly analysis of memory contestation at the site took shape by the 1980s,<sup>33</sup> with the new wave of significant works appearing after 1989.<sup>34</sup>

In the period discussed here, understanding the complexity around Babyn Yar became an important case study for examining the broader context of private, community, and public memory of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union and transnationally.<sup>35</sup> In the 2020s, research on the dilemmas of memory about Babyn Yar shed new light on backstairs influence and the intelligentsia in Kyiv, Moscow, and abroad during the Cold War and in its aftermath.<sup>36</sup> Critically reading contributions about Babyn Yar in Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals, therefore, further enriches our understanding of the place that site holds for mobilising the national consciousness of Jews across the Soviet Union and beyond its borders. Moreover, it helps us better comprehend the polyphonic nature of samizdat periodicals. Beyond political appeals, these unofficial publications created a space for expressing grief, and they allowed Jewish voices beyond those of famous dissidents to be heard.

### *Language(s) of Trauma*

#### *Destination Babyn Yar*

More than twenty-five years separated the liberation of Nazi concentration camps in Europe (in 1945) and the publication of the first Jewish clandestine periodical, the above-mentioned *Iton*. These intervening years shaped the conflicted memory of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. By the 1970s, not only were there

32 For example, see a Background Report by the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Communist Area Analysis Department "Babi Jar – Symbol of an Unsolved Past", from 1968, Blinken OSA Archivum, HU OSA 300-8-3:65/1-10 Records of RFE/RL Research Institute, Publications Department, Background Reports. Available online: <https://catalog.archivum.org/catalog/qDvRZQbpv4>.

33 For instance, works such as William Korey "In History's Memory Hole: The Soviet Treatment of the Holocaust", in *Contemporary Views on the Holocaust*, ed. R. L. Braham (Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishing, 1983), 145–156.

34 See the overview of this new historiographical "new wave" in Shay A. Pilnik, *The Ravine of Memory: Babyn Yar Between the Holocaust and the Great Patriotic War* (Purdue University Press, 2025), 3–5.

35 On this issue, see Jessica Rapson, "Babi Yar: Transcultural Memories of Atrocity from Kiev to Denver", in *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders*, ed. Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson (De Gruyter, 2014), 139–162.

36 Such as Zeltser, "The Cold War and Holocaust Memorialization"; Estraiikh, *Jews in the Soviet Union*; Pilnik, *The Ravine of Memory*; and Victoria Khiterer, *Bitter War of Memory: The Babyn Yar Massacre, Aftermath, and Commemoration* (Purdue University Press, 2025).

many documents and materials circulating – in one way or another – about the Holocaust and its commemoration in the public sphere of the Soviet Union; the Jewish national movement had taken shape by that time, its formation triggered by the events at home and abroad (see the introduction).

The above-mentioned article in the second issue of *Iton* about the unsanctioned demonstration at Babyn Yar in 1969 quoted the first lines of Yevtushenko's 1961 poem "Babyn Yar" in its epigraph.<sup>37</sup> This shows that nine years after its original publication, the poem resonated with the reading public. Jewish activists fully embraced the image of the missing monument at the killing site as a symbol of silenced memory and pain. Overall, in Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals, Babyn Yar served as a symbol of counter-memory of World War II that "worked" for both Jews and non-Jews. It also served as a site where marginalised groups (i.e., Jews, Ukrainian intellectuals, et al.) dared to oppose the regime.

Apart from providing details on how the participants of the unsanctioned rally were kept away from the site by militia and secret services in 1969, the narrative offered in *Iton* lucidly repeated the appeals from years before. In 1959, writer Viktor Nekrasov lamented the absence of the original ravine for political reasons.<sup>38</sup> So, too, did the samizdat authors in 1970; they described the unauthorized rally from 1969 as follows: "however, the precipice and the pit itself are no longer there, they have been buried", and "nothing here is a reminder [of the 1941 shootings – A. F.]; on the contrary, all is shamefully hidden".<sup>39</sup> Also similar to Nekrasov and other intellectuals who spoke at and about Babyn Yar earlier, the samizdat article pointed out that the Kyiv ravine resonates with many residents of the city, not only Jews: "no need to think that only Jews came".<sup>40</sup> But what made this text stand out was its emphasis on the reason for the extermination in 1941: "only the Jews were shot just for being Jews".<sup>41</sup> For the editors of *Iton*, Soviet anti-Zionism and antisemitism went hand in hand: "[right after the unsanctioned meeting – A. F.] the site was being cleared of [the funeral wreath in the form of – A. F.] Magen David".<sup>42</sup>

The *Evreiskii samizdat* series reprinted a number of issues of political Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals, as well as with those belonging to the cultural "branch" of samizdat. A collection of documents on the struggle for emigration entitled *Vestnik iskhoda* assembled appeals and letters together with reports on the progress of the trials against Jews.<sup>43</sup> The notorious Lenin-

37 "September 29, 1969", 79–83.

38 Viktor Nekrasov. "Pochemu eto ne sdelano?", *Literaturnaya gazeta*, no. 125 (4091), 10 October 1959, 2.

39 "September 29, 1969", 79.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 The title of this samizdat collection of documents, *Vestnik iskhoda*, translates as "The herald of Exodus". Its three issues were self-published in Moscow between 1971 and 1973. *Evreiskii samizdat* republished its issues in vol. 3 (containing nos. 1, and 3 of *Vestnik iskho-*

grad trials, Riga trials, and Kishinev trials of the 1970s brought international attention to and led to mobilisation around the cause of Soviet Jews.<sup>44</sup> *Vestnik iskhoda* contained an article about another unsanctioned rally in Babyn Yar, this time held in September 1971.<sup>45</sup> That rally was supposed to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the 1941 shootings, which increased the tension around the commemoration. In August 1971, twelve Jews were arrested for holding a demonstration/prayer meeting at Babyn Yar after they were denied exit visas to emigrate to Israel. By that year, it was the fourth time Kyiv authorities – in order to reduce the significance of the unofficial rally – called for an official gathering to commemorate “Soviet citizens killed by the hands of the fascists”. Around four thousand people participated in this event, while around 2,500 people attended another unsanctioned gathering, according to samizdat authors. Among them were people from Kyiv, Moscow, Leningrad, Riga, Vilnius, Tbilisi, Sverdlovsk (present-day Yekaterinburg), Minsk, Odesa, and Kharkiv.

In the style of a news report, a half-page article in *Vestnik iskhoda* described both rallies, paying special attention to the restrictions the authorities placed on those seeking to commemorate the murder of Jews; these included measures to prevent people from traveling from other cities to attend the rally, closely monitoring the logistics in Kyiv, restricting the purchase of wreaths in the Ukrainian capital, setting up a cordon of three hundred militiamen at Babyn Yar, censoring the messages on the ribbons adorning the memorial wreaths, and selective arrests afterward. *Vestnik iskhoda* featured articles on Babyn Yar alongside other notorious cases of Soviet antisemitism from the early 1970s, such as the second Leningrad trial, the Riga trial, the Kishinev trial, and other events. This indicates that the authors and editors of *Vestnik iskhoda* viewed restrictions on the commemoration of victims of the Holocaust as human rights violations.

Another contribution devoted to Babyn Yar published in *Evreiskii samizdat* appeared in the fifteenth volume published in 1978. This volume compiled academic abstracts, articles, and other texts from a symposium on Jewish culture held in the Soviet Union. The symposium was supposed to take place – with international participation – in Moscow in December 1976, but it was disrupted by the Soviet authorities. Concerned with possible political disturbances such an event might incite, the state launched searches of the homes of the organisers and placed them under house arrest. This reaction caused a minor international furor.<sup>46</sup>

da) in 1974. About this samizdat journal, see a dedicated page in the Project for the Study of Dissidence and Samizdat of the University of Toronto, accessed 5 May 2025, <https://samizdat.library.utoronto.ca/content/vestnik-iskhoda>.

44 On this, see Beckerman, *When They Come for Us*, 203–207, 217–218.

45 “Babi Yar”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 3 (1974): 129. Originally published in *Vestnik Iskhoda*, no. 2 (1971).

46 “Organizers Held, Soviet Jews Meet”, *New York Times*, 22 December 1976, 6.

The texts of the contributions were eventually made available in samizdat publications.<sup>47</sup>

Six months earlier, a full-size monument was finally unveiled at the notorious killing site in Kyiv, ending more than three decades when the line “there is no monument at Babyn Yar”, in Yevtushenko’s words, remained true. This monument, however, reflected the Jewish tragedy neither in its design nor in its inscription.<sup>48</sup> Instead of resolving the conflict, it became another stumbling block that agitated audiences both behind and beyond the Iron Curtain. The opening contribution to the above-mentioned symposium was devoted precisely to this matter.<sup>49</sup> The author Lev El’bert placed Babyn Yar in relation to other notorious Holocaust sites in the Soviet Union, such as Pinsk in Belarus and the Rumbula forest in Latvia. The Kyiv site was also positioned within an “international” context, which was, however, limited to sites in Poland – Oświęcim (Auschwitz-Birkenau), Treblinka, and Sobibór. The paper is a rare example of appropriating the term “the Catastrophe of the European Jews”, a symbol of which, according to El’bert, was Babyn Yar. The Israeli-inspired definition of the Holocaust would come to be used more commonly in samizdat only later on, in the 1980s, making this contribution rather exceptional.

What also made the contribution stand out was the fact that it identified collaborators, such as the Ukrainian police, as directly responsible for the 1941 shooting in Kyiv, and that it addressed the uncertainty about the numbers of victims who perished. For El’bert, the absence of a strong and organised Jewish community in Kyiv was one of the reasons such a horrific mass scale killing was possible, along with the apathy and sometimes hostility of the locals. He interpreted memory activism as a statement of identity: “being at Babi Yar became equivalent to affirming one’s Jewishness, [to supporting – A. F.] the uninterrupted continuity of the tradition and history of our people.”<sup>50</sup> As for the monument, it was called to be “the climax of the forgetting of Jewish martyrs”.<sup>51</sup> El’bert contrasted this “silent” memory of the Soviet official monument with the “living” memory of the existing Jewish community, interpreting the deaths as a mobilising factor: “the memory of them [Jewish victims – A. F.] helped revive the national

47 Apart from *Evreiskii samizdat*, vol. 15 from 1978, the texts of the symposium’s contributions are available at the Archive of Va’ad (“The Federation of Jewish Communities and Organizations”) of Russia. See the archival folder “Materialy simpoziuma ‘Yevreyskaya kul’tura v SSSR: Sostoyaniye. Perspektivy’ (Moskva, 19–21 December 1976)”, Archive of the Vaad of Russia, f. 1, op. 1, d. 19, available online at the J-DOC project, accessed 19 June 2025, <https://jdoc.org.il/items/show/1832>.

48 Victoria Khiterer, “For Fear of Babyn Yar: Why Did It Take So Long for a Monument to Be Built in the Largest Holocaust Site in the Soviet Union?” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 42, no. 3 (2024): 121–125.

49 Lev El’bert, “Babi Yar: proshloe i sovremennosti”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 15 (1978): 369–372 (the presentation was originally prepared for the symposium in 1976).

50 El’bert, “Babi Yar”, 371.

51 *Ibid.*

self-awareness of the survivors”.<sup>52</sup> The 1976 monument in Babyn Yar gained notoriety not only among his contemporaries in Soviet Jewish activist circles but also in the historiography. In the words of Richard Sheldon, the truth about Babyn Yar was “engraved not on the monument, but in the play, the novel, the poem”.<sup>53</sup> To this list, one could also add samizdat.

### *Transnational Echoes of Babyn Yar*

Following the installation of a problematic monument, Babyn Yar gained even more symbolic recognition. From the vantage point of the thirty-fifth anniversary of the 1941 shooting in 1976, it is clear that the notorious ravine became a metonym for the Holocaust in the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup> It became common for people to call other sites of Nazi violence against the Jews in the Soviet Union, “our Babyn Yar”, and this practice found its way into Jewish samizdat. For instance, in a samizdat journal on culture, *Tarbut. Kul'tura*,<sup>55</sup> which was established in the second half of the 1970s and was initially a supplement to the Moscow-produced samizdat periodical *Evrei v SSSR*,<sup>56</sup> one can find an example of this allusion. The twelfth issue of *Tabut. Kul'tura*, originally published clandestinely in Moscow in 1977, contained part of speech-

52 Ibid.

53 Richard Sheldon, “The Transformation of Babi Yar”, in *Soviet Society and Culture: Essays in Honor of Vera S. Dunham*, ed. Terry L. Thompson and Richard Sheldon (Westview Press, 1988), 152. Sheldon means the play *The Lady's Tailor* by Alexander Borshagovsky from 1984, *Babi Yar: Document in the Form of a Novel* by Anatoly Kuznetsov from 1966, and the poem “Babi Yar” by Yevtushenko from 1961.

54 Yet, one can find examples of metaphorical uses of Babyn Yar even earlier. For instance, in a letter from 1969 made available to the broader public in the collection of documents entitled *Iskhod* in 1970, an author refers to the ravine in Kyiv when discussing the disappearance of proletarian Jewish culture in the Soviet Union: “The majority – most of the consumers of this culture – lie in Babi Yar and other mass grave sites.” See Iosif Kerler, “Po povodu stat'i L. Berenshteyna i M. Fridelya ‘Pod ch'yu dudku plyashut sionisty’”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 2 (1974): 23. Originally published in *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov*, no. 1 (1970).

55 The title of this samizdat journal (*Tarbut. Kul'tura*) came from the Hebrew word תרבות, which means “culture”. On the title page of this periodical, the title in Hebrew was followed by the Russian title *Kul'tura*. This samizdat journal supplement was self-published in Moscow in 1975–1979 and later became a stand-alone samizdat publication, publishing thirteen issues. Some of these were republished by *Evreiskii samizdat* in volume 18 (which contained nos. 1–8 of *Tarbut. Kul'tura*) in 1979 and volume 19 (containing nos. 9–12 of *Tarbut. Kul'tura*), also in 1979. About this Soviet Jewish samizdat periodical, see Komaromi, “Jewish Samizdat”, 287 and 289–290, as well as the samizdat database: <https://samizdat.library.utoronto.ca/content/tarbut-kultura>.

56 The samizdat journal *Evrei v SSSR* (translated as *Jews in the Soviet Union*) was devoted to various issues related to Soviet Jews, including their culture. Twenty-one issues of this samizdat periodical were published in Moscow between 1972 and 1979, making it one of the longest running samizdat periodicals of this type and a flagship publication of culture activists (*kul'turniki*) in the Jewish movement in the Soviet Union. *Evreiskii samizdat* republished a significant number of its issues, including in vol. 2 (containing nos. 1–2 of “Jews in the Soviet Union”) in 1974, vol. 6 (containing no. 3–4 of “Jews in the Soviet Union”) in 1974, vol. 7 (containing no. 5–6 of *Evrei v SSSR*) in 1975, vol. 10 (containing nos. 7–8 of *Evrei v SSSR*) in 1976, vol. 11 (containing no. 9 of *Evrei v SSSR*) in 1976, vol. 12 (containing nos. 10–11 of *Evrei v SSSR*) in 1977, and vol. 13 (containing nos. 12–13 of *Evrei v SSSR*) in 1977. About this samizdat journal, see Komaromi, “Jewish Samizdat”, 287–289. For a detailed reprint history and contents of the issues, see <https://samizdat.library.utoronto.ca/content/evrei-v-sssr>.

es delivered by retired colonel Lev Ovsisher at the 9 May commemorative events in Minsk in 1977 and the previous year.<sup>57</sup> The 1977 address, heavily loaded with antifascist rhetoric mixed with national sentiment, contextualised the Holocaust in the Soviet Union as part of a larger European tragedy: “one of the worst atrocities in human history [is] the Catastrophe of European Jewry”.<sup>58</sup> Importantly, Ovsisher did not identify the Nazis with the Germans or nor did he advance the idea that the entire German society was collectively guilty of the Holocaust: “when Hitler declared himself the enemy of the Jews ... he sullied the history of the hard-working and talented German people with a dirty stain.”<sup>59</sup> Speaking about the victims who perished during the war in his homeland, Ovsisher claimed that “every village, every big or small town had its big or small Babi Yar”.<sup>60</sup> The use of Babyn Yar as a metaphor continued in the following decades and even after the Soviet Union collapsed. It was commonly used in Jewish and non-Jewish (counter) media when describing sites of mass violence against the Jews, especially in Ukraine, but also in Russia, such as in Rostov-on-Don.

Although the *Evreiskii samizdat* series did not contain other lengthy contributions on the topic, the image of Babyn Yar repeatedly appeared in Jewish samizdat in the 1970s and the 1980s. Gorbachev’s *perestroika* in second half of the 1980s paved the way for the emergence of a more transparent public discourse about the wartime experience of Soviet citizens. It led to the release of political prisoners and the slow but steady easing of censorship. The regime’s step-by-step acceptance of the need to discuss previously silenced historical matters found its way into a number of reforms. For example, the state did not prevent the growing network of grassroots organisations from advocating for their causes, especially closer to the end of the decade.

This liberalisation of the public memory regime motivated Jews who remained in the Soviet Union to publicly commemorate the Holocaust. However, despite this more open atmosphere, it remained challenging to travel to Kyiv from other cities for commemorations until the late 1980s.<sup>61</sup> Because of this, Jews in Moscow and other cities across the Soviet Union organised their own local memorial events. In the capital, such events were organised

57 [Lev Ovsisher], “Minsk: pam’yati pavshyh”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 19 (1979): 77–82. Originally published in *Tarbut/Kul’tura*, no. 12 (1977).

58 [Ovsisher], “Minsk: pam’yati pavshyh”, 79.

59 *Ibid.*, 80.

60 *Ibid.*, 78.

61 For instance, in 1981, the state security services prevented Jews from Odesa, Moscow, and Leningrad from visiting Kyiv to attend the grassroots memorial ceremony. Some who intended to go were arrested, while others received messages from the security services that refuseniks would not be allowed to visit Babyn Yar due to their nationalism. See “AS 4545. Open Letter of 29 Jews-Refuseniks to the Central Committee of the CPSU, 1981-10-03”; Blinken OSA Archivum HU OSA 300-85-9:109/44, Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute, Published Samizdat, Samizdat Archives. Also published in the RFE/RL bulletin *Materialy Samizdata* 3 (1982), available online: <https://catalog.archivum.org/catalog/ONv3LRNZlp>.

outside the city, in the Jewish section of the Vostryakovo cemetery, in 1987.<sup>62</sup> The following year (in April 1988), events timed to coincide with Yom HaShoah were held in Moscow, Minsk, and Leningrad; these occasions also commemorated the forty-fifth anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.<sup>63</sup> Samizdat beyond the *Evreiskii samizdat* series reported on these events.

Thanks to *glasnost*, the organisers of these grassroots commemorative events, which had attracted hundreds of participants, were granted permission for these memorial activities from the respective city councils. Local mass media informed the general public about the rallies, surprisingly without using explicit anti-semitic rhetoric.<sup>64</sup> At all these gatherings, speakers addressed the wartime killings of Jews as Yom HaShoah and occasionally used the term “the Holocaust”. At the Moscow rally in 1988, one speaker, S. Lozov, mentioned that despite being allowed to speak about the Warsaw ghetto publicly, the topic still remained taboo. According to the speaker, being able to commemorate the Babyn Yar massacre in Moscow a year prior was undoubtedly an important step forward. Yet, it still triggered a hostile article in one of the capital’s newspapers.<sup>65</sup> For Lozov, such a politicisation of the long-stalled memory work was nothing short of insulting to the memory of the victims in the ravine in Kyiv. Lozov urged the 1988 rally participants to respond by making a public statement.

But before Gorbachev fundamentally changed the course of events in the Soviet Union, the dissident movement across the country went through one of the most challenging and lowest points in its history. Unable to appeal to the larger Soviet public concerning the importance of their cause, by the 1980s, the movement was in a deep crisis. Benjamin Nathans interpreted the post-war period of dissidents’ isolation as virtual defeat followed by a crackdown under Leonid Brezhnev and Yuri Andropov.<sup>66</sup>

Interestingly, national movements, including the Jewish movement, were increasingly receptive to dissidents’ message and goals. On this, the rise of Leningrad as an alternative center of the Soviet Jewish movement in the 1980s is noteworthy. In compari-

62 William Korey, “A Monument over Babi Yar?” in *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941–1945*, ed. Lucjan Dobroczycki and Jeffery S. Gurock (M. E. Sharpe Inc., 1993), 72–73. See the texts of the 1987 speeches in the Archive of Va’ad of Russia: “Sbornik materialov traurnogo mitinga, posvyashchennogo godovshchine massovogo rasstrela yevreyev v Bab’yem Yaru, 1987 g., 18–29 September 1987”, Archive of the Vaad of Russia, f. 1, op. 1, d. 41, available online at the J-DOC project: <https://jdoc.org.il/items/show/1970>.

63 See transcript of the 1988 speeches in Moscow, Leningrad, and Minsk in the Archive of Va’ad of Russia: “Obrashcheniya uchastnikov mitingov v Yom Shoa 1988 g. v Moskve, Leningrade i Minske, 1988”, Archive of the Vaad of Russia, f. 1, op. 1, d. 42, available online at the J-DOC project, accessed 19 June 2025, <https://jdoc.org.il/items/show/1815>; and “Materialy mitingov, posvyashchennykh dnyu Katastrofy [...], 1988–1989 gg.”, Archive of the Vaad of Russia, f. 1, op. 1, d. 54, available online at the J-DOC project, accessed 19 June 2025, <https://jdoc.org.il/items/show/1995>.

64 Korey, “A Monument over Babi Yar?”, 73.

65 “Materialy mitingov”, 11. The article in one of Moscow’s official newspapers referred to the 1987 grassroots rally as a provocation organised by Zionists, who timed it to coincide with the state visit of the US secretary of state.

66 Nathans, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause*, 322.

son to their peers in other cities, the Jews of Leningrad initiated an impressive range of activities that called for not only the reinvention of Jewish identity but also a sense of community based on Jews' deeply rooted connection to the city. As Ann Komaromi put it, in the final decade of the Soviet Union, Leningrad Jews took part in homegrown "Hebrew study and teaching, seminars, demonstrations, Jewish soccer teams, local history walking tours, unofficial book collections, and ethnographic expeditions", all of which were part of Jews' memory work.<sup>67</sup>

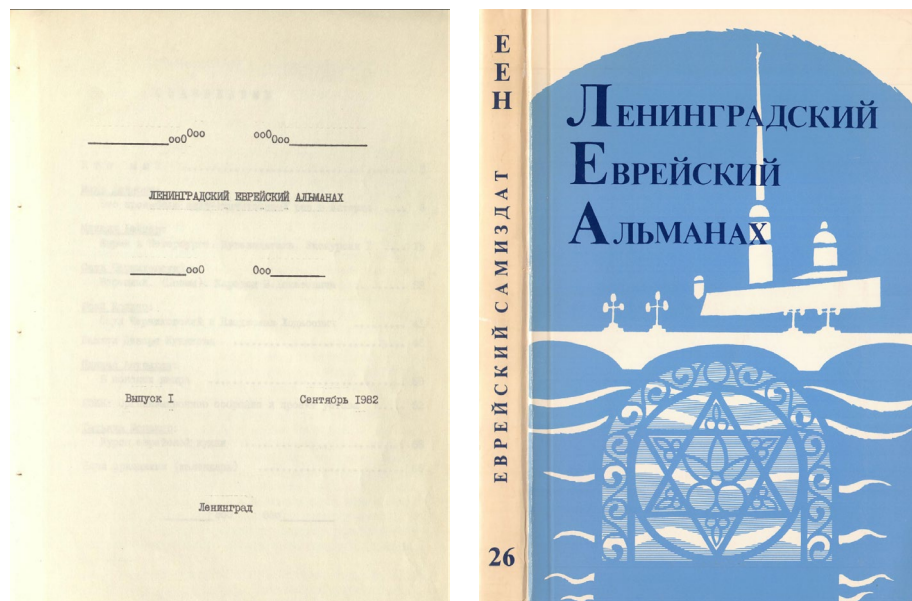
Commemorations of the victims of the Holocaust were part of these broader communal efforts. In fact, Leningrad Jews did not follow Moscow's example but instead organised their own rallies several years before grassroots efforts emerged in the capital. They began their work in 1981 and continued until 1988, as reported in samizdat.<sup>68</sup> Jews in Leningrad, confronted with the problem that the graves of Holocaust victims were not inside the city limits, made the decision to gather in the Piskarevsky cemetery, where Jews from the wartime siege of Leningrad had been laid to rest. Later, the Leningrad activists gathered near a memorial plaque discovered at the cemetery in 1983, a practice that continued for years. By 1988, memorial activities had developed considerably; they were attended by both Jews and non-Jews and were also heavily policed. Not only was the term "the Holocaust" often used at these rallies; participants were also receptive to "Never Again" rhetoric. This brought late Soviet grassroots memory activism closer to the international "commemorative norm" we observe today.

The longest lasting Soviet Jewish samizdat periodical of the decade, *Leningradskii evreiskii al'manakh* or *LEA* (Fig. 3), grew out of a Jewish historical seminar held in the city.<sup>69</sup> In *LEA*, the Holocaust was far from the central topic, but it and discussions of local Jewish (urban) history, tradition, and ethnography served to strengthen the sense of a St. Petersburg/Leningrad Jewish identity and community. According to this samizdat publication, the Day of Memory was first commemorated in 1981, at the Jewish historical seminar held in a private apartment, where around sixty people had gathered. At the opening of the event, before try-

67 Ann Komaromi, "Between Two Worlds: Late Soviet Jews in Leningrad", *East European Jewish Affairs* 48, no. 1 (2018): 23.

68 It is somewhat challenging to date of appearance of the samizdat supplement *Yom HaShoah v Leningrade* that reported on these commemorative events because no date was indicated on the title page and the publication had no connection to *LEA*. The National Library of Israel dates this samizdat supplement to 1987, while the reference guide published in Moscow cites 1988 as the year of publication. See Vladimir Karasik, *Yevreiskaya pressa na russkom yazyke. Rossiya, 1986–1992. Bibliograficheskii spravochnik* (N. I. Krotov, 1992), 139.

69 *Leningradskii evreiskii al'manakh* (Jewish Almanac of Leningrad) or *LEA*, was a samizdat periodical that published a thematic collection of articles devoted to Jewish history, ethnography and heritage in the city. *LEA* was originally published in Leningrad in between 1982 and 1989, with a total of nineteen issues. Most of *LEA* was reprinted in *Evreiskii samizdat*, with *LEA* issues 1, 2 (from 1982), 3 and 4 (from 1984) partially republished in *Evreiskii samizdat*, no. 26 in 1988 (see figure 4); *LEA* issues 5 to 8 (from 1984–1985) were republished in *Evreiskii samizdat* 27 in 1992. See details: <https://samizdat.library.utoronto.ca/content/lea>.



**Figure 3. On the left: the cover page of the original samizdat periodical *Leningradskii evreiskii al'manakh* (Jewish almanac of Leningrad) or *LEA*, originally published in Leningrad in 1982.**

**Credit: The Wende Museum, Culver City, California;**

**On the right: cover page of *Evreiskii samizdat*, vol. 26 (1988), containing nos. 1-4 of *LEA*.**

**Credit: CEU Library, Budapest, Hungary.**

ing to comprehend the horrors of the wartime atrocities, they read Yevtushenko's poem and played Shostakovich's symphony.<sup>70</sup> *LEA* included other texts about the Holocaust, including Ilya Erenburg's 1944 poem about Babyn Yar, securing the place of this artistic meditation on Kyiv's ravine in the canon of Soviet Jewish Holocaust memory.

Placing Babyn Yar at the center of discussions and reflections on the Holocaust in the periodicals under study had a logic beyond the extent of the tragedy itself. Already in the 1970s, the site was associated with memory activism as political action, which made it important for periodicals to report on commemoration developments at the site. This effort was backed by counter-media outlets, such as RFE/RL and Voice of America, integrating Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals into transnational counter-media circulation. At the same time, the circulation of artistic texts devoted to the tragedy in Kyiv created a unique opening for samizdat authors to voice the importance of remembering the Holocaust, citing these existing texts. This made Babyn Yar far more present in the underground media sphere in comparison to other sites of anti-Jewish atrocities in the USSR.

<sup>70</sup> *Yom HaShoah v Leningrade*, 1.

### *Historicising Jewish Victimhood*

There was second important commemorative trope that frequently appeared on the pages of Soviet Jewish samizdat. It was concerned with statements, open letters, and other materials affiliated with “*politiki*”, in addition to various texts about Jewish culture, history, and literature produced by “*kul'turniki*”. The trope was the interpretation of Jewish history as a continuous story of calamity, with the Holocaust as another example – a highly important and traumatic one – of the ills that had befallen Jews, but not the only or even the central catastrophe. Instead, contemporary Soviet antisemitism was viewed as a culmination of all these misfortunes, and fighting it – either by raising the awareness of the international community of the persecution of Jews or by emigrating – was essential.

*Iton*, the oldest Jewish samizdat publication, addressed Jewish historical victimhood through this trope. The most common example was comparing the fate of Soviet refuseniks to Jews’ enslavement in Egypt. Suffering that began long ago, according to this narrative, continued to the present day: “we wept for a long time: over the dying culture of our people in this country, over the millions killed by Hitler, over the thousands murdered by Stalin.”<sup>71</sup> Another leitmotif was the self-image shared by refuseniks. In contrast to the “Jews of Silence” identity that Elie Wiesel assigned to Soviet Jews after his 1965 visit to the Soviet Union, the authors of an article in *Iton* saw themselves as “the Jews of Struggle”.

*Evreiskii samizdat* republished several samizdat periodicals from the early 1970s that were affiliated with the political branch of the Jewish movement. The samizdat journal *Iskhod* collected appeals, open letters, private letters, and statements by refuseniks and other Jews who faced discrimination and persecution.<sup>72</sup> This compilation did not contain lengthy discussions of historical topics. But in these documents, the narrative of protest against forced assimilation and the persistent violation of human rights was accompanied by references to Romans besieging Jerusalem and destroying the Second Temple in 70 CE.<sup>73</sup> Other calamities referenced were the fate of Jews in Spain in 1499, the Beilis affair, and Jews’ experiences of World War II<sup>74</sup> and the late Stalinist pe-

71 “Evrei perestayut molchat’”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 1 (1974): 86. Originally published in *Iton*, no. 1 (1970).

72 *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov* (Exodus: A Collection of Documents) was a Soviet Jewish samizdat periodical with a political orientation originally published in Moscow in 1970–1971. A total of four issues were published. This periodical collected information about the persecution of Jews in the Soviet Union related to their desire to emigrate and for other political reasons. The periodical compiled documents that served as evidence of acts of persecution, including searches, arrests, etc. All four issues of *Iskhod* (nos. 1, 2, and 3 from 1970 and no. 4 from 1971) were published in *Evreiskii samizdat*, volume 2 in 1974. See details: <https://samizdat.library.utoronto.ca/content/iskhod-sbornik-dokumentov>.

73 “Pis'mo 18-ti' glav yevreyskikh semey Gruzii v komitet po pravam cheloveka pri OON”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 2 (1974): 1. Originally published in *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov*, no. 1 (1970).

74 [Tina Brodetskaya], “Predsedatelyu Soveta Ministrov SSSR A.N. Kosyginu”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 2 (1974): 19. Originally published in *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov*, no. 1 (1970).

riod: “they died in the Inquisition in Spain and in the Nazi concentration camps in Germany”;<sup>75</sup> “Jewish history is a road of suffering, where every step is marked with blood”;<sup>76</sup> “the remains of this far-reaching culture were crushed by Beria’s rejection of all things Jewish”.<sup>77</sup>

Appeals were mostly addressed to the broader public (authored by Soviet Jews asking Soviet and world leaders for assistance or at least hoping to publicise their cause abroad). The authors of samizdat referred to the Holocaust in a language inspired by official antifascist rhetoric: “I fought for my long-suffering ancient people, for my relatives exterminated by the Nazis, for the future of Jewish children.”<sup>78</sup> Authors also connected Jewish historical victimhood to more recent cases of anti-Jewish violence in the Middle East: “This is the call of my brothers who died on the gallows in Baghdad.”<sup>79</sup> *Iskhod* also published the protocols of searches of the apartments of Soviet Jews suspected or accused of Zionism. In one such report, a search conducted at the dacha of David Chernoglaz near Leningrad in 1970 resulted in the seizure of a handwritten poem titled “We fought in the Warsaw Ghetto”, among other things.<sup>80</sup>

Soviet Jewish periodicals affiliated with the “*kul'turniki*” branch of the movement, such as the above-mentioned *Evrei v SSSR* published many accounts that described the repressive state machine. Often, samizdat authors shared their personal anecdotes about how this persecution helped them navigate their convoluted search for identity. For instance, Mikhail Klyachkin wrote about how learning about the Holocaust shaped his everyday experience: “the tragedy of the six million Jews of Europe became my wound; I painfully learned about it from a number of sources.”<sup>81</sup>

Soviet Jewish identity was deeply affected by the antisemitic policies that tainted Soviet society starting in the late Stalinist years. In an oft-cited confessional essay meditating on what defines the experience of being Jewish in the Soviet Union originally published in the samizdat journal *Jews in the USSR*, Larisa Bogoraz described the antisemitic stereotypes prevalent in post-war Soviet society.<sup>82</sup> She reminded readers that Jews were portrayed

75 “Pis'mo 18-ti”, 2.

76 “Pis'mo 18-ti' glav yevreyskikh semey Gruzii g-nu U Tanu”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 2 (1974): 16. Originally published in *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov*, no. 1, (1970).

77 Kerler, “Po povodu stat'i L. Berenshteyna”, 23.

78 Hirsch Feigin, “V prezidium Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 2 (1974): 53. Originally published in *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov*, no. 1 (1970).

79 Feigin, “V prezidium Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR”, 53.

80 NA, “Protokol obyska u Davida Chernoglaza”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 2 (1974): 95. Originally published in *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov*, no. 2 (1970).

81 Mikhail Klyachin, “V sem' let mne kazalosi', chto ya sovershenno ne otlichayus' ot svoikh sverstnikov”, *Evreiskii samizdat*, 4 (1974): 45. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 1 (1972).

82 Larisa Bogoraz, “Chuvstvuyu li ya sebya chast'yu yevreyskogo naroda”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 4 (1974): 40. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 1 (1972). About this essay, see Beckerman, *When They Come for Us*, 254.

as a group lacking agency, especially regarding their experience during the war: “some Jews were killed, others extradited, others hid”, and “Jews obediently went to the gas chambers”.<sup>83</sup> Due to this characterisation, Bogoraz recalled that self-identifying as a Jew was a challenge with which she consciously wrestled.

### *Remembering Victims Across the USSR and Beyond*

While Babyn Yar held a special place in the canon of Holocaust memory for the authors, editors, and readers of Soviet Jewish samizdat, further reading reveals four important aspects of knowledge production about the wartime genocide. First, mobilising memories of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union became an additional argument in favor of emigration. Second, the difficulty obtaining knowledge about the wartime Jewish tragedy was intertwined with suffering from antisemitic sentiment in the Soviet Union. Third, arguing against the antisemitic Soviet narrative about Jews *not* actively participating in the fighting during the Second World War was also supposed to counter antisemitic stereotypes. Fourth, emphasising the importance of the Warsaw ghetto uprising as another milestone was supposed to emphasise the heroism of Jews versus their perceived collective apathy toward continuous slaughter. This final aspect also resonated with the Israeli perspective on the Holocaust at the time, which was viewed through the lens of heroism, not victimhood.

Articles published in the samizdat journal *Iskhod* viewed the wartime calamities experienced by Jews as an argument in favor of emigration to Israel. For the authors of these texts, the war signaled, among other things, the rupture of their previous family ties and a tear in the social fabric of prewar Soviet society. One Jewish poet saw no point in staying in the post-war Soviet Union because there was no longer an audience for his Yiddish work.<sup>84</sup> References to the Soviet Union as a metaphoric wasteland where people had no living relatives were also used to support emigration. Many who had lost their families in the war sought to build new social ties through emigration: “returning from Siberia to Latvia in 1958, we did not find any of our relatives. All our loved ones were brutally tortured and shot by the fascists ... At present, we have relatives only in Israel.”<sup>85</sup>

The readers of *Evreiskii samizdat* could also engage with a separate volume entitled “Jews in the War Against Nazi Germany”.<sup>86</sup> It included an address by G. Manevich that he had delivered at an event near Moscow on 9 May 1973. Manevich took part in a gath-

83 Bogoraz, “Chuvstvuyu li ya sebya chast'yu”, 40.

84 Kerler, “Po povodu stat'i L. Berenshteyna”, 23.

85 Itskhok-Ayzik Gamza, “Prem'yer-ministru Velikobritanii”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 2 (1974): 58. Originally published in *Iskhod*, no. 2, 1970.

86 *Yevrei v voyne protiv gitlerovskoy Germanii* was a title that appeared in *Evreiskii samizdat* 9 (1975).

ering of a large number of nationally minded Soviet Jews commemorating the twenty-eighth anniversary of the Soviet victory over the Nazis.<sup>87</sup> His address was full of antifascist rhetoric, but the author repeatedly pointed out the Jewish identity of victims. Another text published in the same volume was authored by Gershon Shapiro, who countered the common Soviet antisemitic stereotype that Jews did not fight in the Red Army during the war, preferring instead to wait for evacuation. Shapiro repeatedly emphasised the difficulty of carrying out this research because he had to “gather data piecemeal”.<sup>88</sup>

*Evreiskii samizdat* republished not only Jewish samizdat periodicals that originally appeared in Riga, Moscow, and Leningrad; it also printed samizdat from other cities. One volume, edited by Jacob Ingerman, compiled 107 articles about Jews – heroes of the Soviet Union.<sup>89</sup> Containing material originally published in 1971–1973 in Odesa, the volume also cited Gershon Shapiro, who continued his earlier work on the subject. The author again explained to readers that due to antisemitism, Holocaust denial, and the lack of openly accessible information in the Soviet Union, he had to gather information about Jews in the Red Army from various scattered sources including “material published in the national press in Moscow, the republics, the local newspaper, or the Jewish press outside of the USSR”, as well as various Yiddish sources.<sup>90</sup>

Jewish samizdat periodicals affiliated with the “*kul'turniki*” branch of the Jewish movement contained an abundance of material commemorating the Holocaust in the Soviet Union and beyond. In the introduction to the first issue of *Evrei v SSSR* from 1972, editor Alexander Voronel’ argued that the Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel that followed just three years after the conclusion of the war were the obvious factors that triggered the formation of the Jewish movement in the Soviet Union.<sup>91</sup> Later, *Evrei v SSSR* published a report about a Jewish antifascist rally in Minsk on 9 May 1975, “on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory over German fascism”, where Efim Davidovich delivered a speech.<sup>92</sup> In this speech, there were many references to the personal experience of losing one’s family at the hands of the

87 G. M. Manevici, “V 28-yu godovshchinu pobedy nad natsistami”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 9 (1975): 1–16.

88 Gershon Shapiro, “Yevrei v voyne protiv gitlerovskoy Germanii”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 9 (1975): 26. Originally published in Odesa in 1972.

89 [G. Shapiro], “Ocherki o yevreyakh – geroyakh Sovetskogo Soyuza”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 14 (1978): 1–326.

90 “Ot redaktsii”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 14 (1978): X.

91 Alexander Voronel, “Sotsial’nye predposylki natsional’nogo probujdenia evreev v SSSR”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 4 (1974): 3–4. Originally published in *Jews in the Soviet Union*, no. 1 (1972).

92 [Efim Davidovich], “Evreiskii antifashistskii miting v Minske”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 12 (1977): 11–13. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 10 (1974–1975). The same address by Davidovich circulated in other samizdat sources, including those related to RFE/RL: “AS 2152. Speech at the Victory Day Rally in Minsk, 1975-05-09”; *Blinken OSA Archivum* HU OSA 300-85-9:54/46; Published Samizdat; Samizdat Archives; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute. Also published in the RFE/RL bulletin *Materialy Samizdata*, vol. 19/1976.

Nazis; to the Warsaw ghetto uprising; and to the heroism of the underground antifascist organisation of the Minsk ghetto.

Davidovich emphasised the importance of memory work in Minsk, a special case given the lack of official monuments to Jewish victims: “under this monument, which was built with the funds of Jewish soldiers and their widows who returned from the front, lie our relatives and friends tortured by the Nazis.”<sup>93</sup> Also in 1975, *Jews in the USSR* published excerpts from journalist Michael Elkins’ book *Forged in Fury*, about the fate of the Jewish antifascist resistance during the war, which had been translated into Russian from the original English.<sup>94</sup> The book described the international reaction to the events of World War II and the establishment of the state of Israel.

*Tarbut. Kul’tura*, another flagship journal of the “kul’turniki” samizdat branch that appeared in the second half of the 1970s, frequently published articles on the Holocaust in the Soviet Union and beyond. Between 1975 and 1979, this samizdat journal contained several pieces about the history of the Holocaust and its aftermath in the Soviet Union and the Socialist bloc. An article from 1975 that was originally published in the journal’s first issue offered detailed statistics about the five hundred thousand Jewish soldiers in the Red Army and two million Jews in the ranks of the Allied armies. It was supposed to further reinforce the narrative of Jewish heroism.<sup>95</sup> Apart from individual biographies, the author summarised the collective efforts and experiences of the Jews who served in these armies. The third issue of *Tarbut. Kul’tura*, also from 1975, contained excerpts from Anne Frank’s diary,<sup>96</sup> while the seventh issue from 1976 offered readers two articles on the Holocaust, both of which were related to Israel. The text by I. Greenberg was entitled “The Religious Significance of the Shoah and the Formation of the State of Israel”,<sup>97</sup> and the second, “Jews and Germans,” was written by Israeli philosopher Gershom Sholem.<sup>98</sup> Other issues of *Tarbut. Kul’tura* offered readers information about the Adolf Eichmann trial and featured several commemorative poems.<sup>99</sup> As with other Soviet Jewish samizdat peri-

93 [Davidovich], “Evreiskii antifashistskii miting v Minske”, 11.

94 Michael Elkins, “Zakalennye yarostiu”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 11 (1976): 43–56. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 9 (1975). Other excerpts of the same novel were republished in *Evreiskii samizdat* 12 (1977): 14–56. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 10 (1975); and *Evreiskii samizdat* 12 (1977): 205–210. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 11 (1975).

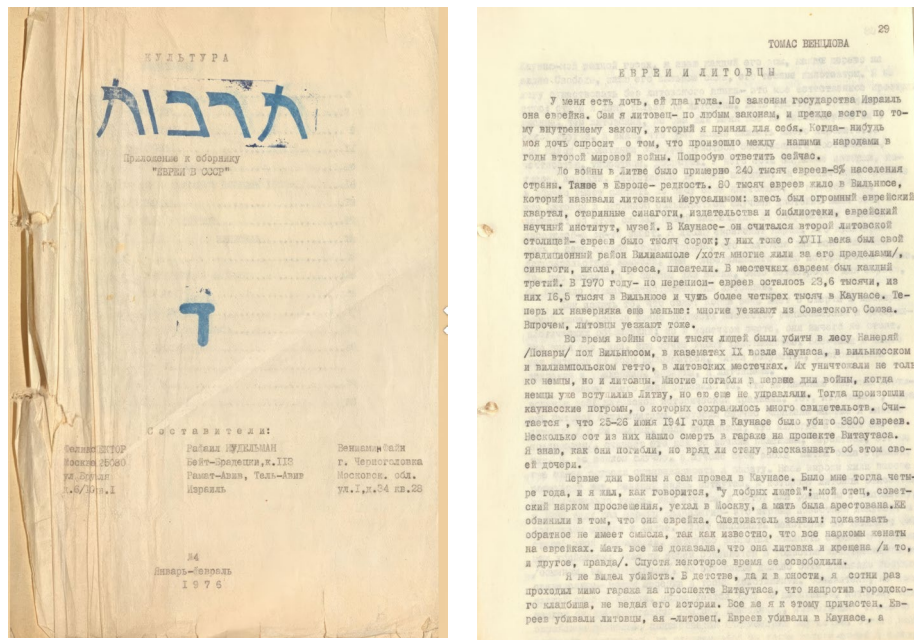
95 V. Vagner, “Evrei v voine 1941–44 gg.”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 18 (1979): 7–26. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul’tura*, no. 1 (1975).

96 “Iz dnevnika Anny Frank”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 18 (1979): 95–96. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul’tura*, no. 3 (1975).

97 I. Greenberg, “Religioznoye znachenie Katastrofy i obrazovaniye Gosudarstva Izrail’”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 18 (1979): 224–239. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul’tura*, no. 7 (1976).

98 G. Sholem, “Yevrei i nemtsy”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 18 (1979): 214–223. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul’tura*, no. 7 (1976).

99 “Kak poymali i kak sudili Adol’fa Eykhmana”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 19 (1979): 63, 66–68. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul’tura*, no. 9 (1977); “Kolybel’naya pesnya detyam Vil’ny”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 19 (1979): 64. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul’tura*, no. 9 (1977); “Muzhchiny muchili detey ...”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 19 (1979): 65. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul’tura*, no. 9 (1977).



**Figure 4. On the left: an original cover page of the Jewish samizdat periodical *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 4 (1976). On the right: the title page of Tomas Venclova's article "Jews and Lithuanians" in the same number of this samizdat periodical (the article appeared on pp. 29–36). Credit: Wende Museum, Culver City, California.**

odicals, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was a frequent reference point for authors of *Tarbut. Kul'tura*. It published articles on the history of the uprising in the Polish capital, interpreting it as "perhaps the most dramatic page in the history of the fight against fascism".<sup>100</sup> The journal also informed its readers about lesser-known regional contexts, such as the Gomel ghetto.<sup>101</sup>

Soviet Jewish samizdat referred to other areas of the Soviet Union tragically marked by the Holocaust, such as Lithuania. In 1976, in its twelfth issue, *Evrei v SSSR* published an essay by Tomas Venclova entitled "Jews and Lithuanians", in which the prominent dissident openly discussed the atrocities Lithuanians unleashed against their Jewish neighbours, sometimes without the direct involvement of Nazi officers.<sup>102</sup> *Evreiskii samizdat* republished the essay in its thirteenth volume in 1977, the year Venclova was forced to emigrate from the Soviet Union, making the work available to a wider international audience, as it appeared in English translation in the West.

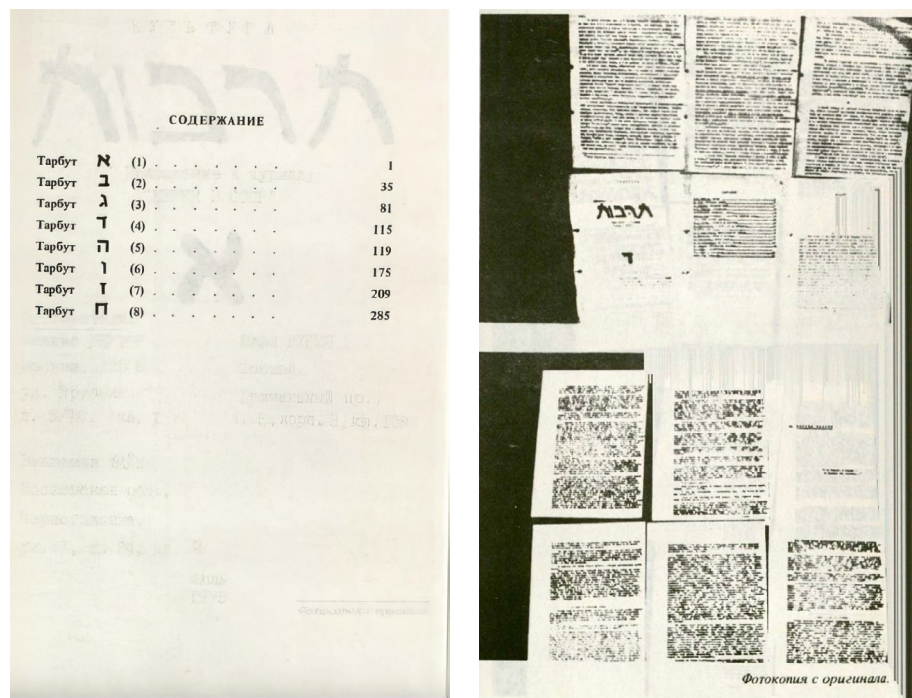
Interestingly, the same essay appeared in the fourth issue of *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, also in 1976 (Fig. 4).<sup>103</sup> Yet, three years later,

100 A. Gerasimov, "Vostaniye varshavskogo getto", *Evreiskii samizdat* 19 (1979): 306–325. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 12 (1978).

101 L. Chenobel'skii, "Eto vse, chto u nas yest'", *Evreiskii samizdat* 19 (1979): 293–305. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 12 (1978).

102 Tomas Venclova, "Evrei i Litovtsy", *Evreiskii samizdat* 13 (1977): 66–71. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 12 (1976).

103 Tomas Venclova "Evrei i Litovtsy", *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 4 (1976): 29–36.



**Figure 5. On the left: the contents page of *Evreiskii samizdat*, vol. 18 (1979) that lists the reprint of *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 4 (1976) on pp. 115–119, that was supposed to contain the article of Tomas Venclova “Jews and Lithuanians”. On the right: the actual reprint (on p. 116) that made the original text illegible. Credit: Library of the Blinken OSA Archivum, Budapest, Hungary.**

when *Evreiskii samizdat* reprinted the content of this samizdat periodical, Venclova’s essay was excluded. In fact, the entire issue was reprinted illegibly (Fig. 5), raising a number of questions about editorial discretion. Ann Komaromi suggested that the topic of collaboration could have been considered too sensitive by the series editors, even for a non-conformist readership.<sup>104</sup> Yet the reason for this decision remains unclear as by 1979, Venclova’s text was circulating internationally through various unofficial channels.

Other volumes of *Evreiskii samizdat* also paid tribute to the calamity of Lithuanian Jews. The twenty-fourth issue of the sub-series, published in 1981, included the piece “A Guide to Jewish Vilnius,” a genre of writing that would become increasingly popular after the Soviet Union collapsed.<sup>105</sup> The text recounted the resistance in the ghetto and listed the Holocaust memorials in the city and in Panerai, but it omitted discussions of Lithuanian collaboration.

<sup>104</sup> Komaromi, “Jewish Samizdat”, 300–301.

<sup>105</sup> Eytan Finkel’shteyn, “Putevoditel’ po yevreyskomu Vi’nyusu”, *Evreiskii samizdat* 24 (1981): 1–22.

### *Conclusion*

In the 1970s and 1980s, in a sporadic and non-systematic manner – like samizdat itself – a dozen Soviet Jewish underground periodicals persistently discussed the trauma of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union and in Europe, especially in the countries of the Eastern Bloc. Despite the repressive state's efforts to suppress the memory of the Holocaust, the topic was not entirely absent from the country's broader public sphere – even more so among Jewish families. For some samizdat authors, the Holocaust stood out from the longer continuum of antisemitic violence in the Soviet Union, whereas for others, it was essential to highlight the wartime trauma as an example of the persecution Jews experienced throughout history.

On the one hand, Holocaust remembrance was not a central topic in Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals. It was interpreted as a tragedy the Jews suffered, indeed an extremely important one, but it was not viewed as the cornerstone of memory for the entire Jewish people. On the other hand, the logic of discussing a Jewish past marked by suffering and persecution in samizdat periodicals lay in interpreting the obstacles faced by refuseniks as a continuation of that same pattern of suffering. Before *perestroika*, discussing the Holocaust in samizdat publications served to strengthen identity and articulate experiences of suffering – sometimes as an intimate personal tragedy, sometimes as a calamity affecting the entire community. During and after *perestroika*, when open Holocaust commemoration became possible, uncensored periodicals began to address the topic in a more systematic way.

Through a close reading of the periodicals reprinted in *Evreiskii samizdat*, a series published by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the reader encounters the counter-memory of the Second World War in the final two decades of the Soviet Union's existence. From the first reprinted issue in 1974 to the last volume in 1992, the series disseminated samizdat publications that informed their readers about memory activism and commemoration efforts in and around Kyiv, Minsk, Vilnius, and other notorious Holocaust killing sites in the Soviet Union.

The memorial topography of the Holocaust on the pages of various samizdat periodicals reprinted in *Evreiskii samizdat* corresponded to the unofficial commemoration efforts Jews organised and carried out across the Soviet Union from the late 1940s onward. The centrality of Babyn Yar on the pages of samizdat periodicals parallels the political significance of the site for Kyiv dissidents – Jews and non-Jews alike – starting in the 1960s, and the international response to their protests. Jewish samizdat periodicals highlighted Babyn Yar's particular significance as a place of remembrance and of the Jewish struggle for memory in confrontation with the Soviet state and its secret security forces. Minsk and Vilnius emerged as sites of wartime extermination

equal only to Warsaw in terms of brutality. This indicates the extent to which samizdat authors were aware of the horrifying international scope of the Holocaust, at least in Central Europe. Awareness of the larger context of the Holocaust was also included in discussions about the number of victims and killing sites. Yet, authors of Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals, who often reproduced antifascist rhetoric, were clearly more familiar with the memory canon and counter-canon in Eastern Bloc countries than they were with developments in the West.

In the 1980s, the terms “Shoah” and “catastrophe” appeared on the pages of *LEA*, the Jewish samizdat periodical from Leningrad. Generally, the term “Holocaust” was not used until the very late 1980s. Behind the Iron Curtain, this term did not have the same mobilising power for samizdat authors and audiences as compared to their post-1989 peers. Eventually, the language of trauma in Soviet Jewish samizdat periodicals emerged as a compilation of antifascist rhetoric and Zionist-inspired vocabulary of homecoming to Israel.

## Bibliography

### Samizdat Sources

- AS 2152. Speech at the Victory Day Rally in Minsk, 1975-05-09. Blinken OSA Archivum HU OSA 300-85-9:54/46, Published Samizdat, Samizdat Archives. Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute. Also available in *Materialy Samizdata*. Vol. 19/1976.
- AS 4545. Open Letter of 29 Jews-Refuseniks to the Central Committee of the CPSU, 1981-10-03. Blinken OSA Archivum HU OSA 300-85-9:109/44, Published Samizdat, Samizdat Archives, Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute. Also available in *Materialy Samizdata*. Vol. 3/1982. <https://catalog.archivum.org/catalog/0Nv3LRNZlp>.
- “Babi Yar”. *Evreiskii samizdat* 3 (1974): 129. Originally published in *Vestnik Iskhoda*, no. 2 (1971).
- “Babi Jar – Symbol of an Unsolved Past”. Background Report by the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Communist Area Analysis Department, 1968. Blinken OSA Archivum, HU OSA 300-8-3:65/1-10, Records of RFE/RL Research Institute, Publications Department, Background Reports, <https://catalog.archivum.org/catalog/qDvRZQbpv4>.
- Bogoraz, Larisa. “Chuvstvuyu li ya sebya chast’yu yevreyskogo naroda” [Do I feel part of the Jewish people?]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 4 (1974): 39–43. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 1 (1972).
- Chenobel’skii, L. “Eto vse, chto u nas yest’” [That is all we have]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 19 (1979): 293–305. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul’tura*, no. 12 (1978).
- [Brodetskaya, Tina]. “Predsedatelyu Soveta Ministrov SSSR A. N. Kosyginu” [To the chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR A. N. Kosygin]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 2 (1974): 19. Originally published in *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov*, no. 1 (1970).
- [Davidovich, Efim]. “Evreiskii antifashistskii miting v Minske” [Jewish antifascist rally in Minsk]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 12 (1977): 11–13. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 10 (1975).
- El’bert, Lev. “Babi Yar: proshloe i sovremennosti” [Babyn Yar: Past and present]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 15 (1978): 369–372.
- Elkins, Michael. “Zakalennye yarostiu” [Forged in fury]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 11 (1976): 43–56. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 9 (1975).
- Elkins, Mikhael. “Zakalennye yarostiu” [Forged in fury]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 12 (1977): 14–56. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 10 (1975).
- Elkins, Michael. “Zakalennye yarostiu” [Forged in fury]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 12 (1977): 205–210. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 11 (1975).
- “Evrei perestayut molchat’” [Jews stop being silent]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 1 (1974): 85–89. Originally published in *Iton*, no. 1 (1970).
- Feigin, Hirsch. “V prezidium Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR” [To the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 2 (1974): 53–54. Originally published in *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov*, no. 1 (1970).
- Finkel’shteyn, Eytan. “Putevoditel’ po yevreyskomu Vi’nyusu” [A guide to Jewish Vilnius]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 24 (1981): 1–22.
- Gamza, Itskhok-Ayzik. “Prem’er-ministru Velikobritanii” [To the prime minister of Great Britain]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 2 (1974): 58. Originally published in *Iskhod*, no. 2 (1970).

- Gerasimov, A. "Vosstaniye varshavskogo getto" [Warsaw Ghetto Uprising]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 19 (1979): 306–325. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 12 (1978).
- Greenberg, I. "Religioznoye znachenie Katastrofy i obrazovaniye Gosudarstva Izrail'" [Religious significance of the Shoah and the formation of the State of Israel]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 18 (1979): 224–239. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 7 (1976).
- "Iz dnevnika Anny Frank" [From the diary of Anne Frank]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 18 (1979): 95. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 3 (1975).
- "Kak poymali i kak sudili Adol'fa Eykhmana" [How Adolf Eichmann was caught and condemned]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 19 (1979): 63, 66–68. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 9 (1977).
- Kerler, Iosif. "Po povodu stat'i L. Berenshteyna i M. Fridelya 'Pod ch'yu dudku plyashut sionisty'" [Regarding the article by L. Berenstein and M. Friedel "To whose tune do the Zionists dance?"]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 2 (1974): 22–24. Originally published in *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov*, no. 1 (1970).
- Klyachin, Mikhail. "V sem' let mne kazalosi', chto ya sovershenno ne otlichayus' ot svoikh sverstnikov" [At seven years old, it seemed to me that I was no different from my peers]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 4 (1974): 43–45. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 1 (1972).
- "Kolybel'naya pesnya detyam Vil'ny" [A lullaby to the children of Vilna]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 19 (1979): 64. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 9 (1977).
- Manevici, G. M. "V 28-yu godovshchinu pobedy nad natsistami" [On the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory over the Nazis]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 9 (1975): 1–16.
- Materialy mitingov, posvyashchennykh dnyu Katastrofy [...], 1988–1989 gg. [Materials from the rallies dedicated to the Shoah Memory Day, 1988–1989]. Archive of the Vaad of Russia f. 1, op. 1, d. 54. Accessed 19 June 2025. <https://jdoc.org.il/items/show/1995>.
- Materialy simpoziuma "Yevreyskaya kul'tura v SSSR: Sostoyaniye. Perspektivy" (Moskva, 19–21 December 1976) [Materials of the symposium "Jewish Culture in the USSR: Status. Prospects" (Moscow, 19–21, December 1976)]. Archive of the Vaad of Russia f. 1, op. 1, d. 19. Accessed 19 June 2025. <https://jdoc.org.il/items/show/1832>.
- "Muzhchiny muchili detey ..." [Men tortured children ...]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 19 (1979): 65. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 9 (1977).
- Nekrasov, Viktor. "Pochemu eto ne sdelano?" [Why has it not been done?]. *Literaturnaya gazeta*, no. 125 (10 October 1959) (4091).
- Obrashcheniya uchastnikov mitingov v Yom Shoa 1988 g. v Moskve, Leningrade i Minske, 1988 [Appeals of participants in the 1988 Yom Shoah rallies in Moscow, Leningrad, and Minsk, 1988]. Archive of the Vaad of Russia f. 1, op. 1, d. 42. Accessed 19 June 2025. <https://jdoc.org.il/items/show/1815>.
- "Organizers Held, Soviet Jews Meet". *New York Times*, 22 December 1976.
- "Ot redaktsii" [From the editors]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 14 (1978): IX–X.
- [Ovsisher, Lev]. "Minsk: pam'yati pavshyh" [Minsk: In memory of the fallen]. *Evreiskii samizdat* 19 (1979): 77–82. Originally published in *Tarbut/ Kul'tura*, no. 12 (1977).

“Pis'mo 18-ti” glav yevreyskikh semey Gruzii g-nu U Tanu” [“Letter of 18” heads of Jewish families of Georgia to U Thant]. *Evreiskii samizdat 2* (1974): 15–17. Originally published in *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov*, no. 1 (1970).

“Pis'mo 18-ti” glav yevreyskikh semey Gruzii v komitet po pravam cheloveka pri OON” [“Letter of 18” heads of Jewish families of Georgia to the UN Human Rights Committee]. *Evreiskii samizdat 2* (1974): 1–3. Originally published in *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov*, no. 1 (1970).

“Protokol obyska u Davida Chernoglaza” [Search protocol of David Chernoglaz]. *Evreiskii samizdat 2* (1974): 94–96. Originally published in *Iskhod: sbornik dokumentov*, no. 2 (1970).

Sbornik materialov traurnogo mitinga, posvyashchennogo godovshchine massovogo rasstrela yevreyev v Bab'yem Yaru, 1987 g., 18–29 September 1987 [Collection of materials from the memorial meeting dedicated to the anniversary of the mass execution of Jews in Babi Yar, 1987, 18–29 September 1987]. Archive of the Vaad of Russia f. 1, op. 1, d. 41. Accessed 19 June 2025. <https://jdoc.org.il/items/show/1970>.

“September 29, 1969”. *Evreiskii samizdat 2* (1974): 79–83. Originally published in *Iton*, no. 2 (“ב” or “Bet”), 1970.

[Shapiro, G.]. “Ocherki o yevreyakh – geroyakh Sovetskogo Soyuza” [Essays about Jews – heroes of the Soviet Union]. *Evreiskii samizdat 14* (1978): 1–326.

Shapiro, Gershon. “Yevrei v voyne protiv gitlerovskoy Germanii” [Jews in the war against Nazi Germany]. *Evreiskii samizdat 9* (1975): 23–26. Originally published in Odesa in 1972.

Sholem, G. “Yevrei i nemtsy” [Jews and Germans]. *Evreiskii samizdat 18* (1979): 214–223. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 7 (1976).

Vagner, V. “Evrei v voine 1941–44 gg” [Jews in the War 1941–44]. *Evreiskii samizdat 18* (1979): 7–26. Originally published in *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 1 (1975).

Venclova, Tomas “Evrei i Litovtsy” [Jews and Lithuanians]. *Evreiskii samizdat 13* (1977): 66–71. Originally published in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 12 (1976).

Venclova, Tomas. “Evrei i Litovtsy” [Jews and Lithuanians]. *Tarbut. Kul'tura*, no. 4 (1976): 29–36.

Voronel, Alexander. “Jewish Samizdat”. In *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*, edited by Yaakov Ro'i and Avi Beker. NYU Press, 1991.

Voronel, Alexander. “Sotsial'nye predposylki natsional'nogo probujdenia evreev v SSSR” [Social prerequisites for the national awakening of Jews in the USSR]. *Evreiskii samizdat 4* (1974): 3–4. Originally published in *Jews in the Soviet Union*, no. 1 (1972).

“Yevrei v voyne protiv gitlerovskoy Germanii” [Jews in the war against Nazi Germany]. *Evreiskii samizdat 9* (1975).

*Yom HaShoah v Leningrade* [Yom HaShoah in Leningrad]. Leningrad, 1987 or 1988.

### Secondary scholarship

Beckerman, Gal. *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.

- Čapková, Kateřina, Kamil Kijek, and Stephan Stach. "Introduction". In *Jewish Lives under Communism: New Perspectives*, edited by Kateřina Čapková and Kamil Kijek. Rutgers University Press, 2022.
- Dumitru, Diana. "From Friends to Enemies?: The Soviet State and Its Jews in the Aftermath of the Holocaust". In Čapková and Kijek, *Jewish Lives under Communism: New Perspectives*.
- Estraikh, Gennady. *Jews in the Soviet Union: A History*. Volume 5, *After Stalin 1953–1967*. NYU Press, 2023.
- Freedman, Robert O. *Soviet Jewry in the 1980s: The Politics of Anti-Semitism and Emigration and the Dynamics of Resettlement*. Duke University Press, 1989.
- Gitelman, Zvi. "The Evolution of Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union". In *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*, edited by Yaacov Ro'i and Avi Beker. NYU Press, 1991.
- Grinberg, Marat. *The Soviet Jewish Bookshelf: Jewish Culture and Identity Between the Lines*. Brandeis University Press, 2022.
- Hoffmann, Stefani. "Jewish Samizdat and the Rise of Jewish National Consciousness". In Ro'i and Beker, *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*. NYU Press, 1991.
- Karasik, Vladimir. *Yevreiskaya pressa na russkom yazyke. Rossia, 1986–1992. Bibliograficheskii spravocnik* [The Jewish press in Russian. Russia, 1986–1992. Bibliographic register]. N.I. Krotov, 1992.
- Kelner, Shaul. *A Cold War Exodus: How American Activists Mobilized to Free Soviet Jews*. NYU Press, 2024.
- Kiebusinski, Ksenya. "Samizdat and Dissident Archives: Trends in Their Acquisition, Preservation, and Access in North American Repositories". *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 13, no. 1 (2012): 3–25.
- Khiterer, Victoria. *Bitter War of Memory: The Babyn Yar Massacre, Aftermath, and Commemoration*. Purdue University Press, 2025.
- Khiterer, Victoria. "For Fear of Babyn Yar: Why Did It Take So Long for a Monument to Be Built in the Largest Holocaust Site in the Soviet Union?" *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 42, no. 3 (2024): 105–132.
- Komaromi, Ann. "Between Two Worlds: Late Soviet Jews in Leningrad". *East European Jewish Affairs* 48, no. 1 (2018): 23–40.
- Komaromi, Ann. "The Bremen Archive". *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2024): 803–814.
- Komaromi, Ann. "Jewish Samizdat: Dissident Texts and the Dynamics of the Jewish Revival in the Soviet Union". In *The Jewish Movement in the Soviet Union*, edited by Yaacov Ro'i. Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012.
- Komaromi, Ann. *Soviet Samizdat: Imagining a New Society*. Cornell University Press, 2022.
- Korey, William. "A Monument over Babi Yar?" In *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941–1945*, edited by Lucjan Dobroczycki and Jeffery S. Gurock. M. E. Sharpe Inc., 1993.
- Korey, William. "In History's Memory Hole: The Soviet Treatment of the Holocaust". In *Contemporary Views on the Holocaust*. Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishing, 1983.

- Lustiger, Arno, and Roman Brackman. *Stalin and the Jews: The Red Book: The Tragedy of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and the Soviet Jews*. Enigma, 2003.
- Nathans, Benjamin. *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement*. Princeton University Press, 2024.
- Petrovsky-Shtern, Yohanan. "A Paradigm-Changing Day: The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Babyn Yar and Ukrainian-Jewish Relations". *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 38, no. 3/4 (2021): 227–258.
- Pilnik, Shay A. *The Ravine of Memory: Babyn Yar Between the Holocaust and the Great Patriotic War*. Purdue University Press, 2025.
- Pinkus, Benjamin. *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority*. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Rapson, Jessica. "Babi Yar: Transcultural Memories of Atrocity from Kiev to Denver". In *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders*, edited by Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson. De Gruyter, 2014.
- Remennick, Larissa. "Soviet Jews between Conformism, Dissent and Emigration". *Jewish Culture and History* 26, no. 1 (2025): 31–48.
- Ro'i, Yaacov. "Samizdat". *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. 2010. Accessed 20 March 2025. <https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/87>.
- Ro'i, Yaacov. "The Soviet Jewish reaction to Six-Day War". In *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War*, edited by Yaacov Ro'i, with Boris Morozov. Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008.
- Ro'i, Yaacov. "Strategy and Tactics". In Ro'i, *The Jewish Movement in the Soviet Union*.
- Schultz, Miriam. "'We Pledge, as if it Was the Highest Sanctum, to Preserve the Memory.' *Sovetish Heymland*, Facets of Holocaust Commemoration in the Soviet Union and the Cold War". In *Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism: Remembering the Holocaust in State-Socialist Eastern Europe*, edited by Kata Bohus, Peter Hallama, Stephan Stach. Central European University Press, 2022.
- Sheldon, Richard. "The Transformation of Babi Yar". In *Soviet Society and Culture: Essays in Honor of Vera S. Dunham*, edited by Terry L. Thompson and Richard Sheldon. Westview Press, 1988.
- Smola, Klavdia. "Jewish Underground Culture in the Soviet Union". In *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture*, edited by Mark Lipovetsky, Maria Engström, Tomáš Glanc, Ilja Kuku, and Klavdia Smola. Oxford University Press, 2024.
- Tippner, Anja. "Conflicting Memories, Conflicting Stories: Masha Rol'nikaite's Novel and the Soviet Culture of Holocaust Remembrance". *East European Jewish Affairs* 48, no. 3 (2018): 372–390.
- Von Zitzewitz, Josephine. *The Culture of Samizdat: Literature and Underground Networks in the Late Soviet Union*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.
- Zaslavskaya, Olga. "From Dispersed to Distributed Archives: The Past and the Present of Samizdat Material". *Poetics Today* 29, no. 4 (2008): 680–703.
- Zeltser, Arkadi. "The Cold War and Holocaust Memorialization in Soviet Publications of the 1960s". In *Holocaust Memory and the Cold War: Remembering across the Iron Curtain*, edited by Anna Koch and Stephan Stach. De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024.
- Zeltser, Arkadi. *Unwelcome Memory: Holocaust Monuments in the Soviet Union*. Yad Vashem, International Institute for Holocaust Research, 2018.

**Anastasia Felcher** is a published researcher and archivist. She obtained her PhD (with distinction) in Management and Development of Cultural Heritage from the IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca, Italy in 2016, defending a dissertation on Jewish cultural heritage and memory in the newly independent states after 1989. Anastasia has been working as a Slavic Archivist at the Blinken OSA Archivum at the Budapest site of Central European University (CEU) since 2020 and has also pursued archival projects for EHRI and ARCA. Since 2022, she has been based part-time in Vienna as a fellow at VWI and IWM, and as visiting faculty member at the CEU Vienna campus in the Department of Historical Studies (HISU), particularly in the Cultural Heritage Studies and Jewish Studies programs. Her first monograph is currently in production with an international academic press. She is now developing a new project on Cold War Holocaust memory and the transnational counter-media sphere.

Email: [felchera@ceu.edu](mailto:felchera@ceu.edu)

Anastasia Felcher, Holocaust Trauma and Jewish Voices in Soviet Jewish Samizdat Periodicals, in S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 13 (2026) 1, 60-92.

[https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126/art\\_felcher](https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126/art_felcher)

S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 13 (2026) 1| <https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126>

This article is licensed under the following Creative Commons License: CC-BY-SA (Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives).

Vlasta Kordová

# The Logic of the Objective Enemy

*Jews, Martial Law, and Nazi Security Policy  
in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia*

## Abstract

This article analyses Nazi repressive policy in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia during two periods of martial law – autumn 1941 and summer 1942 – with particular attention to the treatment of Jews as targeted enemies. It shows that Jews were not only affected by martial law; they also occupied a distinct and structurally significant position within its repressive framework.

Theoretically grounded in Hannah Arendt’s concept of the “objective enemy”, the article interprets Nazi repression as part of an ideologically driven security logic. Drawing on court records, archival documents, and deportation databases, it combines quantitative analysis with individual case studies to identify recurring patterns of anti-Jewish violence.

The article suggests that martial law served as an important instrument for implementing racialised security policies in which Jewish existence was construed as a security concern. By examining the overrepresentation of Jews among those persecuted and the specific forms of violence directed against them, the study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between Holocaust history and the broader repression of civilian populations in occupied Europe.

Large-scale arrests were an integral feature of the Nazi regime, as the expansionist policy of the Third Reich was marked not only by the deployment of military forces but also by the mobilisation of the Nazi regime’s security institutions – foremost among them the police. These organs included the Security Police (Sicherheitspolizei) and the Order Police (Ordnungspolizei), which from the very outset of the Reich’s territorial expansion served as a reliable instrument for the “pacification” of newly occupied territories.

The mobile Einsatzgruppen, primarily associated with operations following the Wehrmacht in the Soviet Union and Poland,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Peter Klein, ed., *Die Einsatzgruppen in der besetzten Sowjetunion 1941/42. Die Tätigkeits- und Lageberichte des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD* (Edition Hentrich, 1997) – in this volume, see: Wolfgang Scheffler, “Die Einsatzgruppe A”, 29–51; Christian Gerlach, “Einsatzgruppe B”, 52–70; Dieter Pohl, “Einsatzgruppe C”, 71–88; Andrej Angrick, “Einsatzgruppe D”, 88–111; Heinz Heinrich Wilhelm, *Einsatzgruppe A der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1941/1942* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998); Helmut Krausnick and Heinz Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges. Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1938–1942* (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1981); Andrej Angrick, *Besatzung*

also played an important role in the earlier phases of Nazi expansion. These units – composed of members of Heydrich’s Sicherheitsdienst (SD) men as well as members of the Ordnungspolizei and Waffen-SS<sup>2</sup> – were already deployed during the annexation of Austria, the cession of border areas of the Czechoslovak Republic, and the subsequent occupation of the Bohemian-Moravian lands and the establishment of the Protectorate in the spring of 1939.<sup>3</sup>

The first wave of persecution in the territory of the former Czechoslovak Republic began immediately after the Munich Agreement in the autumn of 1938. The Einsatzgruppen targeted individuals and documents considered hostile to the Reich, closed institutions associated with the pre-Munich state and took control of local police stations.<sup>4</sup> The commanders of these mobile units – aptly described by K. M. Mallmann as “the Gestapo on wheels” – later took over the leadership of the newly established SD and Gestapo offices in the “pacified” regions, including the Czechoslovak border areas, where these offices were established immediately after the end of military administration.<sup>5</sup>

Further large-scale arrests followed on the heels of the military occupation and the official establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in the spring of 1939. The number of those arrested ranged between 5,800 and 6,400.<sup>6</sup> In this wave, repression was directed primarily against German exiles from the

*und Massenmord. Die Einsatzgruppe D in der südlichen Sowjetunion 1941–1943* (Hamburger Edition, 2003); Helmut Krausnick, *Hitlers Einsatzgruppen: Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges 1938–1942* (Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1993); Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Gerhard Paul, eds., *Die Gestapo im Zweiten Weltkrieg. “Heimatfront” und besetztes Europa* (Primus Verlag, 2000); Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburger Edition, 2003); Klaus-Michael Mallmann, Jochen Böhrer, and Jürgen Matthäus, *Einsatzgruppen in Polen. Darstellung und Dokumentation* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008); Jochen Böhrer and Stephan Lenstaedt, eds., *Die Berichte der Einsatzgruppen aus Polen* (Metropol Verlag, 2013); Jochen Böhrer, *Auftakt zum Vernichtungskrieg: Die Wehrmacht in Polen 1939* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006); Alexander B. Rossino, “Nazi Anti-Jewish Policy during the Polish Campaign: The Case of Einsatzgruppe von Woyrsch”, *German Studies Review* 24 (February 2001): 31–50.

2 Klaus-Michael Mallmann, “Menschenjagd und Massenmord. Das neue Instrument der Einsatzgruppen und -kommandos 1938–1945”, in *Gestapo im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. K.-M. Mallmann and G. Paul, 291–317.

3 Dalibor Krčmář; Petr Kaňák, and Jan Vajskebr, *S jasným cílem a plnou silou. Nasazení německých policejních složek při rozbití Československa* (Památník Terežín, 2010); Jan Vajskebr and Jan Zumr, “Velitelský sbor operačních skupin a oddílů bezpečnostní policie a SD při obsazení československého pohraničí a vnitrozemí”, in *1939. Rok zlomu*, ed. Marek Syrný (Múzeum SNP, 2019), 135–144.

4 H. Krausnick, *Hitlers Einsatzgruppen*, 17.

5 Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 405–406; “V Liberci byla zřízena řídicí úřadovna gestapa a dvě úřadovny gestapa vznikly v Opavě a Karlových Varech”, in Krčmář, Kaňák, and Vajskebr, *S jasným cílem a plnou silou*, 71.

6 Jan Vajskebr and Jan Zumr, *Gestapo. Velitelský sbor tajné státní policie v Protektorátu Čechy a Morava d* (Pulchra, 2024), 353–354; Wolf Gruner, *The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia: Czech Initiatives, German Policies, Jewish Responses* (Berghahn Books, 2019), 59. Gruner reports 4,600 arrests and refers to Livia Rothkirchen and Chad Bryant. However, neither of them draws on primary sources for these arrests but rather paraphrases other literature. Further, this was not action “Gitter”, as is still erroneously claimed in some parts of the literature. Gitter took place in 1944, not in 1939. See Dalibor Krčmář, “Aktion Gitter z roku 1944 ve služební oblasti řídicí úřadovny Gestapa v Praze”, *Terežínské listy* 38 (2010): 59–73; Vajskebr and Zumr, *Gestapo*, 353–354.

Social Democratic Party, many of whom had sought refuge in Prague. However, Jews – regarded as the ultimate “enemies of the Reich” – were also systematically targeted by Security Police and SD units.<sup>7</sup>

Another wave of arrests in the Protectorate was carried out on the basis of pre-compiled lists known as the *A-Kartei*, which constituted a typical instrument to support the preventive detention of so-called objective enemies of the Reich. An outgrowth of Heydrich’s initiative, this card index represented a comprehensive system for identifying and arresting political opponents and dividing them into several categories according to their perceived level of danger; the cards were further differentiated in Nazi documentation by color-coded underlining.<sup>8</sup> The origins of the *A-Kartei* system of “potentially dangerous persons” can be traced back to early 1936, suggesting that comparable lists were likely compiled not only in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia but also in other administrative districts and within the Reich itself.<sup>9</sup>

In the Protectorate, arrests based on the *A-Kartei* were carried out during the German invasion of Poland in the fall of 1939, and they focused primarily on prominent figures in cultural and public life, including academics, journalists, artists, clergy, politicians, and former legionnaires,<sup>10</sup> with the total number of victims estimated at between 964 and 1,247 persons.<sup>11</sup> Jews were also targeted during this wave of repression (particularly Polish Jews residing in the Protectorate), and in the Olomouc region, Jewish detainees made up to one-third of all those arrested.<sup>12</sup>

Alongside arrest campaigns, in the autumn of 1939, the Nazi regime began to address the “Jewish question” in a more comprehensive manner, launching its first attempt at the systematic deportation of Jews. On 21 September 1939, Reinhard Heydrich announced that he had obtained Hitler’s consent to deport Jews and

7 Chad Bryant, *Prague in Black. Nazi Rule and Nationalism* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 34–35. However, Bryant also quoted from the secondary literature and not from the primary source: D. Brandes, *Die Tschechen unter deutschem Protektorat. Teil 1: Besatzungspolitik, Kollaboration und Widerstand im Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren 1939–1942* (R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1969), 24; Vojtech Mastny, *The Czechs Under Nazi Rule: The Failure of National Resistance, 1939–1942* (Columbia University Press, 1971), 56; Jan Vajskebr, “První zatýkáací akce německých bezpečnostních složek v Protektorátu Čechy a Morava (tzv. Akce Gitter)”, in *Okupace, kolaborace, retribuice*, ed. Ivo Pejčoch and Jiří Plachý (Vojenský historický ústav, 2010), 17–23.

8 Bundesarchiv Berlin Lichterfelde (hereafter BAB), R 58/1027, fol. 1. Geheime Staatspolizei, Geheimes Staatspolizeiamt, B. Nr. II 124/38 g. RS., Berlin den 7. Juli 1938. According to this document, the *A-Kartei* as such was established on the basis of a decree dated 5 February 1936. B. Nr. 79/36.

9 On the Protectorate and particularly the arrest operation *A-Kartei*, see Oldřich Sládek, “Stanné právo a stanné soudy/Stanné právo a stanné soudy”, in *Gestapo za druhé světové války*, ed. Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Gerhard Paul (Academia, 2010), 355–356. The book was translated from the German original, *Gestapo im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, by Petr Dvořáček.

10 J. Vajskebr, “První zatýkáací akce”, 18. For recollections of the arrested journalist in the *A-Kartei*, see Jan Hajšman, *V drápech bestie. Vzpomínky na Buchenwald* (XYZ, 2010).

11 Vajskebr and Zumr, *Gestapo*, 358–360.

12 Josef Bartoš, “Akce Albrecht der Erste na střední Moravě a zdejší židovská komunita”, in *Střední Morava. Vlastivědná revue*, no. 17 (2003), 4, 9–10, cited in accordance with Vajskebr and Zumr, *Gestapo*, 358.

Poles from the territories annexed to the Reich. On this basis, transports were dispatched from Ostrava, Vienna, and Katowice to the Nisko area on the San River, where a “Jewish reservation” was to be established and where the deportees were to construct the camp infrastructure. The project, initiated primarily by Adolf Eichmann and supported by the Protectorate’s Security Police and SD commander Walter Stahlecker, was, however, abandoned for logistical reasons shortly after its launch.<sup>13</sup>

In existing historiography, antisemitism, anti-Jewish policies, and the Holocaust are often examined separately from the broader framework of persecution and repressive measures carried out by Nazi security forces in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The aim of this study, by contrast, is to use two major waves of arrests as case studies to connect the history of the Holocaust with other dimensions of Nazi policy – particularly the suppression of resistance. In the occupied Soviet Union and the Balkans, Jews frequently became primary targets of so-called anti-partisan operations. But can similar patterns of behavior be identified in administrative regions such as the Protectorate? This question lies at the core of the present investigation.

### *Constructing Order: Repressive Measures in Nazi Security Discourse*

This study examines two large-scale repressive arrest campaigns conducted by Nazi security forces in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia during the autumn of 1941 and the summer of 1942. In both instances, the declaration of a state of emergency led to mass arrests and expedited trials by summary courts. Special attention is given to the extent and mechanisms by which Jews were affected by these measures, as well as to efforts to reconstruct the fates of selected Jewish individuals within the broader framework of Nazi repressive policy.

These two major waves of repression were usually interpreted in the historiography as the persecution of the Czech nation.<sup>14</sup> This interpretation remains valid when viewed through the lens of the number of Czech (non-Jewish) civilian victims. However, the present study approaches these events from the perspective of Nazi security policy, shifting the focus to the specific target

13 Seev Goshen, “Eichmann und die Nisko Aktion im Oktober 1939. Eine Fallstudie zur NS-Judenpolitik in der letzten Etappe vor der Endlösung”, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 77. On the role of Stahlecker, see Jan Vajskebr and Petr Kaňák, *Kariéry ve službách nacistu. Nejvyšší velitelé německého potlačovacího aparátu v protektorátu Čechy a Morava* (Lidové noviny, 2020), 90.

14 Vojtěch Mastný, *Protektorát a osud českého odboje* (Eurolex Bohemia, 2003); Jan Gebhart and Jan Kuklík, *Velké dějiny země koruny české*, vol. 15 (Paseka, 2007); Detlef Brandes, *Češi pod německým protektorátem. Okupační politika, kolaborace a odboj 1939–1945* (Prostor, 2019); Vojtěch Kyncl, *Bez výčitek: genocida Čechů po atentátu na Heydricha* (Historický ústav Akademie věd, 2012); František Vašek and Zdeněk Štěpánek, *První a druhé stanné právo na Moravě* (Brněnský Legionář, 2002); Oldřich Sládek, *První stanné právo v Praze (28. září 1941–20. ledna 1942)* (Český svaz protifašistických bojovníků, 1986).

groups of repression and examining the extent to which their selection aligned with the ideological framework of the Nazi regime.

This study builds on Hannah Arendt's concept of the *objective enemy*, a notion she developed in reference to legal theorists of the Third Reich such as Theodor Maunz, Hans Frank, and Reinhard Höhn.<sup>15</sup> The *objective enemy* is a key term in Arendt's distinction between the role of the secret police in despotism and in totalitarian regimes: "The chief difference between the despotic and the totalitarian secret police lies in the difference between the 'suspect' and the 'objective enemy.' The latter is defined by the policy of the government and not by his own desire to overthrow it."<sup>16</sup> Arendt's interpretation of the objective enemy is clearly grounded in the practice and ideology of Reinhard Heydrich.

Heydrich, head of Himmler's Security Service and, from the autumn of 1939, chief of the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA), articulated with striking clarity the challenges involved in combating the so-called enemies of the Reich – foremost among them, unsurprisingly, the Jews. In his writings, Heydrich emphasised that no exceptions could be tolerated in this struggle. He argued that if every German were to spare even a single "respectable Jew" from persecution out of misguided compassion, the result would be "exactly sixty million exceptions".<sup>17</sup> The transformation of the police from an individualistic-humanitarian institution<sup>18</sup> into a body concerned with the protection of the nation as an organic whole was articulated by Werner Best in his work *Die Deutsche Polizei*. According to Best, the primary function of the police was to safeguard the integrity of the national community by eliminating all elements deemed disruptive or destructive to its survival.<sup>19</sup>

This study is based on the hypothesis that the repressive policies of the Nazi regime in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia were expressions of an ideologically grounded security logic aimed at so-called objective enemies – above all, Jews. The first and second periods of martial law, examined through a comparative lens, represent critical moments when this logic was put into practice. The analysis that follows focuses on patterns of repression, the selection of victims, and the methods of violence employed. The treatment of Jews during both waves of repression highlights the continuity of the Security Police's worldview in which Jewish existence itself was construed as a security threat. At the same time,

15 Theodor Maunz, *Gestalt und Recht der Polizei* (Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt: Hamburg, 1943); Hans Frank, *Recht und Verwaltung* (Zentralverlag der NSDAP, Franz Eher Nachfolger, 1939); Reinhard Höhn, *Rechtsgemeinschaft und Volksgemeinschaft* (Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1935).

16 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harvest Book, 1973), 423.

17 Reinhard Heydrich, *Wandlungen unseres Kampfes* (Franz Eher Nachfolger, 1936), IV, Unsere Aufgabe; Reinhard Heydrich "Die Bekämpfung der Staatsfeinde", in *Deutsches Recht*, Heft 7/8 (1939).

18 Individualistisch-humanitäre Auffassung x Völkisch-Auffassung, see Werner Best, *Die Deutsche Polizei* (L. C. Wittich Verlag, 1940), 8–9.

19 Best, *Die Deutsche Polizei*, 12.

the repressive campaigns of autumn 1941 and summer 1942 may indicate a shift in the approach of Nazi repressive forces – a process of radicalisation and brutalisation linked to broader transformations in the regime’s warmaking and genocidal policies.

The study specifically investigates how Jews were affected by the arrest campaigns. It asks: What were the most common reasons for their persecution? What fate awaited them after their arrest? And to what extent did the actual practice of arrests reflect the ideological framework of the so-called objective enemy? If some correspondence existed, how consistent was it – and if not, what accounts for the discrepancy? To explore these questions, the research draws on a range of archival sources, including collections held at the National Archives in Prague, the Security Services Archive (Archiv bezpečnostních složek) in Prague, and the Moravian Provincial Archives in Brno.<sup>20</sup> It also engages with the online databases of the Terezín and Mauthausen memorials<sup>21</sup> and editions of published documents – relating to the first, and especially to the second martial law. A four-volume edition on the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich and the second period of martial law in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, compiled by Vojtěch Šustek, provides a strong foundation of documentary evidence. The edition primarily comprises German-language documents created by Nazi security and administrative authorities including reports on the assassination and resistance activities; SD reports that evaluate the daily situation and sentiment of the population; materials related to the propaganda campaign following Heydrich’s death; documentation on the investigation of paratrooper groups; and records of repressive measures and executions carried out by martial law courts. The documents are divided into six thematically structured sections across four volumes, covering the period from the assassination to the declaration of martial law and subsequent repression in 1942.<sup>22</sup>

### *Stabilisation through Terror: Heydrich’s Arrival and the First State of Martial Law*

“As I was leaving, the Führer said to me: ‘Remember, wherever I see the unity of the Reich threatened, I will select an SS commander and send him on behalf of the Reich to preserve the unity of the Reich.’ From these words of the Führer, you can deduce the

20 Archiv bezpečnostních složek v Praze (Archive of the Security Services in Prague, hereafter ABS) here: Fonds 325; Národní Archiv v Praze (National Archive in Prague, NA) Fonds 109, 114; Moravský zemský archiv v Brně (Moravian Provincial Archives in Brno) Fonds B 340; Archival documents from the Jewish Museum in Prague were also partly used.

21 <https://raumdernamen.mauthausen-memorial.org/>; <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/databaze>.

22 Vojtěch Šustek, ed., *Atentát na Reinharda Heydricha a druhé stanné právo na území tzv. protektorátu Čechy a Morava: Edice historických dokumentů*, 4 vols. (Praha: Archiv hlavního města Prahy, 2012–2022).

overall mission of the SS and thus my special mission here.”<sup>23</sup> In the fall of 1941, Reinhard Heydrich took over as acting Reich Protector, replacing Konstantin von Neurath.<sup>24</sup> After three months of fighting in the East, victory against the Soviet Union was nowhere in sight,<sup>25</sup> which was reflected in growing resistance and sabotage activities across Europe, and the Protectorate was no exception to this development. Although resistance activities in the Protectorate may seem modest compared to other occupied areas, the Nazi authorities considered them a serious threat to the stability of the territory, which they regarded as an integral part of the Reich. On 20 September 1941, the head of the Security Police and SD in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, SS Obersturmbannführer Horst Böhme, issued a directive for the establishment of special commissions at the offices of the Gestapo and Criminal Police, which were to record and evaluate suspicious events, fires, and cases of sabotage. The directive, a copy of which was also sent to the RSHA, states:

The experience of recent weeks has shown that there has been a significant increase in cases of sabotage in all areas of the Protectorate. For various economic and political reasons, an even stronger wave of sabotage can be expected in the coming months. In addition to acts of sabotage by individuals who are incited to such acts by hostile radio broadcasts or communist leaflets, large-scale acts of sabotage controlled centrally can certainly be expected. It is therefore necessary for the state police leadership to pay special attention to the fight against sabotage.<sup>26</sup>

In the context of the ongoing campaign on the Eastern Front and growing military losses, the decline in arms production in the Protectorate, which reached up to 35 per cent in some areas, was particularly alarming for the regime.<sup>27</sup> According to Hitler, Konstantin von Neurath was no longer a suitable leader of the Protectorate because he was unable to take decisive measures. Reichsminister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels shared this view in his diary, stating that the moment had arrived for individuals who would not hesitate to take decisive action to lead.<sup>28</sup>

23 Heydrich's speech to occupation authorities at Černín Palace, Prague (2 October 1941), doc. no. 9., in Kárný et al., *Protektorátní politika*, 69.

24 NA, f. ÚŘP 109, sg. 109-5-133.

25 See David Stahel, *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); David M. Glantz, *Barbarossa Derailed: The Battle for Smolensk 10 July–10 September 1941*, vol. 1, *The German Advance, The Encirclement Battle and the First and Second Soviet Counteroffensives, 10 July–24 August 1941* (Helion & Company, 2010).

26 NA, f. ÚŘP 109, sg. 109-4/397, Der Befehlhaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, Tgb. Nr. B. d. S.-IV-280/41-g-, Prag, den 20. September 1941.

27 From the records of conversations at Hitler's lunch and dinner table, compiled by Wilhelm Koeppen, personal assistant to Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories Alfred Rosenberg, 1941, October 1, 2, and 6, Hitler's headquarters, doc. no. 8, Kárný et al., *Protektorátní politika*, 96.

28 Ibid, 96; Joseph Goebbels, *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, ed. Elke Fröhlich, Part II, Vol 1 (K. G. Saur Verlag 1996), entry from 24 September 1941, 479–480.

Heydrich's appointment as Acting Reich Protector aligned closely with Goebbels' vision of a more hardline approach. On 27 September 1941, Heydrich declared martial law, justifying the measure as necessary to protect both the Reich and the Protectorate from "enemy elements" and to combat subversive enemy propaganda.<sup>29</sup> Contemporary press coverage accompanied these measures with appeals for loyalty and warnings against the alleged influence of émigrés, Jews, and Western powers.<sup>30</sup> Antisemitism and anti-Jewish measures in the Protectorate were supported not only by Nazi policy but also by segments of the domestic political and administrative apparatus. However, Heydrich's approach was marked by unprecedented vigor, consistency, and ideological radicalism, reflecting his vision of how the occupied territory should be governed.<sup>31</sup>

On 29 September Heydrich issued a decree ordering the closure of all synagogues and prayer rooms, denouncing them as meeting places for "subversive Jewish elements" and "hotbeds of illegal whispered propaganda".<sup>32</sup> Simultaneously, he instructed the state police to take repressive measures – including preventive detention – against Czechs who demonstratively displayed friendly behavior toward visibly marked Jews in public.<sup>33</sup>

In his speech on 2 October 1941, Heydrich portrayed Jews and Freemasons as the leaders of a global conspiracy whose goal was to destroy National Socialism and to render Germany "small and ruined".<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Hitler emphasised that the Czechs must be kept under control through a system of hostages, strict rationing, and, above all, the deportation of all Jews from the Protectorate – not to the General Government but further east. He noted, however, that the current situation on the front prevented the immediate implementation of this plan, which was also intended to include Jews from Vienna and Berlin.<sup>35</sup>

At a meeting on 10 October 1941, Heydrich and representatives of the occupying authorities discussed practical measures for

29 Detlef Brandes, *Češi pod německým protektorátem* (Prostor, 2019), 331.

30 Pavel Večeřa, "Židé a antisemitismus na stránkách vybraných českých deníků v letech 1939–1945", in *Média a realita 2002: Sborník prací Katedry mediálních studií a žurnalistiky FSS* (Masarykova univerzita, 2003), 110–111.

31 Miroslav Gregorovič, *Kapitoly o českém fašismu* (Lidové noviny, 1995); Tomáš Pasák, *Český fašismus a kolaborace 1922–1945 a kolaborace 1939–1945* (Práh, 1999); Ivo Pejčoch, *Fašismus v Českých zemích. Fašistické a nacionálně socialistické strany a hnutí v Čechách a na Moravě* (Academia, 2011); Milan Nakonečný, *Vlajka. K historii a ideologii českého nacionalismu* (Sol Noctis, 2021); Ivo Pejčoch, "NSGSA a NSČDRS – dvě tváře moravského nacismu", 120–128; Dalibor Státník, "Český fašismus – organizace, spolky, společky, bojůvky a jednotlivci", 139–152, both chapters in *Okupace, kolaborace, retribuce*, ed. Ivo Pejčoch and Jiří Plachý (MNO, 2010).

32 Livia Rothkirchen, *The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia: Facing the Holocaust* (University of Nebraska Press and Yad Vashem, 2005), 124.

33 NA, ÚŘP, f. sg. I-3b-5851, ka. 389, doc. no. 4, in Kárný et al., *Protektorátní politika*, 90.

34 NÁ, ÚŘP, d., ka. 53, Heydrich's speech to the leaders of the occupation authorities in the Protectorate gathered in Prague at the Černín Palace on 2 October 1942, doc. no. 9., in Kárný et al., *Protektorátní politika*, 103.

35 From the notes of the personal assistant to Alfred Rosenberg, Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, recording Hitler's lunch and dinner conversations. Wilhelm Koepen, doc. no. 8, in Kárný et al., *Protektorátní politika*, 97.

“solving the Jewish question” in the Protectorate, including the coordination of propaganda efforts aimed at linking the Jewish population with the resistance movement.<sup>36</sup> A week later, the Chief of Security Policy in the Protectorate, Horst Böhme, drafted a press release regarding the deportations, warning that Czechs who expressed solidarity with Jews could themselves face deportation and public exposure. Authorities also considered publicly shaming several prominent Czech figures who had allegedly “become involved” with Jews.<sup>37</sup>

The overall balance of the first period of martial law is as follows: between 29 September and 28 November 1941, a total of 1,591 sentences were handed down in Prague, of which 247 resulted in capital punishment.<sup>38</sup> In Moravia, military courts issued 1,145 sentences, including 219 death sentences, while an additional 927 individuals were “handed over to the Gestapo”.<sup>39</sup>

### *The Jewish Population during the First Period of Martial Law*

During the first period of martial law, people were most often tried for acts of resistance and economic crimes. For the vast majority of those convicted, the reason given for the verdict was the “violation of public order and safety”.<sup>40</sup> The declaration of martial law specifically addressed the following crimes: the disruption of economic production and supply chains and the deliberate or unauthorised possession of weapons or explosives; it also prohibited gatherings. However, it was not only those who committed such acts who might find themselves before a court martial; those who knew about such acts and did not report them could also be prosecuted. Virtually anyone could be brought up on charges.<sup>41</sup> According to Tomáš Fedorovič, at least twenty-eight Jewish men were executed in Prague, most by hanging.<sup>42</sup> Post-war testimonies further suggest that Jews were sometimes forced to assist in executions, revealing the particular cruelty of measures directed against them.<sup>43</sup>

36 NA, sg. 114-3-17, Notizen aus der Besprechung am 10. Oktober 1941 über die Lösung von Judenfragen, doc. 15, in Kárný et al., *Protektorátní politika*, 129.

37 NA, sg. 114-2-26, Notizen aus der Besprechung über künftige Planungen im Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren am 17. Oktober 1941, um 16 Uhr, doc. 19, in Kárný et al., *Protektorátní politika*, 141.

38 Oldřich Sládek, *Zločinná role gestapa. Nacistická bezpečnostní policie v čes. zemích 1938–1945* (Naše vojsko, 1986), 168.

39 J. Vajskebr and J. Zumr, *Gestapo*, 365.

40 See inventory of fond MZA B 340.

41 Sládek, *První stanné právo*, 27.

42 Tomáš Fedorovič, “Zastupující říšský protektor v Čechách a na Moravě a Terezínské ghetto”, *Terezínské listy* 40 (2012): 118.

43 ABS f. 325, sg. 325-10-2; doc. no VI/37, in Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 4, 151; Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 4, 604 (ABS, sign. 305-192-4 II, Testimony of Michael Kneissl, SS Obersturmbannführer, born 30 November 1891, in Munich, Germany, originally a carpenter, from 1940 commander of the Waffen-SS Böhmen-Mähren Guard Battalion in Brno); ABS, f. 325, sg. 325-38-2, Brno, 5 April 1966, testimony of Jan Matoušek [previous surname Schwartz], born on

Documents relating to the first period of martial law indicate that Jews and individuals accused of violating wartime regulations were sentenced to death by hanging,<sup>44</sup> whereas those convicted of illegal resistance activities were typically executed by shooting.<sup>45</sup> In the cases involving Jewish victims, their identity was often – though not always – emphasised in official death certificates and press reports by inserting the designation “Israel”<sup>46</sup> between the first and last names or by adding the label “Jude”. Beyond its administrative function, this practice also was intended to humiliate the victim.<sup>47</sup>

The persecution of Jews during the first state of martial law did not end with executions. With few exceptions, those who were arrested and subsequently “handed over to the Gestapo” were deported to the Mauthausen concentration camp – an almost certain death sentence, as the vast majority never returned.<sup>48</sup> The mortality rate in Mauthausen began to rise sharply during the autumn and winter of 1941–1942, as the camp adopted increasingly brutal killing methods – including the use of gas vans, ice showers, and practices derived from the T4 Euthanasia Program. In the spring of 1942, a gas chamber was also put into operation, further institutionalising mass murder within the camp system.<sup>49</sup>

Calculating the exact number of Jewish victims of the first period of martial law in Bohemia is complicated by the fact that the persecution of some individuals had already begun prior to Heydrich’s arrival, making it difficult to attribute their fate solely to measures enacted during the state of emergency. This dynamic can be illustrated by the case of the fire at the Welzel fuel depot, which occurred in Náchod during the night of 30–31 August 1941. The Nazi authorities classified the incident as sabotage, prompting a wave of mass arrests. On 9 September a total of seventy-one individuals from Náchod were transferred to the Small Fortress in Terezín, including thirty-one Jews. Together with twenty-nine other individuals arrested in Úpice, the total number reached exactly one hundred – the number of hostages demanded by the Gestapo.<sup>50</sup> It was only after the first declaration of martial law that some of them were deported to the Mauthausen concentration camp, from which only one person returned alive. Pavel

26 December 1905, in Brno, original occupation barber and from 1929 employee of a funeral home in Brno, living at 8 Křenová Street, Brno, doc., in Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 4, 611–612.

44 ABS, f. 325, sg. 325-141-14.

45 Fedorovič, *Zastupující říšský protektor*, 118.

46 ABS, f. 325, sg. 325-141-14, *Národní politika*, 1. října 1941, vol. LIX, no. 272, 1.

47 ABS, f. 325, sg. 325-141-14.

48 D. Brandes, *Češi pod německým protektorátem*, 331.

49 Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel, *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, Band 4 (C.H. Beck), 312, 322; Hans Maršálek, *Mauthausen. Die Geschichte des Konzentrationslager Mauthausen* (Steindl-Druck, 1995), 197–198.

50 See <https://raumdernamen.mauthausen-memorial.org/?id=4&p=6410>. The entire story of Jiří Bondy was researched and written by Alena Čtvrtečková, who drew on sources from: Státní oblastní archiv (SOA)/Zámorsk State District Archive Zámorsk, Fonds MLS Hradec Králové 1945–1947, Ls 33/47, Karton 72, Blatt 72–Jiří Bondy, verhaftet nach dem Brand; SOKA Náchod, Fonds des Kreisgerichts Náchod, Todeseintrag–Jiří Bondy.

Mahler,<sup>51</sup> for example, was executed on 21 October 1941,<sup>52</sup> but Pavel Strass<sup>53</sup> and Pavel Lewith<sup>54</sup> were killed in the concentration camp a month later, on 26 November 1941.<sup>55</sup>

Subsequent research indicates that Jews sentenced by summary courts and “handed over to the Gestapo” were most often deported to the Mauthausen concentration camp, where the vast majority perished within weeks or months of their arrival. This study focuses primarily on cases from Moravia – specifically from Brno – where relatively comprehensive documentation has been preserved, allowing for a more detailed reconstruction of individual fates and broader patterns of repression.<sup>56</sup>

One such case was that of civil engineer Lipmann Brammer, who was sentenced to death on 3 October for “disturbing public order and safety”. He was deported to Mauthausen, where he died on 31 October 1941.<sup>57</sup> A similar fate befell the vast majority of Jews listed in the Terezín database with Mauthausen indicated as their place of death by the end of 1941. Their life expectancy in the camp was typically no longer than a few weeks, as illustrated by the cases of Friedrich Krainer<sup>58</sup> and Heinrich Kramer.<sup>59</sup> In rare cases, individuals such as Max Neufeld – who was arrested and sentenced in Brno on 3 October 1941 – survived more than two months in the camp before dying in Mauthausen on 16 December 1941.<sup>60</sup>

51 Pavel Mahler (born 29 June 1909)/Paul Mahler (born 1 July 1916, in Náchod; died 21 October 1941, in Mauthausen), accessed 25 March 2025, <https://raumdernamen.mauthausen-memorial.org/?id=4&p=3526>.

52 See Pavel Mahler, accessed 26 March 2025, <https://raumdernamen.mauthausen-memorial.org/?id=4&p=3526>.

53 Pavel Strass, (born 19 September 1904, in Chrudim, byt. Náchod, prisoner no. 6430, died 26 November 1941, in Mauthausen), accessed 26 March 2025, <https://raumdernamen.mauthausen-memorial.org/index.php?L=0&id=5&txtFullSearch=Pavel+Strass>.

54 Pavel Lewith (born 24 December 1911, in Náchod, prisoner no. 6435; died 26 November 1941, in Mauthausen), accessed 26 March 2025, <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/vezen/zi-lewith>.

55 Pavel Strass, accessed 26 March 2025, <https://raumdernamen.mauthausen-memorial.org/?id=4&p=3780>.

56 This article draws on archival fonds B 340 (Gestapo Brno) of the Moravian Provincial Archives in Brno, which contains investigative and administrative records documenting the repressive practices of the Brno Gestapo against the civilian population during the Nazi occupation. The fonds are also accessible through the EHRI portal: <https://portal.ehri-project.eu/units/us-005578-irn592858>.

57 Lipmann Brammer (born 11 June 1886, in Hodonín; last place of residence, Brno Pressburger Str. 2; imprisoned in Mauthausen, prisoner no. 5276; executed 31 October 1941), accessed 25 March, 2025, <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/vezen/zi-bramer-lipmann>; Lipmann Brammer <https://raumdernamen.mauthausen-memorial.org/>. Geheime Staatspolizei, Staatspolizeileitstelle Brünn, -Standgericht- Im Namen des Deutschen Volkes, Brünn, den 3. Oktober, 1941. MZA, f. B 340, sg. 100-292-21, fol. 292.

58 MZA, Brno, f. B 340, sg. 100-280-3; Friedrich Krainer (born 23 December 1888, in Brno; prisoner no. 5358, 18 October 1941, in Mauthausen; sentenced by military court in Brno on 3 October 1941), accessed 4 April 2025, <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/vezen/zi-krainer-friedrich>.

59 MZA, f. B 340, sg. 100-292-6, Heinrich Kramer (born 8 July 1869 in Miroslav, prisoner no. 5256, died 13 October 1941, in Mauthausen), <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/vezen/zi-kramer-heinrich>; <https://raumdernamen.mauthausen-memorial.org/?id=4&p=3359&L=0>; Mauthausen database has Otto Kramer registered: <https://raumdernamen.mauthausen-memorial.org/?id=4&p=3359&L=0> where date of birth of Otto Kramer is 28 December 1880 in Miroslav.

60 MZA, Brno, f. B 340, sg. 100-291-3, k. 291; Max Neufeld (born 26 June 1897, in Kuželov; residing at Svatoplukova 5, Brno-Královo Pole, Brno-Město District; prisoner no. 5696; died

In some instances, those convicted were not deported directly to Mauthausen. Walter Neumann, arrested on 30 September 1941, was first transferred to Brno for further proceedings and was subsequently deported to Auschwitz, where he died in March 1942.<sup>61</sup> This fate was most often suffered by Jews who were tried for alleged violations of public order and security and for offenses such as breaching wartime economic regulations or listening to foreign radio broadcasts, etc.<sup>62</sup>

Among the victims of the first martial law period were Jews who actively participated in the anti-Nazi resistance. A prominent example is Jiří Stricker,<sup>63</sup> who was sentenced along with four other members of a communist resistance group. Nazi documentation did not fail to highlight Stricker's Jewish origin, using it to underscore his perceived threat.<sup>64</sup> However, the vast majority of the Jewish individuals examined in this study were sentenced for offenses such as "disturbing public order and security" rather than for direct involvement in organised resistance.

The proportion of Jewish victims during the first period of martial law can be clearly illustrated by the example of the well-documented court-martial in Brno. Available documentation and a comparison of two online databases reveal that a total of 1,146 people from all over Moravia were arrested and tried here in the fall of 1941, of whom 155 were Jews, representing 13.5 per cent of all cases. An even more striking example is the city of Brno itself, where a total of 237 Czechs and 117 Jews were arrested.<sup>65</sup>

### *The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich and the Second State of Martial Law*

Following the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich on 27 May 1942, by Czechoslovak paratroopers Jan Kubiš and Josef Gabčík of the Anthropoid group, which was operating under the umbrella of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), martial law was declared in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. By the time it was lifted on 4 July 1942, a total of 1,587 people had been

6 December 1941, in Mauthausen), sentenced on 3 October 1941, in a court-martial in Brno for disturbing public order and safety, to be handed over to the Gestapo and the confiscation of all his property, accessed 1 April 2025, <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/vezen/zi-neufeld-max>.

61 MZA, f. B 340, sg. 100-103-24, k. 103, Walter Neumann (born 14 May 1907), accessed 4 April 2025, <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/vezen/zi-neumann>.

62 The results of the author's own research are based on the 155 Jews convicted by a court-martial in Brno. MZA, f B 340.

63 Accessed 4 April 2025, <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/vezen/zi-stricker-jiri>.

64 NA, f. 109, sg. 109-5-133. Furthermore, the Gestapo Head Office in Prague commented on the arrest of Dr Bondy at the end of October 1941, with the following words: "Moreover, two of them had been living underground for several years on the basis of false documents. Remarkably, these people were Jews." See NA, ÚŘP, f. 109, sg. 109-4-175 doc. in Kárný et al., *Protektorátní politika*, 170.

65 The author thanks Mirka Salavová for assistance in preparing the Brno dataset.

executed.<sup>66</sup> The destruction of the village of Lidice marked the culmination of Nazi terror. All men over the age of sixteen were executed, the women of the village were deported to the Ravensbrück concentration camp,<sup>67</sup> and the children were either selected for Germanisation or, in most cases, murdered in gas vans at the Chełmno (Kulmhof) extermination camp. Two weeks later, the settlement of Ležáky suffered the very similar fate.<sup>68</sup>

The measures that accompanied the so-called Heydrichiáda closely followed the proposals SS-Obergruppenführer Karl Hermann Frank<sup>69</sup> presented to Hitler immediately after the assassination: the declaration of martial law, the launch of extensive search operations, the punishment of the perpetrators along with their accomplices and families, and a display of German power through the deployment of numerous police units.<sup>70</sup> As the Higher SS and Police Leader, it was K. H. Frank who was directly subordinate to Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler and therefore stood at the top of all SS units and police security forces of the Nazi apparatus in the Protectorate.<sup>71</sup> Thus, immediately after the assassination attempt, he was the person who went to Hitler's headquarters.

K. H. Frank insisted that repression should be directed specifically at perpetrators and their associates rather than executed through indiscriminate mass arrests or the killing of hostages. He also proposed offering a substantial reward for information leading to the assassins. In addition to these repressive measures, Frank called for an extensive propaganda campaign: the Protectorate government was to publicly denounce the assassination and

66 Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 4, doc. IV/122, 832, compare with Vajskebr and Zumr, *Gestapo*, 374 (counted 398 executed persons).

67 Pavla Plachá, *Zerrissene Leben. Tschechoslowakische Frauen im Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück* (VSA Verlag, 2023); Pavel Kreisinger and Jan Zumr, "Heinz Pannwitz (1911–1975): kdo byl hlavní vyšetřovatel atentátu na Reinharda Heydricha?" *Paměť a dějiny: revue pro studium totalitních režimů* 11, no. 2 (2017): 81–92; V. Kyncl, *Bez výčitek: genocida Čechů*; V. Kyncl, *Lidice. Zrození symbol* (Academia, 2016); Eduard Stehlík, *Lidice. Příběh české vsi* (Tváře, 2023). For more information on Special Operations Executive (SOE) parachute operations, see: Jiří Plachý, ed., *Výsadbáři v týlu nepřítelů* (Jota, 2025); Oldřich Sládek, *Přicházeli z nebe* (Naše Vojsko, 1993); Jaroslav Čvančara, Zdeněk Jelínek, Josef Plzák, and Vojtěch Šustek, eds., *Operace Silver A* (Scriptorium, 2011).

68 Vojtěch Kyncl, *Ležáky – obyčejná vesnice. SILVER A a pardubické gestapo v zrcadle heydrichiády* (Nová tiskárna, 2008).

69 Karl Hermann Frank (born 24 January 1898, in Karlsbad, Austrian-Hungarian Empire; died 22 May 1946, in Prague) was a Sudeten German Nazi politician and SS-Führer who served in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia starting in 1939 as State Secretary of the Reich Protector's Office, Higher SS- and Police Leader, and later as German State Minister with the rank of SS-Obergruppenführer and General of the Police and Waffen-SS. In this last position, he headed the occupied country and its security apparatus; was responsible for repressive policies against the population, including the massacres in Lidice and Ležáky; and was sentenced to death and executed in Czechoslovakia after the war. René Küpper, *Karl Hermann Frank (1898–1946): Politische Biographie eines sudetendeutschen Nationalsozialisten* (Oldenbourg, 2010); Karl Hermann Frank, *Zpověď K. H. Franka: podle vlastních výpovědí v době vazby u krajského soudu trestního na Pankráci. S úvodem Karla Vykusy*, intro. by Karel Vykusa (Cíl, 1946).

70 NA, f. 114, sg. 114-10-2, Protokoll! Geheim! Besuch im Führerhauptquartier am Donnerstag, den 28. Mai 1942, Eintreffen 1:15 Uhr, Abflug 16.30 Uhr. Doc. no. 1/49, in Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 1, 208.

71 Ruth Bettina Birn, *Die Höheren SS- und Polizeiführer. Himmlers Vertreter im Reich und den besetzten Gebieten* (Droste, 1986); Friedrich Wilhelm, *Die Polizei im NS-Staat. Die Geschichte ihrer Organisation im Überblick* (Paderborn, 1999), 93–96, 106–109.

the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London while Czech loyalty to the Greater German Reich was to be affirmed through the press, radio broadcasts, and orchestrated public demonstrations.<sup>72</sup>

However, the original plans devised by Himmler and Hitler envisioned far more radical measures. In a telegram sent from Sonderzug Heinrich Himmler ordered the arrest of 10,000 hostages, primarily drawn from the Czech intelligentsia.<sup>73</sup> Hitler, for his part, intended to send Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski to demonstrate that Heydrich's successor would be willing to "wade through a sea of blood".<sup>74</sup>

However, the interpretation advanced by historian Vojtěch Kyncl – that the second period of martial law constituted genocide against the Czechs – does not align with the available evidence concerning Nazi strategy and the scope of the repression.<sup>75</sup> Records of discussions at Hitler's headquarters indicate that although the number of executions was calculated, there was no expressed intent to annihilate the Czech nation as a whole. To our knowledge, the only higher-ranking official who publicly addressed the "Czech question" as a collective problem at that time was the Reich Governor of Vienna Baldur von Schirach, who declared on 5 June: "Just as I will make this city judenfrei, I will also make it tschechenfrei."<sup>76</sup> Yet this type of rhetoric met with immediate criticism from the Nazi leadership. In a letter to Goebbels dated 8 June 1942, Martin Bormann emphasised that such expressions were unacceptable.<sup>77</sup>

### *Forms of Anti-Jewish Persecution during the Second Period of Martial Law*

The Security Service of the Reich Führer SS, Main Section of the Security Service in Prague reported on 7 June 1942:

"The news of the assassination of the acting Reich Protector triggered near-panic among Jews in Bohemia and Moravia. Initially, many feared that a Jew might have been involved, raising concerns about the possibility of intensified anti-Jewish measures. Noticeable relief followed only after reports confirmed that no Jews had participated in the attack. Moreover, the fact that only a small number of Jews were sentenced by the military courts had a markedly calming impact on the Jewish population."<sup>78</sup>

72 NA, f. 114, sg. 114-10-2, Protokoll! Geheim! Besuch im Führerhauptquartier am Donnerstag, den 28. Mai 1942, Eintreffen 1:15 Uhr, Abflug 16.30 Uhr. Doc. no. I/49, in Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 1, 208.

73 ABS, f. 325, sg. 325-140-156, BLITZ SDZ HEINRICH NR. 5745 27.5.42 21.05/HER AN SS GRUPPENFUEHRER FRANK PRAG SOFORT VORLEGEN.

74 NA f. 114, sg. 114-10-2, Protokoll! doc. no. I/49, in Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 1, 212.

75 This is Kyncl's argument in his book *Bez výčitek* (quoted above).

76 BAB, NS 19, sg. NS 19/1969, doc. no. I/80 in Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 1, 340.

77 BAB, NS 19, sg. NS 19/1969 doc. no. I/80, in Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 1, 339–340.

78 NA, f. ÚŘP 109, sg. 109-14-53, doc. no. III/20 in Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 2, 175.

This shows that the SD monitored the attitudes among Jews after the assassination of Heydrich and focused on their reactions and perceptions of repression during the second period of martial law.

Nevertheless, fears among Jews must have persisted given the unpredictability of the situation. The atmosphere of uncertainty was illustrated, for example, by a search operation in Terezín on 16 June 1942, during which prisoners were forced to march under the supervision of gendarmes around tables displaying boards with photographs of the assassins' personal belongings (such as a briefcase and coat), and to sign statements confirming that they did not recognise them.<sup>79</sup> Although the procedure was largely a formality – since most Jews had been interned in the ghetto long before the assassination – no one could be certain that the operation would not escalate into something more serious. In the context of Nazi persecution, factual circumstances often played little role.

Fear was heightened by reports of the massacre in Lidice. Labor commandos from Terezín were sent to dig graves for the executed men of the village without knowing whether they were digging their own. František R. Kraus recalled: “Quicklime, we looked at each other ... We thought: What if we never return to Terezín.”<sup>80</sup> Viktor Laš described his arrival at the destroyed village: “There were still whispered comments among us – a mine exploded somewhere here. And it was Lidice, already razed to the ground.”<sup>81</sup> Kraus described the terrifying scene: “They drove us with rifle butts to a meadow where a carpet of dead bodies lay in front of a farmhouse.”<sup>82</sup> The burial at Lidice was not an isolated experience. According to later testimonies, Jewish prisoners were reportedly also forced to assist in executions, loading the bodies of victims into vehicles and transporting them for cremation.<sup>83</sup>

The assassination of Heydrich led to further restrictions on the freedom of movement for the Jewish population.<sup>84</sup> Individuals who “violated” these regulations, even unknowingly – such as Albín Taussig (born 1883) and Josef Goldschmidt (born 1856) – faced the immediate risk of deportation.<sup>85</sup> Taussig was assigned to transport AAe on 20 June 1942, and was deported to Ausch-

79 Alena Dobišová, “Břežanská balada, Heydrichiáda a její odraz v Malé pevnosti a ghettu Terezín”, *Terezínské listy*, no. 20 (1995): 103.

80 František R. Kraus, *Dvořákovo Rekviem. Modlitba za lidické mrtvé* (Cattacan, 1945), quotations from his book also in *Terezínští hrobaři* documentary film produced by Czech Television, 2019.

81 Testimony of Viktor Laš, one of the members of an Arbeitskommando. Testimony of Viktor Laš, Video History Archives Interview Code: 6809, USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

82 F. R. Kraus, *Dvořákovo Rekviem*, quoted in *Terezín Gravediggers*.

83 Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 4, 472 (BAL, sign. B 162/4804, Interrogation protocol of Otto Karl Maier, born 18 February 1902, in Brenden, Waldshut district, Germany, residing at Radolfzell, Seestrasse 33), 476; BAL, sign. B 162/4804, Singen, 1960, January, 20<sup>th</sup>, interrogation report with Friedrich Pfluger, born 2 February 1900, in Worblingen, district of Konstanz, Germany, living in Rielasinegn, district of Konstanz, Hegaustrasse 32).

84 Praha, 1942, červen, 6.: *Národní práce*, 4; headline “Místa v Praze zakázána Židům”, in Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 2, 188.

85 Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 2, 189.

witz,<sup>86</sup> and Goldschmidt was deported to Terezín on 9 July, where he died less than three months later.<sup>87</sup>

Paradoxically, however, the scheduled transports may also have been the reason some Jews who had been arrested during the second period of martial law were temporarily released – to be included in organised deportations. This was the case for Adolf Berger from Lipník nad Bečvou, who was released on 20 June 1942, after four weeks in protective custody;<sup>88</sup> Alfred Bick<sup>89</sup> and Oskar Drucker<sup>90</sup> experienced a similar fate.

Although the so-called Jewish penal transports following the assassination of Heydrich have since been shown to be a myth,<sup>91</sup> the deportations during the second period of martial law were nonetheless extremely intense and were perceived by the Jewish population with growing anxiety. Egon Redlich noted in his diary in June the unrest surrounding the departures of transports “straight to the East” and the worsening situation in Prague.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Eva Roubíčková described in July the changes within Terezín and the regular arrival of new transports, particularly of elderly people and members of the AK (Aufbaukommando).<sup>93</sup>

During the Heydrichiáda, Jews were also subjected to an escalation of hateful antisemitic propaganda. Pavel Večeřa identifies the assassination of Heydrich as a turning point, marking a shift

86 Database of Terezín prisoners and persons deported to the Łódź and Minsk ghettos and to the Ujazdów labor camp, accessed 7 April 2025, <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/vezen/te-taussig-albin>.

87 Database of Terezín prisoners and persons deported to the Łódź and Minsk ghettos and to the Ujazdów labor camp, accessed 4 April 2025, <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/vezen/te-goldschmidt-josef-8>.

88 MZA, f. B 340, sg. 100-8-16, ka. 8. Adolf Berger (12 June 1913), Lipník nad Bečvou, Nerudova 79. Berger was transported from AAF from Olomouc on 26 June 1942. After spending several days in the Terezín ghetto, he was further deported by transport AAx on 14 July 1942, to Malý Trostinec, where he perished. See: <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/vezen/te-berger-adolf-4>.

89 MZA, f. B 340, sg. 100-9-34, ka. 9 Alfréd Bick, 26.2.1886 Kojetín, okr. Přerov, bydlíště Kojetín č. 735. He was denounced for not complying with the curfew and shopping hours set for Jews. The matter was resolved when he was transported to Terezín on 22 June 1942. From there, he was transported to Buchenwald and then to Auschwitz, where he died on 21 November 1942. See the Terezín database, accessed 5 April 2025, <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/vezen/zi-bick-karel>.

90 MZA, f. B 340, sg. 100-28-4, ka. 28, Oskar Drucker, 16 June 1923, Lipník nad Bečvou, okr. Přerov, bytem Lipník nad Bečvou, Pernštejnská 659, okr. Přerov.

91 In post-war historiography, there are repeated references to the so-called punitive/retaliatory transport of Jews from the Protectorate in response to the assassination of Heydrich. This transport was allegedly designated *Aah* (Attentat auf Heydrich) and was to be carried out as a vendetta for Heydrich (in fact, it was transport AAh). It was to be followed by two more punitive transports (AAk and AAi). However, these retaliatory transports have now been proven false as there is no documentary evidence to support their existence. Furthermore, the transport of Jews from the Protectorate was fully underway at the time of the assassination of Heydrich, and the designation of the transports clearly follows the previous markings. See Anna Hyndráková, Raisa Machatková, and Jaroslava Milotová, eds., *Denní rozkazy Rady starších a sdělení židovské samosprávy Terezín 1941–1945* (Sefer, 2003), 36.

92 Jewish Museum in Prague, Collection: Diaries and Memoirs of Youth and Adults, inventory number: 324aThe Diary of Egon Redlich, translation from the Hebrew, accessed 17 April 2025, [https://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/1942](https://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/1942), 34–37.

93 Vojtěch Blodig, “Z deníku Evy Roubíčkové, July 15, 1942”, *Terezínské listy*, no. 20 (1992): 71.

in the Protectorate press, where antisemitism was reframed: Jews were now depicted as a threat to European civilisation, against which Nazism was portrayed as waging a defensive war.<sup>94</sup> This development reflected the broader line of Nazi propaganda which, according to Jeffrey Herf, openly legitimised the extermination of Jews from the end of 1941 onward.<sup>95</sup> Radicalisation was most evident in the newspapers *Venkov* and *Polední list*, which adopted an increasingly extreme rhetoric against both Jews and the Czechoslovak government-in-exile.<sup>96</sup> Organised demonstrations adopted a similar tone, presenting Nazi repression as a necessary measure to protect the Czech nation.<sup>97</sup> This propagandistic framing was in line with the instructions of Ernst Kaltenbrunner, who ordered the authorities to exploit tensions between the government-in-exile and the domestic resistance while spreading fear of communism through Gestapo informants, known as V-Leute.<sup>98</sup>

From information found in 121 preserved execution reports, the majority of victims were shot. Jews and homeless and mentally disabled individuals, who were regarded as racially inferior or socially dangerous according to Nazi ideology, were more frequently executed by hanging. So, there was a certain continuity in the executions due to the procedures introduced in the fall of 1941. A further continuity can be seen in the executioners themselves: in Bohemia, executions were carried out by Order Police battalions,<sup>99</sup> while in Moravia, these actions remained the responsibility of the Waffen-SS Böhmen-Mähren guard battalion.<sup>100</sup>

The execution reports from this period were far from uniform. In some cases, the Jewish origin of victims was explicitly stated; in others, it was omitted, and their identity must be inferred from context – such as in the case of Irena Demertiniová – or using the information included on the long lists of those executed at shooting ranges in Prague, Tábor, and Klatovy. Occasionally, these reports also recorded the final words of the condemned. One such example appears in a report submitted by the police battalion in Klatovy, which documented the last words of a Jewish woman named Kamila Barth, who protested the false accusations against

94 Pavel Večeřa, “Židé a antisemitismus na stránkách vybraných českých deníků v letech 1939–1945”, *Média a realita 2002. Sborník prací katedry mediálních studií a žurnalistiky FSS* (Masarykova Univerzita, 2003), 115.

95 Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy. The Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2008), 137.

96 Jitka Rašková, “Role českého protektorátního tisku při uplatňování říšské germanizační politiky” (MA thesis, Faculty of Arts, Palacký University, 2010), 17.

97 For the course of the manifestations in the Protectorate, see documents: no. IV/25 and no. IV/24 in Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 2, 533–542.

98 NA, ÚŘP, f. 109, sg. 109-5-71.

99 Kyncl, *Bez výčitek*, 102–187.

100 Jan Vajskebr, “Represivní činnost strážního praporu SS ‘Böhmen-Mähren’ v období prvního a druhého výjimečného stavu na Moravě”, in *Morava v boji proti fašismu*, ed. Jan Mitáček and Libor Vykoupil (Moravské zemské muzeum, 2008), 100–119. While police battalions conducted executions in Bohemia, in Moravia this function was performed solely by Waffen-SS battalion “Böhmen-Mähren”. See Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 4, LII.

her before execution.<sup>101</sup> A similar fate befell the merchant Leopold Singer.<sup>102</sup>

In the case of the second period of martial law, the data reveal an even more pronounced disparity than the first wave. Although the execution of 66 Jews may seem marginal compared to 1,521 Czech victims, the opposite is true when viewed proportionally. By 27 May 1942, only 51,475 Jews remained in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, making the probability of execution among them approximately 0.13 per cent.<sup>103</sup> For the non-Jewish population – about 6.95 million – the probability was roughly 0.022 per cent. In other words, being Jewish in the Protectorate during the Heydrich terror meant that there was a sixfold higher risk of execution than being Czech.

### *Conclusion*

This study examined two major waves of repression enacted through martial law in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia – first in the autumn of 1941 following Reinhard Heydrich's appointment as Deputy Reich Protector, and again in late May 1942, in the aftermath of his assassination. Both actions were marked by mass arrests and executions and have traditionally been interpreted in the historiography primarily as repressive measures targeting the Czech population.

Building on the theoretical framework of Hannah Arendt, this analysis started from the assumption that Jews – understood as “objective enemies” and a latent security threat – would be the natural targets of Nazi repressive measures. The central question, therefore, was whether these assumptions were borne out in practice – and if so, in what specific forms this targeting was manifested during the two periods of martial law.

The analysis confirmed that Jews were a central target of both repressive actions, with their persecution evident in the severity of punishments and in the manner of their execution. By “central”, this study does not imply numerical dominance but rather a structurally privileged position within Nazi security logic. Jews were hanged rather than shot, and, in some cases, forced to carry

101 Kamilla Barth (born 4 September 1897; executed 22 June 1942), ABS, 325, sg. 325-140-199, Abschrift, Anlage 1 zu Res.-Pol.-Batl. Klattau-Ia-Tgb. Nr. 154/42 (g), Klattau, den 23. Juni 1942, Bericht. Hüser, Leutnant d.Sch.d.Res; accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/vezen/zi-barth-kamilla>.

102 Leopold Singer (born 19 March 1894 in Ustalec), in Šustek, *Atentát*, vol. 4 (2022), doc. VI/46, 291–93.

103 Wolf Gruner, *Die Judenverfolgung im Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren. Lokale Initiativen, zentrale Entscheidungen, jüdische Antworten 1939–1945* (Wallstein Verlag, 2016), 395–398; Helena Krejčová, Jana Svobodová, Hana Hyndráková, eds., *Židé v Protektorátu. Hlášení Židovské náboženské obce v roce 1942. Dokumenty* (Maxdorf, 1997) 364–366; Miroslav Kárný, ed., *Terezínská pamětní kniha*, vol. 2 (Melantrich, 1995), 1341–1343. Gruner gives the number of Jews in the Protectorate as 48,273 on 15 June 1942. To this number, I had to add four transports of Jews that took place between 27 May and 15 June 1942 – AAb, AAc, AAH, Aad – a total of 3202 židů – to obtain number 51,475 as of 27 May 1942.

out executions of one another. This method of execution was characteristic of the first and second periods of martial law in both Bohemia and Moravia. Additionally, during the second period of martial law, members of Jewish labor units from Terezín were forced to serve as gravediggers for the victims of the massacre in the village of Lidice.

While Heydrich's speeches in the autumn of 1941 already reflected virulent antisemitism, portraying Jews as a global threat, this rhetoric intensified after his assassination. The press and public demonstrations – often involving Czech nationalists – called for the elimination of the Jewish threat and the cleansing of the Czech nation from elements deemed hostile to the Reich, including supporters of the émigré “Jewish” government led by Edvard Beneš. Public condemnation of Jews thus also served to legitimise the ongoing deportations from the Protectorate.

The proportional representation of Jews among the victims (based on the available data I worked with in the article, which may not be final)<sup>104</sup> in both waves of persecution clearly confirms the premise that Jews were the target of repression. This is all the more surprising given that this also applies to a large extent to the second period of martial law in the summer of 1942, when the deportation of Jews from the Protectorate was already fully underway. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods, this study identifies systematic differences in Nazi repression while documenting specific cases of Jewish victims.

Empirical analysis demonstrates that Arendt's concept of the objective enemy applies not only to the repression directed against Jews but also to the experiences of many other detainees. Persecution frequently targeted individuals not for specific acts they had committed but because they were perceived as existential threats to the political order, as reflected in the prevalence of charges such as “disturbing public order and security”, which often lacked sufficient evidence.

The findings suggest the need to reconsider methodological approaches that strictly separate Nazi persecution directed against the numerically dominant national population from interpretations that treat the Holocaust as an isolated historical phenomenon. As the article shows, relating waves of Nazi repression aimed at suppressing resistance to the persecution of Jews allows for a more comprehensive understanding of these events and allows for a more critical reflection on the collective memory of the occupation.

*Acknowledgments: This research was supported by the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah (grant no. 24/H1546).*

<sup>104</sup> Although I drew data from two databases and the Gestapo inventory, the exact total number of victims under the first period of martial law may vary. In contrast, thanks to Šustek's edition, the data for the second period of martial law can be said to be absolutely accurate.

## Bibliography

### Archival Collections

- Archiv bezpečnostních složek/Security Services Archive (ABS).  
Fonds 325, Stíhání nacistických zločinců/The Prosecution of Nazi War Criminals.
- Moravský zemský archiv/Moravian Land Archives (MZA).  
Fonds B 340, Gestapo Brno 1939–1945/ Gestapo Brno 1939–1945.
- Národní archiv Praha/National Archives in Prague (NA).  
Fonds 109, Státní tajemník u říšského protektora v Čechách a na Moravě/ State.  
Secretary to the Reichs Protector in Bohemia and Moravia.
- Fonds 114, Úřad říšského protektora/Office of the Reich Protector.  
Bundesarchiv Berlin Lichterfelde (BAB).  
R 58, Reichssicherheitshauptamt/The Reich Security Main Office.
- Jewish Museum in Prague, Collection: Diaries and Memoirs of Youth and Adults. Accessed. 17 April 2025. [https://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/1942](https://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/1942).
- Mauthausen Memorial. Online Database of Prisoners. Accessed 8 May 2025. <https://www.mauthausen-memorial.org/en/History/Online-Database-of-Prisoners>.
- Terezín Memorial. Database of Prisoners of the Terezín Ghetto and Small Fortress. Accessed 15 January 2025. <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/database>.

### Published Primary Sources

- Best, Werner. *Die Deutsche Polizei*, L.C. Wittich Verlag, 1940.
- Frank, Hans. *Recht und Verwaltung*, Franz Eher Nachfolger, 1939.
- Goebbels, Joseph. *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, ed. Elke Fröhlich, Part II, Vol 1. K. G. Saur Verlag 1996.
- Heydrich Reinhard. “Die Bekämpfung der Staatsfeinde”. *Deutsches Recht*, no. 7–8 (1939).
- Heydrich Reinhard. *Wandlungen unseres Kampfes*. Franz Eher Nachfolger, 1936.
- Höhn, Reinhard. *Rechtsgemeinschaft und Volksgemeinschaft*. Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1935.
- Kárný Miroslav, ed. *Terezínská pamětní kniha*. Vol. 2. Melantrich, 1995.
- Kárný, Miroslav, Jaroslava Mílová, and Margita Kárná, ed. *Protektorátní politika Reinharda Heydricha*. Teps, 1991.
- Maunz Theodor. *Gestalt und Recht der Polizei*. Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1943.
- Šustek, Vojtěch, ed. *Atentát na Reinharda Heydricha a druhé stanné právo na území tzv. protektorátu Čechy a Morava: Edice historických dokumentů*. Vol. 1. Scriptorium, 2012.
- Šustek, Vojtěch, ed. *Atentát na Reinharda Heydricha a druhé stanné právo na území tzv. protektorátu Čechy a Morava: Edice historických dokumentů*. Vol. 2. Archiv hlavního města Prahy a Scriptorium, 2014.

Šustek, Vojtěch, ed. *Atentát na Reinharda Heydricha a druhé stanné právo na území tzv. protektorátu Čechy a Morava: Edice historických dokumentů*. Vol. 3. Scriptorium, 2019.

Šustek, Vojtěch, ed. *Atentát na Reinharda Heydricha a druhé stanné právo na území tzv. protektorátu Čechy a Morava: Edice historických dokumentů*. Vol. 4. Scriptorium, 2020.

### Secondary Scholarship

Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Harvest Book, 1973.

Bartoš, Josef. "Akce Albrecht der Erste na střední Moravě a zdejší židovská komunita" [The campaign of Albrecht der Erste in Central Moravia and the local Jewish community]. *Střední Morava. Vlastivědná revue*, no. 17 (2003): 4–11.

Benz, Wolfgang, and Barbara Distel. *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*. Vol. 4. C. H. Beck, 2006.

Birn, Ruth Bettina. *Die Höheren SS- und Polizeiführer. Himmlers Vertreter im Reich und den besetzten Gebieten*. Droste, 1986.

Blodig, Vojtěch. "Z deníku Evy Roubíčkové" [From Eva Roubíčková's diary, 15 July 1942]. *Terezínské listy*, no. 20 (1992): 67–102.

Detlef Brandes. *Die Tschechen unter deutschem Protektorat. Teil 1: Besatzungspolitik, Kollaboration und Widerstand im Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren 1939–1942*. R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1969.

Bryant, Chad. *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Nationalism*. Harvard University Press, 2007.

Dobišová, Alena. "Břežanská balada, Heydrichiáda a její odraz v Malé pevnosti a ghettu Terezín" [The Břežany elegy, the Heydrichiáda, and its reflection in the Small Fortress and the Terezín Ghetto]. *Terezínské listy*, no. 20 (1992): 102–110.

Glantz, David M. *Barbarossa Derailed: The Battle for Smolensk 10 July–10 September 1941. The German Advance, The Encirclement Battle and the First and Second Soviet Counteroffensives, 10 July–24 August 1941*. Vol. 1. Solihull: Helion & Company, 2010.

Goshen, Seev. "Eichmann und die Nisko Aktion im Oktober 1939. Eine Fallstudie zur NS-Judenpolitik in der letzten Etappe vor der Endlösung". *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, no. 29 (1981): 74–96.

Gregorovič, Miroslav. *Kapitoly o českém fašismu* [Chapters on Czech fascism]. Lidové noviny, 1995.

Gruner, Wolf. *Die Judenverfolgung im Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren. Lokale Initiativen, zentrale Entscheidungen, jüdische Antworten 1939–1945*. Wallstein Verlag, 2016.

Herf, Jeffrey. *The Jewish Enemy: The Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.

Hydráková, Anna, Raisa Machatková, and Jaroslava Milotová, eds. *Denní rozkazy Rady starších a sdělení židovské samosprávy Terezín 1941–1945* [Daily orders of the Council of Elders and communications from the Jewish self-government of Terezín 1941–1945]. Sefer, 2003.

Klein, Peter, ed. *Die Einsatzgruppen in der besetzten Sowjetunion 1941/42: Die Tätigkeits- und Lageberichte des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD*. Edition Hentrich, 1997.

- Kraus, František R. *Dvořákovo Rekviem. Modlitba za lidické mrtvé* [Dvořák's Requiem. A prayer for the dead of Lidice]. Cattacan, 1945.
- Krausnick, Helmut. *Hitlers Einsatzgruppen: Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges 1938–1942*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993.
- Krausnick, Helmut, and Heinz Heinrich Wilhelm. *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges: Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1938–1942*. Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1981.
- Krčmář, Dalibor, Petr Kaňák, and Jan Vajskebr. *S jasným cílem a plnou silou. Nasazení německých policejních složek při rozbití Československa* [With a clear objective and full force. The deployment of German police forces in the crackdown on Czechoslovakia]. Památník Terezín, 2010.
- Krejčová Helena, Jana Svobodová, and Hana Hyndráková, eds. *Židé v Protektorátu. Hlášení Židovské náboženské obce v roce 1942* [Jews in the Protectorate. Report of the Jewish Religious Community in 1942. Documents]. Maxdorf, 1997.
- Kyncl, Vojtěch. *Bez výčitek ... Genocida Čechů po atentátu na Reinharda Heydricha* [Without Remorse ... The Genocide of the Czechs Following the Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich]. Historický ústav Akademie věd, 2012.
- Kyncl, Vojtěch. *Ležáky – obyčejná vesnice. SILVER A a pardubické gestapo v zrcadle heydrichiády* [Ležáky – An Ordinary Village. SILVER A and the Pardubice Gestapo in the Mirror of the Heydrich Terror]. Nová tiskárna Pelhřimov, 2008.
- Küpper, René. *Karl Hermann Frank (1898–1946): Politische Biographie eines sudetendeutschen Nationalsozialisten*. Oldenbourg, 2010.
- Longerich, Peter. *Heinrich Himmler: A Life*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Mallmann, Klaus-Michael, Jochen Böhrer, and Jürgen Matthäus. *Einsatzgruppen in Polen: Darstellung und Dokumentation*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008.
- Mallmann, Klaus-Michael, and Gerhard Paul. *Die Gestapo im Zweiten Weltkrieg: "Heimatfront" und besetztes Europa*. Primus Verlag, 2000.
- Maršálek, Hans. Mauthausen. *Die Geschichte des Konzentrationslager Mauthausen*. Steindl-Druck, 1995.
- Mastny, Vojtech. *The Czechs Under Nazi Rule: The Failure of National Resistance, 1939–1942*. Columbia University Press, 1971.
- Moses, Dirk. *Problems of Genocide. Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Nakonečný, Milan. *Vlajka. K historii a ideologii českého nacionalismu* [On the history and ideology of Czech nationalism]. Sol Noctis, 2021. First published 2001.
- Pasák, Tomáš. *Český fašismus a kolaborace 1922–1945 a kolaborace 1939–1945* [Czech fascism and collaboration 1922–1945 and collaboration 1939–1945]. Práh, 1999.
- Pejčoch, Ivo. *Fašismus v Českých zemích. Fašistické a nacionálně socialistické strany a hnutí v Čechách a na Moravě* [Fascism in the Czech lands. Fascist and national socialist parties and movements in Bohemia and Moravia]. Academia, 2011.
- Pejčoch, Ivo. "NSGSA a NSČDRS – dvě tváře moravského nacismu" [NSGSA and NSČDRS – two faces of Moravian Nazism]. In *Okupace, kolaborace, retribuce*, edited by Jiří Plachý and Ivo Pejčoch. MNO, 2010.

- Plachá, Pavla. *Zerrissene Leben: Tschechoslowakische Frauen im Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück*. VSA Verlag, 2023.
- Pohl, Dieter. "Einsatzgruppe C". In *Die Einsatzgruppen in der besetzten Sowjetunion 1941/42: Die Tätigkeits- und Lageberichte des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD*, edited by Peter Klein. Edition Hentrich, 1997.
- Rašková, Jitka. "Role českého protektorátního tisku při uplatňování říšské germanizační politiky" [The role of the press of the Czech Protectorate in implementing the Reich's Germanisation policy]. Master thesis, Faculty of Arts, Palacký University, 2010.
- Rossino, Alexander B. "Nazi Anti-Jewish Policy during the Polish Campaign: The Case of Einsatzgruppe von Woyrsch". *German Studies Review* 24 (February 2001): 1–30.
- Rothkirchen, Livia. *The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia: Facing the Holocaust*. University of Nebraska Press and Yad Vashem, 2005.
- Scheffler, Wolfgang. "Die Einsatzgruppe A". In *Die Einsatzgruppen in der besetzten Sowjetunion 1941/42: Die Tätigkeits- und Lageberichte des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD*, edited by Peter Klein, 29–51. Edition Hentrich, 1997.
- Stahel, David. *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Sládek, Oldřich. *Přicházeli z nebe* [They were coming from the sky]. Naše Vojsko, 1993.
- Sládek, Oldřich. *První stanné právo (28. září 1941–20. ledna 1942)* [The first state of martial law in Prague (28 September 1941–20 January 1942)]. Český svaz protifašistických bojovníků, 1986.
- Sládek, Oldřich. "Stanné právo a stanné soudy" [Martial law and military courts]. In *Gestapo za druhé světové války*, edited by Klus-Michael Mallmann and Gerhard Paul. Academia, 2010.
- Sládek, Oldřich. *Zločinná role gestapa. Nacistická bezpečnostní policie v čes. zemích 1938–1945*. Naše vojsko, 1986.
- Státník, Dalibor. "Český fašismus – organizace, spolky, společnosti, bojůvky a jednotlivci" [Czech fascism – organisations, associations, companies, militias, and individuals]. In *Okupace, kolaborace, retribuice*, edited by Jiří Plachý and Ivo Pejčoch. MNO, 2010.
- Stehlík, Eduard. *Lidice. Příběh české vsi* [Lidice. The story of a Czech village]. Tváře, 2023.
- Terezínští hrobaři/Terezín Gravediggers*, documentary movie, 2019.
- Vajskebr, Jan. "Represivní činnost strážního praporu SS 'Böhmen-Mähren' v období prvního a druhého výjimečného stavu na Moravě" [Repressive activities of the SS guard battalion "Böhmen-Mähren" during the first and second states of emergency in Moravia]. In *Morava v boji proti fašismu*, edited by Jan Mitáček and Libor Vykoupil. Moravské zemské muzeum, 2008.
- Vajskebr, Jan, and Jan Zumr. *Gestapo. Velitelský sbor tajné státní policie v Protektorátu Čechy a Morava* [Command headquarters of the Secret State Police in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia]. Pulchra, 2024.
- Vajskebr, Jan, and Jan Zumr. "Velitelský sbor operačních skupin a oddílů bezpečnostní policie a SD při obsazování československého pohraničí a vnitrozemí" [Command staff of Operational Groups and Security Police

and SD units during the occupation of the Czechoslovak borderlands and heartland]. In *1939. Rok zlomu*, edited by Marek Syrný. Múzeum SNP, 2019.

Vajskebr, Jan. "První zatýkací akce německých bezpečnostních složek v Protektorátu Čechy a Morava (tzv. Aktion Gitter)" [The first arrest operation by German security forces in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (so-called Aktion Gitter)]. In *Okupace, kolaborace, retribuce* [Occupation, collaboration, retribution], edited by Ivo Pejčoch and Jiří Plachý, 17–23. Vojenský historický ústav, 2010.

Vašek, František, and Zdeněk Štěpánek, *První a druhé stanné právo na Moravě* [The first and second states of martial law in Moravia]. Brněnský Legionář, 2002.

Večeřa, Pavel. "Židé a antisemitismus na stránkách vybraných českých deníků v letech 1939–1945" [Jews and antisemitism in select Czech newspapers, 1939–1945]. In *Média a realita 2002. Sborník prací katedry mediálních studií a žurnalistiky FSS*, 103–120. Masaryk University, 2003.

Wildt, Michael. *Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes*. Hamburger Edition, 2003.

Wilhelm, Friedrich. *Die Polizei im NS-Staat. Die Geschichte ihrer Organisation im Überblick*. Paderborn, 1999.

Wilhelm, Heinz Heinrich. *Einsatzgruppe A der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1941/1942*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998.

**Vlasta Kordová** is a University Assistant at the Department of East European History at the University of Vienna. Her research focuses on Nazi security policy, occupation regimes, and anti-partisan warfare during the Second World War. She is the author of several scholarly articles, book chapters, and essays, and her dissertation will be published by Bloomsbury Academic. She is currently conducting postdoctoral research on the project "From Ghettos to Gated Communities?", which examines issues of urban security, exclusion, and property control in twentieth-century Central Europe.

Email: [vlasta.kordova@univie.ac.at](mailto:vlasta.kordova@univie.ac.at)

Quotation: Vlasta Kordová, The Logic of the Objective Enemy. Jews, Martial Law, and Nazi Security Policy in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, in S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 13 (2026) 1, 93-116.

[https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126/art\\_kordova](https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126/art_kordova)

S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 13 (2026) 1 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126>

This article is licensed under the following Creative Commons License: CC-BY-SA (Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives).

Roma Sendyka

# The Dispersed Holocaust

## *Pluralising Research on the Violent Past in Eastern Europe*<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Holocaust research and commemoration has a certain tendency to focus on concentrated forms of violence (ghettos and camps), while often overlooking the equally devastating Holocaust by bullets in Eastern Europe. Growing research on that chapter of the Holocaust points to the fact that this decentralised genocide, involving mass shootings, claimed a similar number of Jewish victims but has received less attention due to many geopolitical, empirical, and cognitive barriers. The concept of a “dispersed Holocaust”, which refers to phenomena even broader than the Holocaust by bullets, highlights the widespread nature of wartime atrocities, including the murders of Jews fleeing transports, hiding after ghetto liquidations, being targeted during the *Judenjagd* (“hunt for Jews”) in the “third phase of the Holocaust”, or dying on the roadside during death marches. These killings differ from concentrated ones as they more often occurred publicly or were otherwise observed, implicating high numbers of members of the military and local communities as perpetrators, witnesses, or collaborators who thus shared knowledge of this genocide. Today, many killing sites remain uncommemorated or forgotten, posing challenges to local and national memory cultures. Reframing the Holocaust as a dispersed and plural phenomenon emphasises regional variations of violence, which also reveals its cooccurrence with other forms of murder or genocide. This pluralistic approach offers opportunities to promote more inclusive memory cultures, challenge exclusionary narratives, and counter “memory competition” or “memory wars” that rely on monolithic understandings of the past. It may also shed more light on the diverse forms of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. Recognising the dispersed Holocaust is equally challenging as its centralised form will enrich both scholarly understanding and commemorative practices, offering a more comprehensive view of this genocide’s diverse manifestations.

On 14 October 2010, the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries in the Office of the Chief Rabbi of Poland in Warsaw received a letter originally addressed to the Lublin branch of the Jewish Religious Community. In the missive, an eyewitness, Stanisław Zybała, enumerated and briefly described local killings of Jews during the Second World War and enclosed a map on which he had drawn his local area, marking six Holocaust sites (Fig. 1). Al-

<sup>1</sup> Funding: This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland. Grant number 2018/31/G/HS2/02447 (Polish “Folk Art” and the Holocaust: Perpetrator-Victim-Bystander Memory Transactions in the Polish-German Context).



When taken together, these small, scattered events do not introduce any overarching historiographic narrative (Operation Reinhardt, ghetto liquidation, etc.), but they are part of local history as described in a booklet by the eyewitness Zybała and another local lay historiographer Regina Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz entitled *Ludność żydowska w gminie Radecznicza* (The Jewish Population in the Radecznicza Commune),<sup>2</sup> in which the authors identify the murders in more detail. The map sent to the Rabbinical Commission, I will argue, points to the need to both move beyond the dominant conception of the Holocaust as best exemplified by the violence of the camps and ghettos and emphasise more strongly the breadth and impact of many smaller, dispersed, and more conventional acts of killing that happened predominantly “east of the camps”.<sup>3</sup>

### “Concentrating” Attention

“Auschwitz (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Konzentrationslager Auschwitz, KL Auschwitz) is the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp, recognised as the most emblematic symbol of the Holocaust and a site of genocide globally”;<sup>4</sup> Auschwitz is “the pars pro toto of the National Socialist concentration camps and the Holocaust in the broader discourse on World War II and European history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century”;<sup>5</sup> “Auschwitz has become a universally recognized symbol, for many the symbol, of the Holocaust”;<sup>6</sup> and, finally, “Never again Auschwitz”.<sup>7</sup> This frequently expressed belief about the paradigmatic nature of Auschwitz-Birkenau (both as a death camp and as a concentration camp) now unites the broader public, representatives of governments and the political sphere, commemorative institutions, scholars and researchers who identify with European culture, as well as those who speak from non-European perspectives or similar positions.<sup>8</sup> This as-

2 Regina Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz and Stanisław Rozwar Zybała, *Ludność żydowska w gminie Radecznicza* (Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Szczepieszyna, 2015), 16–17.

3 I work with the concept of geographical reorientation of Holocaust studies in my book Roma Sendyka, *Poza obozem. Nie-miejsca pamięci – próba rozpoznania* (Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2021).

4 See: <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/press/basic-information-on-auschwitz/>.

5 See the announcement of the meeting: “Auschwitz im Kontext. Die ehemaligen Konzentrationslager im gegenwärtigen europäischen Gedächtnis”, Polnisch-österreichische wissenschaftliche Tagung, Polish Academy of Sciences in Vienna, 2014, accessed 12 December 2024, [https://www.oeaw.ac.at/fileadmin/mediapool/archiv/work/Auschwitz\\_im\\_Kontext.pdf](https://www.oeaw.ac.at/fileadmin/mediapool/archiv/work/Auschwitz_im_Kontext.pdf).

6 Marek Kucia, “The Meanings of Auschwitz in Poland, 1945 to the Present”, *Holocaust Studies* 25, no. 3 (2019): 220.

7 This slogan was widespread in the Eastern bloc. See Zofia Wóycicka, *Arrested Mourning: Memory of the Nazi Camps in Poland, 1944–1950* (Peter Lang 2014), 264.

8 See, for instance, Jürgen Zimmerer, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz?: Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust* (LIT Verlag, 2011). Proponents of comparative genocide studies point to the rooting of Holocaust practices in the German colonial experience, and numerous studies follow the emancipation of other genocide victims, highlighting the role that comparisons to the Holocaust or its symbol – Auschwitz – play in the process. See, for example, A. D. Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the

sumption provides a starting point for dominant contemporary educational, social, or remembrance policy measures.<sup>9</sup>

In this text, I would like to reflect on the consequences of this metonymising practice, which reduces a complex historical event to the (already shortened) name of one of the camps. More broadly, I argue that focalising categories like “Auschwitz,” “camp,” or “ghetto”, understood as related to spaces possessing closed boundaries (although the reality was far more complex), reinforces a preference for cognitive strategies seeking territorial, temporal, administrative, and documentary coherence. These strategies not only facilitate the codification and planning of research, allowing it to be organised and rooted solidly in data; they also enable the creation of general models of the Holocaust that are crucial for educational or musealisation strategies. While these focalising templates systematise research and commemoration, they also drastically limit the interest in data that does not fit these models.

### *The Camps as Holocaust*

“The word ‘Auschwitz’ has become a metonym for the Holocaust as a whole”, wrote Timothy Snyder in *Black Earth. The Holocaust as History and Warning*, critically referring to this dominant equivalence.<sup>10</sup> First, he argues, centralisation models focusing on death camps disguise the fact that “the vast majority of Jews had already been murdered, further east, by the time that Auschwitz became a major killing facility”.<sup>11</sup> Snyder is referring to the murder of Jews during the advance of the Eastern Front from June 1941, which temporally preceded “Operation Reinhardt”, that is, the liquidation of the Jewish population concentrated in the ghettos, initiated on 16 March 1942.

In addition to distorting the timeline of the genocide, Snyder argues, the use of Auschwitz as a metonym obscures the scale, impact, and consequences of murder carried out in a conventional, “non-industrial” way through face-to-face executions. “If the Holocaust is identified only with Auschwitz, this experience, too, can be excluded from history and commemoration.”<sup>12</sup> Focusing on close interactions challenges the assumption that the Holocaust occurred in isolation from its social context. This, in turn, proves

“Racial Century”: Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust”, *Patterns of Prejudice* 36, no. 4 (October 2002): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/003132202128811538>; Dorota Głowacka, “‘Never Forget’: Intersecting Memories of the Holocaust and the Settler Colonial Genocide in Canada”, in *Holocaust Memory and Racism in the Postwar World*, ed. Shirli Gilbert et al. (Wayne State University Press, 2019), 386–418. See also Rebecca Jinks, *Representing Genocide: The Holocaust as Paradigm?* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

9 Bogusław Dybaś, Irmgard Nöbauer, and Ljiljana Radonić, *Auschwitz im Kontext* (Peter Lang, 2019). The publication is the result of a meeting in 2014 (see footnote 2).

10 Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (Tim Duggan Books, 2015), 207.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 208.

that the Holocaust was not a “great mystery” to Germans. “The genocide took place, to put it bluntly, in full public view”, wrote Frank Bajohr and Dieter Pohl in their book *Der Holocaust als offenes Geheimnis. Die Deutschen, die NS-Führung und die Alliierten*.<sup>13</sup> And Snyder adds specificity to this claim by recalling the forms of extermination on the Eastern Front, claiming that descriptions of these events reached thousands of families in Germany: “In the East, where tens of thousands of Germans shot millions of Jews over hundreds of death pits over the course of three years, most people knew what was happening.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Snyder writes, the “mythical” and “reductionist” perspective focused on “Auschwitz” changes the perception of the camp itself: “Auschwitz ... does not seem like an actual place. It is surrounded by mental as well as physical barbed wire”,<sup>15</sup> which negatively affects the chances of an ethical doctrine that can convince the public that ordinary people were capable of crimes. This creeping unreality, rooted in distortion brought about by the unequal distribution of attention to other aspects of the Holocaust, creates an urgent need to refocus the cognitive field.

In the following pages, I make the case for a critical shift. I argue that for a full understanding of the course and consequences of the Holocaust that is inclusive of Central and Eastern European history, it is vital to resist centralising – and reductionist – thinking by building alternatives and complementary models. My aim is to provide a preliminary definition of the term “dispersed Holocaust”,<sup>16</sup> which is increasingly used in Polish historical research.<sup>17</sup> Efforts made in the last decade have yielded some important new concepts but have still failed to generate metaphors and cognitive models that could challenge the influence of the figure of the “camp” on the general/global public.

13 Frank Bajohr and Dieter Pohl, *Der Holocaust als offenes Geheimnis. Die Deutschen, die NS-Führung und die Alliierten* (C. H. Beck, 2006), citation from the 2020 edition, 13.

14 Snyder, *Black Earth*, 207.

15 *Ibid.*, 209.

16 I introduce and discuss this term more extensively in the chapter “Rozproszona Zagłada, zdecentralizowana przemoc” [Dispersed Holocaust, decentralised violence] in Roma Sendyka, *Poza obozem. Nie-miejsca pamięci – próba rozpoznania* [Beyond camps. Non-Sites of memory] (Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2021). I also write about decentralised violence in Roma Sendyka, “Sites of Violence and Their Communities: Critical Memory Studies in the Post-Human Era”, *Heritage, Memory and Conflict* 1, (23 November 2021): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.3897/hmc.1.63263>. I first encountered the word “dispersed” in a comment on KL Plaszow by an artist, Jason Francisco, who critically discussed the camp’s chances of escaping the shadow of the Auschwitz museum.

17 Between 2016 and 2020, the concept was implemented by the team working on the project “Uncommemorated Sites of Genocide and Their Impact on Collective Memory, Cultural Identity, Ethical Attitudes and Intercultural Relations in Contemporary Poland” (National Programme for the Development of the Humanities, Poland, 2016–2020). The members of the research team were Aleksandra Janus, Karina Jarzyńska, Maria Kobielska, Jacek Małczyński, Jakub Muchowski, Łukasz Poślusznny, Roma Sendyka (PI), Kinga Siewior, Mikołaj Smykowski, Aleksandra Szczepan, with Katarzyna Grzybowska and Katarzyna Suszkiewicz. Since 2023, the research project “Mass Graves of Holocaust Victims” using the concept of “dispersed Holocaust” has been developed at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw (team led by Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska).

### *The Holocaust by Bullets*

Centralised attention led, as the editors of the publication *Killing Sites – Research and Remembrance* put it, to a situation that “left thousands of sites where millions were murdered as part of the same ‘Final Solution to the Jewish Question’ on the sidelines of memory and education”.<sup>18</sup>

The construction of a counterweight to mainstream research began in the early twenty-first century, with the efforts of French clergyman Patrick Desbois, who, after his first visit to Eastern Europe in 1990 and then a decade of further preparations, visited Ukraine in 2002 in search of the Rava Ruska camp where his grandfather had been held as a prisoner of war during World War II. The discovery of the dramatic state of the memorials, especially those of Jewish victims, inspired the founding of the Yahad-In Unum Foundation in 2004,<sup>19</sup> which documents, researches, and offers education about what Desbois called the Holocaust by bullets. The dissemination of the term was fostered by the publicity around Desbois’s 2007 book *Porteur de mémoires: sur les traces de la Shoah par balles*, which was published a year later in English as *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest’s Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* and was awarded the 2008 National Jewish Book Award in the United States.<sup>20</sup> The conceptual contribution of his work influenced scholars and laid the foundation for further work to generate metaphors and cognitive models for the genocide of the Jews on the Eastern Front.

Yahad-In Unum defines the Holocaust by bullets as the executions carried out by members of SS special units, called Einsatzgruppen, between 1941 and 1944: “These mass shootings took place mostly, but not only, in the occupied territories of the former Soviet Union following the invasion in 1941. The goal behind the shooting operations was to kill ‘enemies’ of Hitler’s Third Reich: Jews, Roma and Sinti, Communists, partisans or their sympathizers. The majority of victims were Jews – over two million human beings were killed one by one, at close range.”<sup>21</sup> The psychological strain and time-consuming nature of the procedure influenced the decision taken at Wannsee in January 1942 to accelerate the extermination through more mechanised forms of killing.<sup>22</sup>

The killing by bullets, as Snyder pointed out, preceded the “epoch of the ovens”, but it also continued during the “liquidation” of ghetto inhabitants in the death camps.<sup>23</sup> The number of victims of the Holocaust carried out by conventional shooting

18 Thomas Lutz, David Silberklang, Piotr Trojański, and Juliane Wetzel, “Foreword”, in *Killing Sites – Research and Remembrance 1*, (Metropol Verlag, 2015), 15.

19 See: <https://yiu.ngo/en>.

20 Patrick Desbois, *Porteur de mémoires: sur les traces de la Shoah par balles* (Lafon, 2007).

21 See: <https://www.thefhm.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Yahad-In-Unum-The-Holocaust-by-Bullets-Guide.pdf>, 13-14.

22 Patrick Desbois, *In Broad Daylight: The Secret Procedures behind the Holocaust by Bullets* (Simon and Schuster, 2018).

23 Dieter Pohl, “Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites”, in *Killing Sites*, 34.

methods is close to that estimated for the victims of the camps and those who died of starvation and disease in the ghettos: Paul Shapiro mentions 1.5 million victims;<sup>24</sup> Mary Fulbrook writes about 1.8 million people being shot;<sup>25</sup> Patrick Desbois, Dieter Pohl, and Karel Berkhoff agree that there were more than two million victims.<sup>26</sup> Estimates therefore assume that between a quarter and a third of Holocaust victims were killed in executions.<sup>27</sup> For many scholars, this is an obvious reason for treating the Holocaust by bullets with the same degree of attention as the two previously emancipated themes of Holocaust research.<sup>28</sup>

The collapse of communist Europe, together with the opening of the region's borders and archives, brought renewed attention to this previously obscured chapter of the Holocaust. Desbois's journey to the east was part of the wider wave of interest in the topic from researchers in democratic countries. As Paul A. Shapiro emphasises, these researchers encountered considerable scholarship and archives that had developed in the Eastern Bloc over decades, which must be considered the precursors of the contemporary research trend commented on above, albeit with a caveat concerning the reliability of some of the documents. A vast amount of documentation was produced by the post-war special commissions charged with investigating Nazi crimes in communist countries, by the courts judging cases of collaboration, and even by the secret services.<sup>29</sup> Post-war and post-1989 local and grassroots efforts to preserve knowledge of the sites of the killings must also be recognised as part of the vernacular archive built up in the region.<sup>30</sup> Western pioneers who studied German mass shootings in the East are usually found among the historians who opened the field of perpetrator studies: the works of Christopher Browning (*Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 1993),<sup>31</sup> Daniel Goldhagen (*Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, 1997),<sup>32</sup> and Richard

24 Paul A. Shapiro, "Foreword", in *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, by Patrick Desbois (St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2008), xi.

25 Mary Fulbrook, *Reckonings: Legacies of Nazi Persecution and the Quest for Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 105.

26 Desbois, *In Broad Daylight*; Pohl, "Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites", 37; Karel Berkhoff, "Afterword", in IHRA, *Killing Sites*, 227.

27 Mario Silva and Andrew Burns, "Preface", in IHRA, *Killing Sites*, 13.

28 IHRA, *Killing Sites*.

29 Shapiro, "Foreword", ix-x.

30 Dieter Pohl in 2015 commented on the state of research as follows: "Some twenty years ago relatively few historians were interested in the so-called Killing Sites of the Holocaust, places of mass executions in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, the Baltic States, Poland, parts of Yugoslavia. Of course, historians were aware of the mass shootings in these areas, but they paid comparatively little attention to the places themselves. It was the survivors, the victims' relatives, activists of memorialization, often communal administrations who took care of these places of mass murder. Monuments were erected at many of these sites immediately after the war, and even more since the 1960s." Dieter Pohl, "Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites", 31.

31 Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (HarperPerennial, 1993).

32 Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Abacus, 1997).

Rhodes (*Masters of Death: The SS Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust*, 2002)<sup>33</sup> laid the groundwork for understanding the actions of mobile units.

Today, the researchers who study the Holocaust by bullets<sup>34</sup> and local actors who have begun to receive scientific, organisational, and financial support<sup>35</sup> collaborate to identify killing sites, victims, and perpetrators and to develop initiatives to commemorate and educate the public about this form of anti-Jewish genocide. The work underway, according to Paul Shapiro's assessment, "opens a new way forward",<sup>36</sup> continuing what Desbois and his growing team accomplished: the indexing of sites of mass executions and interviews collected make it possible to verify the materials found in older communist archives. The newly collected oral history testimonies allow us to probe into past events and the ways they were emotionally experienced, remembered, and how they influenced post-war attitudes toward the past.<sup>37</sup> What distinguishes them from earlier, more numerous testimonies is primarily the fact that the interviewees are non-Jews and child observers of past events separated from the Holocaust by a temporal, emotional, and cognitive gap.

### *The Decentralisation of Genocide*

Acknowledging the Holocaust by bullets may draw it closer to the center of Holocaust historiography and, in effect, decentralise the latter in several ways. The most obvious argument for decentralisation comes from spatial studies that innovatively use Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and mapping, which allow researchers to both zoom out to see the continental scale of the Holocaust and zoom in on individual killing sites, sometimes even down to the level of the individual person.<sup>38</sup> In the process, the large-scale persecution locations that generated "centralised" topographical metaphors have been replaced by an uncoordinated network of small, scattered sites of execution or burial locations. References to closed town districts or wire-enclosed camps have given way to a multitude of index points related to pits and ravines into which the bodies of victims were dumped. Dieter Pohl estimates that there were between five thousand and ten thousand mass execution sites in the former Soviet Union, Poland,

33 Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2002).

34 The support and funding from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), the organisation that launched the Multi-Year Work Plan project "Killing Sites" in 2011, had a visible impact on increasing interest in the topic. See Silva and Burns, "Preface", 13.

35 See, for example, the activities of the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries and the Forgotten Foundation founded in Poland in 2014, or the Forum for Dialogue Foundation, established in 2017.

36 Shapiro, "Introduction", x.

37 *Ibid.*, xi.

38 See, for instance, Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano, eds., *Geographies of the Holocaust*, (Indiana University Press, 2014).

Central Europe, and in the former Yugoslavia; several hundred more locations can be found in other countries in Europe occupied by Nazi Germany: the geography of this phenomenon, as Pohl acknowledges, will be extremely difficult to reconstruct.<sup>39</sup>

The radically different topographical character of this aspect of the Holocaust is easily understood by comparing cartographic documentation: the map constructed by the Yahad-In Unum researchers, which today contains almost 2,100 locations of massacres, differs fundamentally in terms of the number of marked places on conventional maps of the Holocaust.<sup>40</sup> The latter, as Aleksandra Szczepan points out, frequently single out camps and Auschwitz and mark the routes of the victims' transport so the observer's attention is focused on the largest of the death camps,<sup>41</sup> as is the case, for example, on the cover of multiple editions of Martin Gilbert's *Holocaust Atlas*.<sup>42</sup> The decentralisation of execution sites equates to a dispersion of archival resources, witnesses, and research venues, which renders the ongoing research painstaking and slow, making it difficult to gain momentum. On another level, the dispersion of sites means that it is challenging to introduce institutionalised forms of commemoration or practices of care.<sup>43</sup>

Despite two decades of development and the rapid progress made in site identification and archaeological research, this sub-field of Holocaust research has not generated a significant number of new overarching analyses.<sup>44</sup> This might be the reason for the emergence of approaches that go beyond top-down historiographical research: in her 2021 study *The Ravine*, Wendy Lower reveals the events of and actors involved in the Miropol massacre of 13 October 1941, by conducting a detective-style investigation centered on a photograph capturing the moment of the shooting.<sup>45</sup> Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska reconstructs the public awareness of mass executions in post-war West Germany by tracing the reception of the

39 Pohl, "Historiography and Nazi Killing Site", 37.

40 See: <http://www.yahadinunum.orgwww.yahadmap.org/en/#map/>.

41 See the discussion here: [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=941249609616149](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=941249609616149), which appears under the title *Scattered Holocaust, Weak Commemorations*, accessed 12 December 2024.

42 Martin Gilbert, *Atlas of the Holocaust* (Joseph, 1982).

43 As Deidre Berger pointed out: "The many challenges dealing with protection of the sites begins with Jewish tradition, which does not permit removal of bodies, making it necessary to work with the sites in the condition in which they are found. This differs from centralized German war graves cemeteries in Ukraine, where bodies are gathered from numerous sites. These sites are often more easily accessible and located on terrain that lends itself more readily to construction work." Deidre Berger, "Protecting Memory: Preserving and Memorializing the Holocaust Mass Graves of Eastern Europe in: Killing Sites", 98. Desbois was motivated by a similar observation: "While the mass graves of the thousands of Jews who were shot are untraceable, every German killed during the war has been reburied and identified by name. The cemeteries are on the scale of the Reich. Magnificent cemeteries for the Germans, including the SS, little graves for the French, white stones covered in brambles for the tens of thousands." Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets*, 34.

44 See, for example, the database Yahad-In Unum is creating, as well as those of smaller organisations such as the Forgotten Foundation: <https://zapomniane.org/en/#map>.

45 Wendy Lower, *The Ravine: A Family, a Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed*, (Mariner Books, 2021).

Hans Scholz novel *Am grünen Strand der Spree* (1955–1960)<sup>46</sup> and the subsequent radio play and television series based on the book.<sup>47</sup> Jenny Watson is developing a project tracing literary representations of the Holocaust by bullets. Killing sites associated with mass shootings stood at the center of research on memory cultures generated by uncommemorated sites of wartime violence (“Uncommemorated Sites,” Jagiellonian University, Kraków, 2016–2020)<sup>48</sup> and on forms of commemoration of mass grave sites in the post-war era (“Mass Graves of Holocaust Victims/Holocaust Mass Graves,” German Historical Institute in Warsaw, 2023 – ongoing).<sup>49</sup>

It is worth noting that the potential for Einsatzgruppen history to revise post-war Holocaust metaphors and framings was suggested long ago: in a review of Hanna Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Józef [Joseph] Wulf criticised what he saw as a narrowing thesis of the “banality of evil”. The record of the Einsatzgruppen trial in Nuremberg (1947), Wulf claimed, would have revealed a very different view to Arendt than the one she described encountering at Nuremberg, not least because the Nazi executions on the Eastern Front were carried out by highly educated experts in philosophy, theology, economics, and law.<sup>50</sup>

### *From the Holocaust by Bullets to Killing Sites*

Different terms were applied to post-1941 execution sites: post-war and grass-roots terminology includes “war graves”, “common burials”, “fraternal graves”, “pits”, and “sites where they shot Jews”.<sup>51</sup> Karel Berkhoff likewise highlights the significant terminological divergence among those involved in research on “killing sites”: some institutions have developed their own vocabularies including “murder sites” of Jews in the (former) Soviet Union (Yad Vashem), “mass murder sites” (Holocaust Atlas of

46 Published in English translation as Hans Scholz, *Through the Night*, trans. Elisabeth Abbott (Thomas Y. Crowell, 1959).

47 Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, *Microhistories of Memory: Remediating the Holocaust by Bullets in Postwar West Germany*, (Berghahn Books, 2023).

48 Sendyka, “Sites of Violence and Their Communities”, full issue. See also Roma Sendyka, *Poza obozem. Nie-miejsca pamięci*; Roma Sendyka, Maria Kobielska, Jakub Muchowski, and Aleksandra Szczepan, eds., *Nie-miejsca pamięci 1: Nekrotopografie* (Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2021); Roma Sendyka, Aleksandra Janus, Karina Jarzyńska, Kinga Siewior, eds., *Nie-miejsca pamięci 2: Nekrotopologie* (Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2021).

49 See: <https://www.dhi.waw.pl/en/fundamental-research/fundamental-research/masowegroby-ofiar-zagłady/>.

50 See: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wissen/geist-soziales/joseph-wulfs-rezension-zu-hannah-arendts-eichmann-buch-16603967.html>. The review was commissioned by *Der Spiegel* in 1964, but it was not published until the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* printed it on 29 January 2020. See Anja Keith, Detlev Schöttker, “Arendt und Wulf. Eine ‘Spiegel-Affäre’”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24 (2020): 3, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wissen/geist-soziales/spiegel-warum-wurde-joseph-wulfs-arendt-rezension-nicht-gedruckt-16603964/wulfs-fluechtlingspass-des-12134719.html>.

51 Roma Sendyka, “Uncommemorated Sites of Genocide: Mass Graves, Pits, or Garbage Dumps? Vernacular Responses to the Holocaust in Poland”, *Environment, Space, Place* 15, no. 2 (2023): 14–33, <https://doi.org/10.1353/spc.2023.a910009>.

Lithuania), and “massacre sites” (Belarus Memorials Project). Others emphasise the presence of human remains in their terms: for instance, “mass graves” (LoTishkach) and “sites of mass graves” (Yahad-In Unum).<sup>52</sup>

The terminological uncertainty surrounding the phenomenon of mass shootings in the East is based on the fact that – as can already be seen in the definition used by Yahad-In Unum cited above – these murders involved groups other than Jews (Roma, prisoners of war, political prisoners, the disabled, communists; mass murders were also part of local conflicts, e.g., the Polish-Ukrainian conflict in Volhynia).<sup>53</sup> Executions had the same form and took place during the same period, and sometimes the victims, regardless of their identities, were deposited in the same places. The Holocaust by bullets, therefore, does not stand out from its historical context with the same sharpness as the Holocaust that took place in camps and ghettos, as seen in the report on the Babyn Yar Memorial Center: “The killings by Nazi Germany of other victim groups, in a largely deliberate process, *inextricably interwoven with the Holocaust* (whereby some of the victim groups included Jews).”<sup>54</sup> The “Eastern perspective” on the Holocaust is, thus, less susceptible to isolationist understandings of the Holocaust resulting from the Holocaust singularity thesis,<sup>55</sup> and it more easily and with less controversy is open to comparison.

In initiating research projects related to the actions of the Einsatzgruppen, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), an organisation linking thirty-five countries in the field of Holocaust research, did not, symptomatically, choose the term “Holocaust by bullets” as its core concept. The multi-year research plan that resulted in the 2015 publication *Killing Sites – Research and Remembrance* was built around the term “killing sites”. Dieter Pohl explained the term as follows: “What is a mass Killing Site? The main criteria are that a mass killing was perpetrated and that it was perpetrated at a particular site designated

52 Karel Berkhoff, “Afterword”, in *Killing Sites*, 228.

53 On the overlap of events: “It is reasonable to state that mass executions were a specific feature of the Holocaust, but also a feature of German violence against the non-Jewish population in Eastern Europe. And it is difficult to draw a clear line between crimes against Jews and non-Jews. The Einsatzgruppen started their mass executions against both Jewish men and non-Jewish alleged communists; among the Soviet POWs singled out for murder were approximately 50,000 Jewish Red Army soldiers, and the anti-partisan warfare included killing Jewish partisans or family camps uncovered in the forests. There were other overlaps. Of the 5.6–5.8 million murdered Jews, approximately 2–2.2 million died in mass executions, 2.5 million in extermination camps, and approximately one million died due to other circumstances, in ghettos, other camps or during death marches. The Germans and their Axis allies shot between 1.3–1.5 million non-Jews: partisans, Roma, specific groups of Soviet POWs, the mentally disabled, Bosnian Serbs, and others. Among all of them, probably more than 100,000 non-Jewish civilians were shot within or nearby camps or prisons.” Dieter Pohl, “Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites”, 37.

54 Emphasis added. Karel Berkhoff et al., *Basic Historical Narrative of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center*, 29 October 2018, 3, <https://pure.knaw.nl/portal/en/publications/basic-historical-narrative-of-the-babi-yar-holocaust-memorial-cen>.

55 See the debate described in Michael Rothberg and Jürgen Zimmerer, “Enttabuisiert den Vergleich!”, *Die Zeit*, 31 March 2021, <https://www.zeit.de/2021/14/erinnerungskultur-gedenken-pluralisieren-holocaust-vergleich-globalisierung-geschichte>.

for this purpose, such as a clearing in a forest, a cemetery, a building, etc. These mass killings were generally done by shooting.”<sup>56</sup> The decisive factor for combining the murder sites of people of different ethnicities into one category was whether the perpetrator was acting within the framework of a “German or collaborator racist ideology”.<sup>57</sup> According to Pohl, killing site executions should be distinguished from those that occurred in the area or in connection with the liquidation of ghettos and the operations of concentration camps (e.g., “Aktion Erntefest”), as well as from those carried out in the same area by other forces (e.g., by the NKVD).

The second important criterion for distinguishing the category of “killing sites” was the mass nature of the crime, which was already signaled in the definition adopted by Yahad-In Unum. As Pohl reported, within the IHRA, the criterion to describe an interment as a “killing site” was the presence of twenty-five victims if the execution took place in larger and medium-sized communities; if a village or town had a population of only a “few dozen Jews or Roma”, ten victims were sufficient to consider the location a “killing site”.<sup>58</sup>

As may be gleaned from the discussion above, such efforts to provide a definition link the events of the Holocaust by bullets to the experience of mass death, making it, in a way, conceptually more comparable to mass death in camps. However, it is worth emphasising that the criteria above (of ten or more victims constituting a killing site) are not consistent with the definitions of a “mass grave” used in conflict archaeology, forensics, and investigations by tribunals investigating crimes in the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda, which push the boundary significantly downward, proposing that the term “mass grave” be used to describe a site with six or even two bodies.<sup>59</sup>

### *The Third Phase of the Holocaust*

The concept of a killing site, based on the criterion of large numbers and groupings of victims, tends to allow smaller acts of murder to slip through the definitional sieve and, consequently, to escape the attention of the Holocaust researchers and the public. Meanwhile, smaller – even individual – killing sites, as scholars from the “Polish School” of Holocaust research argue, are frequent and significantly represented in accounts and testimonies. As a result, they are nothing short of constitutive of the memory of the Holocaust and are fundamental for understanding the far-reaching impacts of the Holocaust in “the East”. They are especially characteristic of the so-called third phase of the Holocaust.

56 Pohl, “Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites”, 27.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Sendyka, *Poza obozem*, 191.

As Dariusz Libionka writes, “the term ‘third phase of the Holocaust’ has been in use in the historical literature for some time now, but often without any clarification of the term or any indication of the timeframe. In the case of the GG [General Government – R.S.], this refers not so much to the period after the end of the deportations and the liquidation of the ghettos but to all kinds of extermination measures taken against Jews trying to evade the machinery of extermination.”<sup>60</sup> For instance, “escaped prisoners who jumped off trains going to the extermination camps were caught. As a rule, they were led, often by peasants, to police and gendarmerie stations and killed there.”<sup>61</sup>

The term “third phase of the Holocaust” refers to the various means by which the last individuals hiding on the “Aryan side” were pursued and caught after Operation Reinhardt ended.<sup>62</sup> In 1942, as Libionka writes, “the entire territory of the GG became the arena for the ‘hunt for Jews’ (Judenjagd), which continued until liberation. In the eastern areas, the tracking down of Jews continued until the summer of 1944 in western lesser Poland until January 1945.”<sup>63</sup> The “Jew hunt”, recently popularised in the historiography of the Holocaust by the work of Jan Grabowski, was conducted by Germans and the local administration. The occupiers could also count on the compulsory or voluntary participation of locals.<sup>64</sup> Manhunts were organised by the police or district governors, while forced expeditions of mobilised gendarmerie units or Baudienst junkers could be summoned to assist. The search was typically supervised by German gendarmes of the Kriminalpolizei (Kripo). As Libionka estimates, “most of the escapees from ghettos, labor camps, and transports did not make it to liberation, and the circumstances of their deaths, except in cases that were investigated and prosecuted after the war, remain unknown.”<sup>65</sup>

Grabowski identified the period when the “liquidation” of the ghettos took place as the moment of moral transformation, or rather, the moment marking the complete disappearance of ethical norms: “Sometime in 1942, and it is impossible to determine exactly when, it became acceptable, in the eyes of many, that the taking of Jewish life was no longer considered a crime, or a sin.”<sup>66</sup> Due to the public nature of the procedure, Grabowski contends,

60 Dariusz Libionka, *Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie: zarys problematyki* (Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, 2017), 248.

61 Libionka, *Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie*, 248–249.

62 See Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski’s definition: “During the liquidation actions, a part of the Jewish population was murdered in situ, in the liquidated ghettos, while some (according to our count, around 10 percent) managed to flee.” Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking, *Night Without End: The Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland* (Indiana University Press, 2022), 33.

63 Libionka, *Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie*, 248.

64 Alina Skibińska and Jakub Petelewicz, “Udział Polaków w zbrodniach na Żydach na prowincji regionu świętokrzyskiego”, *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 1 (2005): 114–147.

65 Libionka, *Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie*, 250.

66 Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Indiana University Press, 2014), 83.

the entire wartime community became implicated, they became responsible for the effectiveness of the Holocaust. Szymon Datner, a pioneering Polish Jewish historian of the Holocaust, estimated that about one hundred thousand Jews hiding in occupied Polish territories perished in the last phase of the war.<sup>67</sup> Yehuda Bauer, following the findings of Polish historians, gave a range of 130,000 to 200,000 victims.<sup>68</sup> Jan Grabowski wrote, “Given the numbers above, one can assume that the number of victims of the *Judenjagd* (hunt for Jews) could reach 200,000 – and this alone within the prewar Polish borders.”<sup>69</sup>

### *The Dispersed Holocaust*

The Holocaust as observed from the small towns and villages of occupied Poland differs from the one popularised in the global understanding of the term. Jews were deported to ghettos and then returned: ghetto fugitives usually hid in areas where they had acquaintances among the local population. Captured during the third phase of the Holocaust, they were killed in smaller-scale, dispersed executions.

Symptomatically, Desbois’s attention on the persecuted Jews ends with the mass grave itself; in his works and speeches, he emphasises the harrowing image of the “moving grave”. In *Porteur de mémoires*, the not-quite dead mass grave minutes after the execution serves as the final frontier, a trap that absorbs even those who survived the execution.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, the research of Polish scholars, survivors’ accounts,<sup>71</sup> and also the descriptions of witnesses<sup>72</sup> point to a group of refugees of the Holocaust by bullets in the case of those who managed to escape death during the executions, sometimes by literally crawling out of the pit of death. Their fate is extremely difficult to reconstruct, but when done, their ex-

67 Szymon Datner, “Zbrodnie hitlerowskie na Żydach zbiegłych z gett. Groźby i zarządzenia ‘prawne’ w stosunku do Żydów oraz udzielających im pomocy Polaków”, *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 75 (1970): 28–29.

68 Yehuda Bauer, “Creating a ‘Usable’ Past: On Holocaust Denial and Distortion”, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 2, (3 May 2020): 219, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2020.1805916>.

69 Jan Grabowski, “Estimates of the Losses of Polish Jews in Hiding, 1942–1945: Revisiting Yehuda Bauer’s Observations”, *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 36, no. 1 (2022): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25785648.2021.2014673>.

70 Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets*.

71 Barbara Engelking, “‘A minut cu nacht’ Analiza doświadczenia Żydów, którzy przeżyli masowe egzekucje”, in *Oto widać i oto słycać: Świadkowie Zagłady w okupowanej Polsce*, ed. Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, Dariusz Libionka, and Alina Skibińska (Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2024); Barbara Engelking, “‘Many of Those Who Were Only Wounded Suffocated, Buried Alive’: Analyzing the Experiences of Jews Who Survived Mass Executions”, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 36, no. 2 (2022): 171–189, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcac022>. See also Jacek Leociak, “Wyjście z grobu”, *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2004); Roma Sendyka, *Holocaust by Bullets: Expanding the Field of Holocaust Art*, accessed 12 December 2024, <https://www.ehri-project.eu/holocaust-bullets/>. Here, you will find the cases of Jonah Stern and Pinchas Burstein.

72 See the archive of Yahad-In Unum: <http://www.yahadinunum.orgwww.yahadmap.org/en/#map/>.

perience sheds light on the uncoordinated, scattered acts of anti-Jewish violence.

One can only estimate the myriad forms of death from the rare post-war testimonies: the invaluable accounts collected in the 1970s and 1980s by the ethnographer Eugeniusz Czubala offer a shocking catalogue of individual deaths during the “third phase of the Holocaust”. In the section of the book entitled “War and Occupation”, one can find harrowing stories of Jews frozen on the shoulders of roads and in ditches, killed in swamps and pastures, murdered in the forest, thrown into wells, killed in the very houses in which they initially found refuge, raped and murdered while making their way to the next shelter, or killed by Germans or their auxiliaries stationed nearby or by local inhabitants.<sup>73</sup>

The term I propose, “dispersed Holocaust”, encompasses any form of Jewish death during and immediately after the Second World War as long as it was derived from wartime social relations that did not occur within a camp or ghetto. The majority of these events relate to the period after June 1941 and the territory east of Auschwitz-Birkenau, but as researchers of killing sites acknowledge,<sup>74</sup> it is possible to point to a small number of events that preceded this period and which took place in western and southern Europe. Similarly, murders committed after the end of the war can also be included insofar as they resulted from wartime mindset. Paying greater attention to even individual murders that occurred through personal contacts and in a different manner than those identified by historians of the ghettos and camps can better reveal the full extent of the dramatic fate of the persecuted population and expose the brutalization of wartime societies.

### *Conclusions: From Dispersed Holocaust to Holocausts*

Any comprehensive necro-topography of the Holocaust – the mapping of dispersed deaths of the persecuted taking into account the various forms of the Holocaust “in the East” – that does not use the criterion of mass death and an a priori assumed number of victims would be considerably more complex than one that is centralised around the global message of camps and ghettos. Indeed, it would be more complex than even the necro-topography reconstructed in studies of the Holocaust by bullets and killing

73 Dionizjusz Czubala and Piotr Grochowski, *O tym nie wolno mówić .... Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubali* (Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2019); Dionizjusz Czubala, “Pamięć Zagłady w narracji folklorystycznej”, *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 13 (2017): 203–229, <https://doi.org/10.32927/ZZSiM.357>. See also Piotr Filipkowski, “Historia mówiona jako wybór źródeł. Wokół ‘O tym nie wolno mówić’: Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubali”, *Studia Litteraria et Historica* 9 (2020): 1–16.

74 Dieter Pohl, “Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites”, 34. See also Alexander Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs: Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941–1945* (Hamburger Edition, 2013); Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Cornell University Press, 2016).

sites. A hypothetical exhaustive map of Holocaust sites would ultimately never be complete, but it would include sites of persecution and sites of death: camps and subcamps, ghettos and other forms of detention (transfer centers, prisons), sites of mass shootings, locations of deaths during transport, sites of smaller when it comes to the number of victims murders, executions, and deaths from illness or exhaustion in hiding, as well as sites of deaths during death marches in the final months of the war. It could interact with a map of places where Jews were killed not on racial grounds but for political, class, property, or personal reasons, including post-war pogroms and murders in places to which Jews attempted to return, as long as these deaths were “inextricably interwoven with the Holocaust”. Such a map would contain a multiplicity of marked sites, revealing their fragmentation and dispersion. It would be an attempt to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the Holocaust, one that more fully takes into account the diverse forms of death suffered by Jews both from and in Central and Eastern Europe.

In lieu of this hypothetical map, if the geographical complexity of the Holocaust can be captured in the more general formula of the “dispersed Holocaust”, the term can shed light on the specific nature of this genocide “beyond camps”: first, the murder of Jews took place in public, so both perpetrators and persons living in the surrounding communities had a great deal of knowledge about the events and were involved in them to a greater extent and in greater numbers than has heretofore been acknowledged. Second, the presence of these often uncommemorated death or execution sites has had an impact on local memory cultures that is not yet sufficiently understood. Third, the commemoration of such sites, which are diverse in terms of history, terrain, ecology, and social environment, faces greater difficulties than the now well-developed practices of commemorating victims of camps and/or ghettos.

The dispersed Holocaust might reveal more distinctively the diverse internal character of the genocide against the Jews. In this light, the Holocaust could be understood *plurally*: as *Holocausts*, and more often referred to by local terms (such as *Zagłada* or *Khurban*). Such an approach would help support local, “situated” Holocaust studies, understood as studies of diverse, locally embedded events in which the positionality of all actors, including present-day researchers, might play a more visible role. Second, the model of the dispersed Holocaust sheds more light on the *inextricably interwoven* yet different forms of extreme violence against different population groups. This would support comparative research that challenges the isolationist approach to the Holocaust without overlooking its significance. This would, finally, successfully challenge existing centralised thinking and support inclusive forms of memory culture that transcend the “competition over memory”.

## Bibliography

- “Auschwitz im Kontext. Die ehemaligen Konzentrationslager im gegenwärtigen europäischen Gedächtnis”. Polnisch-österreichische wissenschaftliche Tagung, Polish Academy of Sciences in Vienna (2014). Accessed 12 December 2024. [https://www.oeaw.ac.at/fileadmin/mediapool/archiv/work/Auschwitz\\_im\\_Kontext.pdf](https://www.oeaw.ac.at/fileadmin/mediapool/archiv/work/Auschwitz_im_Kontext.pdf).
- Bajohr, Frank, and Dieter Pohl. *Der Holocaust als offenes Geheimnis. Die Deutschen, die NS-Führung und die Alliierten*. C. H. Beck, 2006.
- Bauer, Yehuda. “Creating a ‘Usable’ Past: On Holocaust Denial and Distortion”. *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 2, (3 May 2020): 209–227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2020.1805916>.
- Berger, Deidre. “Protecting Memory: Preserving and Memorializing the Holocaust Mass Graves of Eastern Europe”. In IHRA, *Killing Sites – Research and Remembrance 1*.
- Bergholz, Max. *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*. Cornell University Press, 2016.
- Berkhoff, Karel. “Afterword”. In IHRA, *Killing Sites – Research and Remembrance 1*.
- Berkhoff, Karel, et al., *Basic Historical Narrative of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center*. 29 October 2018. <https://pure.knaw.nl/portal/en/publications/basic-historical-narrative-of-the-babi-yar-holocaust-memorial-cen>.
- Browning, Christopher R. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. HarperPerennial, 1993.
- Czubala, Dionizjusz. “Pamięć Zagłady w narracji folklorystycznej”. *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 13 (2017): 203–229. <https://doi.org/10.32927/ZZSiM.357>.
- Czubala, Dionizjusz, and Piotr Grochowski. *O tym nie wolno mówić ...: Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubałi*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2019.
- Datner, Szymon. “Zbrodnie hitlerowskie na Żydach zbiegłych z gett. Groźby i zarządzenia ‘prawne’ w stosunku do Żydów oraz udzielających im pomocy Polaków”. *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 75 (1970).
- Desbois, Patrick. *In Broad Daylight: The Secret Procedures behind the Holocaust by Bullets*. Simon and Schuster, 2018.
- Desbois, Patrick. *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest’s Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*. St. Martin’s Publishing Group, 2008.
- Dybaś, Bogusław, Irmgard Nöbauer, and Ljiljana Radonić. *Auschwitz im Kontext*. Peter Lang, 2019.
- Engelking, Barbara. “‘A minut cu nacht’ Analiza doświadczenia Żydów, którzy przeżyli masowe egzekucje”. In *Oto widać i oto słychać: Świadkowie Zagłady w okupowanej Polsce*, edited by Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, Dariusz Libionka, and Alina Skibińska. Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2024.
- Engelking, Barbara. “‘Many of Those Who Were Only Wounded Suffocated, Buried Alive’: Analyzing the Experiences of Jews Who Survived Mass Executions”. *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 36, no. 2 (2022): 171–189. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcac022>.

- Filipkowski, Piotr. "Historia mówiona jako wybór źródeł. Wokół 'O tym nie wolno mówić': Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubali". *Studia Litteraria et Historica* 9 (2020): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.11649/slh.2269>.
- Fulbrook, Mary. *Reckonings: Legacies of Nazi Persecution and the Quest for Justice*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Głowacka, Dorota. "'Never Forget': Intersecting Memories of the Holocaust and the Settler Colonial Genocide in Canada". In *Holocaust Memory and Racism in the Postwar World*, edited by Shirli Gilbert et al. Wayne State University Press, 2019.
- Gilbert, Martin. *Atlas of the Holocaust*. Joseph, 1982.
- Goldhagen, Daniel. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. Abacus, 1997.
- Grabowski, Jan. "Estimates of the Losses of Polish Jews in Hiding, 1942–1945: Revisiting Yehuda Bauer's Observations". *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 36, no. 1 (2022): 96–109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25785648.2021.2014673>.
- Grabowski, Jan. *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland*. Indiana University Press, 2014.
- Grabowski, Jan, and Barbara Engelking. *Night Without End: The Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland*. Indiana University Press, 2022.
- International Holocaust Research Alliance (IHRA), ed. *Killing Sites – Research and Remembrance 1*. Metropol Verlag, 2015.
- Jinks, Rebecca. *Representing Genocide: The Holocaust as Paradigm?* Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.
- Keith, Anja, and Detlev Schöttker. "Arendt und Wulf. Eine 'Spiegel-Affäre'". *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24 (2020): 3. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wissen/geist-soziales/spiegel-warum-wurde-joseph-wulfs-arendt-rezension-nicht-gedruckt-16603964/wulfs-fluechtlingspass-des-12134719.html>.
- Knowles, Anne Kelly, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano, eds. *Geographies of the Holocaust*. Indiana University Press, 2014.
- Korb, Alexander. *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs: Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941–1945*. Hamburger Edition, 2013.
- Kucia, Marek. "The Meanings of Auschwitz in Poland, 1945 to the Present". *Holocaust Studies* 25, no. 3 (2019): 220–247.
- Leociak, Jacek. "Wyjście z grobu", *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2004).
- Libionka, Dariusz. *Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie: zarys problematyki*. Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, 2017.
- Lower, Wendy. *The Ravine: A Family, a Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed*. Mariner Books, 2021.
- Lutz, Thomas, David Silberklang, Piotr Trojański, and Juliane Wetzel. "Foreword". In IHRA, *Killing Sites – Research and Remembrance 1*.
- Moses, A. Dirk "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the 'Racial Century': Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust". *Patterns of Prejudice* 36, no. 4 (October 2002): 7–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/003132202128811538>.

- Pohl, Dieter. "Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites". In IHRA, *Killing Sites – Research and Remembrance 1*.
- Rhodes, Richard. *Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2002.
- Rothberg, Michael, and Jürgen Zimmerer. "Enttabuisiert den Vergleich!" *Die Zeit*, 31 March 2021. <https://www.zeit.de/2021/14/erinnerungskultur-gedenken-pl>.
- Saryusz-Wolska, Magdalena. *Microhistories of Memory: Remediating the Holocaust by Bullets in Postwar West Germany*. Berghahn Books, 2023.
- "Scattered Holocaust, Weak Commemorations". Facebook discussion. Accessed 12 December 2024. [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=941249609616149](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=941249609616149).
- Scholz, Hans. *Through the Night*. Translated by Elisabeth Abbott. Thomas Y. Crowell, 1959.
- Sendyka, Roma. *Holocaust by Bullets: Expanding the Field of Holocaust Art*. Accessed 12 December 2024. <https://www.ehri-project.eu/holocaust-bullets/>.
- Sendyka, Roma. *Poza obozem. Nie-miejsca pamięci – próba rozpoznania*. Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2021.
- Sendyka, Roma. "Sites of Violence and Their Communities: Critical Memory Studies in the Post-Human Era". *Heritage, Memory and Conflict* 1, (23 November 2021): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.3897/hmc.1.63263>.
- Sendyka, Roma. "Uncommemorated Sites of Genocide: Mass Graves, Pits, or Garbage Dumps? Vernacular Responses to the Holocaust in Poland". *Environment, Space, Place* 15, no. 2 (2023): 14–33. <https://doi.org/10.1353/spc.2023.a910009>.
- Sendyka, Roma, Aleksandra Janus, Karina Jarzyńska, Kinga Siewior, eds., *Nie-miejsca pamięci 2: Nekrotopologie*. Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2021.
- Sendyka, Roma, Maria Kobielska, Jakub Muchowski, and Aleksandra Szczepan, eds., *Nie-miejsca pamięci 1: Nekrotopografie*. Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2021.
- Shapiro, Paul A. "Foreword". In Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*.
- Silva, Mario, and Andrew Burns. "Preface". In IHRA, *Killing Sites – Research and Remembrance 1*.
- Skibińska, Alina, and Jakub Petelewicz. "Udział Polaków w zbrodniach na Żydach na prowincji regionu świętokrzyskiego". *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 1 (2005): 114–147.
- Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz, Regina, and Stanisław Rozwar Zybała. *Ludność żydowska w gminie Radecznicza*. Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Szczepreszy-na, 2015.
- Snyder, Timothy. *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*. Tim Duggan Books 2015.
- Wóycicka, Zofia. *Arrested Mourning: Memory of the Nazi Camps in Poland, 1944–1950*. Peter Lang, 2014.
- Zimmerer, Jürgen. *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz?: Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust*. LIT Verlag, 2011.

**Roma Sendyka** is a cultural anthropologist and memory studies scholar. She is Professor, co-founder and first director of the Research Center for Memory Cultures. She teaches in the Anthropology of Literature and Cultural Studies department at the Faculty of Polish Studies at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków. She specialises in criticism and theory, Holocaust studies, and memory studies. Her focus is on relations between behaviours, sites, images and memory, and she is currently working on a project on “non-sites of memory” in Central and Eastern Europe and bystanding to the Holocaust in Poland. Sendyka is also co-curator of the 2018-2019 exhibition “Terribly Close: Polish Vernacular Artists Face the Holocaust” at the Kraków Ethnographic Museum. She authored three books on identity and memory, and co-edited fourteen volumes dealing with memory cultures. Email: [roma.sendyka@uj.edu.pl](mailto:roma.sendyka@uj.edu.pl)

Quotation: Roma Sendyka, The Dispersed Holocaust. Pluralising Research on the Violent Past in Eastern Europe, in S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 13 (2026) 1, 117-136.

[https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126/art\\_sendyka](https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126/art_sendyka)

S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 13 (2026) 1 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126>

This article is licensed under the following Creative Commons License: CC-BY-SA (Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives).

Attila Novák

## “A Convinced Anti-Communist and Rabid Zionist”

*Simon Wiesenthal through the Lens of Hungarian State Security Service Reports during the Kádár Era*

### Abstract

This study focuses on Simon Wiesenthal, the former head of the Zentrum für jüdische historische Dokumentation (Jewish Historical Documentation Centre), and his relations with Hungary during the Kádár era. Based on original and previously unpublished sources from the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (ÁBTL) and other repositories, this article examines the attitude of János Kádár’s regime toward Wiesenthal. Wiesenthal, who was under surveillance by the Hungarian State Security Services from the 1960s until the fall of communism, attracted the attention of political decision-makers not only in Hungary but also in other Eastern European countries as a leading figure in the Austrian Jewish community, though his activities aimed at exposing and bringing Nazis to justice soon came to the fore. Wiesenthal, who was also familiar with the activities of former Nazis in the countries of the Eastern Bloc, became a symbol of a new Austrian Jewish identity, but he also became more universally significant. Eastern European state-socialist countries would have preferred him to focus solely on “capitalist countries”, but Wiesenthal’s universal quest for justice made no distinction between Eastern and Western European citizens, and therefore between Eastern and Western crimes and criminals. These observations were generally expressed in the rhetoric of official anti-Zionist propaganda and the ideological language of the Eastern European regimes – in relation to Jews and Israel – which was significantly strengthened after the Six-Day War (1967) and the Polish anti-Zionist purges (1968).

One of the most famous “Nazi hunters” of all time, the legendary Austrian Simon Wiesenthal, himself a Holocaust survivor, was the target of several Eastern European secret service agencies over the years. He was the subject of both more general surveillance and of operations that specifically targeted him. The pages that follow examine how Hungarian State Security Services viewed Wiesenthal: was he a target of central surveillance, or was he merely monitored on an ad hoc basis by various lower-level departments? Furthermore, given Hungary’s official policy toward the Jewish community and Zionism, was there any guiding principle or even ideology behind these surveillance activities? These aspects have not been addressed in the existing scholarship on Wiesenthal; thus, the study is pioneering and lays the ground-

work for further research, drawing on and fully incorporating the records of the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, ÁBTL), which houses the records of the Hungarian State Security Agency and Political Police.

Of the vast amount of documents the Hungarian State Security Service produced during the state-socialist period, there are three types of documents that mention Wiesenthal. The first is documents related to the state security agency's monitoring of foreign Zionist and Jewish organisations (there was a separate dossier entitled "Gemeinde", for example, which dealt with the Jewish community in Vienna). Related to this corpus are individual agent files in which agents (one of whom was in the leadership of the Vienna Jewish community) monitored and reported on movements related to Hungary in Vienna and Budapest, and in some cases, Wiesenthal was monitored in relation to the surveillance of someone else. Additionally, there are sources that monitored Israeli intelligence and reported on agent activities concerning Israel's activities in Europe. It is important to note that no separate file was maintained for Wiesenthal; the reports about him are embedded within existing files. The relevant records are filed under the categories of operational and work files.

The post-war Hungarian State Security Service's interest in Zionism and Simon Wiesenthal developed only somewhat slowly, and in fact, only a fraction of the many reports it produced on Austria and Jewish or Zionist movements dealt with him specifically. These reports can and should be interpreted within the context of the Cold War standoff between East and West, with the state security services of socialist countries (including the Hungarian Security Agency) motivated chiefly by their desire to gather information about what was happening in the West while also being interested in the aftermath of the Holocaust, which was otherwise concealed at home, i.e., in Hungary. The reasons for this suppression were manifold, but in general, the Jewish cause was seen as being particularistic, whereas the perpetrators and their descendants were viewed as fully integrated into Hungarian society. If the Hungarian communist government had addressed the Holocaust during this period, it would have been forced to deal with many unpleasant issues. At some point in the 1960s, however, a gradual change began to take place, and slowly, traces of Holocaust remembrance began to appear both in literature and in the state-controlled press in the country.

To explain the attitude of the Hungarian State Security Service to Wiesenthal, it is necessary to examine the relationship between the Hungarian state (and its security apparatus) and local Jewry after 1953. I consider 1953 to be a turning point because it marks the end of the harshest period of so-called communism in Hungary. Because there was little active exploratory work on Zionist affairs between 1953 and 1961, it seemed appropriate to organise this research from a new perspective. During the (early)

post-Stalinist period, new files, “group dossiers”, were opened to collect the results of systematic surveillance. On the one hand, there was a charge to gather information on Professor Sándor Scheiber, the prominent director of the Budapest-based Rabbinical Seminary and other Jewish leaders in Hungary who were considered unreliable; on the other hand, with equal vigor, agents were called to investigate youth groups in Jewish religious communities, which were considered operational “targets” of “Zionist propaganda”.

Within the Jewish community, where the Orthodox and Neolog factions had been forced merge, informers, often drawn from among the religious and secular leaders of the community, also sought to prevent the formation of groups sympathetic to Israel. Although the Jewish community had already been put under surveillance in the years immediately following the 1956 revolution, this activity intensified and became more systematic in 1960. In the early 1960s, the Soviet intelligence service asked its counterparts in “friendly countries” (all official relations with other Eastern European socialist countries were described as “friendly”) to “compile and submit to the State Security Council a summary report on the most characteristic trends in the Israeli intelligence service’s activities against the people’s democracies and the Soviet Union”. In its reply to this “friendly inquiry”, the Hungarian Secret Service already highlighted the nodes to which intelligence activities in connection with Hungarian Jewry should be directed: the Israeli embassy; an individual – Professor Sándor Scheiber, director of the Budapest Rabbinical Seminary; and the foreign relations activities and finances of the Jewish community.<sup>1</sup> The Soviet request accelerated events, as from 1961 onward, the staff of the Political Investigation Department of the Interior Ministry’s Political Investigation Division (Interior Ministry), subdivision II/5-c, in coordination with several subdivisions, began its intensive investigative work.

At this point it may be instructive to present a few examples of how the Hungarian state’s anti-Zionist campaign operated in the post-1956 period. The year 1956 was a turning point in Hungarian history in every respect. After the revolution, which finally put an end to Stalinism in Hungary, the new General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party János Kádár learned – even though the beginning of the era was marked by purges, imprisonments, and executions – that he had to make some kind of compromise.

Between 1957 and the end of 1961, the state security agency did not deal systematically with what it deemed Zionist cases, although the Israeli embassy was under surveillance. In 1962, a subdivision of the Interior Ministry created a dossier entitled “Zionist organisations” because “According to information from our own

1 Historical Archives of the State Security Services (ÁBTL), Budapest, “Zionists engaged in hostile activities”, O-17169.

and friendly acquaintances, Israeli and international Zionist organisations are actively gathering intelligence information about us and using their representations as a front for Israeli and Western intelligence organisations.”<sup>2</sup> Large Jewish organisations dealing with Israel, along with Jewish bodies that were only indirectly linked to Israel, such as the World Federation of Hungarian Jews or the Masonic B’nai B’rith, were characterised as Zionist in this document. The report also found that Zionism was also present in the “eastern countries”, particularly among people who had been harmed by the nationalisation of businesses. The Hungarian Residency in Tel Aviv was also involved in the “fight” against Zionism, and it viewed the monitoring of reciprocal travelers as a means of controlling Israeli interests.

After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, however, János Kádár’s Hungary, on Soviet orders, severed its relations with the Jewish state and closed its diplomatic missions. The countries of the Soviet bloc, with the exception of the somewhat renegade Romania, waged a fiercely anti-Zionist and anti-Israel campaign. In Poland,<sup>3</sup> the remaining Jews were forced to emigrate. In Hungary – the only country in the region where there was a large and integrated Jewish community, although Jewish religious life was under close state supervision – no anti-Zionist campaign was conducted; indeed, the top party and state leadership did not want one. In a speech to the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party’s (MSZMP) Political Committee delivered on 13 June 1967, Kádár made it clear that while he held Israel responsible for the war, he did not want to make a “racial issue” of the matter.

On the one hand, the severing of relations with Israel meant that Hungarian State Security Agency lost one of its domestic targets; and on the other hand, those who wished to maintain relations with Israel had been delegitimised (although no specific law was passed on this), and from this point of view, the state had even greater capacity to persecute Jewish communal activity – under the pretext of anti-Zionism. The task of monitoring the activities of the Zionists was also partly delegated to Hungarian embassies abroad. For example, in the early 1970s, the Ministry of the Interior (with the help of the Hungarian Embassy in the United States) prepared a report on the activities of the Zionist lobby in the United States. This type of surveillance also covered Hungarian diplomatic missions abroad and agents embedded in certain Jewish organisations. From then on, attention was focused on major international Jewish organisations, and (where they could, mainly with the help of agents working in Hungarian embassies) the Hungarian Security Service also monitored the activities of Israeli embassies and reported on their possible Jewish contacts in Hungary.

2 ABTL 3.2.5.O-8-301/1, “Tivadar Herzl” – Zionist organizations”, 9 May 1962, Ministry of the Interior, Subdivision II/3. Signed by Lieutenant Colonel János Vértes (Deputy Head of Division) and Lieutenant Colonel Endre Tóth (Deputy Head of Division).

3 Simon Wiesenthal, *Anti-Jewish Agitation in Poland: A Documentary Report* (Vogel, 1969).

Wiesenthal's post-war life took a turn shortly before 1964, as he moved with his family from Linz to Vienna in 1960 and, encouraged by Eichmann's capture, reopened the Jewish Historical Documentation Centre (now in the capital) in 1961. Austrian national political life dominated by the Austrian People's Party and the rapprochement between the great powers (the meeting between Soviet Party Secretary Nikita Khrushchev and US President John F. Kennedy was held in Vienna in June 1961) gave new impetus to the possibility of finding and justly punishing Nazi criminals.

### *The East Bloc's Israel Policy*

Relations between Israel and the Soviet Bloc were cool and then were severed altogether in 1967, with the exception of Israel's relations with Romania, which later even attempted to mediate between the Palestinians and Israelis. The Cold War situation, the rivalry between the two superpowers, and the Arab-Israeli wars and conflicts determined the nature of this relationship. From the 1960s onward, Israel was considered a pro-American state, while the Soviets (including Hungary) supported Arab states, especially those inclined to accept a form of socialism.

After the Six-Day War in 1967, there were anti-Zionist campaigns in the Eastern Bloc countries, which resulted in, for example, the emigration of the remaining Polish Jews from Poland. The Soviet Union provided military assistance to Arab states (mainly Egypt, Syria, and Iran) and the Palestine Liberation Organization, and Hungary did too. The Arab countries' request for military aid was discussed at the Politburo (PB - Political Committee of the MSZMP) meeting on 18 July 1967, and despite the more cautious position of Kádár, military equipment was shipped from Hungary to these countries.<sup>4</sup> During the Yom Kippur War five years later, direct requests for aid from the Arab states and the Soviet pressure reinforcing these intensified. The MSZMP PB meeting, followed by the smaller cabinet of the Council of Ministers, the Defense Committee, did not discuss the shipments of (military) aid until 30 November 1973, and only then did the deputy military president of the National Planning Office Ervin Jávör announce that the defense ministries of Iraq, Syria, and Egypt had requested military technology from Hungary. Based on a February 1974 meeting of the Defense Committee, we now know that Hungary exported approximately ninety T54 tanks, twelve MIG-21 F13 fighter jets, and three million rubles worth of

<sup>4</sup> On 20 July 1967, the Hungarian government approved aid to the United Arab Republic (UAR) and the Syrian Arab Republic with its decision No. 3227/1967. Budapest undertook to supply military technology free of charge: 100 million forints to Egypt and 50 million forints to Syria. Pál Germuska, "Magyar katonai segítségnyújtás az arab országoknak az 1973-as Jom Kippuri háború idején", in *Hadi és más nevezetes történetek*, ed. Tanulmányok Veszprémi László tiszteletére (HM Hadtörténeti Intézet és Múzeum, 2018), 152-156.

new weapons and ammunition during the Yom Kippur War (due to the initiative of the Soviet Union). The financial basis for this aid was provided by a number of previous loan agreements. Throughout this period, Jewish emigration was generally prohibited, and Jewish organisations were monitored in relation to both the Arab-Israel conflict and emigration.

### *The Beginning*

Simon Wiesenthal, who was nicknamed the “Nazi hunter”, became the subject of Hungarian State Security Service reports in 1964. While it is possible that similar reports had been produced earlier, it seems that Wiesenthal reached the threshold for attracting the interest of the security agencies at the same time his public activity was significantly intensifying. Wiesenthal, who barely existed in the public consciousness and media of the Hungarian Socialist Republic in the Kádár era (since his name appeared only very rarely in the general Hungarian and Jewish press during this period), was very much on the radar of the state security apparatus, although he was by no means the individual they were most interested in. Regarding the actual focus of their surveillance, Wiesenthal’s name was most frequently mentioned in Hungarian State Security Service documents in connection with its monitoring of Zionist and/or Jewish organisations in Austria.

This also means, of course, that what we think of as the relationship between Wiesenthal and the state security services of Hungary is partly a type of construct, since the Nazi hunter’s activities were not a specific target of observation but rather played a tangential role in the broader enquiries of the security agency. The Viennese engineer was under surveillance not only by Hungarian State Security but also by the security services of other socialist countries too (these certainly included – based on my research – Poland and Czechoslovakia), since he refused to shape his activities around Soviet considerations.<sup>5</sup> To take the Polish example alone: the Polish state security service kept an eye on Wiesenthal for decades. Between 1963 and 1974, this operation was code-named “Duna” (Dunaj), and Wiesenthal himself was code-named “Izmir”. The Polish security service files contain long lists of people with whom Wiesenthal was in contact and the places he visited. The Polish intelligence agency surrounded Wiesenthal with a network of spies, many of whom were Holocaust survivors.<sup>6</sup>

Wiesenthal’s post-war life had changed quite significantly by the time the Hungarian Security Service began monitoring him in 1964, as he had moved with his family from Linz to Vienna in

5 Tom Segev, *Simon Wiesenthal: The Life and Legends* (Doubleday, 2010), 227–228.

6 Segev, *Simon Wiesenthal*, 184–186, 227–228, 293–294. Stankowski’s comprehensive biography of Wiesenthal (in Polish) does not deal with this issue. Witold Stankowski, *Szymon Wiesenthal: biografia* (Wydawnictwo “Książka i Wiedza”, 2009).

1960 and founded the Jewish Historical Documentation Centre there a year later.<sup>7</sup> Austrian national political life was dominated by the Austrian People's Party, and the rapprochement between the great powers (the meeting between Soviet Party Secretary Nikita Khrushchev and US President Kennedy took place in Vienna in June 1961) seemed to expand the possibilities of finding and justly punishing Nazi criminals.

Wiesenthal had previously collaborated with the American and Israeli authorities in the search for war criminals and had been involved in the (unsuccessful) attempt to capture Eichmann by Israeli agents in 1948. In 1953, he informed the Israeli Consul General in Vienna, Aryeh Eshel, that Eichmann was hiding in Argentina, and the Israeli secret service eventually managed to apprehend the former high-ranking Nazi in 1960. Although Isser Harel, the chief of Mossad (1952–1963) who masterminded Eichmann's capture, would later vehemently deny Wiesenthal's role in it, the latter undoubtedly contributed to Eichmann's arrest, according to Tom Segev's research.<sup>8</sup>

### *A Brief Biography of Simon Wiesenthal*

Although Wiesenthal's life has been well documented, what follows is a brief biographical sketch that highlights core elements relevant for this analysis. The founder of the Jewish Historical Documentation Centre in Vienna became famous primarily for his pursuit of former Nazis. He captured more than one hundred war criminals, assisting in the capture of Adolf Eichmann, and he also helped apprehend SS officer Franz Murer, the organiser of the Vilnius ghetto.<sup>9</sup>

Wiesenthal was born on 31 December 1908, in Buczacz, a town that is now in Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> When Stalin's Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed a non-aggression pact in 1939, agreeing to divide Poland, worse times came for Wiesenthal too. The struggle against all forms of totalitarian dictatorship was very important to Wiesenthal, and it was in the city of his birth that he became acquainted with the Soviet type. His stepfather was arrested by the NKVD and died in prison, and his stepbrother was killed. Wiesenthal closed his business and found work as a mechanic in a factory. Later, when the Germans occupied Lvov in 1941, he spent months in the Janowska labor camp near the city, after which he and his wife were sent to another forced labor camp. The plan and practice of exterminating the Jews affected Wiesenthal most directly: in August 1942, his mother was deported to the Bełżec death camp. By September, he and his wife had lost most of their family.

7 Segev, *Simon Wiesenthal*, 30.

8 *Ibid.*, 101–102.

9 *Ibid.*

10 See: <https://wiesenthal.org/about/about-simon-wiesenthal>.

Wiesenthal escaped from Janowska in October 1943 (immediately before the prisoners were murdered). However, in June 1944, he was recaptured and taken back to the camp, but he was fortunate in that the SS guards at the camp, anticipating the outcome of the war, had decided not to kill the remaining prisoners. Instead, inmates were herded westward, passing through Plaszow (a suburb south of Krakow), Gross-Rosen (now Rogoźnica, Poland), and Buchenwald, ending up in Mauthausen. Wiesenthal was weak and emaciated when he was liberated by the US Army on 11 May 1945.

Immediately after the war, Wiesenthal decided to help the Americans punish former Nazi criminals. He helped collect relevant documents for the US Army, which had a department responsible for dealing with war criminals. At the end of 1945, Simon and his wife were happily reunited (although they had both believed the other was dead), and in 1946, their daughter Pauline was born.

The materials found by Wiesenthal were used in the post-war trials of war criminals in the American zone. In 1947, Wiesenthal's relationship with the US Army ended, and he founded the Jewish Historical Documentation Centre in Linz with a dozen volunteers. The goal was to collect evidence for future trials. As the Soviet Union and the United States lost interest in war criminals and trials, Wiesenthal closed his office in Linz in 1954 and handed over the documents, with the exception of the Eichmann dossier, to the Yad Vashem Archives. Wiesenthal played a significant role in Eichmann's capture. There was cooperation between some Eastern European countries and Israel in the Eichmann case (Hungary, for example, handed over filtered documents), but in general, this type of collaboration did not call into question their strained relationship with Israel.

### *Wiesenthal as the Subject of State Surveillance*

In 1938, there were approximately 192,000 Jews living in Austria, but many emigrated after the German annexation of Austria, and their numbers declined. After the Holocaust, the Allied powers concentrated the surviving Jews in Displaced Persons (DP) camps in Austria. Those Holocaust survivors who had nowhere to return to after the war stayed in the DP camps (one of which was in Linz), and they were assisted by groups of volunteers from Palestine, among others. By 1955, there were between 250,000 and 300,000 displaced Jews living in Austria. About 3,000 of them would remain in the country and helped form the new post-war Austrian Jewish community. During the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, about 200,000 Hungarians fled to the West, including approximately 15,000 to 20,000 Jews. Seventy thousand Hungarians remained in Austria, including numerous Jews, many of whom joined local communities (*kehilloth*) there. The

Hungarian State Security Agency was able to exploit some of their members for several reasons: they were offered various benefits and many had family living in Hungary through whom they could exert pressure.

Wiesenthal's earlier investigation of Eichmann was not, however, the motivation for the Hungarian security service's surveillance operations; their interest in the Viennese engineer was much more local and regional in nature. Wiesenthal was a person of interest to state security services as someone who had organised a "special party" in the Viennese religious community elections (the first report mentioning him is dated 19 May, 1964 and may be found in the file on the "Gemeinde", i.e., the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien - IKG - the official Viennese religious community in Vienna). The Hungarian State Security Service was interested in, among many other things, political relations in the IKG and the influence Austrian political parties and the Israeli embassy had on the community. They were also interested in gauging the strength of Zionist sentiment among the leadership. Austria was not seen as a friendly country (it was considered a neutral state), and Hungary, a country in which the Soviets had an interest, wanted information on everything it could get its hands on.

The attitude of the Hungarian State Security apparatus concerning the Wiesenthal case cannot be understood without considering the history of Hungarian-Israeli relations during this time. Hungarian-Israeli relations had been somewhat normalised in the 1960s (until the Soviet-initiated break in 1967) after some minor skirmishes (disputes concerning such issues as the "smuggling" of Israeli diplomats from Budapest, the expulsion of Israeli diplomats, the arrest of a Hungarian actor in Israel, and the money paid by Israel to Hungary in exchange for permitting emigration). The diplomats sent to Budapest by the Israeli side included a wide range of people, from left-wing kibbutzers to journalists. While the Arab affairs section of the Hungarian foreign affairs apparatus was not very keen to build closer relations with Israel, others (especially in the business community) would have welcomed them.

An interesting phase in the relations between the two countries occurred when the Hungarian and Central and Eastern European countries took positions on the Eichmann trial. Hungary refused to treat the case as a "Jewish issue" due to the specific instructions given by János Kádár, the long-serving General Secretary of the MSZMP.<sup>11</sup> Following Soviet guidelines, the Hungarian leadership initially claimed that Eichmann should be extradited to the country where he had committed his crimes. However, the plan, which was revised on the basis of Kádár's instructions and submitted to the MSZMP Political Committee, was later with-

<sup>11</sup> See András Kovács, ed., *Communism's Jewish Question: Jewish Issues in Communist Archives* (De Gruyter, 2017), 77–84.

drawn, reflecting the Soviet position. After consulting with other socialist countries (Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Soviet Union), these countries also agreed that, despite Tel Aviv's diplomatic request, they would not allow representatives of the Israeli special investigation team into their countries to obtain evidence and witness statements. Instead, Hungary undertook to collect the material itself and forward it to the Israeli side. At the same time, this material was also suitable for supporting the Soviet bloc's policy against West Germany, and the documents were selected accordingly.

At the end of 1961, a previously non-existent publisher, Pannonia, published a source book entitled *Eichmann in Hungary* in both English and German. This collection of documents, which had never been published in Hungarian, was edited by Jenő Lévai (1892-1983), the best-known Holocaust expert in the country in first the three years after the Second World War and a journalist and historian who had been silenced after 1948. Suddenly invited to come out of the woodwork, Lévai was the only person the authorities considered "duly prepared" to be allowed to testify at the trial in Jerusalem, which began on 11 April 1961, lasted more than four months, and ended with Eichmann's execution.

The intensification of Hungarian-Israeli relations was tempered by the fact that (West) German Chancellor Ludwig Erhard and Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol agreed in May 1965 to establish full diplomatic relations. This agreement, which was adopted by the Knesset in March 1965, was the most significant event in relations between the Bundesrepublik and Israel since the 1952 Compensation Agreement. The establishment of diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and Israel was based on the German desire to assume full responsibility for Germany's past acts against the Jews and the desire of the FRG to participate in the new Europe.

The improvement in West German-Israeli relations was deeply troubling for the socialist countries of the Eastern Bloc. The Hungarian State Security Services, for example, constantly tried (often successfully) to persuade Hungarian Jews to make anti-(West)German statements. They also tried to lodge protests with the Israeli embassy in Hungary about the upturn in relations in order to put moral pressure on the Israelis, thus further reducing the embassy's already limited influence on Hungarian Jewry. The aim was to place a moral stigma on the Federal Republic, which was regarded as an ideological and political opponent of the Soviet Union, by using propaganda to portray it as the successor to Nazi Germany, where former Nazis were once again able to occupy high office.

Throughout the socialist era, the Hungarian State Security apparatus monitored Israeli diplomats, tapped their phones, read their letters and watched their movements. Wiesenthal was among those considered by them to be a "man" of the Israeli services (especially Mossad), an assumption which had some truth to

it, as according to Tom Segev's book, Wiesenthal was on the organisation's payroll for several years after the Second World War (under the pseudonym "Theocrat") and engaged in what it called "diversionary activities", targeting the socialist democracies of Eastern Europe. Wiesenthal was credited by the Hungarian Internal Security Service as one of Eichmann's "captors" and was regarded as a "big name" (in a report on the chief rabbi of Vienna, Dr Akiba/Béla Eisenberg from 3 November 1964).<sup>12</sup> These two developments were in fact connected. The security service reports established that key figures in the Viennese Jewish religious establishment such as Ernst Feldsberg (1894-1970) - who was the leader of Vienna's Jewish community from 1963 - and Wilhelm Krell (1902-1973), who was cultivating closer relations with the Viennese government and others were alarmed by Wiesenthal's breakthrough and regarded him as a hostile person.

The Hungarian State Security Service engaged two persons to collect information: a respected Hungarian rabbi (Chief Rabbi Dr László Salgó [1910-1985], alias "Agent Sárvári"), who was also familiar with Austrian affairs, as well as another leading functionary of the religious community ("Agent Xavér"), the codename for museum director Ilona Benoschofsky (1913-1997), who in 1962 had overthrown her predecessor Fülöp Grünwald (1887-1964). This turned out to be relatively easy, and they did not even have to go to Vienna because the chief rabbi of the city, the aforementioned Akiba (Béla) Eisenberg (1909-1983), had Hungarian origins, so he visited Budapest on several occasions and had good contacts with official Hungarian Jewry. However, Eisenberg was no longer as sympathetic to the Hungarian Interior Ministry because of his Zionist leanings.

So, between 1964 and 1965, Simon Wiesenthal gained considerable influence among the elite of the Jewish community in Vienna, and this prompted the Hungarian State Security Service to investigate him through its contacts there (many Hungarian Jews, including members and leaders of religious communities, lived in the Austrian capital). However, the Hungarian State Security Services - at least according to the reports I have seen - did not link him to the Eichmann case, nor, for example, to the Silberbauer case (a much less important matter), which began in 1964; moreover, his name did not come up in connection with similar cases. While during the Kádár era the Eichmann case was dealt with at the highest level and Hungarian journalists covered the trial, Wiesenthal's name was not mentioned in the coverage.

Another aspect of state security surveillance was more global in nature. In reports prepared for the Hungarian Interior Ministry, Wiesenthal's Zentrum für jüdische Historische Dokumentation and Wiesenthal himself were accused not only of being under the "direct control" of the Israeli embassy in Vienna and of work-

<sup>12</sup> ÁBTL, 3.2.5 O-8-301/1, "Herzl Tivadar - Cionista szervezetek", "Report on Zionist Diversionary Activity", 9 November 1971.

ing for Mossad but also of being involved, together with other Western secret services, in an “anti-communist campaign against the socialist countries”. This accusation continued to be leveled at Wiesenthal until the end of the period of surveillance (1980s), while his position – both in Austria and abroad – was strengthened by Israel’s resounding victory in the Six-Day War. Wiesenthal, who did not remain silent during the 1968 anti-Zionist campaign in Poland, also spoke out against former Nazis and criticised their socio-political reintegration into communist countries.<sup>13</sup> This is a recurring motif in state security reports: Wiesenthal wanted to expose and prosecute former Nazis in capitalist countries and socialist countries.<sup>14</sup> This did not fit the self-image that the socialist regimes had created for themselves and liked to promote to the world, and it also contradicted one of the themes of their propaganda that held that former Nazis were at large only in one of the German states, the Federal Republic of Germany. And that’s not all: in August 1978, for example, Wiesenthal demanded that Sweden not take part in the 1980 Moscow Olympics (which had, in any case, been boycotted by many countries because of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) until the fate of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved many Jewish Hungarians but who later disappeared in the Soviet Union, had been clarified.

Returning to the 1960s, in February 1965, it was reported that Wiesenthal (via the work of the agent “Xaver”, who was conducting surveillance of the famous London-based Hungarian Jewish writer and journalist Pál Ignóty among others) wanted to enter into a coalition with the “Zionists” in the IKG.<sup>15</sup> An undated report – but one which can be dated to 1965 – on “the activities of Zionist organisations in Europe” mentions Wiesenthal as a figure in the Joint Distribution Committee’s (JDC) efforts to expedite Jewish emigration from Linz to Israel.<sup>16</sup> This source seems problematic because by 1961, the number of Jews in Linz was very low – less than two hundred persons.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the number was so low it was not published in the census.

The report distinguishes between the JDC and the work of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), which sometimes opposed emigration. Agent “Filder John”, in his summary for the BM (Interior Ministry) III/I Group Headquarters, reported that Wiesenthal, as owner of the newspaper *Der Freiheitskämpfer*, was “investigating public figures and functionaries in Hungary who had collaborated with the Nazis before and during World War II, and had participated in mass murders and anti-Jewish actions

13 Segev, *Simon Wiesenthal*, 225–227.

14 ÁBTL, 3.2.5 O-8-301/1, “Report on Zionist Diversionary Activity”, 9 November 1971.

15 ÁBTL, M-37478, “Xavér”, Working dossier, 1 February 1965.

16 ÁBTL, 3.2.5 O-8-301/1, “Herzl Tivadar – Zionist organisations, the activities of Zionist organisations in Europe”.

17 Michael John, “Gebrochene Kontinuität – Die Kultusgemeinde Linz nach 1945”, in *Jüdische Gemeinden: Kontinuitäten und Brüche. Studien zur Geschichte der Juden*, ed. Eleonore Lapin (Philo Verlagsleges, 2002), 139–178, 28.

and those who were members of the Arrow Cross party. With the information he has obtained, Wiesenthal intends to publish revelations.” (I found no trace of these claims reported in the Hungarian state media.) The agent was subsequently instructed to monitor Wiesenthal’s activities.<sup>18</sup>

The attention paid to Wiesenthal was reflected in a press review conducted by the Ministry of Interior in 1969 (a collection of articles). This can be found in a Hungarian State Security dossier called “Gemeinde” (“Organizations of the Zionist movement in Austria”). The collection of foreign press reports, as well as the management of the whole dossier, was carried out by the Hungarian Interior Ministry’s Department II/I-2, which dealt with so-called foreign interception. The collation of foreign press reports served the purposes of state security, and they were never made public.

The first item in the dossier was a German-language article about Wiesenthal in which the Nazi hunter, at a press conference in Vienna, accused the initiators and perpetrators of the (officially anti-Zionist) persecution of Jews in Poland in 1968 of having been fascists during the Nazi era.<sup>19</sup> In the spring of 1969, Wiesenthal’s various disputes – published in the Austrian press – had already been translated and made known to the Hungarian State Security Service. Similarly, the Hungarian security apparatus was aware of his clashes with the Polish authorities, who stated that they would not be pursuing Nazi war criminals on the basis of Wiesenthal’s documentation.<sup>20</sup> In July 1969, the first Hungarian State Security Service summary of foreign media reportage and articles, as well as reports dealing specifically with Wiesenthal was published.<sup>21</sup> The summary focused mainly on the debate about Poland and on articles critical of Wiesenthal published in the weekly German radical right-wing paper the *National-Zeitung*. According to a November 1969 report, Wiesenthal was in contact with Ableitinger, a high-ranking official in the Austrian State Police, who was at that point being discussed by the Austrian Parliament’s Committee on Counterintelligence.<sup>22</sup> Wiesenthal, the report claimed, received regular information from him about various citizens. According to the document entitled “On the relationship between international Zionist leaders and Austrian police officers accused of espionage”, Ableitinger and his associates within the Austrian State Police were in contact with the Israeli embassy in Vienna, which was providing them with information.<sup>23</sup> In this source, Wiesenthal was named as a police official: a claim I found no evidence to support. In any case, the text is revealing

18 ÁBTL, 3.2.3.Mt-69 “Filder John”, Working file, Budapest, 25 March 1965.

19 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, Organizations of the Zionist movement in Austria, 18 March 1969. Wiesenthal (allegedly) had incriminating data on 48 such persons.

20 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, 22 March 1969.

21 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, 30 July 1969.

22 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, Budapest, 4 November 1969.

23 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, Organizations of the Zionist movement in Austria, Report, 27 November 1969.

about the attitudes and competence of Hungarian security operatives:

The above circles acknowledge that the Israeli Embassy in Vienna maintained regular contact with Simon Wiesenthal, an official of the Austrian State Police. According to them, the contact was limited to requesting information about the possible Nazi past of Austrian citizens travelling to Israel. Wiesenthal was not always able to provide sufficient information and, in such cases, recommended Ableitinger as a private detective who always had accurate data.<sup>24</sup>

### *The Focus and “Evolution” of the State Security Service’s Reports*

By December 1969, Simon Wiesenthal was clearly no longer being described in Hungarian intelligence reports as *just* a Nazi hunter, and the authors of these reports believed that the Center Wiesenthal had established engaged in “espionage activities” against the socialist camp and had “regular” contacts with Zionists in the Eastern Bloc countries.<sup>25</sup> The report, originally written in German and circulated by the Vienna Resident Office in December 1969, makes it clear what the Eastern bloc state security community believed concerning the threat Wiesenthal and his staff posed to the communist bloc: they have “regular contacts with Zionists in socialist countries”.

Around this time, the Hungarian Security Services also became interested in Laetitia Dyckerhoff, (today, best known as a photographer), a West German citizen who worked as a permanent correspondent in Vienna for the journal publishing house Dr. Bilz und Dr. Fraund KG. (*Kommanditgesellschaft*).<sup>26</sup> A staff member of the Hungarian Embassy in Vienna contacted Dyckerhoff because she wanted to visit Budapest for the International Fair and she said that she had been in contact with Wiesenthal.<sup>27</sup> Dyckerhoff (it was alleged) offered to publish documents in the Hungarian press about the Nazi past of certain West German leaders, but – despite a recommendation by the Hungarian Embassy in Vienna – her approach was rebuffed by the Hungarian daily newspaper *Magyar Nemzet*. In any case, the state security agency did not learn much from Dyckerhoff about Wiesenthal except for a vague rumor that Wiesenthal wanted to publish material in *Der Spiegel* but the West German Embassy would not allow it.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, Report on Organizations of the Zionist movement in Austria, 23 December 1969.

<sup>26</sup> K.G. or limited commercial partnership. This is a type of business entity, and the same term is used in German, Belgian, Dutch, etc.

<sup>27</sup> ÁBTL, 0-8-193/2, “NSZK bécsi követsége és konzulátusa”, Report from Nyerges at the Embassy and Consulate of the FRG in Vienna, 27 May 1970.

<sup>28</sup> ÁBTL, 0-8-193/2, NSZK bécsi követsége és konzulátusa, Embassy and Consulate of the FRG in Vienna, Vienna, 27 May 1970.

We also know about the Dyckerhoff connection from other sources. One of the files of the “Gemeinde”, which focused on Wiesenthal in a separate section, summarises Dyckerhoff’s relationship with him, and mentions the journalist’s visit to the Hungarian Embassy in Vienna on 19 October 1970.<sup>29</sup> The Hungarian Embassy in Vienna’s referral itself contained an assessment of the events: the West German government of Willy Brandt wanted to prevent the exposure of minor Nazi functionaries. Dyckerhoff herself told the staff at the embassy that (allegedly) both the West Germans and the Israelis had given Wiesenthal “confidential instructions” to deal only with the exposure of major Nazis. “The instructions were that the Documentation Centre should not disclose any information or take any action against other Nazi party members or functionaries. This would provide protection for all those minor, but no less fanatical, Nazis who today live mainly in West Germany.”<sup>30</sup> Dyckerhoff also claimed that the so-called Verbelen trial (of Robert Jan Verbelen, a Belgian Nazi collaborator who fled to Austria and was eventually acquitted of all charges) had not been prosecuted because West Germans (according to Dyckerhoff) had paid “two billion marks in aid” to Israel. According to Dyckerhoff, the Brussels headquarters of the Resistance League was under heavy pressure from Bonn, but such pressure had not yet been applied to Wiesenthal. At the same time, Dyckerhoff claimed, Israel was also instructing Wiesenthal not to pursue his activities further.

The security agencies also monitored and distributed press reports about Wiesenthal. These included a pamphlet by the Vereinigung der Verfolgten des NS-Regimes (Association of the Persecuted of the Nazi Regime), which mainly analysed the conflicts between the Kreisky government, Bruno Kreisky himself, and Wiesenthal, but which also sympathised with the Nazi hunter in Vienna.<sup>31</sup>

A May 1970 report in the “Gemeinde” dossier (Dyckerhoff was the source for this report too) also attempted to map Wiesenthal’s political sympathies/antipathies.<sup>32</sup> It noted that Wiesenthal sympathised with the ÖVP, the Austrian People’s Party, not the Social Democrats. The cynical assumption of the report is that Wiesenthal’s relationship with the West German Embassy was intended not only to keep himself informed but also to acquire certain sums of money “for half information or information withheld”. This is how the author of the report viewed the Schirmer case when it came to the (alleged) past of the new West German ambassador in Vienna. This involved the fact that an individual named Hans Schirmer had worked in the Nazi Foreign Ministry

29 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, Information report, Organizations of the Zionist movement in Austria, Vienna, 26 October 1970.

30 Ibid.

31 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”; ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, Subject: distribution of a Zionist pamphlet attacking the Kreisky government, October 1970 Report.

32 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, Vienna, 27 May 1970.

under Ribbentrop, and a person with the same name served as the West German ambassador to Vienna between 1970 and 1974. Of course, the ambassador denied that he was the same person and would only admit to sharing a name with the other man.

### *Eastern European State Security Agencies at Work*

The Czechoslovak State Security Agency joined in the surveillance of Wiesenthal and assisted in gathering information about him. According to a report from Prague dated 28 May 1970, Wiesenthal was planning to move his Documentation Centre to Norway, while the Swedish press reported that he was moving it to Sweden.<sup>33</sup> The Prague report claimed that Wiesenthal was cooperating with Czechoslovak and Polish authorities, but given that it was “only a game – his [Wiesenthal’s] aim was primarily to develop his activities in the interests of the Zionist movement”. In June, the Czechs gave the Hungarian authorities detailed information about the source of their intelligence.<sup>34</sup> A Russian-language source in August 1970 reported that Austrian Zionist organisations were claiming that Soviet condemnations of “aggressive” Israeli policy and the negative “stance” of the socialist countries toward Zionism constituted antisemitism.<sup>35</sup> It noted that these organisations collect information on “discrimination” against Jews in socialist states and identified Wiesenthal’s Vienna Documentation Centre as one such organisation. In “recent times”, it had cast aspersions on socialist countries, including the GDR, according to the report. Wiesenthal was indeed critical of the East German state: in February 1969, during a radio appearance, he estimated that the number of former Nazis in the GDR who occupied leading positions in parliament, the media, and higher education stood at around one thousand persons.

The state security apparatuses in the state-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe were, therefore, keeping their eyes on Wiesenthal. The Security Services Archive in Prague (Archiv bezpečnostních složek) holds records and summaries concerning the Nazi hunter. The Czechoslovak state security service, which had been monitoring “Zionists” for some time (from 1958 onward they also coordinated their activities to some extent with the Hungarian State Security Service), became as interested in the Viennese engineer as their Hungarian colleagues.

33 ÁBTL, Budapest, Report, “Gemeinde”, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, 28 May 1970. (Translated from Czech into Hungarian.)

34 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, Prague, 1 June 1970. The text has been translated from Czech into Hungarian. “In May of this year, we learned through an agent that WULF HINRICH /of Jewish origin/ Director of the Norwegian Shipping Company in Hamburg and AAGTE BJERKE of the Norwegian Shipping Company, would be moving to Norway, to the suburb of Oslo, with WIESENTHAL at the head of the Jewish Documentation Centre in Austria, later this year. The exact address is unknown. WIESENTHAL is currently still in Vienna.”

35 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, 25 August 1970.

A Czechoslovak internal affairs briefing paper compiled in the summer of 1971 (“The Role of the Zionist Movement in Subversive Activities against the Socialist States”) deals at length with Wiesenthal.<sup>36</sup> The text dates back to 1968–1969 and states that during his last stay in Austria, a certain Jiri Hajek (the former Czech diplomat and foreign minister is probably the person referred to in the text) had a “conspiratorial” meeting in Vienna with Simon Wiesenthal:

As you know, the so-called European Documentation Centre is located in Vienna. This is the name of the large-scale spy agency set up by the international Zionist organisation and the CIA, which at the height of the events in Czechoslovakia set up a “subsidiary” under the name of the “Czechoslovak Refugee Committee.” The head of the documentation centre is the well-known Zionist specialist in “covert operations”, Simon Wiesenthal, who was personally involved in supporting the right-wing forces in 1968.

The text quotes a letter ostensibly written and sent by Wiesenthal to prominent Jews in Czechoslovakia in support of the 1968 Prague reformers, liberalisation, and democracy. Wiesenthal, in a statement to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency on 28 August 1968 (after the Warsaw Pact military invasion), called the letters a forgery.<sup>37</sup> He also pointed out that the anti-reformist forces in Czechoslovakia had described Dubcek’s regime as a “Zionist conspiracy” and that the Poles and East Germans had legitimised the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia by claiming that “Zionist forces” had taken over the leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party.

A Czechoslovak national security service textbook from 1977 entitled *Boj se sionismem a jehu agenturou* (Combating Zionism and Jewish Agency) states that it is necessary to deal with individuals (Czechoslovak citizens) who, during their “travels”, come into contact with “foreign Zionist centres”, such as Simon Wiesenthal’s Documentation Centre in Vienna.<sup>38</sup> Although the “Zionist centres” mentioned in the textbook include – in addition to Wiesenthal’s organisation – HIAS, Sochnut (the Jewish Agency for Palestine), and the World Federation of Jews in Czechoslovakia, the whole text is concerned with the “struggle” waged by the StB (the Czechoslovak “State Security” agency) against the “infiltration” of Zionism into Czechoslovakia.

Returning to the world of the Hungarian Internal Security Services, over time there was a spirit of ideological hardening,

36 Archive Ministerstva Vnitřní (Security Services Archive, Prague), Fond: A 30 Inv.jedn.: 407, 36–37. The archival research in Prague was supported by the International Visegrad Fund (Visegrad Fellowship – 62420030).

37 “Wiesenthal Says Zionist Plot Alleged by Opponents of Czech Reform in Spring”, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 28 August 1968, accessed 28 April 2025, <https://www.jta.org/archive/wiesenthal-says-zionist-plot-alleged-by-opponents-of-czech-reform-in-spring>.

38 Archive Ministerstva Vnitřní (Security Services Archive), Prague, RV. 413, 95.

as, for example, in a March 1971 report entitled “On the Activities of the Israeli Secret Service in Austria”, which deals with Wiesenthal in the same spirit as before, but in a more focused way.<sup>39</sup> It describes the Documentation Centre as one of the European centers of the Israeli Secret Service, and identifies Wiesenthal himself as a key local figure in the Austrian, West German, and Israeli services. “It cannot be considered a coincidence that this centre is operating so close to the borders of neutral Austria and the socialist countries”, the authors write. This activity, according to the report, has nothing to do with his activities to apprehend war criminals but is exclusively linked to “Western” intelligence agencies, while Wiesenthal also “uses” Jewish aid organisations from socialist countries that provide supplies for Jewish refugees in and around Vienna. According to the report, at the Schönau Castle near Wiener Neustadt, an important reception center for Jewish immigrants to Austria, the Jewish Agency for Palestine’s (Sochnut) representatives were thoroughly “interrogating” the new arrivals. The author of the report assumes, as a matter of course, that Sochnut is also an agency associated with US intelligence services and that the organisation’s aim is to extract information from people arriving from the Eastern Bloc.

In November 1971, Wiesenthal’s name appeared in a State Security service document entitled “Zionist Dissident Activities against the Polish People’s Republic and the Socialist Camp”, which was probably a translation of a Polish text.<sup>40</sup> According to the report:

First and foremost, the Vienna Documentation Centre of the European Federation of Jews Persecuted by the Nazi Regime, headed by *S. Wiesenthal*. This centre operates under the direct auspices of the Israeli Embassy in Vienna and the Israeli intelligence service and works in close cooperation with special services in the Western countries and with ideological-political centres of divergence, especially Radio Free Europe and the Parisian (journal) *Kulturá*. This centre plays an important role in the anti-communist campaign against the socialist countries and Wiesenthal (sic!) himself is the inspiration for many slanderous propaganda campaigns in the press, radio and television, mainly in Sweden, Denmark and the FRG, in which he often takes part personally. Wiesenthal’s activities also include the production and dissemination of satirical pamphlets about the situation in Poland and other socialist countries, and about the political and state figures in our countries. Wiesenthal’s (sic!) fanaticism goes so far as to him saying, for example, in a speech in Sweden ... that “Nazi criminals must be persecuted everywhere, even

39 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, Report, Budapest, 24 March 1971.

40 ÁBTL, 3.2.5 O-8-301/1, “Herzl Tivadar – Zionist organisations”.

in the communist parties, where new Nazi groups are being formed.”<sup>41</sup>

### *Wiesenthal as an Opinion Leader of the Viennese Community*

The 1970s witnessed an interesting transformation of the Jewish religious community in Vienna, which had been traditionally social democratic in orientation, and traces of this development can be detected in Hungarian state security sources. On 12 February 1973, a report in the state security service’s “Gemeinde” dossier<sup>42</sup> (“On Zionist organisations in Austria and their activities”) states that Wiesenthal was the leader of the Zionist organisation *Ausweg* (Exit). According to an internal source cited in the report, Wiesenthal had formed an alternative Zionist organisation. In the most recent congregational elections, the Bund, the strongest member of the Misrachi-Zionist (religious Zionist) organisation, had won fourteen seats, while Wiesenthal’s supporters had won five seats, the Zionists four seats and Aguda (Agudat Yisrael, a formally anti-Zionist organisation which abandoned its anti-Zionism) one seat. However, when the issue of aid to the state of Israel was raised, Wiesenthal voted with the Zionists, only “taking an opposition position on certain internal issues of the community”.<sup>43</sup>

According to inside source of the Hungarian Security Service, about 60 per cent of the Jewish population participated in the elections, many of whom were members of the Communist Party. The report notes with dismay that many did not wish to participate in Austrian Jewish life at all.

Although seemingly not much had actually happened, the labels that the Hungarian State Security attached to Wiesenthal became increasingly harsh. In an undated document, probably dating from around 1973–1974, which discusses Zionist organisations in Austria, the Documentation Centre is mentioned prominently.<sup>44</sup> Although it is stated that Wiesenthal’s main aim was to track down former Hitlerites, it noted that “retaliatory” measures were to be taken against them (ex-Hitlerites), while at the same time the “members” of the Documentation Centre are described as anti-Marxists. Wiesenthal’s Documentation Centre was (according to the report) actively collaborating with “foreign centres of ideological diversion”, including Radio Free Europe. “The Centre is headed by Simon Wiesenthal, a Polish Jew, a convinced anti-communist and rabid Zionist. Before the war,

41 ÁBTL, 3.2.5 O-8-301/1, “Herzl Tivadar” – Zionist organisations”.

42 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, Report on Organizations of the Zionist movement in Austria, Budapest, 12 February 1973.

43 Ibid.

44 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, Report on Organizations of the Zionist movement in Austria.

Wiesenthal lived in Lwów. After the war, he actively cooperated with the American and Austrian special services, and when the Israeli state was established, he began working for the Israeli Intelligence Agency.”<sup>45</sup>

The report lists the Documentation Centre’s staff and external contacts, claiming that two internal staff members had been found to be “Israeli intelligence officers”.<sup>46</sup> According to another information report, from January 1974 on, Jan Gajewski and Dr Knoll, the latter of whom was known to be an American intelligence agent, were in contact with the office.

In the mid-1970s, an informant named “Alexander”, who was active in the Viennese religious community, kept the Hungarian authorities informed about Wiesenthal’s activities. The Hungarian-born Viennese merchant Ernő Ackermann was one of the leaders of the community and was also an opponent of Wiesenthal. In January 1975, a report by “Alexander” stated that Wiesenthal had attacked the leadership of the Vienna *kehilla* through Alexander Friedman.<sup>47</sup> Other young Zionists also criticised the old leaders, reported “Alexander”, who also provided information on several other members of the Hungarian Israeli community in Vienna, including Bentzur Zeew, a leading figure among the Hungarian Jews in Vienna. Later, at a meeting of the Jewish Community Board on 24 June 1975, Wiesenthal personally criticised “Alexander”.<sup>48</sup> The agent himself described the Nazi hunter as an “extremist” member of the Misrachi faction who had apparently been encouraged by another individual (Braw Ehrenberg). Because Wiesenthal threatened “Alexander” with an investigation into his past after “Alexander” told Wiesenthal that he was responsible for radicalising the community, “Alexander” became very nervous about being exposed. Not only did “Alexander” meet with his Hungarian State Security contact; he also met with a man from the Israeli Embassy in Vienna who, like Brünnerberger, the leader of the Vienna Misrachi faction, called Wiesenthal’s accusation exaggerated. “Alexander” also asked to meet a member of the Budapest State Security Service, the contact person of the “Centre”, in Prague on 7 July 1975.

The meeting was set up in the Czechoslovak capital, and a very upset “Alexander” in Prague told his central contact that Wiesenthal was only a tool of the local Zionist right (e.g., of Herut and Misrachi) and that the threat had not been directed at him personally but at the religious community leadership under the influence of social democracy.<sup>49</sup> “Alexander” led the local branch of the social democratic Po’ale Zion movement. The contact agreed

45 Ibid.

46 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, Report, Budapest, 22 January 1974. For Lieutenant Colonel Ferenc, Head of BM III/I-4.

47 ÁBTL, Bt-1560/IV (10-69993), “Alexander”, 3 January 1975.

48 ÁBTL, Szegedi had a meeting and “material exchange” with Alexander on 26 June 1975, at the Elan café. Vienna, 30 June 1975.

49 ÁBTL, “Alexander”, Bt-1560/IV. (10-69993) case dossier, Report, Budapest, 15 July 1975.

with the agent that “Alexander” should reduce his activity in the congregation after his return to Austria on the pretext of being “offended”. After a short interval, “Alexander” would then accept the peace offering that would arrive from the right-wing group; this would be a moral victory for him, as it would appease the indignant Zionist Left. In August 1975, Agent “Alexander” reported that his situation had stabilised.<sup>50</sup> Zohar, the first secretary of the Israeli Embassy in Vienna, was (“Alexander” claimed) outraged by Wiesenthal’s behavior, saying that Wiesenthal was not only living on “Jewish money” (which had been allocated for persecuting fascists) but was using it to discredit “honest” Jews (i.e., “Alexander”). Zohar encouraged “Alexander” to communicate openly about these problems. In the end, Wiesenthal did not come to the 26 August 1975, congregational meeting. “Alexander” also reported that Yitzhak Korn (Yitzhak Coren, 1911–1994, Labour Zionist politician), Secretary of the World Organisation of Labour Zionists, had been in Vienna “recently” and had asked to attend the World Zionist Organisation’s main conference as a delegate (to be held in 1976).

In the autumn of 1975, the situation was further consolidated, and Wiesenthal criticised “Alexander” in his newspaper, but in a more moderate tone than before.<sup>51</sup> The critical Die Blaue group was also disbanded, and Wiesenthal had a good chance of becoming a candidate on the joint Po’ale Zion-Misrachi list for the elections to the Zionist Congress in Jerusalem (as one of three people representing Austrian Jewry).

The Hungarian Security Service’s antipathy toward Wiesenthal was expressed in a report in the autumn of 1975, which asserted that he was a convinced anticommunist and Zionist and had links with the Israeli secret service.<sup>52</sup> According to the authors:

They regard spying and data collection against socialist countries, especially the Soviet Union, as their main task. Through his travelling agents, he maintains contact with Jewish acquaintances in socialist countries, from whom he tries to gather incriminating information on party leaders, government members and other important figures.

Interestingly, the report also goes into great detail about the institutional structure, party affiliations and contacts of Viennese Jewry.

The figure of Wiesenthal was further brought to the fore in connection with his Nazi hunting activities – for example, when the informer codenamed “Unique” met Holger Bauer, the Freedom Party of Austria’s (FPÖ) national press officer on 3 February 1976, who told him that Wiesenthal, during the 1975 election campaign,

50 ÁBTL, Bt-1560/IV. (10-69993) “Alexander”, case dossier, Budapest, 8 September 1975.

51 ÁBTL, Bt-1560/IV. (10-69993) “Alexander”, case dossier, Budapest, 2 October 1975: “Compared to his previous extreme outburst, this article shows a complete retreat. Wiesenthal merely questions how a man as small as ALEXANDER can be the community’s most influential figure in Hungary.”

52 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, 30 October 1975.

had accused Friedrich Peter, the FPÖ's national leader, of having been a member of an SS brigade linked to a mass murder during the Second World War.<sup>53</sup> According to the report filed by the agent codenamed "Unique", Friedrich Peter spoke to a senior diplomat in the Soviet Embassy, who told him that the Soviet press would not intervene in the case because they considered Wiesenthal to be a CIA agent. Peter sued Wiesenthal, but it did not degrade his (Peter's) position as in any case he would still travel to Czechoslovakia with Kreisky. Chancellor Kreisky, also persecuted as a Jew by the Nazi regime, however, defended Peter and accused Wiesenthal of "mafia methods", accusing him of collaborating with the Gestapo.

The particularly bad relationship between Wiesenthal and Kreisky is also reflected in the material of the Hungarian State Security Service, for example, when "Alexander" specifically refers to it in his report from 30 October 1976, which is specifically about Wiesenthal.<sup>54</sup> According to the head of the religious community, who personally hated Wiesenthal (and who was himself a CIA agent), it represented the stance of the left-wing Zionists who had saved Wiesenthal from getting into greater trouble earlier that year, when he had implicated a member of the government. "Now that his situation has been sorted out, he is attacking the leftists again, and he is not afraid of slander."<sup>55</sup>

### *The End of the Wiesenthal Saga and the Religious Community Line*

As the decades passed, the hostile tone toward Wiesenthal did not change much. The next time Wiesenthal appears in the reports, as far I know, was when, on Canadian television in October 1974, he accused – rightly – a former Hungarian gendarme captain named Imre Finta, the commander of the Szeged ghetto, of having participated in the murder of Hungarian Jews. The year 1974 marks the beginning of the Finta case, as it was in that year (as documented by Randolph L. Braham)<sup>56</sup> that Wiesenthal informed the Canadian government in a letter about Finta's past and forwarded a file to Sabina Citron, the head of the Canadian Holocaust Remembrance Association (CHRA). In connection with this, a Hungarian member of the staff of CBC Canadian Television, with the support of the Hungarian state authorities, wanted to learn more about the background of the case in Hungary.<sup>57</sup> Although Imre Finta ultimately escaped punishment,

53 ÁBTL, 3.2.5. 0-8-198/4, Tükör nyugatkövet", "Report on Meeting with Holger Bauer", 3 February 1976.

54 ÁBTL, Bt-1560/IV. (10-69993), "Alexander", case dossier, Budapest, 30 October 1976, BM III/1-4.

55 Ibid.

56 "Hungarian War Crimes Trial in North America", *Regio* 27, no. 1 (2019): 222–241.

57 ÁBTL, 3.2.5 O-8-301/1, "Herzl Tivadar: Cionista szervezetek", László Bastoványzsky, Canadian citizen, CBC staff member, on his entry to Hungary, Budapest, 17 February 1975 (?).

Wiesenthal played a major role in raising awareness of what had happened.

At the end of 1976, Vienna's Jewish community was preparing for elections at a time when its governing body was dominated by the Left, with the twenty-four-member board dominated by the Labour faction, which held a majority of seats.<sup>58</sup> To try to break this dominance, various factions including the "far left" (Shomer), the Stern group (radical right), and Simon Wiesenthal's group ran against Labour in the elections. As it turned out, Wiesenthal won seven seats, including the position of Shomer, which amounted to half a seat. The Stern group won one seat, and the Misrachi group two seats. The Orthodox, led by Rabbi Grünfeld, won three seats, having previously supported the Labor Party. This left Labour with a minority share of eleven seats, although it was still the strongest single parliamentary group.<sup>59</sup> "Alexander" subsequently warned young people to avoid Wiesenthal, claiming that the "institution he maintained and organised against fascism [the Documentation Centre - AN] is increasingly being used against progressive Jews and socialist countries".<sup>60</sup> He published a list of young Austrian citizens who had visited socialist countries, highlighting in particular Sonia Veró, whose main "crime" was sending Zionist literature to the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.<sup>61</sup>

An informational report dated 1 February 1977, confirmed that the new leadership of the Jewish Community of Vienna had been re-established (or re-elected), and that its first meeting "was attended by our agent".<sup>62</sup> At the meeting, which (most probably) took place on 1 February, the chairman (Anton Pick) remained in office. Of the twenty-four-member board, Po'ale Zion won twelve seats, the Wiesenthal List (United Jewish List) won nine seats, and Rabbi Grünfeld's group gained nine.<sup>63</sup>

At the end of April 1977, a conference of Jews who had emigrated from Israel back to the Soviet Union was held in Vienna, at which Wiesenthal also spoke.<sup>64</sup> The event was attended by correspondents from the socialist bloc. Wiesenthal urged people who were dissatisfied with Israel and who had been unable to establish

58 ÁBTL, Bt-1560/IV (10-69993), "Alexander", 17 December 1976.

59 The dilemmas posed by the election are clearly stated by "Alexander": "If the Labour faction succeeds in winning the Grünfeld group for the coalition, the direction will remain the same as before. If the opposing parties can unite, it will be the strongest coalition, since the extreme left forces will be as much a part of it as the extreme right. This unity is likely to be short-lived precisely because of these major differences of opinion, as the opinions within these groups have not changed and are divided. For the time being, with the huge sums of money at Wiesenthal's disposal, the unity may be sustainable, but the separation and rupture would be almost total if this were to occur." Ibid.

60 ÁBTL, Bt-1560/IV. (10-69993), "Alexander", case file, Budapest, 17 December 1976.

61 The information report of 11 February 1977, confirms this line. The daughter of "Alexander" was in contact with Sonja Veró. BM III/I-4. ÁBTL, Bt-1560/IV. (10-69993), "Alexander", case file.

62 ÁBTL, Bt-1560/IV (10-69993), "Alexander", Budapest, 11 February 1977.

63 There are two deputies to the President, Edmund Reiss of Poale Zion and Dr Ivan Hacker of the Wiesenthal United Jewish List. Ibid.

64 ÁBTL, Bt-1560/IV. (10-69993), "Alexander", case file, 30 April 1977.

roots there to exercise restraint – as far as criticism of Zionism and Israel were concerned. Some of the disgruntled elements (allegedly) called Wiesenthal a CIA agent, and the conference organisers, citing Helsinki and human rights, “demanded that the Austrian government provide decent social support and accommodation for our temporary stay”.<sup>65</sup>

An important point of contact between Wiesenthal and the Hungarian authorities was their common interest in the whereabouts of Hungarian perpetrators of the Holocaust and, if discovered, their punishment. In September 1977, the Amsterdam chief prosecutor, on the basis of information from Wiesenthal, ordered an investigation of Zoltán Papp, a Dutch citizen and resident of the city.<sup>66</sup> Papp, according to Wiesenthal, had been the commander of the ghetto in the town of Pápa and was currently an employee of the Dutch railways (albeit he was, at the time, suspended from his job).

In the 1970s, the public was shocked by the trial and conviction of Jewish Zionist activists (refuseniks) in the Soviet Union. A response to this was organised by Yaacov Doron, Israel’s ambassador in Vienna, and an individual referred to in the security service’s documents as “Rave”, the embassy’s press secretary (whose identity has not been confirmed). On 11 July 1978, the Israeli Embassy initiated a protest action in Vienna whereby they tried to persuade the Jewish community in Vienna to send telegrams of protest to the Soviet Embassy.<sup>67</sup> According to information the Hungarian Security Service gleaned from the Jewish community’s leadership in Vienna on 13 July, “Rave”, on behalf of the ambassador, asked the leaders of the community to visit the embassy and proposed that they begin organising a “day of protest”. The end point of the demonstration was to be the Soviet Embassy, where placards would be hung up and loud protests would take place. “Rave” explained that the demonstration would (formally) have nothing to do with the Israeli Embassy, and it would have to appear to be spontaneous.

The leaders of the congregation summarily stated that “Rave”’s proposal – on the date he had set – was unfeasible. They did not have police permission, and most of the Jewish youth in Vienna were on summer vacation, and they would only be able to mobilise a maximum of thirty to forty people. “Rave” was not happy about this, but the leadership of the community decided to hold a commemorative service in a synagogue at the same time as the demonstration to pray for the Soviet Jews. This took place on 13 July and Ambassador Yaacov Doron and “Rave” were among the one hundred or so attendees. First, a member of the leadership read a statement (allegedly) calling the Soviet Union antisemitic; then (as the Hungarian agent’s report puts it) in a series of speeches

65 Ibid.

66 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, “Gemeinde”, Report on Organizations of the Zionist movement in Austria, 3.2.5.O-8-317/1, Budapest, 21 September 1977.

67 ÁBTL, 3.2.1. Bt-455, “Filder John” B file, 28 July 1978.

“Simon Wiesenthal, head of the Vienna documentation office, attacked the Soviet Union in extreme terms and suggested that the demonstration should be held immediately. On this issue, too, a dispute escalated into a brawl, and the demonstration did not take place.”<sup>68</sup>

The next Hungarian State Security report mentioning Wiesenthal appeared in November 1980, when III/I (11th Division) wrote a report on Zionist organisations operating in Austria. Wiesenthal, who headed the Jewish Historical Documentation Centre, is described in this document as a “convinced anti-communist and Zionist”, an Israeli agent whose organisation “initially concentrated on tracking down Nazi war criminals. More recently, mainly under Israeli pressure, the main emphasis has been on ‘persecutions of Jews’ in socialist countries. The centre has good contacts with ideological centres of sedition and subversion.”<sup>69</sup>

The last state security source dealing with Wiesenthal that we know of was written in April 1981, and it contains similar content to earlier reports and the usual accusations about his “links” with American, Israeli, and West German intelligence agencies and his active intelligence “activities” against the socialist camp and the Arab countries of the Middle East.<sup>70</sup> According to the report, Wiesenthal kept records on and documentation related to human rights abuses in the socialist camp by the various governments and Communist Party representatives, and dissidents allegedly “assist[ed]” him in these activities. The report’s claim that “The information obtained will be sent to the US and Israeli intelligence services”, seems to draw on the usual rhetoric of the state-socialist regime.<sup>71</sup>

While logic would suggest that surveillance of Wiesenthal became increasingly frequent due to the developments in Hungary in the 1980s, I have found no evidence of this. (This may also be due to the fact that much of the secret service material was destroyed, at least as far as the 1980s are concerned.)

### *Conclusion*

The research on Wiesenthal (including the biography by Tom Segev) has not systematically dealt with the relationship between the Zentrum für Jüdische Historische Dokumentation and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Wiesenthal, who came to Vienna after leaving Linz, forged a new post-Holocaust identity for Austrian Jewry (this statement is, by the way, consistent with Rachel Blumenthal’s assertion in her book *Holocaust Survivors*

68 Ibid.

69 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.O-8-532/1, “Chameleon – Israeli intelligence. An overview of Zionist organisations in Austria”.

70 ÁBTL, 3.2.5.-O-8-504/6, “Israeli general agent situation Budapest”, 10 April 1981.

71 Ibid.

*and Jewish Identity in Postwar Austria*,<sup>72</sup> which moves beyond the traditional understandings of Austrian Jewish (or even a former) identity. This kind of identity, unconstrained by the rigid ideological and political boundaries of the socialist countries of Eastern Europe was, of course, only “possible” for an exceptional individual such as Simon Wiesenthal. It is worth considering how this new and complex identity related to the official policy of the Zentrum, which Wiesenthal officially represented. Closely related to this development, I suspect, was the Documentation Centre’s refusal to acknowledge the East-West divide and the fact that the socialist countries of Eastern Europe were not excluded from its investigations into the post-war lives of former Nazis.

Another important question concerns the motives and objectives of state surveillance in this period. These questions are not only related to Wiesenthal but more broadly to the official policy of anti-Zionism in Hungary and other state-socialist countries, which was a kind of common language of official Soviet-inspired politics: the language of totalitarianism was used to formulate their views on an important buffer zone of East-West confrontation. After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, this language became dominant in the Eastern bloc and was used against Jews and “Western phenomena” identified as Jewish. In Czechoslovakia, and especially in Poland, the “struggle” against the Zionists had serious consequences, with people not only being forced out of their jobs and positions but also compelled to emigrate.

It is also interesting to consider the extent to which the ideological language and content directed at Wiesenthal in the state security documents was an independent Hungarian product, and to what extent it was a translation (even a literal translation) of other, possibly Soviet sources. The 1968 anti-Zionist campaign in Poland produced a quantity of influential material, and by the 1970s, Soviet-led agreements between the interior ministries and state security services in the bloc’s member states had already been negotiated, with the fight against Zionists given special attention. The extent to which the party leadership controlled these processes and the extent to which Wiesenthal’s intransigence influenced the policies of the socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe concerning Nazi war crimes and criminals also requires research. For example, in the Eichmann case, there was cooperation between some Eastern European countries and Israel (e.g., Hungary handed over filtered documents), but the prevailing interpretation of Israel’s role in the case was not questioned.

It is also interesting to consider what Wiesenthal’s pure victim perspective meant and the “dangers” this perspective entailed for the Hungarian socialist politics of memory during the Kádár era. From Wiesenthal’s perspective, the victims and perpetrators of

72 Rachel Blumenthal, “Holocaust Survivors and Jewish Identity in Postwar Austria”, in *Constructing and Experiencing Jewish Identity* (Brill, 2022), 50–67.

the Holocaust had to be named, and he did not feel the need to hide them behind socialist humanist rhetoric. The taboo around the memory of the Holocaust, as Regina Fritz describes it in her 2012 book,<sup>73</sup> only began to fade in the 1980s. As Hungarian historian Gábor Gyáni observed,<sup>74</sup> in the first Marxist history book published in Hungary in 1964, the author of the chapter on the Nazi period devoted only twenty-one lines to the deportations of the summer of 1944, and only twelve of these referred to the deportation of half a million Hungarian Jews to the death camps. The date of the book's publication coincided with period the Hungarian State Security Services began to surveil Wiesenthal, and most of their reports – until the early 1980s – reflected this kind of attitude of Holocaust minimisation or erasure. Wiesenthal's activities were not presented to the Hungarian general public nor were they reported on in the Hungarian Jewish press.

To the specific question of what Simon Wiesenthal as an individual meant to Kádár's Hungarian socialist state, there is a complex answer. For the ruling elite, the activities of the Nazi hunter in Vienna meant little. Due to the restricted publishing environment of the era, there was a slow evolution as in the 1960s/1970s, the Hungarian media did not address Simon Wiesenthal at all; there are hardly any official newspaper articles about him, and his name and activities were barely mentioned in the restricted Jewish press in Hungary. However, in the 1980s, more was written about him and his organisation, and the gradual process of political détente put him on the radar of Hungarian newspapers. However, in the 1960s, Wiesenthal's activities left a mark on the state security organs that monitored various Western ideological and political movements. In this arena, he played a prominent role, and in this respect, the world of state security reports can also be viewed as a kind of subconscious mind of the regime: it administered, removed, and, at the same time, concealed beyond recognition that which it basically wanted to suppress (including itself), but it also found greatly interesting and exciting. The regime hoped to relegate Wiesenthal's activities – the main aspect of which was to “cultivate” Holocaust memory and break the silence surrounding it – to some kind of secret archive.

In summary, the Hungarian State Security apparatus did not approach Wiesenthal's activities from the point of view of the Holocaust, but it was interested in his perceived anti-Sovietism and hostility toward the countries of the Eastern Bloc. This was the main motive for its observations (which can be found spread across several dossiers, often isolated from each other). Wiesenthal was seen as an influential Viennese Jewish personality who was also concerned with the Eastern European states and who was therefore considered worthy of observation. The fact that Wie-

73 Regina Fritz, *Nach Krieg und Judenmord: Ungarns Geschichtspolitik seit 1944* (Wallstein Verlag, 2012).

74 Gábor Gyáni, “The Hungarian Memory of the Holocaust”, in *History as Memory* (Pesti Kalligram Kft, 2016), 187.

senthal's aversion to the Eastern Bloc countries was not due primarily to an anti-communist outlook but to their governments' half-hearted approach to the legacy of the Holocaust and their poor record on human rights (including, in the case of Soviet Jews, the right to emigrate) was of little concern to state security.

## Bibliography

(ÁBTL) Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára [Historical Archives of the State Security Services]

O-17169

3.2.5 O-8-301/1

M-37478

3.2.5.O-8-317/1

3.2.3.Mt-69

O-8-193/2

3.2.5. O-8-198/4.

Bt-1560/IV. (10-69993).

BM III/I-4.

3.2.1. Bt-455.

3.2.5.O-8-532/1.

3.2.5.-O-8-504/6.

Archive Ministerstva Vnitra [Security Services Archive], Prague

Fond: A 30 Inv.jedn.: 407, 36–37.

RV. 413, 95.

### Secondary Scholarship

*Anti-Jewish Agitation in Poland: A Documentary Report*. R. Vogel, 1969.

Blumenthal, Rachel. "Holocaust Survivors and Jewish Identity in Postwar Austria". In *Constructing and Experiencing Jewish Identity*. Brill, 2022.

Fritz, Regina. *Nach Krieg und Judenmord: Ungarns Geschichtspolitik seit 1944*. Wallstein Verlag, 2012.

Germuska, Pál. "Magyar katonai segítségnyújtás az arab országoknak az 1973-as Jom Kippuri háború idején" [Hungarian military assistance to Arab countries during the 1973 Yom Kippur War]. In *Hadi és más nevezetes történetek. Tanulmányok Veszprémy László tiszteletére*. HM Hadtörténeti Intézet és Múzeum, 2018.

Gyáni, Gábor. "The Hungarian Memory of the Holocaust". In *History as Memory*. Pesti Kalligram Kft, 2016.

"Hungarian War Crimes Trial in North America". *Regio* 27, no. 1 (2019): 222–241.

John, Michael. "Gebrochene Kontinuität – Die Kultusgemeinde Linz nach 1945". In *Jüdische Gemeinden: Kontinuitäten und Brüche. Studien zur Geschichte der Juden*, edited by Eleonore Lappin, Philo Verlagsges, 2002.

Kovács, András, ed. *Communism's Jewish Question: Jewish issues in Communist Archives*. De Gruyter, 2017.

Segev, Tom. *Simon Wiesenthal: The Life and Legends*. Doubleday, 2010.

Stankowski, Witold. *Szymon Wiesenthal: biografia*. Wydawnictwo "Książka i Wiedza," 2009.

"Wiesenthal Says Zionist Plot Alleged by Opponents of Czech Reform in Spring". *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 28 August 1968. Accessed 28 April 2025. <https://www.jta.org/archive/wiesenthal-says-zionist-plot-alleged-by-opponents-of-czech-reform-in-spring>.

**Attila Novák**, Historian, is a Senior Research Fellow at the Thomas Molnar Institute for Advanced Studies (Ludovika University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary), and at the Goldziher Ignác Institute of Jewish History and Culture (Budapest, Hungary). He studied History and Philosophy at Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest), where he earned his MA and PhD. He also completed an MA in Nationalism Studies at Central European University (1999). He served as an editor of the Hungarian Jewish cultural monthly Szombat from 1999 to 2011. He was a research fellow at Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1994), working under the guidance of Professor Ezra Mendelsohn, and later received a postdoctoral scholarship from Yad Vashem (The International Institute for Holocaust Research) in 2003. He has also received scholarships from the OSA and the International Visegrád Fund in recent years. His research focuses on the history of Hungarian Jewry after World War II (particularly during the Communist era), as well as the political and ideological challenges of Zionism in Central and Eastern Europe.

Novák served as Cultural Attaché at the Embassy of Hungary in Tel Aviv between 2012 and 2016. He is a member of the Hungary Forum on the History of Hungarian Jewry, part of the Arnold and Leona Finkler Institute of Holocaust Research at Bar-Ilan University.

Email: [Novak.Atila.Andras@uni-nke.hu](mailto:Novak.Atila.Andras@uni-nke.hu)

Quotation: Attila Novák, "A Convinced Anti-Communist and Rabid Zionist". Simon Wiesenthal through the Lens of Hungarian State Security Service Reports during the Kádár Era, in S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 13 (2026) 1, 137–166.

[https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126/doc\\_novak](https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126/doc_novak)

S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 13 (2026) 1 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126>

This article is licensed under the following Creative Commons License: CC-BY-SA (Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives).

# “I Want to Talk About the Truth That was There”

*The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial 1963–1965*<sup>1</sup>

An interview with curators

Florine Miez and Anna Wolfinger

Conducted by Marianne Windsperger

## Abstract

The exhibition “I want to talk about the truth that was there”: The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial 1963–1965 at Frankfurt’s Römer traced the history and impact of the largest and most significant trial against National Socialist perpetrators in post-war Germany. Using written documents, photographs, film and audio recordings; interviews with contemporary witnesses; and autobiographical accounts, it reconstructs the origins of the trial, the exceptional circumstances to which witnesses were exposed, how the trial became a media event, and the trial’s legal and cultural consequences. The exhibition focuses on the role of survivors, whether as witnesses, activists, or lawyers – it was they who played a decisive role in bringing the truth about Auschwitz to light. Two of the curators, Florine Miez and Anna Wolfinger, in conversation with Marianne Windsperger, provide insights into the making of this groundbreaking exhibition.

**Windsperger:** In 2025, we were looking at eighty years since the end of the Second World War and celebrating this anniversary. How did your exhibition relate to this anniversary, and what topics did you want to focus on?

**Wolfinger:** Mounting the exhibition for the second time, we deliberately chose the date of 8 May as the day our exhibition would end. We wanted to highlight this historic date. It was only through liberation from Nazism and the perspective of the post-war period that it became possible to come to terms with the past. The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial was the most comprehensive legal examination of the crimes of the Holocaust in Germany, and this is also the subject of the exhibition: the trial – from the investigations to the indictment to the verdict. In addition to the legal and procedural aspects, we put emphasis on presenting the circumstances and, above all, the perceptions and perspectives of the witnesses who survived. This is the focus that runs like a thread through the exhibition panels. In addition, we documented a section on the cultural and media reception of the trial.

<sup>1</sup> A German version of this interview has been published in the journal *Zwischenwelt. Literatur/Widerstand/Exil* in June 2025.

**Miez:** Anniversaries always involve a form of reflection. In this case, the question was: Have we done enough to come to terms with the past? What was possible and necessary in the eighty years that have passed [since the Holocaust]? And how much has happened? Unfortunately, the answer is that much more should have happened. Visitors may also ask themselves: What does this have to do with me? And how does it affect me? In this sense, the exhibition is not intended to leave visitors feeling good. This is especially true when they see the last exhibition panels, which show how few perpetrators actually were put on trial.

**Windsperger:** In addition to the anniversary, there are also personal motivations behind the exhibition. Perhaps you could both briefly introduce yourselves and tell us what your motivations and starting points were?

**Miez:** First, I would like to introduce the starting point of the exhibition. It all began in 2022, when I found a letter from Frankfurt lawyer Henry Ormond to his Polish colleague Jan Sehn during archival research.<sup>2</sup> This letter was written in January 1963, eleven months before the Auschwitz trial began. Ormond writes to Sehn that he had discussed with Fritz Bauer the possibility of displaying material not used in the trial in an exhibition at the Frankfurt Student Union House. This exhibition never took place. In 2022, a group of friends and interested people came together to plan and design the exhibition. At the time, we decided on the sixtieth anniversary of the start of the trial in December 2023 as the date to open the exhibition. Many of us were students then. Now we are working - in law, in an archive, in Holocaust research, and in art. There is a collective of five people behind the exhibition: Anna Wolfinger, Anne Uhl, Maximilian Steinborn, Alexander Toumanides, and me.

**Wolfinger:** I joined a little later, in the summer of 2023. I am a lawyer, and in law school, the topic of Nazi crimes and their legal punishment runs through many areas because our legal system is a counter-model to that of the Nazi era. However, some laws are even older, and in other areas of the law, certain values and judgments still have an impact [on the contemporary German legal system]. So, the topic plays a role in legal studies, but the actual focus on Nazi crimes is usually a voluntary seminar. I attended such a seminar, but it was only one course, and I always thought that the topic was not covered in sufficient depth. It is very important, especially for lawyers, to strengthen their knowledge [of this topic].

2 Letter from Henry Ormond to Jan Sehn, 1963, S 78.2011.Zn, Institute of National Memory (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN), Krakow Branch Office, Commission for the Crimes against the Polish Nation, Krakow, Poland.

17

HENRY ORMOND  
RECHTSANWALT  
BEIM OBERLANDESGERICHT

DIETRICH BRANDT  
DIETRICH KREMER  
RECHTSANWÄLTE  
BEIM LANDGERICHT

6 FRANKFURT (MAIN) 1. den 18.1.1963  
POSTFACH 2767  
Rahnhofstraße 4  
Postscheckkonto: Frankfurt/M. 144655  
Bankkonten: Dresdner Bank  
Bankhaus Bass & Herz  
Telefon: 22463  
27192

10/HK/I/10001

Herrn  
Prof. Dr. Jan Sehn  
Westerplatte 9  
K r a k a u / Polen

Bitte dieses Diktatzeichen in  
Ihrem Antwortschreiben angeben

Betr.:- Verfahren KZ-Auschwitz.

Sehr geehrter Herr Professor Sehn,

Erst vor kurzer Zeit habe ich Gelegenheit gehabt, mit Herrn Generalstaatsanwalt Dr. Bauer zu sprechen. Alles für eine etwaige Informationsstelle bestimmte Material sollte zunächst ihm selbst zugänglich gemacht werden, da er prüfen möchte, ob und inwieweit er es auch in den Prozess einführen kann. Dr. Bauer möchte mit den modernsten Mitteln und allem zur Verfügung stehenden Anschauungsmaterial die Anklage geführt wissen, wobei Schaubilder, Filme, etc. durchaus eine Rolle spielen sollen.

Er hat nichts dagegen, wenn das für den Prozess selbst nicht geeignete Material in einer Ausstellung, vorzugsweise im Studentenhaus der Universität, gezeigt wird, wenn dort Vorträge gehalten und die Filme vorgeführt werden. Im übrigen, so fürchte ich, wird der Prozess dadurch eine Verzögerung erfahren, dass infolge der Krankheit von Staatsanwalt Vogel und dadurch Staatsanwalt Kügler mit der Alleinarbeit wohl einfach überfordert war, die Anklage nicht zu dem vorgesehenen Zeitpunkt (31.12.1962) fertiggestellt werden konnte. Staatsanwalt Vogel, der seit Mitte Dezember wieder im Dienst ist, sagte mir dieser Tage, die Hälfte des allgemeinen Teils sei fertiggestellt, der besondere Teil mit den 28 Angeklagten sei zwischen ihnen beiden aufgeteilt. Er persönlich rechnet mit einer Fertigstellung der Anklageschrift bis zum April.

Es ist mir jetzt endlich gelungen, die von Ihnen gewünschte Zeitschrift (Journal of Forensic Science) zu bestellen, und ich hoffe, dass Sie sie vom 1.1.1963 ab regelmässig erhalten.

Mit vorzüglicher Hochachtung  
Hm

17

**Letter by Henry Ormond to Jan Sehn, 1963.**

**© Instytut Pamięci Narodowej - Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu (IPN), Signature: S 782011.Zn.**

### *About the Exhibition*

We shifted the focus slightly from what Fritz Bauer had in mind [back when he first discussed mounting an exhibition]. He was thinking of the materials that were not shown at the original trial. Back then, the trial was very much in the media spotlight, whereas today, the aim is to make the trial itself understandable for later generations. That's why we decided to show it more com-

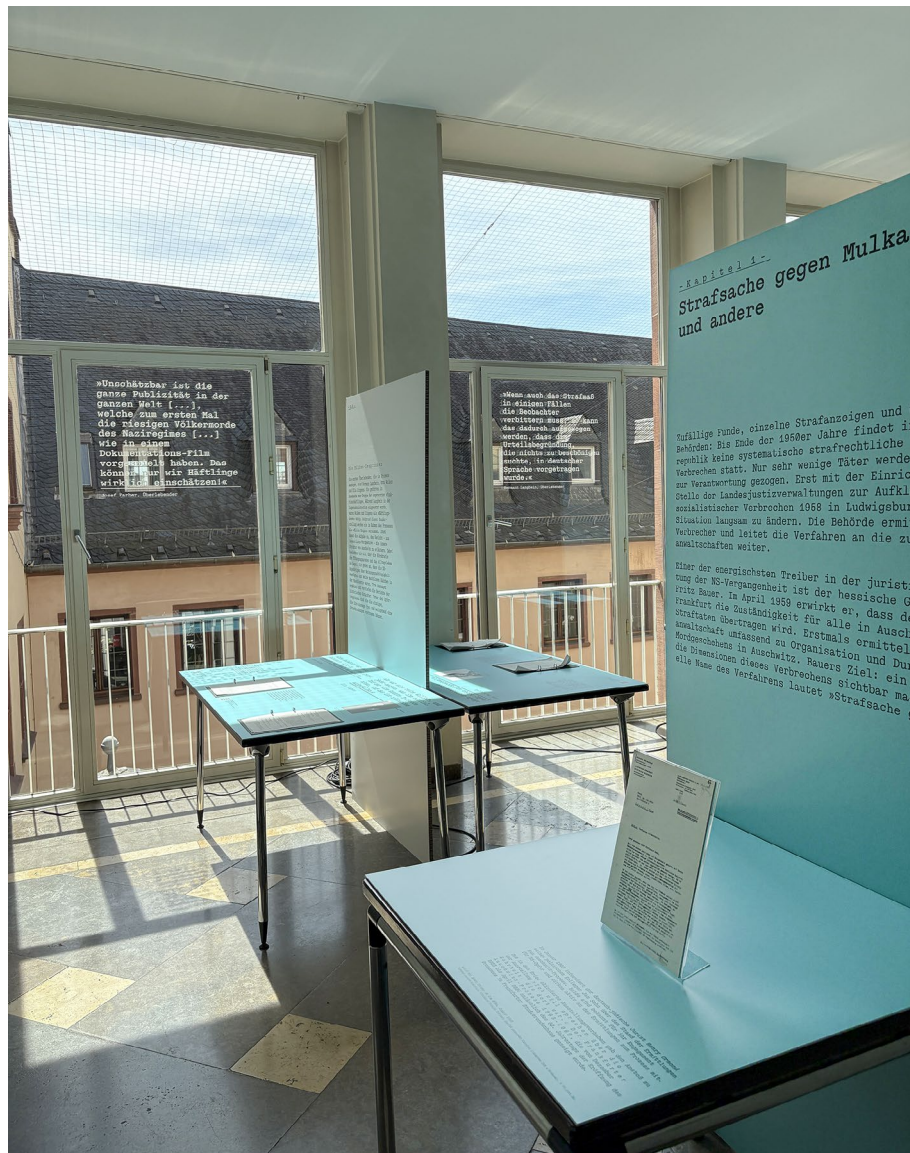
prehensively in the exhibition, with a strong focus on the survivors' perspective. In line with Bauer's idea, we initially chose the Student Union building as the venue for the exhibition. In 2025, we mounted [the exhibition] a second time, this time in the Römer, the city hall of Frankfurt am Main and the first venue of the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial. In May 2026, we will display the exhibition in the bunker at Friedberger Anlage in Frankfurt. This site was once the location of the large synagogue of the Israelite Religious Society. The Nazis set it on fire during the November pogroms of 1938, and it was destroyed. A high-rise bunker was then built on the site. Since 1988, the volunteer initiative 9 November has been taking care of the commemorative site.

**Windsperger:** Let's move on to the content of the exhibition. The title of the exhibition already highlights the important voices of the survivors. Whose voice have you emphasised here, and can you tell us something about this person? More generally: What role did the survivors play in coming to terms with Nazi crimes?

**Wolfinger:** The quote is from Imrich Gönczi, who came to Frankfurt from what was then Czechoslovakia to testify at the trial. He describes the murder of his father. What is special about him is that he came from Eastern Europe. The trial took place during the Cold War, and witnesses from the so-called Eastern Bloc were viewed even more critically, or their statements were classified as less credible because there was the suspicion that they might use the trial for propaganda. Gönczi had already spoken about the crimes before the trial, unlike other witnesses who only spoke publicly about them twenty years later. The exhibition attempts to show the diversity of the witnesses, both in terms of what it meant for them to give their testimony and how they were perceived by the press. This is why we display various transcripts and quotations.

**Miez:** The exhibition features thematic tables showcasing examples of special details or problems that affected the trial, such as the Cold War. Then, there are two witnesses presented for each topic - with a photo if we could find one and a short text about the individual. A QR code leads to a video excerpt from the respective person's testimony with a transcript so you can read along. These excerpts are between two and ten minutes long. These elements form the main part of the exhibition.

We also drew on the book *Die Überlebenden vor Gericht. Auschwitz-Häftlinge als Zeugen in NS-Prozessen (1950-1976)* (The Survivors in Court: Auschwitz Prisoners as Witnesses in Nazi Trials [1950-1976]) by Katharina Stengel (Fritz Bauer Institute). It helped us find the witnesses we wanted to present. Survivors have played a decisive role in coming to terms with the past. This begins with the fact that the initiative for the Auschwitz trial emerged from the documents and statements of survivors. On the one hand, there was the letter from Auschwitz survivor Adolf Rögner, who, with the help of Hermann Langbein, filed a criminal



**The exhibition takes the visitors on a chronological journey through the trial.**

© Florine Miez

complaint against one of the (later) main defendants in 1958. On the other hand, in January 1959, the so-called Breslau documents [execution lists from Auschwitz], which journalist Thomas Gnielka had received from Auschwitz survivor Emil Wulkan, were passed on to Fritz Bauer. These are two essential starting points that are closely linked to the fact that survivors took the initiative. Hermann Langbein also played an important role in the Auschwitz trial. As co-initiator and secretary general of the International Auschwitz Committee, he made a significant contribution by contacting survivors and convincing them to testify, to come to Frankfurt, and to go to court. Many of them were concerned about whether a German court could be trusted. For Langbein, it was clear that it was important for the survivors to tell their stories in court.



**One of the thematic of the exhibition focusing on  
“Emotion and Trauma”**

© Florine Miez

**Wolfinger:** The exhibition consists of so-called honeycomb panels, i.e., thick cardboard panels. The starting point, where the tour begins and from which the reading flows, is the letter from Henry Ormond to Jan Sehn.<sup>3</sup> We have highlighted the document on a small pedestal. From there, visitors are guided chronologically through the trial, from the preliminary investigations to the aftermath. In addition to the texts, there are three video interviews with contemporary witnesses and descendants, transcripts of the interrogations, photos and quotes from those involved, tape recordings of the verdict, and excerpts from newspa-

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Henry Ormond to Jan Sehn, 1963, S 78.2011.Zn, IPN.

pers, theater, and films. There are also seven tables that focus on different topics. The titles of these individual segments are: “The Milieu Witnesses” as a special group of witnesses who were interrogated in a distinctive way – “Communication in Court”, “Cold War in the Courtroom”, “Emotion and Trauma”, “As a Child in Auschwitz”, “Remembering, Forgetting”, and “Women in the Trial”.

**Miez:** And then there were books by survivors, accounts of what they experienced in Auschwitz and about the trial.

**Wolfinger:** Yes, the idea was that visitors could sit down and immerse themselves in the books or perhaps take the idea of reading with them.

**Windsperger:** On the topic of women in the trial – what was important from your perspective?

**Wolfinger:** Women are not as strongly represented as men [at the trial]. On the one hand, no female SS officers were charged, and on the other hand, only twenty-eight of the 211 witnesses were women. Of course, this does not reflect the reality of the crimes. In addition, women often had a different experience during their imprisonment. Some of them had a better chance of survival because as clerks, they were at least provided with food and adequate clothing, which was not the case for most men. In this respect, [the trial] would actually have been an opportunity to recruit more female witnesses.

**Miez:** Just to add: the survivor networks were also very male dominated, which certainly contributed to fewer women testifying in the trial. In the exhibition section “As a Child in Auschwitz”, we present two witnesses – Jehuda Bacon and Otto Dov Kulka. Both were in Auschwitz between the ages of ten and fourteen, both in the so-called Theresienstadt family camp. Both lost almost their entire families and testified about this at the trial. In Otto Dov Kulka’s case, it is exceptional that his father, Erich Kulka, testified a few months before him. Here, survivor networks become clear again: we show a letter from Hermann Langbein to Erich Kulka in which he writes that Otto Dov Kulka testified excellently and made a strong impression. Erich Kulka had previously asked Hermann Langbein to let his son contact him if he needed help.

**Windsperger:** It’s important that you mention that the survivor networks were also male dominated. I can mainly recount my impressions from the Wiesenthal Archive here [in Vienna]. The correspondence that Wiesenthal conducted was also mainly with male survivors. You have included interviews with contemporary witnesses or descendants in the exhibition that you conducted yourselves. Can you tell us something about these encounters?

**Miez:** I interviewed Peter Kalb. During the trial, he was in his early twenties, and he was responsible for taking care of the witnesses on a voluntary basis. For example, he picked up the witnesses from the airport and spent time with them during their

time outside the court. He went hiking with some of them, or took them out for a meal, or for a walk – he took care of the witnesses.

He talked about what these encounters were like. When he picked them up from the airport, the witnesses were relieved when they saw a young man sitting in the car because it was clear that he was so young that he couldn't have been a Nazi. He got into this work through his father, who worked for the Red Cross. There was a network of volunteers who took care of the witnesses. But he never really got any training on how to deal with people who are extremely traumatised. There were no guidelines on how he should talk to them. For example, he recounts that he was riding in an elevator with one of the witnesses, Stanisław Kamiński, whom he had picked up from the hotel. Suddenly, the elevator doors opened and a woman entered, and the witness next to him froze and couldn't say anything until the woman got out. Then the witness said to him, "That was Mrs Höß". This again makes it clear that something like post-traumatic stress disorder was not really an issue that was taken into account at the time. The victim-witnesses – that is, the survivors – and the other witnesses were housed in the same hotel as the non-incarcerated defendants. No care was taken to separate them.

**Wolfinger:** Another interview is with Gerhard Wiese, a young prosecutor from Fritz Bauer's team. He is now over ninety, lives in Frankfurt, and still gives lectures. The approximately fifteen-minute video interviews all have specific themes. His interview focuses on how he experienced the trial and, in particular, the site visits to Auschwitz. Incidentally, both Peter Kalb and Gerhard Wiese were at our opening, which we consider a great honor. It was touching to see how they spoke to each other. The third interview is with Kurt and Daniel Langbein, the son and grandson of Hermann Langbein. They talk about his commitment as a representative of the survivors and about Hermann Langbein's role in the trial.

**Windsperger:** The focus on post-traumatic stress disorder – including the surge in research and psychology – really took off with the Vietnam War. Attempts to understand what war and persecution experiences mean across generations were certainly not part of the trial at the time. What other sources were of particular interest to you? How did you integrate them into the exhibition, and were there any surprising finds or discoveries?

**Wolfinger:** I think the most surprising find is the starting point, the letter. Otherwise, we were fortunate that a lot was publicly available in archives: more letters, tape recordings, photos. The special thing about the tape recordings is that they allow you to follow the trial as if it were live, and that gives a more immediate impression than if you only read the statements. You can read what happened in the transcripts, but there's something different about hearing the intonation, the reactions, and what's between the lines ... Not everything went smoothly – there were transla-

tion difficulties and situations that were very stressful for those involved. It's good that these recordings are still accessible.

**Miez:** And these recordings have only been preserved because Hermann Langbein strongly advocated for them to be preserved. In fact, they would have been destroyed after the trial ended – their main purpose was to serve as an aide-mémoire for the court – but he argued that they should be preserved for posterity as historical sources. All of these recordings can also be listened to online: The Fritz Bauer Institute has uploaded them and produced transcripts.<sup>4</sup>

**Windsperger:** This is perhaps a related question: The role of language, which is probably much more evident in these recordings than in written documents and transcripts? What role did language or languages play in the witnesses' statements, and how did the court deal with these linguistic challenges?

**Wolfinger:** Here, too, there were different starting points and circumstances. There were witnesses who were fluent in German but no longer wanted to speak it and also had difficulty hearing it in court, especially such formal language. Then, there were problems with the interpreters because the judge initially thought he could understand Yiddish. However, there were comprehension problems during the examination of survivor Simon Gotland. He (the judge) repeatedly says that he does not understand him (Gotland) and therefore interrupts him, which makes his [Gotland's] testimony and comprehensibility more difficult. Some witnesses had to switch to other languages, mostly Polish or French. Others deliberately testified in German.

**Miez:** On top of that, the witnesses were sitting very, very close to the perpetrators. They already had to move [the trial] to a room outside the courthouse because all the rooms there were too small for the court, the witnesses, the defendants, the defense, visitors, and the press. That's why the trial began in Frankfurt's Römer and then moved to the Bürgerhaus Gallus in April 1964. The situation must have been very unpleasant and difficult for the witnesses – sitting there with the perpetrators behind them and also having to pass them to make their statements.

**Windsperger:** Could you explain a little more about how the survivors experienced the trial – what they emphasised in their memories or in the texts that were produced – which you have also integrated into the exhibition with the reading corner – and how they remembered it?

**Wolfinger:** We show these memories in this tense relationship – on the one hand, there was the opportunity to confront the perpetrators with their crimes and to counter it with the support of the society. On the other hand, there is disillusionment and frustration about the sentences that were ultimately handed down, which were significantly lower than what the prosecution had demanded. For many survivors, this confirmed their distrust of the

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.auschwitz-prozess.de>.

German legal system. What shocks me personally is the reaction of the defendants – I mean the reactions of the defendants themselves: no humility, no remorse, just a strategy of denial, of withdrawing, of not taking responsibility – and this in full view of the public. Part of the defense strategy was to focus on memory gaps, twenty years after [the events]. It would be rather surprising to have a complete memory, especially of such traumatic experiences. The renewed confrontation [with what had happened] was a heavy psychological burden [for survivors], which is why the way the witnesses' statements were handled often seems insensitive. We have included a quote from the publicist Ralph Giordano on "second guilt" in the exhibition: [first] that the Germans are guilty of the greatest mass murder in history, and now a second time because of how this trial proceeded and ended. At the same time, however, it was a major legal review [of the crimes of the Holocaust], and that must also be acknowledged. As we can see, this goes hand in hand with the historical documentation of the events. Today, we can revisit the issue and voice our criticism. **Miez:** Perhaps another example of what Anna just said. Specifically, the defense, pounced on the witnesses: There is a statement by Stanisław Kamiński, who is questioned by the defense, and they refer precisely to this detailed question and say: "How many meters were you away from this and that point?" until he eventually says: "I didn't have a measuring tape to measure exactly how many meters there were between them." And that's what makes it so completely absurd, that they [witnesses-survivors] have to provide details that no one can give; it's just impossible.

**Windsperger:** Back to the exhibition and the reactions you received from visitors and the media. What interested visitors most during guided tours, for example, and what messages visitors should take away with them?

**Miez:** During the tours, I told the visitors that if they remembered just one fact from the exhibition, it should be that the survivors were largely responsible for making this trial happen in the first place. The reactions of visitors have been overwhelmingly positive. We had a different audience at the Römer than we had at the Student Union House. The exhibition at the Römer also received more media coverage, and we had a very diverse range of visitors, including elderly people. But we also had school classes there, which also worked out quite well. Many know the Römer in Frankfurt was the place where the trial began. Sometimes city employees showed the plenary hall from inside; it was interesting for people to see the place they just read about. The place still looks the same, except that a plaque has now been added in memory of the Auschwitz trial and Fritz Bauer. Many visitors were repeatedly shocked, and I think the question I was asked most often is: "Why were so few perpetrators brought to justice? How could that happen?" There is complete incomprehension about why there has been such a lack of reassessment. What sometimes leads to discussion is that we made a conscious decision not to show pic-

tures of the perpetrators but only images of the survivors. We deliberately wanted to focus on the survivors and bring in this perspective. The focus [of other works] is often on the perpetrators. That's not what we want, although we have also printed the profiles of the accused, so they're not completely invisible in the exhibition.

**Florine Miez** is a researcher at the Center for Holocaust Studies at the Institute for Contemporary History Munich-Berlin and previously worked at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies. She studied political science and German language and literature in Frankfurt.  
Email: [miez@ifz-muenchen.de](mailto:miez@ifz-muenchen.de)

**Anna Wolfinger** is a legal advisor in the field of women's and equality law for the federal state of Bremen. She studied law in Bremen and Vienna, specialising in international law and legal theory. She completed her second state examination in 2023.  
Email: [anna.wolfinger@posteo.de](mailto:anna.wolfinger@posteo.de)

Quotation: Florine Miez and Anna Wolfinger, "I Want to Talk About the Truth That was There".  
The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial 1963–1965, in S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 13 (2026) 1, 167–177.

S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 13 (2026) 1 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0126>

This article is licensed under the following Creative Commons License: CC-BY-SA  
(Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives).