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’nikaite, 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

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focus, of course, was that of “heroism” and “sacrifice,” never one of victimhood or even a specific “Jewish” fight that transcended the overall Soviet struggle. In particular, the all-inclusive Soviet war narrative made Jews disappear as soldiers, civilians, and most of all as victims, as Amir Weiner has pointed out. See Amir Weiner, Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 231–32.

After the war, a series of wartime memoirs appeared that were based on accounts by members of different nationalities involved in military campaigns on the front. These included collections dedicated to Georgians, Kazakhs, Ukrainians, and others, but never to Jews. Histories of Jews who fought in the war and Jewish partisans were suppressed and could only be published after perestroika. The Holocaust proved to be a complicated and dangerous topic not only in itself, but also because it was difficult to write about it without mentioning the failure of Soviet citizens to protect their Jewish neighbors, without addressing denunciations and collaboration with the Germans by Soviet citizens, and without stressing German war crimes at a time when socialist Germany had become an ally. Soviet writers tackling the subject thus had to tread lightly and observe the rules of Soviet memorial culture.

These problems notwithstanding, Jewish victims were memorialized in literature, and the ways of memorialization devised by authors like Grossman, Rol’nikaite, and Rybakov should be acknowledged. Importantly, they should be discussed within a framework of Soviet war literature and in the context of changing cultural and political attitudes towards Jews in the Soviet Union, not solely within that of Western Holocaust literature. Rybakov is a fairly typical example of a palimpsestic writing style that fuses public Soviet discourse and private Jewish Holocaust remembrance. Taking this into account, the situation calls for a reassessment of how Rybakov’s novel addresses the Holocaust and a need to discuss it within the context of Soviet discourse, as opposed to the Western poetics of Holocaust writing. The way the Holocaust is rendered in literature depends heavily on the way a historical event is itself remembered, which—in the case of the Soviet Union—happened mostly in a circumstantial way. This article, then, argues that Rybakov makes use of tried and tested representations of the war, employing them to promote less approved and critical subjects, such as Jewish life in the shtetl and the Holocaust. His writing style functions very

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much in the fashion of Michael Rothberg’s “multidirectional memory,” that is, by way of “cross-referencing” and borrowing elements of an established memorial discourse—in the case of Rybakov, those of socialist realist narratives—and combining them with representations of Jewish life and death. In this way, he is able to represent topics and memorialize events that are otherwise excluded from public memory. It will be furthermore argued that it is more enlightening to look at Rybakov’s achievements rather than to voice more discontent, given that the text can be regarded as a case study in the workings of literary historiography in the USSR. Thus, the guiding questions that are addressed here are: How was the murder of Soviet Jews represented and fictionalized in a discursive environment that did not lend itself to commemorations of the Holocaust? How did Rybakov make use of the aesthetics of late socialist realism to introduce a topic that was hitherto only marginally present among Soviet reading audiences? How was victimhood represented in a culture that favored heroism? How does one write historical fiction if one lacks historiographies and testimonies of the “sayable” that serve as a factual background? How did Rybakov support his claim to facticity? And which events, dates, and texts does he refer to in order to write a Holocaust novel?

**Heavy Sand: Finding Facts and Making Use of Soviet Realist Templates**

By the time in the 1970s when Rybakov began to write about the Holocaust and the fate of his extended family before and after the war, he had already become a well-known and established writer. Among his achievements were a successful production novel *Voditeli* (The Drivers, 1951) and several very popular children’s books, such as *Kortik* (The Dagger, 1948) and *Bronzovaia ptitsa* (The Bronze Bird, 1956), which were turned into films. His early works were well written and firmly rooted in Soviet literary aesthetics and ideology, and he was even awarded the Stalin prize for *The Drivers*. He had honed his writing style and was well aware of what was “sayable,” that is, what was and was not permissible for a writer in the Soviet Union. While he deviated thematically from the template of

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6 The concept of the sayable/unsayable is used here in a Foucauldian sense in order to describe the ideological practices and the discursive context that characterized Soviet literature. See Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge, 1981), 48–79.