Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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Writing a Soviet Holocaust Novel: Traumatic Memory, the Search for Documents, and the Soviet War Narrative in Anatolii Rybakov’s *Heavy Sand*

Literature and the Holocaust in the Soviet Union: The Example of Rybakov

Literature came to play a significant role in establishing the collective memory of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, since historical writings on the subject were scarce. Soviet Jewish writers like Vasily Grossman, Ilya Ehrenburg, Anatolii Kuznetsov, Boris Slutskii, Masha Rol’nikaitė, and Anatolii Rybakov succeeded in keeping alive a public conversation about the death of hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews in the Soviet Union and abroad in the face of an official discourse that mostly remained silent on the topic. As Timothy Snyder writes, “the Holocaust could never become part of the Soviet history of the war.”¹ The reasons for this complicated attitude were manifold: Writing about the Holocaust was difficult because public collective memories of the Holocaust were in short supply and public discussion of the killing of Jews was inhibited by many restraints and ideological assumptions. In addition, after the war Russian writers had to contend with a strong antisemitic undercurrent in the Soviet Union, the predominance of a “heroic” war narrative, and the fact that most of the Jewish victims were not exactly “Soviet,” as they stemmed from the newly annexed Soviet lands in Western Ukraine, the Baltics, and Belorussia.² The subject of the Holocaust, therefore, veered dangerously far from the safe and powerful domain of approved topics of Soviet literature. With regard to World War II, the most prominent