Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

Stach, Stephan, Hallama, Peter, Bohus, Kata

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Russian wife, is a war hero and a Party member, and still has not forgotten or suppressed his Jewish roots in the shtetl. This inherent structure and the opposition of happy prewar days and grim wartime events conform to Soviet narrative practices. All in all, Rybakov’s depiction of shtetl life is thus pure ideology in a Žižekian sense: “The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel.” However, as mentioned earlier, the style changes notably when Rybakov narrates the events that surround the killing of the Jews of Ivanivka.

**Heavy Sand: The Soviet Holocaust Narrative and Its Discontents**

In many ways, Rybakov followed socialist realist formulas and relied on the Soviet master narrative of World War II when he wrote his Holocaust novel. As stated above, the Soviet narrative was based on a fixed set of motifs and templates, mainly the idea that all death was heroic, and that Soviet soldiers and Soviet citizens were one big family. Accommodating this discursive set of rules, the texts of Anatolii Rybakov and his contemporary Masha Rol’nikaitė were thus presented foremost as texts about the war. The Holocaust was only a secondary theme, even if their main agenda was to inscribe the Holocaust into the Soviet literary canon. The fact that their texts could be read as an extension of the war narrative placed them firmly within the Soviet canon and made publication possible, but it also called for adapting to the established aesthetics of the war narrative. From the start, texts dealing with the Holocaust on Soviet soil encountered difficulties, since discussing the mass killing of Soviet Jews already veered between the permissible and the forbidden during the war. The fact that these killings were part of Soviet war history as well as part of a solely Jewish history complicated matters further. In what should have been a shared narrative, Jewish suffering was mostly overwritten by Soviet suffering as a whole. Historians have shown that while the Holocaust was mentioned and discussed during the war, the subject was rarely broached in the 1950s, only to slowly reemerge in Soviet discourse starting in the 1960s, when a new type of war narrative was being forged. This reformed war narrative gave rise to de-homogenized war accounts, in which hitherto prohibited topics—like Soviet prisoners of war in Germany,

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collaboration, or the Holocaust—became accessible to Soviet readers. Because of these factors, Rybakov’s *Heavy Sand* is one of the few Soviet works that can be properly called a Soviet Holocaust novel. Epelboin and Kovriguina call it the “only” Soviet novel that has made the genocide of the Jews its main subject. It is true that Rybakov’s is one of these very rare novels, but it is certainly not the only one. At the same time, Masha Rol’nikaitė wrote several fictional as well as autobiographical texts that deal with the Holocaust. Thus, the novel owes its distinctive aesthetic shape as much to individual private memories of the Holocaust in circulation among Rybakov’s family and friends, as it does to public memories of the war inscribed in the poetics of socialist realism and in Soviet war discourse. Viewed in comparison with the criteria established by Berel Lang’s influential study on writing Holocaust literature, for example, Rybakov’s book falls short, as it relies heavily on personalization and figurative discourse. But viewed within the context of Soviet writing about the Holocaust, Rybakov’s novel is the “greatest surprise,” with its Jewish cast, Jewish theme, and description of the extermination of the Jews in the Ukrainian-Belorussian border region.

However, focusing solely on Jewish experiences and singling out the special Jewish fate meant deviating from the established perception of the war. As Gregory Carleton has stated, the Great Patriotic War and the artifacts that surrounded it became the “supreme unifying myth, masking discontent (particularly among the recently annexed Baltic states) and other internal fractures” in the Soviet Union. This myth did not allow for other stories or voices to be heard. Rybakov was thus confronted with a conundrum: if he wanted to present the reader with a Jewish war narrative, especially one that included the Holocaust, he had to adapt it to the templates of the greater Soviet war narrative. This be-

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21 For a description of the Soviet war narrative, see Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).
comes most visible in the way he deals with the actual killing and dying of the Jewish inhabitants of Ivanivka.

Rybakov incorporates into his text stories about partisan heroism and self-sacrifice, as well as Soviet solidarity between neighbors of different ethnicities. In some respects, the death of his sister Dina resembles the fictionalized death of the young partisan heroine, Zoia Kosmod’em’ianskaia. Like Zoia, Dina is beaten and hanged naked, and, like Zoia, her last words under the gallows are an act of defiance: she starts to sing “maybe a Jewish, Ukrainian or Russian song, or perhaps the ‘Internationale,’ the hymn of our youth and our hopes.” Even the little brother of the narrator, Igor, dies like one of the child partisan heroes, who were so popular among children and adults in the Soviet Union. Eight-year-old Igor, who serves as a courier between the inhabitants of the ghetto and partisan units in the forest, is captured by the Germans, tortured, and hanged—never betraying his folks. Not only do all members of the Rakhlenko and Ivanovsky families act in accordance with Soviet ideology, they actively declare their allegiance to it and are extremely courageous. Because they are putting the welfare of the state and the collective first, they are willing to sacrifice themselves and the welfare of their families, instead of saving their own skin. The neighbors, too, are willing to sacrifice their own well-being in order to help their persecuted and starving Jewish friends and, in the end, are even willing to die for them. Rybakov’s description of Soviet solidarity reads as follows: “but the Stashenoks were true human beings, they didn’t stoop before the Germans, they put human obligation above fear.” And when the Stashenok family is arrested because of its “links with the ghetto” and subjected to torture, they “stand firm” and do not denounce their Jewish neighbors. The narrator concludes the pages devoted to the solidarity among the Soviet people with a description of the execution of the Belorussian Stashenok family with the following words: “Long live their memory! Eternal glory to those brave sons and daughters of the Belorussian nation!”

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25 For the child hero narrative, see Anja Tippner, “Girls in Combat: Zoia Kosmod’em’ianskaia and the Image of Young Soviet Wartime Heroines,” Russian Review 73, no. 3 (2014): 371–89. The name of the sister also evokes the name of Kuznetsov’s source, Dina Pronicheva, one of the few survivors of Babyn Yar (in Russian Babi Yar).
26 Rybakov, Heavy Sand, 348–49. The speculations of the narrator with regard to the song are a good example of the way in which he introduces Jewish themes into a Soviet template.
28 Rybakov, Heavy Sand, 359, 326.
29 Rybakov, Heavy Sand, 362.
Union, but it is even more astonishing, because we find nothing similar regarding the “Jewish nation” in the text. Here, as in other areas, Rybakov does not falsify historical facts, he merely adjusts them to preexisting Soviet templates and represses other historical experiences, such as denunciations by greedy, antisemitic, or frightened neighbors.30

While Rybakov effectively inscribes aspects of the ghetto story into the standard war narrative by describing how part of the Jewish population joins the partisans in the Bryansk woods in order to evade the killings and defend the motherland, he jettisons the prescribed formula in other aspects. For example, when turning the reader’s attention to the way most of the Jews in the Ukraine died, he singles out Jewish victims, instead of subsuming them as usual under the umbrella term “peaceful Soviet citizens” (myrnye sovetskie zhiteli). Confronted with the accusation that the remaining Jews in the ghetto locked themselves inside their houses and then went to their deaths “like sheep to the slaughter,” the narrator points out that it was not only Jews who were captured and victimized, but also Soviet soldiers who were captured and killed as prisoners of war, thus dismissing the common accusation and turning the war narrative on its head. The lines evoking a sheep-like death contain another layer of meaning, as they resonate with the slogan of the United Partisan Organization (Farbenikte Partizaner Organizatsye, FPO), the Jewish resistance movement in the Vilna ghetto, which urged Jews to join the partisans and not go to death “like sheep to the slaughter.” The novel does not take an easy stance on the question of resistance vs. compliance, pointing out that either way, the Jews were doomed:

The question was insoluble, so was the problem. An uprising? ... Make a break for the forest? ... The alternative was to resign yourself to your fate, to lie down in the ditch next to your son and daughter, and expose the back of your neck to a German bullet, without putting up any righteous resistance, however hopeless, without raising your hand against your murderers. This was the least acceptable of all options. They all offered death, only resistance offered death with honor.31

The narrator’s sister Dina is confronted with the same choice: either resist and probably die or give in and probably die as well. However, the narrator points

out: “Of course, it’s easy for us to reason on Dina’s behalf, to put forth the arguments and counter-arguments, and to make this or that decision. It was harder for her. She didn’t know the true situation.” 32 Here as well as elsewhere in the novel, the reasoning of the protagonists—in this case Grisha, the narrator’s uncle—conforms to the Soviet credo. It is only the negative characters, mainly the members of the Judenrat (Jewish Council), who opt out of heroism for the sake of self-preservation. The case of the Judenrat was not only fraught with ethical questions as in Western literature but was also viewed within a framework of class divisions, which called for an unfavorable depiction of members of the Jewish bourgeoisie and upper-class. 33

In his attempt to tell a story about the Holocaust, Rybakov makes use of three narrative devices usually not found in a traditional war narrative: voids, foreshadowing, and the refusal of closure. First, voids are the result of the set-up of the chapters dealing with the Holocaust, since the narrator, Boris, is not an eyewitness. So there are many things he either does not know or cannot be sure of because he could not find informants. Boris thus systematically imposes and narrates voids, remarking:

I don’t intend to tell you the story of this ghetto, I do not know it, nobody does. It was a little one, and it was short-lived. No written accounts of it have survived; it doesn’t figure in official documents, it was simply wiped off the face of the earth. Anyway, what else is there to be added to the stories about ghettos, they have all been described in hundreds of books. It was the same everywhere, they tortured and tortured the people, then they killed them. What can you add to that? 34

The paradoxical rhetoric of telling and not telling, knowing and not knowing, pervades the chapters about the ghetto and the killing of the Jews in Ivanivka. Here, as well as elsewhere, the narrator configures the Holocaust as a fact that is simultaneously known and unknown. He presents the reader with facts and stories that he has gathered, implying that these are already firmly established in So-

32 Rybakov, Heavy Sand, 343.
33 Masha Rol’nikaitė recalls the way in which the censor of her memoir, I Have to Tell, criticized her account of the Judenrat in the Vilna ghetto and demanded an unfavorable depiction of its members. See Anja Tippner, “The Writings of a Soviet Anne Frank: Masha Rol’nikaitė’s Holocaust Memoir I Have to Tell and Its Place in Soviet Literature,” in Search and Research: Lectures and Series, Volume 19: Representation of the Holocaust in Soviet Literature and Film (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2013), 76.
34 Rybakov, Heavy Sand, 232.
viet memory, although the author obviously knows this not to be true. Thus, he is not only sharing Holocaust history but also suggesting that it ought to be an integral part of the Soviet war narrative. As such, the novel is directed at those with knowledge of Jewish atrocities: they were the ones who could “restore” the rhetoric of (not) telling and those who wanted to know and were directed toward other sources. In suggesting the existence of hundreds of books on the topic, he points his readers toward the symbolic void that is Holocaust remembrance and Holocaust knowledge in the USSR. The most striking aspect of this passage is the contradictory way in which the past is constructed as a void when it comes to remembering the Jewish genocide. Adding another layer to his description is the fact that the void also represents a complex symbol of the killing sites in the Soviet Union—often unmarked pits, ravines, and shallow ditches in rural areas.

The narrator interprets his sister Dina’s death as well as his father’s death within this frame of uncertainty. At the same time, he makes use of Soviet certainties and convictions, such as the Soviet template of self-sacrifice for the collective and the greater good. Since the narrator is only in possession of the bare facts, but not of his father’s motivations or thoughts, he starts to “imagine” a reason that made his father confess to a “crime” he never committed and sees this reason in his Soviet righteousness. In its own specific way, the text thus makes its readers aware of the fact that eyewitness accounts, so crucial to Western Holocaust literature, are not available to the Soviet public. So, again and again, Rybakov’s narrator resorts to Soviet thought patterns to produce a coherent narrative without completely erasing the voids and blank spaces created by the absence of witnesses. For secondary witnesses, such as Rybakov in particular, the absence of testimonies—be they written “from within the events” or afterwards as “interpretive” testimonies—poses a great problem in their search for “truth.” It is one of Rybakov’s greatest achievements that he balances the urge to fill the void with passages that retain it on both the thematic and the textual plane, while retaining the fact that—where there ought to be testimony—we are confronted with a void.

The Holocaust emerges here simultaneously as both irretrievable past and a memory void, for example when the narrator discusses the fruitless search for the remains of his father, how he sifted through the sand at the riverbank. All he

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finds is the clean and “heavy sand” of the title.37 While he knows, at least, when and where his father was killed, his mother has vanished into thin air, leaving behind not even the certainty of her death. After leading a group of Jews from the ghetto into the woods to escape destruction and to join the partisans, she dies from exhaustion and hunger in the woods: “And when people looked back, she was no longer there. Nobody heard the sound of her footsteps or the crunch of twigs under her feet, she simply dissolved into the forest amid the motionless pines, she melted into the air.”38 Her death and missing grave, as well as those of other family members, symbolize the emptiness and void that is felt by survivors and descendants alike. The uncertainties surrounding these deaths produce long-term effects and unarticulated trauma in the Soviet Union. Thus, describing the voids and the last surviving son’s quest to fill them serves as a model for a possible Soviet way to remember the Holocaust. In the poetics of Rybakov, one has to remember by the absence of history, not its presence.

The second device can also be seen in the above-cited passage. Here, Rybakov’s narrator refers his interlocutor to the “hundreds of books” that have been written about life and death in the ghettos. Elsewhere he points him toward the case records of the Nuremberg trials and quotes a statement by Hitler that was given as evidence by one of the prosecutors.39 The narrator establishes a bond with his listener that is built on their shared knowledge of the Holocaust, while employing foreshadowing: “We know now that those who were left behind perished, but how could we have known then.”40 One could argue that Nuremberg is a point of reference because of the newsreels made immediately after the war and shown widely in the Soviet Union. Yet, the hundreds of books about the ghettos and the case files of the Nuremberg trials were not available to Soviet readers, just as the witness testimonies collected in Ehrenburg and Grossman’s Black Book of Russian Jewry were suppressed and censored.41 Thus, Rybakov’s novel creates a somewhat paradoxical addressee, someone who both knows and does not know about the

37 Rybakov, Heavy Sand, 379.
38 Rybakov, Heavy Sand, 376.
39 Rybakov, Heavy Sand, 249, 253.
40 Rybakov, Heavy Sand, 245.
41 Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry, trans. and ed. David Patterson (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002). Members of the Jewish Antifascist Committee helped to collect testimonies and legal documents for the publication. Due to changing politics and increasing antisemitism in the immediate postwar period, the book could not be published in the Soviet Union and the manuscript was confined to the archives for decades. The first Russian edition finally saw the light of day in Kyiv in 1991, that is, in the last months prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, published on the basis of a Russian version issued in Jerusalem in 1970.
Writing a Soviet Holocaust Novel

Holocaust at the same time, just as his narrator knows and does not know. The implied reader of the novel is a foreshadowing of future Russian readers, who know about the Holocaust from documents, historical reports, oral histories, memorials, and literature, from cultural as well as communicative memory. The modes of looking back that are depicted in the parts of the book dealing with the Holocaust are an act of prefiguring desired future forms of remembrance, they are a certain form of futurity, as Amir Eshel has called this way of writing.42

Finally, Rybakov refuses closure—something that was essential to Soviet novels. The impossibility of closure and the permanence of grief pervade the last chapters of the book. The narrator begins his retelling of the extermination of the Ivaniivka Jews and the tale of his quest for truth with the following remark: “A black night had fallen on the town. Many years I have wandered in that gloom, along the same streets, there and back and there again. And the ghosts of the tormented wander with me from house to house.”43 The novel presents itself as an unsuccessful search for these ghosts. In the end, the protagonist-narrator Boris visits the Jewish cemetery in the old shtetl together with his Russian friend, a former partisan and miner, named Sidorov. They are looking for Jewish graves, but fail to find any. While the little town once had a big and beautiful Jewish cemetery, now there are almost no headstones and no inscriptions to mourn the dead. So, while the deaths of his family members are described in an individualized manner that runs counter to the actual ways of killing by the German Einsatzgruppen, their afterlife is uniformly characterized by a lack of individual as well as collective remembrance, thus containing a critique of Soviet practices. In the cemetery, there is a memorial stone with a text in Russian and Hebrew. The miner Sidorov asks the protagonist if the Russian text that reads “To the eternal memory of the victims of the German Fascist invaders” is translated correctly from Russian into the Hebrew. The Hebrew text reads “Venikoisi domom loi nikoisi,” which the narrator translates for himself as: “Everything is forgiven, but those who have spilled innocent blood shall never be forgiven.” After some hesitation he answers, “yes . . . , it’s right, it’s exact.”44 The memorial stone not only functions as a memorial, but it is also a cenotaph for the dead who are buried elsewhere. Rybakov makes it clear that this memorial

42 Eshel explores the idea that we always write the past with the idea of a certain future in mind. See Amir Eshel, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1–23.
44 Eshel, *Futurity*, 381.
with its defective inscription does not provide closure, but instead calls for another mode of remembrance in the future.

These last passages of Rybakov’s novel resonate with the first line of Evtushenko’s famous poem “Babi Yar,” which reads: “Over Babi Yar there are no memorials,” as well as Ol’ga Berggolts’s inscription on the memorial in Leningrad, which ends with the line: “Nobody is forgotten, nothing is forgotten,” but also with the Torah, overwriting one text with the other. The epilogue also refers the reader to the fact that even this distorted, divergent Russian-Jewish memory does not yet exist and is only a projection into the future. The memorial plate is at once a foreshadowing of a future still to be attained: in 1972, the time of the epilogue, there were very few memorial plates at burial sites and even fewer with inscriptions in Hebrew, and the small number of memorials that existed were initiated by Jewish survivors or their family members and made the news in the Soviet Yiddish press. Rybakov’s depictions of the lack of memorial practices are thus at once a critique of current Soviet practices of remembering the Holocaust, as well as a hint of what they could look like. And finally, this writing style corresponded to socialist realism in that it depicted reality not as it was, but as it should be. The memorial that is portrayed in the book stands in stark contrast to the killing sites that bear no trace of the dead. While the eponymous “heavy sand” is the only spatial remnant at this former killing site, it is not identifiable as such. For those who were witnesses this is a negative space, and for those who came after them this site is just another place, untouched by memorial practices or interventions. It is also an inverse allusion to the popular tombstone inscription “May the earth be light upon you.” At the end of his novel, Rybakov combined all narrative devices—describing the voids, employing foreshadowing, and avoiding closure—in the narrator’s unsuccessful search for his dead parents or at least their graves and the insufficient memorial that nevertheless foreshadows a glimpse of a possible memorial culture.

Conclusion: Remembering and Forgetting the Holocaust in the USSR

As this article has tried to demonstrate, Rybakov’s text symptomatically moves between different modes of writing to inform Soviet readers about the Holo-

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