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# Partisans and Soldiers: Themes of Gender and the Commemoration of Jewish Resistance in the Soviet Union During World War II

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PARTISANS AND SOLDIERS: THEMES OF GENDER AND THE COMMEMORATION  
OF JEWISH RESISTANCE IN THE SOVIET UNION DURING WORLD WAR II

by

Taylor Dews

A Thesis Submitted in  
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## ABSTRACT

### PARTISANS AND SOLDIERS: THEMES OF GENDER AND THE COMMEMORATION OF JEWISH RESISTANCE IN THE SOVIET UNION DURING WORLD WAR II

by

Taylor Dews

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2019  
Under the Supervision of Professor Christine Evans

Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, thousands of Red Army soldiers, peasants, and Jewish men, women, and children escaped imprisonment and certain death by fleeing into the vast forests of Belorussia. Using oral histories, archival websites, and survivor testimony, this thesis explores the Soviet partisan units and the Jewish partisan units and family camps that were organized in the forests and raises questions including: How do the experiences of Jewish women in the partisans compare with Jewish women who fought in the Red Army? How are the Jewish partisans remembered around the world today? What postwar political objectives helped to shape the contemporary commemoration of Jewish partisans? Although historical narratives may lack absolute certainty in some cases, the testimony of Jewish partisans and soldiers reveals experiences that allow for a more complete understanding of the Second World War in the Soviet Union and expose the ways in which political power can impact social memory.

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This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather, Richard Lester King

June 17, 1943 – January 15, 2017

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Since the end of the Second World War and the liberation of the death camps, Holocaust survivors have passionately urged for the widespread retraction of the myth of Jewish passivity. The narrative of Jews going to their deaths without opposition has been disapproved by scholars who have more recently joined in the effort to withdraw these falsehoods by uncovering counter narratives of resistance and defiance. The phrase, “like sheep to the slaughter,” was introduced into the Jewish resistance narrative by 23-year-old Aba Kovner, a Jewish prisoner in the Vilna ghetto, who worked alongside several Jewish youth movement organizations inside the ghetto. Appearing in a 1942 New Year’s Manifesto, the phrase was used as a call to resistance after the Nazi goal of systematic annihilation of all Jews was recognized. Nearly a month after the proclamation was issued, several of the Vilna youth groups established the Vilna Partisan Organization whose chief goal was to make Jewish people aware of their certain fate.<sup>1</sup>

For the past seventy years, scholars have debated the meaning and the impact that Jewish resistance had on the outcomes of WWII. Scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s produced a twofold historiography. Historians who argued that Jewish resistance made a significant impact during the war did so by focusing their studies on the victims of genocide, while the other group of historians argued that because of the long history

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<sup>1</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resistance: Jews and Christians Who Defied the Nazi Terror*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

of Jewish diaspora and discrimination, Jews could not help but to submit to Nazi oppression. Although this last argument may be shocking and seemingly unsympathetic to human suffering, the lack of documentation produced after the war created silences and misinterpretations surrounding the impact of Jewish resistance. When it was discussed, scholars focused on underground resistance movements, like the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the uprisings in Auschwitz and Treblinka. In the Soviet Union, early attempts to shed light on Jewish resistance efforts were interrupted and silenced by state censorship and persecution.

It is now widely agreed amongst Western historians in the twenty-first century that Jews did indeed resist the Nazis during the Holocaust and did play an integral part in the success of the Soviet Union. Now the dialectic is between those who choose to focus on the perpetrators and their crimes or the victims and their efforts to resist. One method of approach that many historians have since used to argue against this myth of passivity and to show how critical Jewish resistance was to the outcome of the war in the Soviet Union is Jewish involvement in the partisan movement.

### **The Making of a “Partisan Republic”**

Prior to the 1939, Belorussia, now modern day Belarus, had primarily belonged to the Polish state. When the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was signed in 1939, Poland was once again divided, and the former Western territories of Belorussia were integrated with the Soviet Union, becoming the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). The German-Soviet non-aggression pact determined that the territories to the east of Minsk



would also become part of the BSSR.<sup>2</sup> Many Jewish testimonies support the idea that Jews welcomed the Soviets; some believed it was better to live under Soviet control than under Polish or German occupation. Many held the assumption that Soviet control meant protection.<sup>3</sup>

Zus Bielski, one of the Bielski brothers responsible for the formation of the Bielski *otriad* (battalion), described life before the war under the control of the Soviet Union as tolerable; in his opinion Jews were treated fairly and for the most part equally.<sup>4</sup> Jewish survivors who choose to discuss their prewar lives detail growing up without being aware of anti-Semitism and rather relay wonderful memories of their childhoods.<sup>5</sup> However, on June 22, 1941, when the German Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union thus beginning the war, these wonderful childhood memories turned immediately into memories of fear, oppression, and loss. By August of that same year, German troops had occupied all of Belorussia and ultimately controlled the lives of several more million Jewish people.<sup>6</sup>

The chaos and decimation that accompanied Operation Barbarossa in 1941 led to the collapse of the Red Army, with thousands of soldiers taking refuge in the dense Belorussian woods. Accompanying these soldiers were peasants who lived in the surrounding area and loyal Communist Party members who sought to establish some

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<sup>2</sup> Anika Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of the Nazi Genocide in Belorussia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), "Note on Transliteration and Geopolitical terminology"

<sup>3</sup> Nechama Tec, *Defiance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Zus Bielski, "Zus Bielski Interview - Defiance, the Bielski Otriad, part 2 of 4". Filmed [1987], Youtube Video, 07:15. Posted [October 5, 2013].

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5KrODWTBO8&t=314s>

<sup>5</sup> Some of these testimonies include those of Raisa Brook (Blavatnik Archive) and Maria Gilmovskaya (Blavatnik Archive).

<sup>6</sup> Tim Cole, *Holocaust Landscapes* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 45.

sort of resistance network. By the end of 1942, partisan warfare became an intricate part of the military success of the Soviet Union.

Partisans and Soviet officials recognized that guerilla warfare in this environment would be highly effective due to the topographic layout of the region. Belorussian forests were vastly dense and jungle-like, and the swamps within made the land impenetrable. The impenetrability of the forests allowed the partisans to operate in an area that German troops could not access.<sup>7</sup> According to some survivors, the undergrowth and bush created a more sufficient camouflage than the trees, yet the trees sheltered forest occupants from being noticed by German pilots in the air.<sup>8</sup> The utilization of the natural environment was taken advantage of by the early Soviet partisans and by Jews who chose to go into hiding.

At the same time that Red Army soldiers were escaping to the forests, Jewish men, women, and children were also taking shelter there. Although there is a rich body of scholarship on the Soviet partisan movement, scholarship on Jewish involvement in partisan activity and the survival of Jewish family camps in the forests has only begun to develop. Two historical categories of analysis in regards to the Jewish partisan movement, gender and commemoration, have gone largely unexplored by historians thus far. I argue that studying topics of gender within the context of the partisan movement in the Soviet Union, especially in the BSSR, as well as examining the increase of contemporary recognition and commemorative projects in the West and in

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<sup>7</sup> John A. Armstrong, *Soviet Partisans in WWII*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Cole, 52.

Russia allow scholars to better understand a more individualized Jewish experience and expose how political power influences social memory.

### **The Historiography of Jewish Resistance in the East**

The first publication on the topic of Jewish partisans in the Soviet Union was *Partisan Brotherhood (Partizanska Druzhba)*. The book, published in 1948, was a compilation of documents originally prepared by non-Jewish Soviet partisan commanders who described their experiences with the Jewish fighters in their units.<sup>9</sup> The documents were collected by editors of Der Emes (“The Truth” in Yiddish) Publishing House and the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee.<sup>10</sup> The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (J AFC) worked to gain support and acceptance of Jewish involvement and resistance against the Nazis and after the war quickly worked to provide a non-Jewish audience with documented proof of Jewish involvement in the Soviet war effort.<sup>11</sup> According to Jack Nusan Porter, the J AFC did not have enough time to completely issue the book before the Soviet state began abolishing Jewish cultural programs. Active members of the J AFC were allegedly murdered by the state, and the Der Emes Publishing House was closed. Before its closure in 1948, however, *Partisan Brotherhood* was published in a limited edition manuscript.<sup>12</sup> *Partisan Brotherhood* is the first example of political interruption in the history of Jewish resistance in the USSR.

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<sup>9</sup> Jack Nusan Porter, *Jewish Partisans: A Documentary of Jewish Resistance in the Soviet Union During WWII, Volume I*, (New York: University Press of America, 1975), ix.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

In the West, major projects on the study of partisan warfare in the Soviet Union were motivated by the Cold War. After the end of World War II, the United States government funded Project Alexander, a research program that was to be implemented by the War Documentation Project (A.F Contract 18[600]-1) and under contract with the United States Air Force. John A. Armstrong's 1964 book, *Soviet Partisans in WWII*, was not only a product of Project Alexander, but it was also a product of the Cold War and was therefore shaped by the moment of history in which it was created. Based on a group of studies that included other important scholars, such as Fritz T. Epstein and Kurt DeWitt, who were hired by the Department of Defense to study and research the Soviet partisan movement, the book is part of a larger examination of Soviet military activity during the Second World War.<sup>13</sup> The focus of this study, as well as many others produced in the 1960s, was motivated by American military interests in the Soviet Union during the height of the Cold War.

Armstrong's book was a major contribution to the field because of its use of captured German and Soviet sources at the end of the war and the in-depth description of the Soviet partisan structure. A major criticism of his work though, is the lack of discussion regarding the contributions made towards the Soviet partisan movement by the Jews living in the region. The only times that the book considers the Jewish population living in the Soviet east can be found in discussions of how they were impacted by the partisans in the region and used as sources of propaganda. This follows suit with other military historians who do little to work against the myth of Jewish passivity by simply leaving the Jewish narrative out.

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<sup>13</sup> Armstrong, vii.

Historians of the 1950s, while focused on structural and military histories of the partisan movement, also became interested in anti-partisan warfare. Historian Ben Shepherd details the changing historiography from directly after the war to more recent works. He explains that in the years following the war, historians examined the Wehrmacht (the general term for all fighting armies of the German military) and concluded it to be a 'clean' institution separated from the crimes committed by the Nazis. Whether this was determined by Western historians due to the lack of sources or because of the relationship with former military officers in the new West German state, the role of the Wehrmacht was not acknowledged as a criminal one.

Responses in the 1960s were certainly critical and have since centered on the extent of the Wehrmacht's involvement in Nazi crimes, which includes the annihilation of Jewish people believed to be involved with Soviet partisan units.<sup>14</sup> There is growing historiography on the Wehrmacht's involvement in anti-partisan warfare in relationship to the plans for systematic genocide. Ironically, this debate is once again focused on the perpetrators, and while acknowledging that Jews did participate in partisan activity in Belorussia, there is a lack of agency given to Jews as historical actors instead of mere victims.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time John A. Armstrong began his research for the Department of Defense, Raul Hilberg published his book, *Destruction of the European Jews*, in 1961.

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<sup>14</sup> Ben Shepherd, "The Clean Wehrmacht, The War of Extermination, and Beyond," *The Historical Journal* 52, no. 2 (2009), 456.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of this growing body of scholarship on anti-partisan warfare include Ben Shepherd's *War in the Wild East* and "War in a Twilight World: Partisan and Anti-Partisan Warfare in Eastern Europe, 1939-45," and Waitman W. Beorn's article, "A Calculus of Complicity: The Wehrmacht, the Anti-Partisan War, and The Final Solution in White Russia, 1941-42."

Hilberg's controversial work fits into a larger trend surrounding the historiography that centers around the perpetrators rather than the victims. He clearly articulates his view of the Jewish position during the Holocaust and argues that Jews ultimately chose not to resist the Germans. Since 1961, a multitude of publications have confronted Hilberg's analysis; in his article, *Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust*, Michael R. Marrus condemns Hilberg's analysis and contends that Hilberg blames the victim for their own destruction. Hilberg writes, "The Jews were not oriented toward resistance. They took up resistance only in a few cases, locally, and at the last moment."<sup>16</sup> He goes on to say that Jewish armed resistance was insignificant and that although there were indeed Jewish partisans fighting in the east, German casualties amounted to less than one hundred and therefore the German destructive process went uninterrupted.<sup>17</sup>

Frequently mentioned with Hilberg in the historiography due to their comparable viewpoints on Jewish resistance is German philosopher and political theorist, Hannah Arendt. Both Hilberg and Arendt's works do little to refute the myth that the Jews went to their deaths without opposition. Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, brought great controversy to the Jewish community in both the United States and in Israel, especially because Arendt herself was Jewish. Her viewpoints on the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann expand into claims regarding the lack of resistance on behalf of the Jews in Europe, in fact she argues that the Jews, especially heads of

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<sup>16</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1961), 663.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 663.

the *Judenräte*, had a substantial effect in assisting and collaborating with the Nazis in their own destruction.<sup>18</sup>

Marrus, while discussing these two influential scholars, says that while they are often linked (he himself talks about Hilberg in relationship to the work of Arendt), they are different. While Arendt does little to support the efforts of the Jewish resistance, she does acknowledge that there were those who did resist, and those few were given respect and admiration in her work. On the other hand, Hilberg argues that the Jewish people of Europe had a submissiveness so natural and engrained in their psyches that they were absolutely helpless.<sup>19</sup> It can be argued that a great number of works produced in the aftermath of these two publications, *Destruction of the European Jews* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, were done in an attempt to refute the claims made by Hilberg and Arendt and were motivated by a strong sense of purpose, opposition, and emotion.

Bruno Bettelheim, a Jewish political prisoner of Dachau and Buchenwald in the late 1930s, is often grouped together with Arendt and Hilberg in historiographical analyses. After being rescued from imprisonment by an American supporter in 1939, Bettelheim established himself as a prominent psychoanalyst in the United States. His publications in 1943 and again in the early 1960s explore his time in German concentration camps, and he emphasizes the docile nature of the prisoners whom he describes as a general group rather than identifying specific individual's religions or

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<sup>18</sup> Michael R. Marrus, "Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 1 (1995), 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

ethnicities.<sup>20</sup> His analysis of Jewish behavior during the Holocaust includes general conclusions based on his individual experience.

As the Soviet Union began the transformation towards a less censored and more open political and social atmosphere, scholarship in the United States underwent a change as well. While there were many historians and scholars who made claims that Jews did little or nothing to resist German atrocities, there were also a great number of historians who sought to prove this false and were able to make these arguments with the use of once unattainable Soviet documents. Jack Nusan Porter's *Jewish Partisans*, an edition of the 1948 *Partisan Brotherhood*, includes the documents originally compiled for the 1948 version and is written and presented in various editions of the English, Russian, and Hebrew languages. Aimed at both a Jewish and non-Jewish audience, Porter's book claims to be both a literary document as well as a historical account of the efforts of Jews to resist Nazi oppression in the USSR.<sup>21</sup>

Porter's motivations for expanding on the 1948 version are clear. He introduces the book by once again acknowledging the myth of passivity and argues that the motivation for the book is to "set the record straight."<sup>22</sup> He then thanks the Red Army for the liberation of his parents, who fought as Jewish partisans, showing the reader the intimate relationship between author and subject. His book seems to fill in one of the gaps left empty by John A. Armstrong; Porter does give a detailed description of the Soviet partisan unit structure and the history behind it, and in doing so includes the estimated 25,000 Jewish partisans that fought in the Soviet Union.

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<sup>20</sup> Tec, *Resistance*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Porter, ix.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.



Porter includes himself in the scholarly debate of earlier historiography, detailing the arguable flaws in Hilberg, Arendt, and Bettelheim's claims on the subject. He includes a quote from Holocaust survivor and historian Ruth Kunzer, who responded to Hilberg, Arendt, and Bettelheim's works by arguing that their belief that the Jews "failed" to fight back without regards to their lack of weapons or cooperation from their Christian neighbors stems from their own suffering from a "failure of imagination."<sup>23</sup> Porter elaborates more on this by stating that this "failure of imagination" is a failure to accept that the most important question is not why there was such little resistance, but why there was so much resistance in the face of absolute destruction.<sup>24</sup>

In his 1979 book, *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness*, Historian and former head of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Yehuda Bauer points out the importance of resistance during the gradual emergence of the Jewish people from total political powerlessness.<sup>25</sup> In the second part the book, Bauer explains forms of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust and explores how other historians have defined resistance. He notes the definitions of Henri Michel and Raul Hilberg, whose interpretations are notably different. Bauer explains that Hilberg argues Jewish armed resistance to be the only legitimate form of Nazi opposition while Henri Michel defines resistance as the maintenance of self-respect. Bauer's own definition of resistance can be understood as "any group action consciously taken in opposition to known or surmised laws, actions, or intentions directed against the Jews by the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>25</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 1.

Germans and their supporters;” he does not agree with Michel or Hilberg, and claims that their definitions and descriptions, especially Hilberg’s, are historically inaccurate.<sup>26</sup>

In a more recent publication of Bauer’s, *The Death of the Shtetl*, he examines the region from 1939-1941 with an ethnographic emphasis. He asks research questions such as: “What was the nature of the Judenräte, and what options were available to them?” He also asks the important question of whether there was a resistance that based its ideals on keeping the shtetl and community alive despite a Nazi threat.<sup>27</sup> What is important to gain from this book is Bauer’s views on the limits of historical analysis. In the preface Bauer argues, “To deal with only stories or only historical analysis is unsatisfactory in the extreme. Real history combines both.”<sup>28</sup>

Similar to the broader definition of resistance given by Yehuda Bauer is that of Lester Eckman and Chaim Lazar. Resistance, according to these scholars, is something that can be physical or spiritual. Published in 1977, *The Jewish Resistance: The History of the Jewish Partisans in Lithuania and White Russia During the Nazi Occupation 1940-1945*, provides the definition of resistance as “an act by an individual Jew or group of Jews who undertook to resist the Nazis passively or actively in acts of moral, spiritual, economic, cultural, political or military nature in the preservation of the honor of the Jewish people and their Torah and culture.”<sup>29</sup> The motivation for this book

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<sup>26</sup> Bauer, *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl*, vii. Also in the preface Bauer thanks his late friend, Raul Hilberg. Interestingly, he lightheartedly makes mention of their relationship of disagreements and criticisms, which Bauer says that he will greatly miss.

<sup>29</sup> Lester Eckman and Chaim Lazar, *The Jewish Resistance: The History of the Jewish Partisans in Lithuania and White Russia During the Nazi Occupation 1940-1945*, (New York: Shengold Publishers, Inc, 1977), 6.

is frankly stated in the introduction when the authors write, “Too many people have labeled as cattle or sheep the six million Jews who died in the Holocaust. It is our goal to prove to our children and grandchildren that this is a false assumption.”<sup>30</sup>

The book is unique because of the way these authors approach the history of Jewish resistance and the adversity for which Jews attempted to overcome at the beginning of the war. They argue that historically, Jews were the first to deploy partisan warfare first against the Greeks and later against the Romans. The short history of Jewish involvement in partisan activity discusses Napoleon, the American Revolution, and then leads up to the Second World War, where Jews were once again among the first to take up partisan warfare in the forests of Eastern Europe. This book is also unique because it places great importance in the understanding of the Torah and Jewish culture as a way to argue against the myth of passivity; for example, the authors contend that the reader must understand the religious concept of one Jew being responsible for a fellow Jew in order to grasp the frequently asked question of why Jews did not resist. Often, the fear of group punishment was a factor in submission. Lazar and Eckman go into great detail about the difficulties Jews faced in attempting to resist, such as the establishment of the Judenräte system and the idea that Jews did not have “warlike traditions” embedded in their culture.<sup>31</sup>

Eckman and Lazar’s book on family camps and illegal forest dwellings in Lithuania and Belorussia essentially serves as a precursor to Nechama Tec’s book *Defiance*. Tec, Holocaust scholar and Professor Emerita of Sociology at the University

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 15.

of Connecticut, is a prominent intellectual in the field who has fought against the myth of passivity with multiple publications. Her works include *Defiance* (1993), *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (2003), and *Resistance: Jews and Christians who Defied the Nazi Terror* (2013), and are motivated by questions frequently asked of her during her lectures on Jewish annihilation: “Why did the Jews refuse to fight?” or “Why did the Jews submit so passively to the German assaults upon their dignity and their lives?”<sup>32</sup>

The best understanding of Tec’s idea of resistance comes from her book, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust*. In her chapter on resistance, Tec states that the most useful definition of resistance during this time is one that “sees it as activities motivated by the desire to thwart, limit, undermine, or end the exercise of oppression over the oppressed.”<sup>33</sup> In her summary of the historiography of resistance, Tec recognizes that most scholars conclude that there were resistance movements of various degrees in every Nazi-occupied country. She reflects back to historian Henri Michel whose argument that different aspects of Nazi oppression, like economic exploitation and the severity of violence, were what developed the resistance movements across Europe. In other words, the motivations for resistance differed in areas across Europe because Nazi violence and annihilation policy differed throughout occupied territories.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Tec, *Resistance*, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 261.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

In the 2000s, there is a notable pattern that scholars began spending less time describing the myth of passivity and slowly began focusing on individuals; this was made possible partly because of the collapse of the Soviet Union a decade prior and the subsequent opening of archives. A modern consensus appears in Western scholarship in which Jewish resistance efforts did exist and were indeed impactful, and with this a shift to social and culture methods in order to explore specific partisan units or individual people has occurred. In 2009 Yehuda Bauer stated, “We know that Jews were murdered – for that we do not need more research.”<sup>35</sup> Rather than focusing on general structure of the partisan units or the various theories behind resistance, the following historians have used their works to humanize and individualize Jewish experiences in the forest and present readers with cultural histories.

*Defiance* is one of these scholarly works that both examines the foundations of the partisan movement and uses the leadership and social identity of Tuvia Bielski and his brothers in order to present a more intimate narrative. *Defiance* is a rich secondary source that provides a blending of personal testimony with structural and cultural material on Jewish partisan groups. The main partisan group that Nechama Tec uses for this historical analysis is the Bielski otriad, a family camp lead by Tuvia Bielski, a Jewish native of Stankiewicze. Using the example of the Bielski otriad, Tec persists against the rumored passive nature of the Jewish people and argues that although a “partisan law” existed throughout the Soviet partisan network that was linked to the Jewish partisan network, the Bielski brothers were able to use their upbringings,

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<sup>35</sup> Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl*, 2.

knowledge of the land, and their past experiences and relationships with Christian peasants to overcome in ways other family camps could not.

Freelance journalist Peter Duffy continues Tec's analysis of the Bielski otriad in his 2003 book, *The Bielski Brothers*. Duffy provides his readers with a much deeper narrative surrounding the family life of the Bielskis before, during, and after WWII. Interestingly, he was able to reassemble the presumed emotions and actions of brothers Tuvia, Zus, and Aron Bielski during the crucial war years using their memoirs, documents, and photographs. He interviewed the widows of the brothers, and details an experience finding a book-length manuscript written by Tuvia Bielski which was hidden from his wife and family.<sup>36</sup> As Tec focused on the Bielski brothers and their roles in the structure of the partisan movement, Duffy centers on the brothers more as individuals.

Sara Bender does a similar work in her article, "Life Stories as Testament and Memorial: The Short Life of Neqama Battalion." Here, Bender investigates the relationship between an independent revenge partisan unit comprised of Jews, the Neqama battalion, and the Soviet partisan units that dominated much of the Belorussian forests by 1943. Using survivor testimony and memoirs, Bender also provides a social history of the Jewish partisan movement and does so by observing how survivors describe their daily lives and duties. She makes an interesting note early in her article where she reflects on the research barriers that she encountered. She states,

...while archival material was found in the Belorussian Partisans Archive in Minsk, in which the battalions that included Jewish fighters are mentioned and the fighters' names are separately noted, no evidence came to light on separatist partisan activity on the part of the Jews in the Narocz forest. Thus, the scholar

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Duffy, *The Bielski Brothers* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), xiii.

who seeks to portray the everyday life of the Jewish partisans in the forests must rely on the testimonies and memoirs of surviving partisans.”<sup>37</sup>

The research barriers Bender describes are partly a result of silences created by the Soviet state in an effort to efface Jewish involvement in the war. The complications that Bender faced during her research process are not uncommon and are apparent in various works as historians continue to recognize the unexplored yet necessary histories.

An example of one historian that works to recover the history of a traditionally silenced group is Anika Walke. Walke’s 2015 book, *Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia*, uncovers important silences within the historiography surrounding Jewish children. She uses “three analytical dimensions”: age and gender, identity and memory, and trauma and community, in order to provide an inside perspective on the life of Jewish children during the Nazi occupation of Belorussia. Her study is significant because of her method; Walke uses more than one hundred video and interview testimonies that she began collecting after the fall of the Soviet Union around 1991 to explore how social change impacts the way narratives are shaped.<sup>38</sup> I believe her work is part of a gradual change in historical methodology towards the seriousness and growing valued importance of oral histories, diaries, and memoirs.

Memory work in the context of World War II is often argued through oral histories, and more recently this method has gained increased credibility from the academic

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<sup>37</sup> Sara Bender, “Life Stories as Testament and Memorial” *East European Jewish Affairs* (Routledge Publishing) 42, no. 1 (2012), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans*, 35.

community. In his article, "Ten Jewish Red Army Veterans of the Great Patriotic War," Roger Reese argues that despite the claims made by historians who criticize the recent growth in works using oral history, there is no single representative experience that historians can use to make generalizations about World War II in the Soviet Union. He argues that "every veterans voice adds to our knowledge of the war and how it is remembered and portrayed."<sup>39</sup> His methodology is interesting because he uses a small sample of testimony, arguing that the larger and more diverse a group is, the more difficult it will be to notice a clear representative voice or consensus; partly because there are too many variables. In the case of Jewish Red Army soldiers, the variables, such as gender, class, and nationality, create particularly complex experiences and interpretations.

### **Contributing to a Larger Discussion**

Through a survey of the historiography surrounding Jewish resistance in the Soviet Union during the Second World War, there are two areas in particular that lack scholarly attention. The first of these silences is the experiences of Jewish women who participated in both the Soviet partisan movement and in the Jewish partisan units and family camps. Although most Jewish women in the forests were dependent on men for survival, they served as active and integral participants of the partisan movement in Belorussia.

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<sup>39</sup> Roger Reese, "Ten Jewish Red Army Veterans of the Great Patriotic War: In Search of the Mythical Representative Soldier's Story," in *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27 (2014), 421.



Using Roger Reese's method of utilizing a small sample to explore experiences, I will use oral histories, testimony, and memoirs to explore the lives of Jewish women who escaped persecution in the forest. I use the oral history projects of the Blavatnik Archive, the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, and the USC Shoah Foundation in order to obtain narratives and identify common themes and distinct variants of what prior historians have determined to be general experiences. In order to begin to understand women's experiences, I will examine video testimony and oral histories of Jewish women who participated in the Soviet partisan movement and in the Jewish partisans and family camps.<sup>40</sup> I also compare these testimonies with Jewish women who fought in the Red Army. In doing so, I will argue that not only did Jewish men and women experience the war and the Holocaust differently, but Jewish women also had very different experiences, even within the same part of the Soviet Union. Further, this argument aids in my attempt to show that the Holocaust was not genderless, and in fact, a person's fate was strongly determined by their sex.

The second area that lacks historical attention is how the postwar Soviet state used memory politics to create a unique war narrative that has since left a profound legacy on contemporary Russian commemoration. Additionally, the recent creation of museums and online archives in the West and in Russia to commemorate and preserve the memory of Jewish involvement in the Second World War is notable and requires consideration. Because there are more Western online archives and museums on the topic of Jewish partisans, I will also use early Soviet war films to identify motivations and

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<sup>40</sup> Many Jewish family camps were also defined as Jewish partisan units, because of their supervision and forced participation with the larger Soviet partisan movement beginning in 1942. I use the terms Jewish family camp and Jewish partisan unit interchangeably.

methods of the Soviet state to mold a particular war narrative that excluded Jewish participation. As I will show, while Western museums and online archives, like the Blavatnik Archive founded in 2005 and the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation created in 2000, serve to educate and provide students and scholars with narratives that have otherwise been silenced, Russian museums and archives surrounding topics of Jewish involvement in the war only slightly attribute individual suffering to the Soviet Jewish population. The Jewish experience is incorporated in a much larger Soviet experience that details the suffering of all Soviet people, not only Jewish people. The universalization policy enacted by Stalin has evolved through years of social and political change in Russia, but can still be recognized under the Presidency of Vladimir Putin.

The two silences that I address in this thesis are integral to a global understanding of human experiences in World War II. My contribution to the historiography combines the use of oral histories, survivor testimony, and museums and archives as both primary and secondary sources in order to prioritize the study of gender and commemoration.

## The Silencing of a Gendered Resistance

It was early morning, and a group of women and girls led by armed guards to their execution passed me. One of the girls turned around and looked straight into my eyes. Her gaze meant a farewell, but it also conveyed a sacred message: do not forget!<sup>41</sup>

Since the end of the war, the position of women during the Holocaust has been largely presented as a genderless experience. Regardless of their sex, Jews were thought to have witnessed the same atrocities, felt the same emotions, and were persecuted equally. Prior to the 1980s, gender and the Holocaust as a topic of historical inquiry was deemed by many historians to be irrelevant because of the Nazi objective to annihilate all Jewish people, regardless of age or gender. Although historians have considered the position of women during the Holocaust since the 1970s, Zoë Waxman's 2017 book places the position of women who experienced the Holocaust outside of the important, but limited roles of mother and caregiver. Waxman argues against the assumption that men's experiences, not women's, were normative and could reveal more about the Holocaust. She states that although gender has been recently included in Holocaust studies, it has often remained a sub-field of history, one that often valorized the woman's experience in order to make the narrative more appealing.<sup>42</sup> This is notable in the scholarship on Soviet women who participated in the war effort.

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<sup>41</sup> Foreword by Simon Wiesenthal, Edited and with an Introduction by Vera Laska, *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses*, (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1983), xi.

<sup>42</sup> Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.

There has been far more work done on Soviet women fighters during World War II than there is on Jewish women partisan fighters, and these histories often reflect Waxman's claim that gendered histories have the tendency to homogenize and valorize the women's experience. Two prominent works on Soviet women who participated in military activity and warfare during World War II are those of Anna Krylova and Australian scholars Roger D. Markwick and Euridice Charon Cardona. While both books take on the idea of gender as a separate category of historical analysis and include the roles of Soviet women involved in partisan activity and guerilla warfare, neither include the roles of Jewish women in either the Soviet partisan units or in the Jewish partisan units.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, while these books do provide an idea of the amount of agency Soviet women held during wartime, they also give a valorized history common to this kind of scholarship.

Jewish women, on the other hand, still do not receive the appropriate amount of scholarly attention that I argue would expand and benefit historical discourse of the Holocaust and the Second World War in the east. Joan Ringelheim, arguably the first to advocate for scholarship on the subject, used oral histories and survivor testimony in the 1970s and 1980s to connect sexual assault victims of the Holocaust to scholarly Holocaust discourse.<sup>44</sup> When listening to women survivors speak about their experiences, Ringelheim noticed a "split memory." Split memory was and continues to be problematic because it means the survivor's memory is conflicted between how they

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<sup>43</sup> See Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (2010) and Roger D. Markwick and Euridice Charon Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War* (2012).

<sup>44</sup> Joan Ringelheim, "Genocide and Gender: A Split Memory," in *Gender and Catastrophe*, ed. Ronit Lentin (New York: Zed Books Ltd, 1997), 20.

remember their own personal experiences and how they perceive traditional Holocaust history, which mostly excludes topics such as sexual violence against women.

Ringelheim's groundbreaking study using the oral histories of survivors allowed for a growing acceptance in the 1980s for untraditional examinations of gender in the Holocaust.

Vera Laska's introduction to the 1983 book, *Women in the Resistance and Holocaust*, objects to the early historiography of Jewish resistance that excludes the important role women took part in resistance efforts. She too acknowledges the myth that Jews submitted to the Germans without a fight, but her analysis differs because she not only includes the terrors women faced in the camps and in the forests of the occupied Soviet Union, but she also introduces sex as a category of analysis. Laska talks about the abuses against homosexual males and lesbian women who were captured by the Germans and put into concentration camps. She brings forth topics like sexual relationships, prostitution, and rape, and uses these topics to reach an audience with a raw historical narrative that has otherwise been silenced. She ends her introduction with, "We the women who speak to you from these pages have one goal: to tell it as it was, to leave behind a reminder that we were there and saw Satan's realm."<sup>45</sup> The topics and narratives that she chooses to present to the audience are important to her because they prove that Jewish women and men were persecuted and mistreated in ways that were not entirely equal.

Nechama Tec also confronts the historiographical absence of the relationship between the genocide and gender. Using testimony from women survivors in the

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<sup>45</sup> Laska, "Introduction," 40.

research of her 1993 book, *Defiance*, Tec was better able to see the distinction between the experiences of men and women living illegally in the forests of Western Belorussia. She explains that Jewish women inserted themselves into both the Soviet partisan units as well as the Jewish units and family camps in ways that were perhaps untraditional at the time. However, she ultimately comes to the conclusion that the forest setting helped to strengthen patriarchal social patterns because of the strong reliance Jewish women had on men.<sup>46</sup>

Although there is a significant shift in the historiography that is beginning to reveal more uncomfortable or taboo historical topics, there is still the prominent assumption that Holocaust experiences were gender neutral. Even though common themes can be identified within female survivor testimony, such as the concept of forest relationships between men and women, these are viewed by survivors through different opinions and judgments. I argue that Jewish women in the Soviet Union not only experienced the Holocaust differently from Jewish men, but depending on their role as partisan or soldier, their experiences differed greatly from one another as well.

### **Memory Politics and the Commemoration of Jewish Resistance**

The transmission of past events, especially traumatic events, into the present causes room for misinterpretation and sometimes further silencing. In this thesis I will use oral histories and survivor testimony to argue that the way survivors remember their experiences is heavily impacted by memory politics. Political memory is explained by Jenny Edkins as how power dynamics of nations or states work to impact the memory

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<sup>46</sup> Tec, "Women in the Forest," *Contemporary Jewry* 17, no. 1 (1996): 44.

of an event such as a genocide or war.<sup>47</sup> She argues that in many cases, a government or person in political power can take advantage of the aftermath of a traumatic event in order to shape a narrative. I argue in this section that memory politics played a large part in how Jewish veterans and survivors were treated after the Second World War in the Soviet Union, and how their experiences were incorporated into a larger, universalist policy to prevent a separate Jewish victim group and therefore silencing the Jewish narrative.

Modern commemoration of Jewish partisans in the West and in Russia can be best understood by exploring the history of political memory. Interestingly, despite the wide scale of publications on resistance, the partisan movement, and memory, scholars have yet to examine the new wave of commemoration of the Jewish partisan movement that extends beyond the United States. New museums and archives have been rapidly appearing in the past twenty years, and this is telling of how people have chosen to remember the movement and ascribe importance to its preservation. In this thesis, I use online museums and archives as both primary and secondary sources in order to explore the ways Jewish resistance is memorialized globally. I also use these online sources in order to identify what is left out, and these silences are often as telling as what the sources do include.

Much of the historiography on memory politics reveals close ties with the building of nationhood and collective trauma. In her article, "Introduction 'Remembering' War," Joanna Bourke seeks to add her own contribution to the discourse on historical and

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<sup>47</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

collective memory by discussing how personal inner conflict interrupts and challenges the relaying of memory. Bourke states, "The chasm between memory and history is not only narrow, it is wholly imaginary in places. Private memory not only contributes to history, but it also takes some of its knowledges from history."<sup>48</sup> Bourke also discusses the idea that postwar traumas and the narrations of those traumas are conflicted by feelings of survivor's guilt. She uses psychoanalytic methods to express this point which is interesting when thinking about the motivations and experiences of Bruno Bettelheim.<sup>49</sup>

Dominick LaCapra's 1998 book, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, focuses on interactions between history, memory, and ethical concerns that stem from the aftermath of the Holocaust.<sup>50</sup> LaCapra takes a very theoretical approach to the interplay between memory and history, and argues that memory makes for an excellent historical source. Like Bourke, LaCapra uses fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, like resistance, denial, and repression, in order to separate the individual memory from a collective memory. He concludes with once again the idea of imagination that Ruth Kunzer described while interpreting Arendt and Bettelheim; LaCapra claims that extremely traumatic events, like those perpetrated during the Holocaust, do not allow a person to imagine a certain magnitude of suffering and survival.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Joanna Bourke, "Introduction 'Remembering' War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 4 (2004): 484.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 477.

<sup>50</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.



Also published in the 1990s, *The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust*, details the postwar psychological state of survivors of the Holocaust. Using the testimony of 58 Jewish survivors, Aaron Hass' book regards the emotions and experiences of individuals rather than examining a collective memory. Hass himself approaches the history as a clinical psychologist, but uses historical methodologies in order to spread an understanding of pain and resilience. Hass explores the idea that recounting historical experience can sometimes cause further suffering, he describes how some American Jews met survivors with insensitivity and misunderstanding, asking questions like, "Why didn't you run?" or "Why didn't you fight back?"<sup>52</sup> Hass describes the victim blaming and uneasy interpretation of the fate of Jewish people by Jewish people around the world, and offers an attempt to understand a self identity that grew extremely disharmonized in the 1950s and 1960s.

Straying from psychoanalytic methods in the 1990s, some journalists and academics began writing about the impact that politics had on social memory in an historical context. In 1993, Israeli Journalist Amos Elon published an article on the state of the Arab-Israeli conflict in regards to suppression and the effects of a modern Holocaust consciousness. Titled "The Politics of Memory," Elon's article represents a trend in the historiography beginning around 1990 where the linkage between the past and the present is more recognizable. More recently, Jenny Edkins' book, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, takes Elon's ideas a step further by exploring traumatic events and relating them to questions of commemorations, which she argues reinforces the

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<sup>52</sup> Aaron Hass, *The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 17.

state and nationhood. Viewing memory as a social activity, Edkins uses Marx and Foucault in order to address power relations and “truths.”<sup>53</sup> This is the first work to link testimony and memory with state memorialization and will be an essential source for future scholarship. Edkins recognizes the expansive memorialization of the Holocaust into the twenty-first century and explores the idea of not remembering history as a narrative about the past, but rather remembering the *past*. These works are essential to an interpretation of the impact memory has on history in the context of Jewish resistance.

Indisputably, another place where the politics of memory heavily impacts human understanding of the war is Israel. Tom Segev, whose book *The Seventh Million*, describes how Israeli society urges the preservation of Holocaust memory. Published in 1991, *The Seventh Million* claims to be the first book to document how the Holocaust impacts Israeli identity, culture, and politics. Used by Domick LaCapra and Alfred Rosenfeld in their research, Segev’s book is an important interdisciplinary resource that links the past to the present in important political and cultural ways, such as the implications that Holocaust history has on the attitudes of Israelis and Palestinians who now suffer from their own violent conflict and the ways in which Israel has been treated by the world because of the Holocaust. Israel is not the only country that urges for the memorialization of WWII; of course, the politics of memory is quite a universal concept. For much different reasons, contemporary Russian leadership has also pushed for the nationwide memorialization of the Great Patriotic War.

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<sup>53</sup> Edkins, 52.

Elizabeth A Wood has researched this modern devotion by the Russian government, especially through the efforts of President Vladimir Putin, in order to push for the modernization and unification of Russia. “Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of WWII in Russia” is an essay in which Wood argues that by decisively making WWII the most celebrated historical event of the twentieth century, Putin marks the war as a mythical experience that is “simultaneously timeless and rooted in time.”<sup>54</sup>

This mythical experience is also reflected in the way that Russian leadership portrays the Soviet partisan movement more explicitly. Kenneth Slepyan argues that previous works done on the Soviet partisan movement by Soviet and Russian historians demonstrate that “the partisan movement was an essential part of the mythology of the Great Patriotic War, as World War II was known in the Soviet Union.”<sup>55</sup> He goes on to explain that in almost every history of the war, the Soviet partisan movement was recognized as a patriotic movement in which active members were genuinely and efficiently working towards the goals of the Communist party. I will be examining the origins of the myth of World War II in Russia discussed by Slepyan and Wood in order to understand the contemporary politics behind Holocaust memory in Russia.

As I have argued in this section, scholars since the 1960s have attempted to confront Jewish resistance in the Second World War; many have fought the myth of passivity that was established shortly after the war through extensive research on the many forms of Jewish resistance. By studying the literature done on the Soviet

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<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth A. Wood, “Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of WWII in Russia,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38 (2011), 173.

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Slepyan, *Stalin’s Guerillas: Soviet Partisans in World War II* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2006), 3.

partisans, Jewish partisans, gender studies of the Holocaust, and memory studies in this context, one can begin to see the silences that exist and that have only recently been given attention through commemorative methods, such as newer memorials and museums.

Furthermore, by identifying these silences and linking them to the ways traumatic experiences are recorded and expressed later on, a significant improvement on the ways in which we define and interpret something that is historically “true” can be established and utilized by future scholars. One way of identifying the silences is to look at the memoirs, interview testimony and oral histories, and films that reflect the experiences of the Jewish partisans in order to better understand the historical participants who unquestionably defied Nazi oppression during occupation.

## Chapter Two

### The Holocaust as a Gendered Experience

Warfare is, nevertheless, the one human activity from which women, with the most insignificant exceptions, have always and everywhere stood apart...Women, however, do not fight...If warfare is as old as history and as universal as mankind, we must now enter the supremely important limitation that it is an entirely masculine activity.<sup>56</sup>

To ignore the plight of women is, in reality, to ignore more than half of the Jewish population. And this ignorance is what most of Holocaust history delivers.<sup>57</sup>

Since the 1980s and the rise of feminist scholarship, the role of women in the Holocaust and the Second World War has grown as an interest of historians and has consequently evolved as its own category of historical analysis. Before the 1980s, gender and the Holocaust was thought to be a topic of minor relevance due to the Nazi plan of annihilating all Jewish people, regardless of age or gender. Sub-bodies of scholarship that reflect gender in the Holocaust confront areas such as Jewish women in Nazi concentration and death camps and women who served and provided for the allied military forces. While scholarship centered on Soviet women who participated in active combat during the Second World War is ever-growing, the roles and daily lives of Jewish women in the Red Army and in the resistance and partisan units during the Holocaust is still largely omitted from historical scholarship. Not only were Jewish women marginalized, mistreated by their neighbors, and viciously murdered for being Jewish, but these women were also persecuted and suspected of Nazi collaboration specifically because of their gender. Examining the testimony of Jewish women

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<sup>56</sup> John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 76.

<sup>57</sup> Ringelheim, 25.

combatants in the Soviet partisan movement and female non-combatants in the all Jewish partisan units and family camps with the testimony of Jewish women who fought with the Red Army reveals very different experiences, post-war memories, and traumas that have been left untouched by historians.

It is apparent that scholars cannot agree on the role of Jewish women involved in partisan units. It is interesting that most scholars do however, agree that women in the forest, Jew and gentile, were dependent on men in at least one way whether it be for defense, shelter, or the acquisition of food. While Jewish women did indeed take on domestic roles in these camps, it is clear that they also participated independently from men and were assigned dangerous military roles both in the partisans and in the ranks of the Red Army. Not only were they capable of survival, but they also were proud and capable members of a resistance movement that aimed to destroy and sabotage Nazi efforts of annihilation. Oral testimonies from these different groups of women shows this dependent and independent dialectic and proves it more complicated than just domestic roles and combatant roles.

Instead of attempting to list the many duties of Jewish women combatants and non-combatants, I argue that it more important to understand the many dimensions of everyday life as a Jewish woman in the forests of Nazi-occupied Belorussia. It is important because Holocaust historiography has only begun to recognize how Jewish men and women experienced genocide differently. Understanding daily life for Jewish women in the forests is also important when considering the various ways the Soviet state worked to obscure the participation of women as combatants from history, especially the participation of Jewish women.

It is equally important to consider how the risks for Jewish women in the partisans differed from those in the Red Army. In the West, non-Jewish Soviet women fighters in World War II receive more scholarly attention than Jewish women fighters, and while the histories of Soviet women tend to homogenize and valorize the woman's experience, the history of Jewish women in the forests, much like the the history of Jews in general during the Holocaust, has been presented as story of passivity and dependence. While this dependent force is present in the testimony, there is much more to be said about the sacrifices and dangers that Jewish women were faced with every day in hiding. In her article, "Women in the Forest," Nechama Tec states, "Defined as sex objects, excluded from participation in valued activities, all women in the forest were in dependent positions."<sup>58</sup> Women in the forest were there for many different reasons, and held diverse roles depending on age, skill set, and the condition of her health. While it is true that for Jewish women, life in the partisans was less threatening if there was a connection to a man, claims of absolute dependence can be re-evaluated through a survey of recent oral history projects. Despite prior claims, Jewish women did have opportunities to fight in the Red Army and in the forests as partisans. Yet while there were opportunities, Jewish women in the forests were indeed at the mercy of men regardless of their role as combatant or non-combatant.

Most stories of Jewish women are found not in memoirs or history books, but rather in oral history interviews done by scholars and academic institutions as part of a larger, more recent project to preserve and teach Jewish resistance during the Holocaust, a topic which until the twenty first century has largely been omitted from

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<sup>58</sup> Tec, "Women in the Forest," 39.

historical scholarship. Although they are still few in number, there are more interviews in online archives of Jewish women survivors than there are memoirs or diaries available to historians. Four of these sources in particular, the Blavatnik Archive, the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation (JPEF), the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (VHA), and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), provide scholars with hours of footage of women Holocaust survivors and veterans of the Second World War.<sup>59</sup> Now in the year 2019, the concept of Jewish women participating in World War II as partisans or Red Army soldiers is more widely accepted and recognized. Surprisingly though, these oral interviews, which have been available for at least a decade, have not been used to compare these chosen three categories of testimony in which women take part. By analyzing the narratives of female Jewish partisan combatants in the almost all male Soviet partisan movement and Jewish women family camp members with female Jewish Red Army soldiers, we are better able to understand trauma related to marginalization and dependence, sexual violence, and discrimination in the postwar years.<sup>60</sup> I also argue that the testimonies prove that not only do Jewish women's Holocaust experiences differ from those of Jewish men, but the experiences of Jewish women in the partisans and Jewish women soldiers in the Red Army greatly differ as well.

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<sup>59</sup> Many of these archives refer to women interviewees as veterans of the Great Patriotic War, the Russian name for World War II.

<sup>60</sup> I refer to women in all-Jewish family camps as non-combatant partisans, as most were members of active all-Jewish partisan detachments that by 1943 were integrated into a larger Soviet partisan movement. Although most of these women were not allowed weapons and held domestic duties in the camp, they were still actively resisting the Nazi occupation in countless ways.



### **Marginalization, Motivation, and Second Class Citizenship**

Although many Jewish women volunteered for the army immediately after the Soviet Union was invaded by the Nazis in June of 1941, women were not mobilized into the Red Army until 1942. Within a year, women were integrated into a wide array of services including medical duties, established support roles, and jobs in anti-aircraft defense.<sup>61</sup> One of these women volunteers who worked in anti-aircraft defense was Raisa Brook. Brook was eighteen years old when the district Komsomol Committee began looking for volunteers. A Jewish native of Vitebsk, Brook and her family narrowly escaped capture as the Germans advanced into Belorussia. Perhaps determined to leave the horrific conditions of hiding, Brook was relieved to be called to service on April 9, 1942 with seventy-five other young women. After months of training in an anti-aircraft artillery unit, Brook was sent to junior officer training and shortly after became junior sergeant in charge of commanding the equipment, which included tanks and cannons that were mostly operated by women.<sup>62</sup>

Her interview with the Blavatnik Archive details the many difficulties that her and her female comrades faced in the bitter cold and primitive conditions, such as digging holes to use for toilets. Brook's testimony gives us a small glimpse of what military life was like for a determined young woman trying to prove herself in a patriarchal institution such as the Soviet army. However, the experiences that she chooses to discuss with

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<sup>61</sup> Reina Pennington, "Offensive Women: Women in Combat in the Red Army in the Second World War," *The Journal of Military History* 74, (July 2010): 782.

<sup>62</sup> Raisa Brook, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online on January 15, 2019.

the interviewer may set her apart as a woman, but do not set her apart as a Jewish woman. In fact, the only times she discusses her Jewish upbringing and her experiences with anti-Semitism are when the interviewer asks her specific questions regarding such topics. Perhaps her family was not very religious and therefore she did not find it important to mention that part of her upbringing in the interview. Also, according to her testimony, Brook's identity as a Jewish woman did not play a large part of her time as a member of the Red Army. Only later, when describes the living conditions of her postwar life does she reflect on her Jewishness. Regardless of her intentions, Brook chose to focus her story on other parts of her life, those which she found most integral to her narrative.

The oral testimony of Dora Nemirovskaya gives a similar tone of independence and identity. Nemirovskaya left for the front in May of 1942 and spent her time there rescuing, transporting, and bandaging the wounded. She proudly tells the interviewer many stories about different military operations she was involved in including a situation in 1944 when she lead her company in an attack on the retreating German army.<sup>63</sup> She spends much of the interview accompanying these stories with documents and letters that she received from her comrades after the war. One of the letters read, "Dear Dora Matveyevna, I was just recalling the events of 50 years ago. We were at the front and I saw a small pillbox dug out near the railroad embankment. The door is just a poncho and you are sitting inside drying undershirts, trying to tuck your feet in from the cold. Next to you are your huge military boots. I again saw a young Jewish girl who was

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<sup>63</sup> Dora Nemirovskaya, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online on January 16, 2019.

ready to lay down her life for her fellow soldiers at any moment.”<sup>64</sup> Only when it was mentioned by others did Nemirovskaya choose to discuss how her Jewish identity impacted her time during the war. She felt proud that as a young Jewish girl she was able to save numerous lives at the front. Nemirovskaya makes it clear that the men in her unit were proud to serve next to her, and in doing so she emphasizes her ability to overcome and thrive in an environment that historians now recognize as hostile and anti-Semitic in many cases. Even though she does not discuss her Jewish identity in detail, the mention of her own strength and acceptance from the men in her unit prove her capable of overcoming prejudices that undoubtedly existed throughout the ranks of the Red Army.

At the same time that Jewish women like Nemirovskaya and Brook were volunteering for the front, other women were making plans to escape the ghetto and join partisan units in the forests. By 1943, Soviet partisans in Belorussia were actively carrying out acts of sabotage and participating in guerilla warfare against the Nazi invaders. Some surrounding Jewish family camps, such as the Bielski unit, fought alongside and provided resources to the much larger Soviet partisan movement in order to prove themselves as valuable participants in the Soviet war effort.<sup>65</sup>

Jewish units like the Bielski otriad were far more accepting of women. Because the Bielski otriad was the largest armed rescue effort of Jews by Jews, men, women, children, and the elderly were all welcome into the forest camp. Gender roles were much more traditional when it came to duties in the Bielski camp due to the large and

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<sup>64</sup> Dora Nemirovskaya, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online on January 16, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Tec, “Women in the Forest,” 37.

very diverse group of people. One preeminent scholar of the Bielski otriad, Nechama Tec, writes that, “Bowling to tradition, the men handled the acquisition of food while the women prepared the meals.”<sup>66</sup> There were other sorts of gender separations that occurred, for example if a Jewish woman who owned a weapon arrived at the Bielski camp, that weapon would be confiscated and given to a man since women were not allowed on food expeditions or raids. While some women were relieved to be rid of frightening responsibilities, others did in fact complain to their superiors about the confiscation.<sup>67</sup>

Many female partisans do agree that there was a substantial amount of gendered marginalization happening in the forest when it came to responsibilities, yet they often relay their experiences through proud and brave voices nonetheless. Often for female Jewish partisans, these proud memories are relayed in order to confront the myth of Jewish passivity that the survivors recognize to be present in the decades following the war and continue into the modern day. Survivor Fela Abramowicz tells the USC Shoah Foundation in her interview that she was motivated to escape the ghetto because she was aware of the almost certain outcome of the Jews and did not want to be lead to her death without a fight.<sup>68</sup> Abramowicz successfully escaped a Belorussian ghetto and lived out the rest of the war as a non-combatant member of the Bielski partisan unit. Maria Gilmovskaya, a Jewish woman who fought with the Soviet partisans in Belorussia, acknowledges the myth of Jewish passivity and confronts it directly in her

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<sup>66</sup> Tec, *Defiance*, 55.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>68</sup> Fela Abramowicz, Interview, Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, Accessed online on Jan 20, 2019.

interview when she explains why she chose to escape from the ghetto in the town of Mir. She says, "...but we decided we would not [be] slaughtered like sheep, but would instead arm ourselves."<sup>69</sup>

Maria Gilmovskaya offered similar testimony about her decision to join the partisans. Gilmovskaya was born into a wealthy Jewish family in the town of Mir in Western Belorussia.<sup>70</sup> When the first pogrom occurred in January of 1941, the remaining Jews of Mir were forced into ghettoization in the Mir Castle, where she describes the living situation as brutal. In the Mir Castle, Gilmovskaya met two other young women and recognizing that they would be eventually killed, they chose to arm themselves with the help of a Jewish man who disguised himself as a German. With this man's help, one hundred capable prisoners, mostly young men and women, were able to dig a tunnel and escape the castle before the final action was to take place on August 22, 1942.<sup>71</sup>

After she and her comrades had established themselves in the forest and connected with other, more stable partisan units, Gilmovskaya was placed into a saboteur unit where she participated in the "Railroad War." Here, she grew exceptionally talented at planting mines under train tracks in order to prevent the German army from advancing further east.<sup>72</sup> Gilmovskaya's role in the partisan movement is unique, as many Jewish women were not allowed entry into Soviet

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<sup>69</sup> Maria Gilmovskaya, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online on January 15, 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Before 1939, the town of Mir was part of Poland.

<sup>71</sup> Maria Gilmovskaya, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online on January 15, 2019.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

partisan units. If they were granted entry, it was usually because they agreed to be the sexual partner of a partisan officer. For those like Gilmovskaya who did not agree to such “partnerships,” having a skill like nursing or cooking could be enough for acceptance into a detachment.<sup>73</sup> Partisan Galina Yaroslavovna Dubovik adds to this skillset the necessity for “boldness, desperateness of character.”<sup>74</sup> A woman had to prove herself worthy and deserving of duties other than those of the domestic sort. She states,

I carry a handheld machine gun on my shoulder...I'll never admit it's heavy. Otherwise who would keep me as number two? Inadequate fighter, to be replaced. They'd send me to the kitchen. That's a disgrace. God forbid I should spend the whole war in the kitchen. I'd just cry...<sup>75</sup>

Faye Schulman's testimony also described the need for women to prove themselves to male partisans. Schulman was just nineteen years old when all but five families in the Jewish community in her town, Lenin, were murdered. After escaping the ghetto and fleeing to the woods, she joined the Molotava Brigade, made up of mostly Red Army soldiers who had also escaped and were re-grouping.<sup>76</sup> After begging to take revenge for the murder of her family and the occupation of her town, the commander allowed her to join the unit. She recalls a time after initially joining the partisans that exemplifies how women struggled to prove themselves physically capable; she says, “Though I could speak Russian perfectly I was afraid to ask how much longer we had to

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<sup>73</sup> Tec, “Women in the Forest,” 40.

<sup>74</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Random House Publishing, 2017), 205.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>76</sup> Faye Schulman, *A Partisan's Memoir: Woman of the Holocaust* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995), 16.

walk. I was now part of the Soviet partisans and I know that in the Soviet Union one didn't ask too many questions. I knew I was being watched to determine my fitness."<sup>77</sup> Schulman would go on to participate in many attacks on German posts and destroy bridges and supply lines to enemy troops.<sup>78</sup>

Another Jewish partisan, Vitka Kempner, states in her interview with the JPEF that while the conditions made it near impossible for women to participate as active fighters, there were opportunities. "The Soviet partisans did not appreciate that women could fight," she says. She then goes on to describe an example of why some of these opportunities only reinforced the Soviet partisan's argument that women were not meant for combat, "When we'd go to blow up a train, we'd have to carry many kilograms of T.N.T. So, for a woman it was it was really difficult to walk for fifty kilometers with the T.N.T. So the task would fall on the men, who then, would have to take more. So our own people did not want to go with women, not just Soviets."<sup>79</sup> Kemper escaped the Vilna ghetto to the partisans, and in 1942, she and one another Jewish woman took part in a sabotage operation that derailed and destroyed a German train engine near Wilejka. Like Gilmovskaya, Kemper became skilled at placing mines under trains to disrupt German communication and transportation lines. However, Gilmovskaya and Kemper may have only been included in these missions due to the state of the partisan movement in its early stages. Tec explains, "In the forests around Bialystok and Vilna the participation of women in what were traditionally regarded as masculine roles was

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>79</sup> Vitka Kempner, Interview segment in film, "Everyday the Impossible: Jewish Women in the Partisans," Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, Accessed online on January 20, 2019.

due to the harsh conditions rather than to beliefs around sexual equality.”<sup>80</sup> As the Soviet partisan movement transitioned to become more stable, traditional gender roles were more likely to be imposed among male and female partisans.

Other Jewish partisans, however, chose to deemphasize the salience of gender in their experiences of daily partisan life. In her conversation with Jewish partisan, Mina Dorn, Nechama Tec sought to engage Dorn directly on the subject of the divisions of gender roles and power dynamics of forest relationships between men and women. Tec asks, “When you look back, what differences were there between men and women?” Dorn answers, “I saw no differences. Women walked around with their guns just like men. We had to run away, and the Germans were after us, and we ran away just like the men...Men always tried to show their macho, that they were superior to us, that we women were inferior to them.” When asked if this was unique to forest life Dorn replied, “This was both in the ghetto and in the forest, but I didn’t even pay attention. The bullets reached all of us, men, women, and children...I never paid attention to male-female differences. For example, one night I was guarding the camp where we were sleeping, I did the same thing as the others, walking around and watching. There were men and women there.”<sup>81</sup>

Regardless of their motivations to fight or take to the forests and their sacrifices, women were treated as second class citizens, especially in the combat units. It is essential to remember that everyday life for a Jewish woman in the forest, whether she participated in guerilla warfare or took care of children at a family camp, differed greatly

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<sup>80</sup> Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men and the Holocaust*, 282.

<sup>81</sup> Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 279-280. Testimony of Mina Dorn, Interview with Nechama Tec, Tel-Aviv, 1995.



from the everyday life of a Jewish man. Sexual violence and exploitation, considered “extra burdens” for women in the forest, were two serious conditions of everyday life that affected women in ways much different than men.<sup>82</sup>

### **Exploitation, Sexual Violence, and the Dangers of Identity**

Despite being a horrific reality of both peace and war-time, the topic of violence against women is one that is often left out of academic lessons, educational films, museum exhibits, memoirs, and interviews.<sup>83</sup> Because so many women (and men) experienced sexual violence during the Second World War and the Holocaust, it is a topic that deserves to be acknowledged by historians, and so far they have only begun to scratch the surface. When sexual violence does get mentioned, it is often in the context of general wartime trauma studies. Joan Ringelheim confronts this issue and argues that “the impulse to neutralize the issue of sex by treating it as non-existent or insignificant is entirely understandable.” This, she argues, is because the idea that one’s own family member could be a victim of rape or sexual violence is too unbearable of a thought. Additionally, many do not wish to think that their mothers, grandmothers, or loved ones would “voluntarily” offer sex for protection. Sex, according to Ringelheim, is a topic that despite being troublesome, is integral to truly understand the victimization of women in the Holocaust.<sup>84</sup> I argue that although it brings much discomfort, it is a way to understand individual, gendered experiences that have otherwise been erased within a

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<sup>82</sup> Ringelheim, 32.

<sup>83</sup> Women as an individual category of victimhood is equally as absent in memorials and museums. This problem will be addressed in the third chapter of this thesis.

<sup>84</sup> Ringelheim, 25.

collective narrative. It is also an example of why overly broad generalizations made regarding experiences of the Holocaust must be avoided. The importance of keeping survivor narration individualized is critical to the preservation of historical truth. Without individual memory, perhaps we would not be able to decipher between state sponsored propaganda and reality, a reality that reveals much more brutality and mistreatment, especially the abuse of Jewish women.

Women, as a sub-category of a larger group of Jewish victims, were targeted by an array of perpetrators during the war. Non-Jewish women were also viciously targeted by German soldiers; the hostility towards Soviet women soldiers was of great measure. However, Jewish women partisans were exposed to violence more frequently than other women who encountered men in the forests because they were threatened not only by the Germans, but also by their male counterparts and peasants in surrounding towns. Historians argue that there was a certain hostility towards Jewish women that was not present for women from Slavic ethnic groups.<sup>85</sup> This is not to say that women in the Red Army did not experience rape at the hands of their fellow soldiers, but Jewish women were under extreme pressure to quickly establish sometimes unwanted relationships with men under the assumption that they would be protected from such violence. This fact raises the question of consent due to the imbalance of power in these relationships.<sup>86</sup> This along with survivor feelings of shame and guilt that stem from using sexuality to survive makes understanding the nature of both non-violent and violent sexual relationships in the forest a difficult task.

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<sup>85</sup> Tec, "Women in the Forest," 39.

<sup>86</sup> Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 60.

Women in the forest experienced a form of sexual violence that was almost inevitable if she was not linked to or in the presence of a father, brother, or husband. Without protection from a man, Jewish women were more susceptible to sexual assault. Many female partisans share stories of how they avoided brutality because of these connections. One of these women, Gertrude Boyarski, argues that because she had her father and brother with her, she did not have to “sell herself” in order to survive.<sup>87</sup> After escaping the ghetto in July of 1942, Boyarski and her family joined a family camp in the forest. She sought revenge after the murder of her family and attempted to join a partisan unit where, in order to join, she was given orders to stand guard by herself one mile from camp each night for two weeks. Once the two weeks were successfully completed, Boyarski was accepted into the partisan unit. According to Tec, not only was acceptance into a partisan unit based on physical ability, but it was usually determined by how willing a woman was to “sell herself;” she notes that the more powerful the man was, the better the chances for a woman to survive.<sup>88</sup>

To most in the all-Jewish partisan units, this idea of “selling one’s self,” or “bartering sex” was not considered an abusive act in which women were taken advantage of.<sup>89</sup> Becoming attached or establishing a relationship with a partisan officer meant survival. Sonia Orbuch recalls a time when she was called in by the commander’s wife who wished to speak with her. The commander’s wife told Orbuch,

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<sup>87</sup> Gertrude Boyarski, Interview in film, “Everyday the Impossible: Jewish Women in the Partisans,” Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, Accessed online on January 20, 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Tec, *Defiance*, 219.

<sup>89</sup> The term “bartering sex” is taken from Nomi Levenkron’s chapter, “Death and the Maidens: “Prostitution,” Rape, and Sexual Slavery During World War II,” in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*

“You’re a young girl. There are very few women in the partisans, and I would advise you to select an officer. Life would go better for you.”<sup>90</sup>

While some Jewish women partisans describe forming a relationship to ensure personal safety as something they managed to avoid, other women offer direct testimony regarding their own decisions to gain protection by entering a relationship with a male partisan. A member of the Bielski otriad, Lili Krawitz, explained in an interview that her marriage to her husband was a complete act of survival, though the protection provided by her new husband eventually resulted in love. She says,

I don’t think that a woman would have sold herself for food, more likely for security. During a raid a man would look after her. It was important. One always lived in fear about what might happen next. How does one live with fear, all alone? A young girl needed someone.

“I do not agree,” Krawitz continued, “that women were selling themselves, but it was not love either. To be sure,” she explained, “men rather than women would select a partner. But if a woman did not like the man,” Krawitz insisted, “no one forced her. She was free to reject a man.”<sup>91</sup>

The unsureness of Krawitz’s testimony exemplifies how conflicted survivors were about what could have been the pleasant experience of free courtship during peacetime. By noting that women were never forced to marry or “sell themselves,” Krawitz shows that women in Jewish partisan units were treated appropriately and were given basic control over their lives and bodies. At the same time, by noting on the freedom to reject a man, Krawitz is also distancing sex for protection from negative

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<sup>90</sup> Sonia Orbuch, Interview in film, “Everyday the Impossible: Jewish Women in the Partisans,” Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, Accessed online on January 30, 2019.

<sup>91</sup> Tec, *Defiance*, 228.

conceptions. Because consent in these situations is so convoluted, the idea that women were “selling themselves” under extreme circumstances was, to many Jewish women partisans, not in the same category as prostitution. Although some women felt that trading marriage or sex for protection was forced due to the nature of the situation, some insisted on the independence of women’s choices, and, as Nechama Tec notes, many forest marriages lasted long after the war was over.<sup>92</sup>

The testimony of Fela Abramowicz offers a case study in the complexity of the choices Jewish women partisans made. Abramowicz met her husband, Leon, in the Nowogródek ghetto. Leon was a pleasant presence in her life under imprisonment as he was always willing to help her with the more difficult duties forced upon her accompanied by a “no strings attached” attitude. Fela describes not having anything in common with Leon, interestingly, he was not her type, but, as Fela says, “in times like this, you look for something that’s real, that’s reliable.”<sup>93</sup> Later in the interview, when reflecting on her decision to leave the ghetto, she asked herself how she could have survived without a man. Leon’s physical strength, his background in the Polish army, and his knowledge of the jungle-like landscape were all qualities that Fela decided would be essential for survival and therefore she decided to plan her escape from the ghetto with him. She told Leon that if he would plan an escape with her, she would marry him; “He had the strength, I had the enthusiasm.”<sup>94</sup> Another woman, who was interviewed by Nechama Tec and requested to remain nameless, detailed her

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>93</sup> Fela Abramowicz, Interview, Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, Accessed online on Jan 20, 2019.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

experience marrying a man whom she had met in the ghetto. After the death of her husband, this woman revealed to Tec, “He became my husband only because he was going to save me, not for any other reason. Do not mention my name in this connection. I would have never married him before the war. I would have never met him. We lived in very different worlds.”<sup>95</sup> Regardless of the struggle between survival, class difference, and world view, this couple was married for over forty years.

One of these marriages, that of Helene Lewine and her husband, was also a product of this kind of protection. At age 13 and alone in hiding, Lewine sought the shelter of a partisan unit. She says,

As a girl of 13, I had nobody and when I found out that there was a partisan unit, I felt yes, I want some protection. They will help me and I will help them – in any way they tell me. I think I looked more for myself. I did not want to be all by myself. I was still a child and I was looking for somebody to belong someplace and to do whatever they wanted me to do.<sup>96</sup>

The sense of loss and loneliness is overwhelming in this short testimonial segment. In this partisan unit Lewine would enter a relationship with a 21-year-old man who would become her husband after the war.<sup>97</sup> Zoë Waxman takes the theme of dependence in a new direction while analyzing Lewine’s testimony by arguing that while some women were trading their bodies for protection or food, other young women were desperately trying to recover the families that had been taken from them.<sup>98</sup> Both are arguably

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<sup>95</sup> Tec, *Defiance*, 221.

<sup>96</sup> Waxman, 64. Original testimony found in ‘Panel on Resistance and Non-Compliance,’ in Esther Katz and Joan Miriam Ringelheim (eds.), *Proceedings of the Conference: Women Surviving the Holocaust* (New York: Occasional Papers from The Institute for Research in History, 1983), 60.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

similar in the fact that protection, food, and the emotions of hope and comfort that a family structure provides are all necessary for survival.

Although these women did not explicitly state that they felt threatened with sexual abuse, there are many cases where a Jewish women's dependence was exploited.<sup>99</sup> Maria Gilmovskaya lacked the connections that Boyarski or Abramowitz had, and this, according to Gilmovskaya, resulted in her brutal treatment.<sup>100</sup> It is important to note that Gilmovskaya's situation was different from Ambramowicz's in that Gilmovskaya was part of a non-Jewish partisan unit while Ambramowicz was a member of the Bielski otriad, an all Jewish partisan unit and family camp. This is an example of how generalizations can prove complicated and flawed when considering women's experiences, yet the narratives of both women provide information useful in understanding the structure and risks of partisan life.

Gilmovskaya's testimony gives a small, but important glimpse into her life as a woman in the partisans. She states, "I was not connected to any of the men, so I was raped and abused in every way imaginable. My youngest sister was killed by the partisans."<sup>101</sup> She goes on to state, "You know how it is among the partisans...it was a man's world..."<sup>102</sup> The interviewer then redirects the conversation and asks Gilmovskaya to tell him about the awards she received. By steering the conversation away from Gilmovskaya's memories of some of the most painful experiences during the

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<sup>99</sup> Nomi Levenkron, "Death and the Maidens: 'Prostitution,' Rape, and Sexual Slavery During World War II," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M Hedgepeth and Rochelle G Saidel (Waltham: University Press of New England, 2010), xxxi.

<sup>100</sup> Maria Gilmovskaya, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online on January 15, 2019.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

war for her, we see an example of how the horrific aspects of war, mostly unique to women, continue to be silenced, even if it is done out of ideas about respect for the interviewee. Gilmovskaya's mention of her experience with sexual assault was the most in depth description of such a topic that I could find in the Blavatnik Archive. Even though it is indeed one survivor's testimony out of 500 video interviews, it is still extraordinary that she shared such a memory at all.

Although Faye Schulman, like Gilmovskaya, did not have any romantic connections to a man in her partisan unit, she describes being rescued from rape and murder by a male friend who stole the bullets out of the gun of a drunk officer who proclaimed he would "finish her off."<sup>103</sup> She recalls the situation in her memoir and explains that she recognized if she wanted to survive she would have to stay away from men like this officer. In Schulman's partisan unit, sex was punishable by death, but as she explains, this did not stop her comrades from exploring surrounding areas for women. According to her narrative, once the German troops caught on to this habit, they began injecting young women with venereal diseases in an attempt to lure in partisans and infect them. Schulman recalls many of the men catching sexually transmitted diseases and falling extremely ill.<sup>104</sup> Even in a partisan unit that ostensibly forbade sex, Schulman's narrative demonstrates how sex was still a conspicuous element of partisan life.

Another source of vulnerability to sexual violence for Jewish women partisans were accusations of treason stemming from anti-Semitic views. Besides threatening a

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<sup>103</sup> Schulman, 145.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.



woman for sex, sometimes male partisans suspected women, especially Jewish women, to be Nazi collaborators who acted as a sort of “siren” sent to infiltrate partisan detachments, collect information, and murder the enemy. Partisans were ordered to assist or collaborate only with those deemed trustworthy citizens of the state, such as those with Komsomol membership.<sup>105</sup> Often this meant that civilians in need of protection or help were left to fend for themselves; women, children, Jews, and anyone who had previously been in trouble with the party had an extremely hard time gaining the trust and respect of the partisans. Elena Drapkina, a Minsk ghetto escapee, remembers her time as a secretary for the partisan headquarters when she explained in an interview that the authorities were looking for two reliable young women to fill the open job positions. In this case, reliable “meant being free from the suspicion of having collaborated with the German occupation regime,” however, because Drapkina and her friend spent time in a partisan unit, they were cleared from suspicion and chosen for the job.<sup>106</sup>

Safety was not guaranteed to any Jewish person after they escaped to the forest. In his testimony, Alexander Abugov recalls a time when his reconnaissance company expelled the Jewish women and forced them back into the dangerous forests to die. He states,

One day an order was issued by both the chief of staff and the commissar to expel, within twenty-four hours, all the Jewish women and girls from the company. I went down to the staff command and tried to prove to them that the order was unjustified, that the work of the Jewish women was of great benefit for the company, that they were looking after the wounded, and therefore no one

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<sup>105</sup> Walke, 139.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 208.

had the right to expel them from the partisan company, and, by doing so, to expose them to certain death.<sup>107</sup>

This detailed memory of the expulsion of the Jewish female partisans in his unit was essential to Abugov's story because he himself was Jewish and was concealing his identity from his partisan unit. Unable to live with their certain fate, Abugov left the company with the Jewish women. This, alongside the fact that they had taken with them the rifles they themselves owned, he was sentenced to death by the unit.<sup>108</sup>

Safety for Jewish men and women in the partisans could be influenced by how well one could conceal their Jewish identity. This reveals how anti-Semitic and dangerous the partisan units were.

Like Abugov, Faye Schulman was mostly able to conceal her identity as a Jewish girl by speaking perfect Russian and hiding her accent. She realized that her comrades did not know she was Jewish when one day on a mission they passed a young Jewish girl dressed in rags. Schulman states in her memoir, "One of my assistants said, 'Oh, look! A Jewish girl. Oh! How I hate her! I hate all Jews. I would kill all of them.' To me he turned and said, 'My feelings towards you are different. You are Russian. It is a pleasure to be with you, to talk to you.'<sup>109</sup> Not only does this experience show how anti-Semitism produced dangerous conditions for Jews who were able to escape the ghettos, but it also shows how unlike the experiences of Maria Gilmovskaya, Schulman was given respect in her partisan unit. Schulman also recalls a time in her brigade when the Jewish and non-Jewish women were given the responsibility of tending and

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<sup>107</sup> Porter, 135.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>109</sup> Schulman, 142.

milking the cows that recently had fallen in the hands of her unit. Not long after the work began, a rumor started that accused the Jewish girls of not knowing how to milk cows, deeming them useless. Schulman remembers how fearful she was that all women would be excluded from the brigade, as being useful was an essential trait in the partisans.<sup>110</sup>

Although recognizing that sometimes attitudes towards women were inappropriate, female Jewish Red Army soldiers had far better memories of the men they served with. Veteran Raisa Brook had many pleasant experiences with her fellow male soldiers during the war. When asked how the men in her battery treated her, Brook replied, “We never thought about love and didn’t have any affairs, none at all. I arrived an honest woman and left an honest woman.”<sup>111</sup> The interviewer, Leonid Reines followed up with the question, “But did they respect you?” Brook answered that of course they respected her, they had to look out for one another. Like Brook, veteran Alexandra Bocharova reflects on the relationships with her soldiers, stating that they respected her as their sergeant. She states,

I don’t know, others complained about the men. Nothing like that. It depended on how you presented yourself, how you behaved and that’s how it would be. And I don’t believe, don’t believe! Maybe, I had one horrible episode that I don’t even want to say into the camera, horrible.<sup>112</sup>

Bocharova’s testimony is impacted by her gender. Although she did not have any complaints about men throughout the interview, her choice to not tell the interviewer

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>111</sup> Raisa Brook, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online on January 15, 2019.

<sup>112</sup> Alexandra Bocharova, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online on January 12, 2019.

about her “one horrible episode” is indicative of how, for many possible reasons, survivors of trauma leave parts of their narratives out, leaving room only for interpretation and speculation.

### **Recognition of Valor in the Postwar and Post-Soviet Eras**

Documents produced after the war reveal little about what life was like for Jews in Belorussia during the war. Jewish historical commissions and psychologists went about interviewing Jewish survivors, mostly children, after the war in Western European regions. Jewish children of the Soviet territories, however, were left without a voice.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, Soviet officials did go about their own project of collecting information by listing material and human losses. Included in this report were descriptions of German war crimes and measures of destruction, yet an idea of Jewish life under Nazi occupation in the Soviet states was not included. This resulted in the loss of immediate documented memory that would allow the state to narrate the war and “fill in the gaps” without much question.<sup>114</sup>

Historians have argued that the Soviet state purposely took additional means at silencing women’s involvement in the Second World War. Most notable is the 1945 decree to demobilize women and remove them from their military and partisan duties.<sup>115</sup> In theory, Soviet women had the right to partake in the war as equals, but in practice, women were discouraged from volunteering and joining combat units. This fits with the testimony from women who went through horrifying tests just to gain acceptance into a

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<sup>113</sup> Walke, 8.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>115</sup> Pennington, 817.

unit and the examples of women who, once accused of being talentless or useless, were abandoned by the partisans. In this way, not only did state policy discourage women's participation but male soldiers did as well.

The attempts of the state to shield women from future military participation are thought to have been determined much earlier than 1941. Addressing prewar Soviet policy Griesse and Stites note, "Pronatalist, sexist, and suspicious of spontaneity, Stalinism assured that the Soviet high command would have a deeply ambivalent attitude to the participation of women in the next war."<sup>116</sup> The reason why this decree silenced women's involvement is because it erased any opportunities women had for future military careers and undermined their efforts and sacrifices by being abruptly excluded. One survivor remembers,

There was a parade... Our partisan detachment merged with units of the Red Army, and after the parade we were told to surrender our weapons and go and work on restoring the city. But it just didn't make sense to us: the war was still going on, only Belorussia had been liberated, but we were supposed to surrender our weapons. Every one of us wanted to go on fighting.<sup>117</sup>

Many women veterans were not given the opportunity to share their experiences and losses with others because they were pushed out of the military environment. According to Pennington, a pre-determined Soviet plan to erase the involvement of women in the military was established before the end of the war, and this plan urged the contradictory rebirth of "traditional" gender roles.<sup>118</sup> For Soviet citizens, the once important promises of gender equality and ethnic harmony went unfilled. One of the

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<sup>116</sup> Pennington, 780. Quoted from Anne Eliot Griesse and Richard Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," in *Female Soldiers – Combatants or Non-combatants?: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Loring Goldman (Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 1982), 68.

<sup>117</sup> Alexievich, 50. Testimony of Vera Sergeevna Romanovskaya.

<sup>118</sup> Pennington, 818-819.

many ways this plan was hidden was by use of the argument that while women did indeed serve and defend the Motherland, war had taken too many Soviet citizens and it was now the duty of women to serve in that home rather than the front.<sup>119</sup>

Anika Walke calls this contradictory political action that is so present in the oral testimony, “simultaneous assimilation and exclusion.” “The survivors whom I interviewed,” Walke writes, “were constructing personal narratives of wartime experience against the backdrop of Soviet war portrayals that favored Soviet masculine heroism and downplayed the experiences of non-hegemonic nationalities and female activity.” The result of this “deliberate silencing,” according to Walke, is the fragmented and incomplete historical reconstruction.<sup>120</sup> In order to reconstruct history then, these individual testimonies are more than necessary. One way the testimonies are necessary is that they help us understand the ways Jewish involvement is remembered after the war. The narratives reveal much about how postwar life for Jewish veterans and survivors was shaped by a policy that worked to silence Jewish loss and universalize Soviet suffering.

While anti-Semitism did not directly affect their wartime experience, the oral histories reveal that it did have great impact on the post war experiences of female Jewish Red Army veterans. In 2008, when Dora Nemirovskaya was interviewed by Leonid Reines of the Blavatnik Archive, she was proudly dressed in a blouse and jacket

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<sup>119</sup> For more information on Stalinist gender concepts before the war, See Anna Krylova, “Stalinist Identity from the Viewpoint of Gender: Rearing a Generation of Professionally Violent Women-Fighters in 1930s Stalinist Russia,” *Gender and History* 16, no. 3 (2004): 626-653.

<sup>120</sup> Walke, 135.

highly decorated with war medals. When asked if she experienced any anti-Semitism at the front, she replied,

I did not experience any personally. I only felt it when it came time to give awards. Personally...of course it existed, especially toward men, but I was the only girl. I carried them and dragged them out of combat. How could there possibly be anti-Semitism from those I have saved? But in general it existed of course and how! You could see it in which medals were give out to whom.<sup>121</sup>

This question regarding anti-Semitism at the front was a question asked of all female Jewish Red Army veterans whose testimonies I observed, and almost all had answers that resembled Nemirovskaya's. When Raisa Brook was asked about what life was like in Belorussia with such a diverse group of people coexisting in the same environment before the war (Russians, Belorussians, and Jews), she replied that life was easy, and that the anti-Semitic attitudes that did exist before the war were nothing like those that came after.<sup>122</sup>

For some, postwar life brought on new challenges and discriminatory obstacles as the Soviet state refused veteran benefits to Jewish soldiers. Raisa Brook was seemingly more uncomfortable discussing her life during the war than her experiences after the war; she told the interviewer that her life after the war was not a life, but simply a state of suffering in extreme poverty and emotional and physical pain. Brook and her family were given assistance for an apartment in 1964 only because they were family members of a deceased soldier (Brook's brother also served in the Red Army and died at the front). For female Jewish Red Army veterans, the postwar experience was

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<sup>121</sup> Dora Nemirovskaya, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online on January 12, 2019.

<sup>122</sup> Raisa Brook, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online on January 15, 2019.

negatively impacted by a Jewish identity rather than a female identity. According to Brook, before 1964 she was not considered a participant, she remembered, “We were not considered people, not by Brezhnev, and not even by Khrushchev.”<sup>123</sup>

For Jewish partisans, the postwar experience was impacted by both gender and ethnicity. Walke describes the postwar situation for Jews and women when she says, “Jews and women found that the officially promoted brotherhood of the Soviet people did not quite apply to them.”<sup>124</sup> During the war the Soviet government praised women’s involvement and contributions to the partisan movement and used the woman partisan to symbolize the patriotism and dedication of the Soviet people. However, after the war, accounts of partisan activity and partisan victories often omitted the involvement of women. Women partisans were often accused of serving as prostitutes rather than as active members of the movement. Additionally, while men were individually awarded, women were congratulated as a collective group.<sup>125</sup> Perhaps as a result, many Jewish women did not have the opportunity to share their experiences until scholars began gaining interest in their stories around the 1980s and 1990s. Walke states,

The Soviet war portrayal was largely limited to, and directed at, military achievements of the victorious Soviet army, and omitted the targeted extermination of Jews, the confiscation of their property, and the role of collaboration in both... state campaigns against ‘cosmopolitanism’ targeted Jewish intellectuals and professionals to a disproportionate degree and instilled fear of further anti-Semitic assaults among Soviet Jews. Therefore, many decided to keep a low profile and remained silent about war experiences that highlighted the role of their national identity.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Walke, 134.

<sup>125</sup> Pennington, 814.

<sup>126</sup> Walke, 219.



A survey of the testimony included in this research does parallel Walke's explanations for silences in the interviews. Despite the overall unfair and harsh conditions of life for all Jewish women veterans after the war, a stronger sense of community was present for Red Army veterans than for the Jewish women partisans and arguably even for the women in all-Jewish partisan units. This could be due to the Soviet emphasis on victory and non-recognition of loss – Jewish Red Army soldiers were part of a larger victory, one that was recognized by the Soviet state immediately and has become even more acknowledged since 1990. The testimony of Jewish Red Army veterans features less conflicted accounts of their experiences with men and with anti-Semitism than those who fought with the partisans.

### **Applications of Trauma Theory**

By observing the testimony of female Jewish Red Army soldiers, Jewish partisan combatants, and Jewish women in family camps, we are better able to understand trauma and how history and the silencing of history greatly impacts the way a war and genocide are remembered later on. Sociologists, psychoanalysts, and historians have all sought to use theories of trauma and memory to make concrete, very general conclusions based on Holocaust experiences.

One unfortunate example of the consequences of silencing and trauma is that true understanding of the levels of sexual violence in the forests may never be reached. Even though rape occurs during peacetime and wartime, historians like Zoë Waxman have argued that rape and exploitation of Jewish women played a significant role in the Nazi threat to the Jewish family structure, and therefore it is an important matter to

consider.<sup>127</sup> However, because of the level of sensitivity that surrounds topics like sexual assault, it is understandably difficult for historians to gather information. Reflecting on her experiences interviewing Jewish women survivors, Anika Walke confronts these difficulties; she states that when women interviewees did want to tell their stories of sexual trauma, they would often request to have the camera or recorder turned off. When sociologist and Holocaust historian Nechama Tec began interviewing Holocaust survivors, she made the following note: “Judging by the hesitation I encountered among interviewees to recount these coercive sexual experiences, I have to assume that most of these stories will die with the victims.”<sup>128</sup>

Walke offers an explanation of social structure; the survivor may be feeling shameful or embarrassed, or perhaps she did not wish to be recorded because Soviet and post-Soviet behavior marked subjects such as sex to be inappropriate topics of conversation. Other societal norms may have disallowed narratives to emerge. For example, those who provided sexual favors for food or protection were named prostitutes instead of victims struggling to survive. Nomi Levenkron argues that this is due to a postwar society whose views on women were “one-dimensional.”<sup>129</sup> Implications of Soviet social structure highly impact survivor narratives, and this is clear when observing the postwar lives of Soviet female Jewish Holocaust survivors.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union beginning in the 1980s, Jews and women finally began to be recognized as groups responsible in the Soviet victory

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<sup>127</sup> Waxman, 54.

<sup>128</sup> Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Also quoted in: Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 54.

<sup>129</sup> Levenkron, xxvii.

narrative surrounding World War II. A television program that aired in Russia on May 8, 1990 unexpectedly showed images of the horrors of war rather than images of victorious Russians, breaking the “cult” that so strongly survived in the Soviet post-war years. Nina Tumarkin, a viewer of this program, states that to much surprise the episode included references to the Jewish contribution to the war; “Everyone is equal in war, in death – man and woman, general and soldier, communist and non-communist, Russian, Lithuanian, Uzbek, Jew...”<sup>130</sup> Later that evening, Tumarkin remembers a sense of unity and peace that, because of a long waited recognition of collective sacrifice, brought about “healing and genuine commemoration.”<sup>131</sup>

Because decades have separated experience and memory and because of these forced silences and unrecognition, it is becoming more difficult to collect individual survivor accounts that address the uncomfortable truths of what it meant to be a woman in the forests of the occupied Soviet Union. Progress has been made though, as museums and archives dedicated to the Jewish partisan movement and Jewish resistance have been appearing rapidly in the last two decades. One way to understand the push for preservation of historical truths and ultimately, for the truth behind Jewish resistance efforts, is to look at these modern commemorative practices in the West and in Russia, and to dig deeper into the present issues that impact memory and memory making. As veteran testimony reveals how certain narratives persisted and how others were silenced, new museums and archives of World War II experiences in

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<sup>130</sup> Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of WWII in Russia*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 201.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

the West and in Russia reveal how Jewish resistance and the inclusion of women at the front are still highly contested issues.

## Chapter Three

### The Commemoration of Jewish Resistance

On October 26, 1941 a woman named Masha Bruskina was hung by the Wehrmacht for her involvement in the Minsk underground. Labeled as partisans, Bruskina and two other Soviet citizens, Kiril Trus and Volodia Shcherbatshevich, were marched through the streets of the city. They were photographed by a Lithuanian soldier collaborating with the Germans. In one of the photographs, Bruskina is shown with a large sign hung around her neck declaring in both German and Russian, “We are partisans and have shot at German soldiers.”<sup>132</sup> Bruskina, Trus, and Shcherbatshevich were the first in the Soviet Union to be executed by the Germans for their participation in the resistance.<sup>133</sup> While the photographs of Bruskina and her comrades certainly reveal much about the brutality of the war in the East, the story of these photographs and their subjects serve as a haunting example of the exclusions created by the process of war commemoration in the Soviet Union.

This death parade and the execution that followed was a spectacle widely attended by citizens of Minsk and the German occupiers and their collaborators. The photographer who captured the horrific event publicized his work after the war. Trus and Shcherbatshevich, the two male subjects of these photographs, were identified as leading figures in the early Belorussian partisan movement. However, the identity of the

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<sup>132</sup> Nechama Tec and Daniel Weiss, “The Heroine of Minsk: Eight Photographs of an Execution,” *History of Photography* 23, no. 4 (1999): 322.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

female subject went unknown; the label, 'the Unknown Girl,' would remain her only identity until the 1990s.<sup>134</sup>

After years of investigation, interviews, and speculation, 'the Unknown Girl' finally had a name: Masha Bruskina. Bruskina had served as a prominent and dedicated member of the Minsk underground and was an active member of the Communist Party. She was also Jewish. Serving as a courier for the partisans during the beginning months of the war, her dedication to the communist victory over fascism showed; she dyed her hair and changed her name to conceal her Jewish identity. What is compelling about Bruskina's story is not only her short life and brave devotion to defeating the Nazis, but also her posthumous memory. Despite the overwhelming evidence that the woman in the photographs was Bruskina, Soviet authorities and Belorussian historians have argued, and continue to argue, that the woman in the photographs was in fact not Masha Bruskina.<sup>135</sup>

In their article, "The Heroine of Minsk," Daniel Weiss and Nechama Tec search for answers regarding the concealment of Bruskina's identity. The denial of her involvement is important when considering how postwar memory was coerced and molded so viciously that it forbid veterans and victims honor, even after death. According to Tec and Weiss, the denial of identity was not because Bruskina was a woman, but because she was Jewish. They close the article with the lines, "More than simply a heroine, Masha Bruskina helped restore the national honour of her country. For some, such a prominent figure is better thought of as an unknown than as a Jew."<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 324.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 325, 326.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 329.

Bruskina's story is only one example that gives an idea of Soviet treatment of Jewish people, those who sacrificed, fought, and perished during the war. It is, once again, a story of contradictions. With the gradual opening of Soviet archives beginning in the early 1990s and the work of museums and other archives to collect survivor testimonies, the recognition of Jewish involvement and the idea that Jews resisted Nazi oppression entered Western historiography and, to some extent, has become the popular Western narrative about World War II.<sup>137</sup> Yet, even with new information and the end of direct censorship, this has not been the outcome in the former Soviet Union.

Jewish victims and veterans that remained in the Soviet Union after the war were not granted a narrative because the Soviet government worked to efface the Jewish element out of commemoration of the war. Only recently have veterans who stayed in the former USSR been given opportunities to tell their stories. Because these veterans were not commemorated by the Soviet government, I will use film to explore how Jewish resistance during the war was portrayed to public audiences. The evolution of Jewish resistance in Soviet film is telling because of the quick interference of the state to generate new censorship regulations in order to prohibit the Jewish experience on screen.

Additionally, within the last twenty years, the number of museums and archives that focus on Jewish partisans, Red Army Jews, and the experiences of women, have opened to presumably fight against historical silences or purposeful misinterpretations

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<sup>137</sup> There are some works that supported claims of Jewish resistance before the 1990s. Some exceptions include Jack Nusan Porter's 1982 book *Jewish Partisans*, and Yehuda Bauer's 1979 book, *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness*. Both of these works argue that armed resistance was not the only form of defiance against the Nazis, and that the many forms of resistance during the war made a powerful impact on the outcome.

that became more apparent to the global community after the fall of the Soviet Union. I will also be examining these sources in order to understand the way the world chooses to commemorate Jewish partisans who took shelter and fought in this region during the war.

In the Soviet Union, the role of Jewish partisans and other Jewish veterans during the war focused, inaccurately, on passivity and eluding conflict. Once again, their history and influence during the war was portrayed as ineffective. I argue in this chapter that the silencing of such a large historical narrative remains possible because of memory politics and the power of the state to shape war narratives in accordance with political goals that are predicated on the exclusion of Jewish Soviet citizens. Soviet and post-Soviet memorialization projects further the myth of Jewish passivity that was established directly after the war by silencing integral survivor narratives and universalizing the traumas of war.

Western commemoration methods prove to be more diverse than those of contemporary Russia. Because there are fewer modern museums and archives dedicated to women, the Jewish partisan movement, and Jews in the Red Army in Russia, I will look at Soviet films as an arena of commemoration because they both supported and vilified the official history of the Second World War. Memorialization of World War II in the West has been greatly imbedded in culture and society, as it has in Russia; however, the ways that Soviet and post-Soviet political figures have manipulated these memory tools to shift public consciousness is just as telling about the present as it is the past.



This chapter will explore Soviet postwar life for Jewish people and how their mistreatment and exclusion impacted the memory of World War II in Soviet and post-Soviet society. Using the concept of memory politics, I will argue that much of the history of the war in the East, both in the forests and on the frontlines, has been lost because of power structures that condition memory narratives by suppressing these experiences. Although there is a shift in contemporary Russia to incorporate Jewish involvement during World War II into the much larger Soviet victory narrative, the concept of an individualized targeting of the Jewish people and genocide has yet to receive commemoration. Because the Russian state has continued to deny the specific targeting of Jews by the Nazis, the efforts to incorporate Jewish involvement appear constrained and questionable.

Museums, archives, and websites dedicated to the largely omitted historical victim groups of the war have appeared in greater number within the last two decades. This chapter will consider this recent effort, mostly by the United States, to educate the public about Jewish resistance while examining how Western memorialization and commemoration by way of museums and archives differs from contemporary Russian memorialization. While these post-Soviet attempts to memorialize, educate the public, and disprove the myth of Jewish passivity during the Holocaust are constructing a new historical narrative based on survivor testimony and access to new sources, commemorative practices in Russia still focus on the Soviet victory rather than education and genocide prevention.

While both Russian and Western commemorative establishments and foundations serve as critical contributors to the documentation of witness and victim

experience, both leave out critical topics. By excluding questions of gendered marginalization and relationships between men and women and focusing on military efforts, they reinforce conventional narratives while suppressing the everyday. Because Soviet and post-Soviet political elites have so greatly interfered with historical memory and the ways in which the public perceives an event or group, scholars still do not have an adequate understanding of the roles and experiences of Jewish people and women in the partisan movement or in the Red Army.

### **Soviet Films as Narrative Propaganda and “Counter-History”**

What many historians understand now to be truthful historical facets of World War II in the Soviet Union were largely distorted by the Soviet Communist Party’s efforts, beginning as soon as the war was over, to regulate the historical narrative about the war experience and its meaning. Denise J. Youngblood argues, “All the allied nations celebrated the end of the war by glorifying the heroism and sacrifices of their soldiers and citizens, but in the USSR, World War II was quickly objectified to the point of non-recognition.”<sup>138</sup> One way that the party narrative was reinforced throughout the Soviet Union was through film, and much like the testimony of Jewish survivors, films created in the early postwar Soviet Union also allow for an inside look at Holocaust representation and the controversy around silencing Jewish resistance. Because there were most certainly no museums or archives dedicated to the Jewish plight in the Soviet Union during the war, I will use films as a primary source to analyze the ways the

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<sup>138</sup> Denise J. Youngblood, “A War Remembered: Soviet Films of the Great Patriotic War,” *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (2001): 844.

Jewish experience was excluded in Soviet war memory and how only political changes allowed its entry into film.<sup>139</sup>

The majority of early Soviet war films focused on the positive and mighty war efforts of the Soviet Union, they highlighted the partisan movement, the strength and mightiness of the Red Army, and even included the involvement of Soviet women.<sup>140</sup> Women in Soviet war films, often depicted as beautiful warriors, were responsible for the survival of the Soviet Union. When the party gained stronger influence on art and visual culture after the war though, this trend would change. Consequently, the powerful and determined female character, often a symbol of the “motherland” (*rodina*), was replaced with a lead male role. Now the protection of the “fatherland” (*otechestvo*) was the responsibility of a male figure. This character usually represented Stalin himself. This is one way that Soviet propaganda both acted and reacted to consequences of war through use of film. Because the Soviet Union did not fall to Nazi Germany, it was acceptable that Stalin was the hero and was responsible for the survival of the country.<sup>141</sup> While some testimony supports Soviet troops motivating themselves by references to Stalin as a leader, others regard Stalin’s role as perhaps exaggerated.<sup>142</sup> For example, in his testimony on the Russian archival website, “I Remember” (*Ia Pomniu*), Nikolai Safonov writes, “One more thing to notice: although we

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<sup>139</sup> David Schneer describes a similar narrative regarding Soviet Jewish photographers during World War II in his book, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

<sup>140</sup> Youngblood, 841.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 842.

<sup>142</sup> Dennis Starosvetsky, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online March 1, 2019. Starosvetsky tells Blavatnik, “At the front I yelled ‘For Stalin, for the Motherland’ and his portrait was on our banner.”

were patriots of the USSR, we never shouted in our attacks, 'For Stalin!' Just 'Hurrah!' and some foul language..."<sup>143</sup> This small interruption in his story of interrelations at the front is interesting when reflecting on how survivor's understand popular war narratives and their reactions to those narratives. It is as if as though Safonov took the time to explain how motivations at the front were actually expressed by Soviet troops.

Before films shifted from heroine to hero in 1945, opportunities were available for film makers to include non-traditional narratives of wartime experiences. The best example of this is the film, *The Unvanquished*, by director Mark Semenovich Donskoi. His project to make the 1943 Soviet novel *The Unvanquished*, by Boris Leont'evich Gorbатов, into a film is a unique model of how the Soviet government used its power to silence certain portrayals of the war.

Originally written as a novel, *The Unvanquished* was released in the popular Soviet newspaper, *Pravda*, and tells the story of a Ukrainian family's struggles during the war.<sup>144</sup> Filled with both hidden and clear references to Jewish culture and by the important role that Jewish characters play in the story, the film was the first to depict the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. In fact, it was also the first to represent any mass killing on screen.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Nikolai Safonov, "Memories of Veterans of the Great Patriotic War," I Remember, published Sept 28, 2010/accessed February 15, 2019.

<https://iremember.ru/en/memoirs/infantrymen/nikolai-safonov/>

<sup>144</sup> Olga Gernshenson, Between the Permitted and the Forbidden: The Politics of Holocaust Representation in *The Unvanquished* (1945), in *Soviet Jews in World War II: Fighting, Witnessing, Remembering*, ed. Harriet Murav and Gennady Estraikh, (Boston: Academic Studies Press), 169.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

As the history of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union became more more accessible to scholars in the 1990s, historians and film critics have sought an understanding of the film and have deeply analyzed its paradoxical nature and the implications of its “hidden” meanings.<sup>146</sup> Gershenson provides one example of Donskoi’s work at including references of Judaism; the closing scene shows a dead, isolated tree with a scarf caught on a branch. Gershenson explains that for the State Yiddish Theater, this scarf and tree was used as a symbol of Judaism on stage. When considering the broader historical context in which the film was released, it is interesting that a film with sympathetic attitudes towards the individualized Jewish experience was received in the way that it was.

Because it was the first of its kind, film scholars and historians claim that Soviet officials were confused on how to perceive the film and its message to the public. According to Gershenson, there was no clear party line regarding this kind of film.<sup>147</sup> When members of the Artistic Council of the Film Committee met to discuss *The Unvanquished* in June of 1945, many had problems with the scenes of mass executions, not because they were too frightening and inhumane as they claimed, but really because “it portrayed the murder of innocent people outside the trope of Soviet-style heroism.”<sup>148</sup> Films were to show the resistance efforts and sacrifices of the Soviet people, not the suffering of the people. And yet, because there was no determined formula for how the Holocaust should have been received by Soviet citizens, the film was released before the universalization policy of Holocaust memory was put into place.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 177.

The implementation of a universalization policy emphasized that all Soviet citizens were victims of the Nazi genocidal policy, Jews were not specifically targeted and therefore were not a separate category of victims.

By the time this universalization guideline developed into policy, film became an important part of World War II memorialization and strategically excluded the plight of Soviet Jews.<sup>149</sup> The 1985 film, *Come and See (Idi I smotri)*, was the last production that emphasized the “Cult of WWII.”<sup>150</sup> Instead of following the Stalinist era style of commemorative films, *Come and See* depicts tragedy and chaos and does not have a hero character. Set in Belorussia during the war, the film’s protagonist is a young man named Flera who, at the beginning of the film, is determined to leave his family to join the partisan movement. He is excited and ready to show his patriotism by volunteering for the partisans, and when two men come to retrieve him from his home, Flera is shown smiling with a suitcase in one hand and a rifle in the other.<sup>151</sup>

As the film progresses, the trials and brutalities of war shape Flera into a seemingly different person as his character is broken down and tested.<sup>152</sup> His endeavors in the partisan movement are not portrayed heroically by any means as they often were in earlier Soviet war films.<sup>153</sup> One of the final scenes shows an almost unrecognizable Flera as he comes in contact with a woman who is unclothed from the

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<sup>149</sup> Youngblood, 840.

<sup>150</sup> Youngblood, 852. The “Cult of WWII” is a concept defined by historian Nina Tumarkin as the Soviet’s deliberate transformation of the horrors of World War II into a heroic achievement. For more on the Cult of WWII 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.

<sup>151</sup> Ales Adamovich, *Come and See*, directed by Elem Klimov (1985; Moscow: Mosfilm/Sovexportfilm), film.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

waist down and has clearly been assaulted. She approaches Flera quietly blowing a whistle and when the whistle falls from her mouth, Flera whispers, “to love...to have children...,” realizing how different his life would have been had the war not happened.<sup>154</sup> His encounter with the young woman is significant because it shows how the Soviet people could not all have been protected by the heroic partisans, directly contradicting prior efforts of official history that encouraged the valiant and superb characteristics of the partisans. The film is certainly difficult to watch as it visually details the horrific side of war, one that otherwise had been left out of earlier war films.

In the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachov, film makers like Ales Adamovich were celebrated for their work in reestablishing culture and art and became representatives for *glasnost* (openness).<sup>155</sup> Historians have identified films of this kind as a tool for considerable change and restructuring (*perestroika*) in Soviet society during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Youngblood states, “Through this small but exceptional body of work, Soviet filmmakers had already succeeded in returning to the Soviet people an authentic memory of the conflict.” She goes on to say, “By stripping the war of the cant and bombast of official history...these moviemakers have succeeded where historians had not (and indeed could not, given the strictures of the Soviet historical profession).”<sup>156</sup> I use film here to show how important of a tool it was for Stalinist era films that represented the war in a positive way, reinforcing the victory of the Soviet Union and the protection of the fatherland by none other than Stalin himself. At the same time, film is also an example of how art served as a counter-historical weapon

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Youngblood, 854.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 855.

during the late Soviet period, and how productive it was at bringing some kind of historical truth to the Soviet people who ironically, and in many cases, experienced the war themselves and witnessed atrocities that were purposefully left out of most early Soviet war films.<sup>157</sup>

### **Jewish Postwar Life and Early Soviet Commemoration of World War II**

Jewish commemoration in the Soviet Union has proven to have complex and important ramifications on how the rest of the world remembers the Holocaust. Joanna Bourke in her article, "Introduction 'Remembering' War," states, "...those people who experienced traumas such as war will only see their narratives enter the public realm 'if their vision meets with compatible social or political objectives and inclinations among other important social groups.'"<sup>158</sup> This was the case for Soviet Jews, as their experiences did not fit with Soviet political objectives for World War II commemoration.

The environment in which a survivor lives shapes the way they remember and what they choose to discuss when interviewed.<sup>159</sup> For those who stayed in the Soviet Union after the war, the relationship between witnessing and remembering enhanced their already poor treatment. The challenges that Jewish survivors were faced within the Soviet Union were unique partly because of the geography and direct relationship with killing sites. Anika Walke discusses the mass grave of Jewish victims in Beshankovichy

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<sup>157</sup> The idea that many Soviet people experienced the war and witnessed the atrocities against Jews is proof of how powerful the politics of memory was in the Soviet Union.

<sup>158</sup> Bourke, 473.

<sup>159</sup> I discussed this briefly in the last chapter when thinking about how female survivors may not talk about their experiences with love, sexuality, or sexual violence during the war because in Soviet society, these are rude or inappropriate topics of conversation.



and uses it as an example of the exclusion Bourke refers to. In her examination of how mass gravesites impact local memory, Walke uses oral testimony to observe emotion and the relationship between victims of genocide and their neighbors, some of whom collaborated with the Nazis during the war. She argues that emotions such as shame and resentment silenced large groups of survivors after the war.<sup>160</sup>

I argue that Jewish narratives did not enter the public realm not only because Stalin wanted to universalize the war experience to include all Soviet citizens, but also because the geography of genocide would allow their narratives to remain outside of the confines of the public. The geographical location of mass graves permitted the terrors of the Holocaust to go without state commemoration for so long because the memorials were often out of sight. Visiting grave sites was one of the ways that Jewish survivors were able to commemorate their loved ones, yet this was often a difficult task.

While the killing sites ultimately separated Jewish victims from society, the Soviet state simultaneously worked to integrate Jewish victims into a collective society. First, as was the case for Masha Bruskina, the Jews commemorated in Beshankovichy's gravesite are not identified as such but are rather called "Soviet citizens" on the tomb. The grave, nearly inaccessible without a guide, is far removed from local residents and the core of the town. This, according to Walke, removes their memory from the town and other commemoration sites creating both geographical divisions and divisions of memory.<sup>161</sup> The Nazi troops began this silencing process by removing Jews from their homes or from the ghetto and committing the murders in massive, open, and secluded

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<sup>160</sup> Anika Walke, "Split Memory: The Geography of Holocaust Memory and Amnesia in Belarus," *Slavic Review* 77, no. 1 (2018): 175.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

areas. Later, when the grave sites were recovered, they were marked and memorialized with a grave stone or a plaque in the same spot where the killing took place. One interviewee, Leonid Gol'braikh, explained to Walke in 2005 that every year he would travel to Beshankovichy to visit the grave and pay respects to his mother and sisters. However, he had not been able to go since 1998 because he could not climb the hill that lead up to the grave site. This was not the first instance that I had come across in the testimony that described the necessary physical ability that was demanded of survivor's when they wished to commemorate their loved ones.

In "A Partisan Returns: The Tale of Two Sisters," a film presented by the Jewish Partisans Educational Foundation, Lisa Raibel visits Novogrodek, where she was imprisoned in a work camp with her sister and brother. On the first day in the town, Lisa and her family members went to visit the mass grave where her older sister, Hanesta is buried. The group then travelled to another grave where her mother was laid to rest. The grave of her mother is located on the top of a hill, and Lisa was unable to get there on her own. The camera zooms in on four men carrying Lisa up a grassy hill in her wheelchair so that she may visit her mother for the first time since her death.<sup>162</sup> Raibel and Gol'Braikh's difficulties with commemorating and paying tribute to their loved ones is evidence that because the sites are so far detached from the town center, the geography of the killing sites determined by the Nazis became a sort of barrier that would have implications on remembering and silencing after the war. The sites of

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<sup>162</sup> Film, "A Partisan Returns: The Legacy of Two Sisters," Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, Accessed online on February 16, 2019.

memory are detached from the rest of the community and because of this, they do not have to be faced everyday.

A sort of determination powerfully emerged in the Soviet Union during the years following the end of the war, and this was motivated to keep the Jewish victims and women veterans integrated with the collective. That is, the Nazi project to annihilate Jews was not unique from the collective destruction of the Soviet people, therefore Jews were not considered independently persecuted.<sup>163</sup> One of the consequences of this ideology was the lack of source and documentation production immediately after the war. Because Jews were not considered an independent victim group of the Nazi extermination plan, they were not recorded separately; all Soviets were victims, not only the Jews.<sup>164</sup>

Not only did the Soviet state attempt to erase Jews as a separate group of victims during the war, but it also largely ignored the experiences of Jewish Red Army veterans as part of the victory against fascism. Mocked in the streets and questioned on how they obtained their war medals, some Jewish veterans were openly discriminated against.<sup>165</sup> Further examples of discrimination against Jews can be found when considering the difficulties these veterans and victims had faced when attempting to reestablish themselves in a society where total destruction wiped away families, homes, jobs, and belongings. Many Jewish victims in the once occupied areas of the Soviet Union did not return to their homes after the war because of the violent traumas and the

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<sup>163</sup> Antonella Salomoni, "State-sponsored Anti-Semitism in Postwar USSR: Studies and Research Perspectives," *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*. Issue 1 (2010).

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> Porter, x.

knowledge of local collaboration with Nazi occupiers.<sup>166</sup> Returning to the same place where such violence was experienced was not an option for many young victims who were looking for a new start. Survivor Rita Kazhdan was not comfortable living in her uncle's rented home in Minsk; she said "For him, this did not mean anything. But for me, it was *ghetto*."<sup>167</sup> Anika Walke explains that because he did not experience the violence, ghettoization, and witnessing that she did in Minsk, Kazhdan's uncle was not attached to the place of genocide like Kazhdan was. Once again, the geography of the Holocaust directly and greatly impacted the postwar life of Jewish survivors, and in some cases, this traumatic effort at reestablishment was made more difficult by the state.

In the case that Jewish victims and veterans did attempt to return back to their homes after the war, they were openly met with administrative complications like challenges to their housing and property rights stemming from the exclusionary policy of the state.<sup>168</sup> In the 1960s during a period of slight ethnic liberalization under Nikita Khrushchev, Jewish Red Army veteran Raisa Brook was granted an apartment with her disabled mother. Together they lived in a 22 square foot space with no hot water and only a stove in the kitchen to heat the apartment. A conversation sparked by a description of her mother's job in a leather factory is shocking evidence of just how poorly Jewish veterans were treated. She tells the interviewer, "It was really hard work and her arms began to hurt a great deal. She received a pension of 13 rubles and 10 kopeks." Appearing shocked, Leonid Reines from the Blavatnik Archive asks, "Only 13 rubles?" Brook explains more thoroughly,

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<sup>166</sup> Walke, "Split Memory: The Geography of Holocaust Memory and Amnesia in Belarus," 178.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>168</sup> Salomoni.

Yes, 13 rubles and 10 kopeks, and we needed to pay 150 for the apartment. That's how it was. We lived in extreme poverty. I don't even want to remember it. We came back in 1946 and only got an apartment in 1964 as family members of a deceased soldier. Before that, we were not even considered participants. My mother only got it as family of a deceased soldier.<sup>169</sup>

The resentment that Brook expresses towards her lack of veteran privileges and rights is overwhelming, especially when considering the primitive conditions that she describes. Although it is a bit unclear whether Brook is referring to Jewish veterans or female veterans when she uses "we," her description gives a sense of what daily life was like for Jewish and female veterans in the Soviet Union.

In addition to the resettlement difficulties that Jewish veterans faced directly after the war, Stalin set forth a series of ethnic and political purges aimed at reconstructing and deinstitutionalizing what was considered to be the proper Soviet citizen. Eric Weitz argues that although the cruelty did not happen in the name of racial ideology, racial politics were exercised under Stalin after the war. He summarizes the deportations of entire national groups that occurred from 1937-1953,

In the Stalin period especially, particular populations were endowed with immutable traits that every member of the group possessed and that were passed from one generation to the next. The particular traits could be the source of praise or power, as with the Russians, or could lead to round-ups, forced deportations, and resettlement in horrendous conditions.<sup>170</sup>

Referred to as the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, Stalin's postwar turn against Jewish cultural and political organizations and against urban, educated Soviet Jews meant that Jewish veterans in urban areas were also unable to maintain personal archives of their

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<sup>169</sup> Raisa Brook, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online on February 28, 2019.

<sup>170</sup> Eric D. Weitz, "Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (2002): 3.

wartime service. Many Jewish Soviet citizens who held prominent positions and roles in the Soviet government and Communist Party were affected, and memories of the 1937-38 Terror contributed to postwar fears. One Jewish veteran, Abram Blyakher tells the Blavatnik Archive that while he was stationed in Berlin before it was split into zones, he took pictures with American and British soldiers there. Upon seeing the photos, Blyakher's wife demanded that he destroyed them. He remembers,

My wife's father was a professor who was sent to prison in 1937. He spent eight years in prison and six years in exile...So my wife started urging me to destroy those photographs, just in case. 'Shlossberg was arrested, Shlyaper was arrested, another [friend of ours] was arrested. They will use these against you' she said to me. And so with great sorrow I had to destroy some photos. And when I was told that you were coming from the US, I remembered them.<sup>171</sup>

Much like how Jews were not safe in the forests even after escaping the ghetto, in the postwar Soviet era, Jews were not safe from persecution despite having survived the Holocaust. The postwar experiences of Brook and Blyakher give historians and scholars a look inside the early establishment of memory politics and the discrimination that worked to silence a large portion of Soviet war history.

### **Commemoration of the War in Post-Soviet Russia**

In their article on Soviet and post-Soviet monuments, Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson define the years 1991-1999 as a "critical juncture," a period in which political elites had the most opportunities to cultivate and establish their views on national

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<sup>171</sup> Abram Blyakher, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, Accessed on February 16, 2019.

identity.<sup>172</sup> With glasnost and perestroika, the terrors of Stalin began to unravel and appear to the public eye; separating post-Soviet Russian identity from Stalin's promotion of Russian national identity was essential. Forest and Johnson argue that by "co-opting, contesting, ignoring, or removing certain kinds of monuments, political elites engage in symbolic dialogue with each other and the public in order to gain prestige, legitimacy, and influence."<sup>173</sup> Deciding how to shift the commemoration of the Second World War from a time heavily identified with Joseph Stalin to the memory of a victory that could have been possible without him became a focus for Russian political elites during these critical juncture years. In Russia and in other parts of the world, national identity is encouraged by "heroes" that are monumentalized in the public sphere.<sup>174</sup> Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, even though making up a large portion of Soviet population before the war, are not monumentalized in Russia and are therefore are not a strong part of what constitutes Russian national identity.

Attempting to locate testimony of Jewish survivors of the partisan movement or of Jewish Red Army veterans in Russian archival websites is challenging. The Russian website, "I Remember" (*Ia Pomniu*) is a source of Soviet veteran testimony, as well as other primary source documents such as letters and photographs. The website's homepage reads, "Memories of Veterans of the Great Patriotic War;" here, any visitor who knows the Russian language can read the stories of hundreds of war veterans.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson, "Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Moscow." In *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92, no. 3 (2002): 524.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 525.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.

<sup>175</sup> "Memories of Veterans of the Great Patriotic War," I Remember. Accessed on February 15, 2019. <https://iremember.ru/en/>

Learning about the creation and motivation of the website itself proves difficult. There is no “about” tab, nor are there any details regarding the intended purpose of the site. At the bottom of the homepage there is a brief two sentence note that reads, “Website created with financial support of the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communication. License Ministry of Press No. 77-4834.”<sup>176</sup> This indicates that although there is a lack of evidence regarding who is behind the creation and maintenance of this site, it appears to be funded by the state.

The bulk of the online archive is made of testimonials from veterans, “allies and opponents,” and “contemporaries.” Titled “memoirs,” the homepage shows the veterans photograph and includes a brief summary of their experience. Upon clicking on the photograph, a much larger document appears. Most of the testimony is in the form of an interview, with the interviewer asking a similar set of questions from each veteran such as, “do you remember June 22, 1941?” or, “what was your first impression of the Germans?”<sup>177</sup> Interestingly, many of the interviews with the USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive and the Blavatnik Archive also include similar questions. The questions asked of the veterans on “I Remember” however, do not include specific inquiries about relationships with Jews that were most certainly in the area. While both men and women’s testimony is included in the site, the specific Jewish experience is not. Even in the memoirs where relationships between civilians and soldiers and soldiers and their comrades are discussed, I did not find any mention of a Jewish person or descriptions of what was happening to the Jewish populations around the

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.



Soviet Union that veterans undoubtedly witnessed. Perhaps this is an indication that the universalist policy still remains a part of how the Second World War in Russia is portrayed to the public.

Another state-funded Russian online archive, “Memory of the People” (*Pamyat Naroda*), is comparable to the “I Remember” archive because of its restricted search accessibility. The website acts as a research tool for people searching for information about family members or loved ones who served during World War II. A visitor of the website can search for a veteran using specific information such as a name or date of birth, but cannot search general terms such as “partisan,” “Jewish,” or “woman.” One can also search military combat units and over two hundred military operations; however, partisan units and their operations are not included in the site’s vast database.<sup>178</sup>

The focus and importance that this site places on familial experiences makes the narrative extremely individual and does not encompass the very diverse character of the Red Army. “Memory of the People” and “I Remember” are archival sites that indicate a pattern or trend indicative of the priorities of contemporary Russian commemoration of the war. The idea that war experiences were shaped by various ethnic identities, is one that is clearly avoided by the state, and instead, the narrow, singular experiences generate the popular narrative. The universal Soviet experience is supported by the avoidance of ethnic diversity in the Red Army. The evasion of more ethnically diverse

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<sup>178</sup> Memory of the People (Pamyat Naroda). Accessed on March 30, 2019. <https://pamyat-naroda.ru/ops/>

narratives creates a silence that can be noticed in physical commemoration sites as well.

The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow is another source of commemoration presented for a global audience. Their website, however, does not provide any archival documents or testimonials.<sup>179</sup> The museum, founded in 2012, claims to take a modern approach at the history of Russian Jewry. Olga Gershenson's 2016 article, "How Russia created a Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center even Vladimir Putin can Tolerate," published in the newspaper "Forward," puts the museum in the context of a larger phenomenon: the rise of Jewish memorialization in the east.

The museum includes 2,000 years of Jewish history, and focuses primarily on three major exhibits. The Beginnings Theatre, a biblical representation of the Jewish people, the gallery "The Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust," and the Tolerance Center, which according to Gershenson, "promotes a universal idea of multiculturalism in Russia," were emphasized as the most crucial sections of the museum.<sup>180</sup> By including the term "Holocaust," which was not used in Russia until the 1990s, the museum recognizes the genocide within the framework of the war.

The pressing question of how the museum portrays, if at all, the brutalization, pogroms, and racial politics of the Stalinist period that define part of the long history of Jews in Russia which bled into the regimes of Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Yeltsin, and Putin

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<sup>179</sup> Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center. Accessed on March 1, 2019. <https://www.jewish-museum.ru/en/>

<sup>180</sup> Olga Gershenson, "How Russia Created a Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center even Vladimir Putin can Tolerate," *Forward*, January 8, 2019. Accessed March 1, 2019. <https://forward.com/culture/art/328682/how-russia-created-a-jewish-museum-and-tolerance-center-even-vladimir-putin/>

is addressed in a way that is also obscure. For example, “The Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust” section of the museum strategically leaves out Soviet violence against Jews and only includes German and Polish crimes against Jews. According to Elizabeth A. Wood, “The values of remembering the war are embedded in the actions of remembering it.” She goes on to explain that the more difficult questions about the war, such as the role of Stalin and the exclusion and oppression of certain nationalities, “do not have to be answered because the war is a mythical event more than a historically specific one.”<sup>181</sup> This is relevant to how the museum reflects the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Other difficult questions, like the relationship between Jews and non-Jews during the war and anti-Semitism in the ranks of the Red Army are not included in the exhibit.<sup>182</sup>

The mythical history of World War II in Russia began with Stalin and has since evolved into an event that has the capability to transcend time and allows the war to hold great power in the present.<sup>183</sup> This myth is enforced by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who, since his election in 2000, has culminated a history that replaces Stalin as the key to upholding a specific and very patriotic war memory with himself. According to Wood, Putin has designed and reintegrated himself as the defender of the motherland resulting in the significant advancement of his powerful political position.<sup>184</sup> By rendering himself as a World War II father-like symbol reminiscent to but distant enough from the way Stalin wished to portray his position in the war, Putin has put himself at the center

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<sup>181</sup> Wood, 177.

<sup>182</sup> Gershenson, ““How Russia Created a Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center even Vladimir Putin can Tolerate.”

<sup>183</sup> Forest and Johnson, 526.

<sup>184</sup> Wood, 172.

of the modern commemoration.<sup>185</sup> Putin's direct relationship with the war (his family suffered during the Siege of Leningrad), his publicized meeting with veterans and visits to monuments, and his efforts to create a girl's school based on military tradition, enhances his position as an icon of World War II.<sup>186</sup> These are all factors in Wood's central argument that "by making World War II the central historical event of the twentieth century, Putin and his handlers have chosen an event of mythic proportions that underlines the unity and coherence of the nation, gives it legitimacy and status as a world power."<sup>187</sup> I explore additional factors in terms of the state's involvement in funding museums and archives. Because of his political position, Putin, and those that came before him, have a critical influence on the way the memory of World War II is manipulated in order to portray a desired history to the Russian people and to the world.

Vladimir Putin's influence on the way WWII history is presented to a global audience in Russia is unique in that the Jewish experience is indeed recognized. Yet, as the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow shows, this experience is still presented within the larger framework of Russian history, one that avoids the negative portrayal of the non-Jewish Soviet population and instead glorifies the efforts of the partisan movement and the Red Army.<sup>188</sup> In Russia, Putin on the surface represents change by endorsing Jewish commemorative establishments like the Jewish Museum

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.,174.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>188</sup> Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center. Accessed on March 1, 2019. <https://www.jewish-museum.ru/en/>

and Tolerance Center in Moscow.<sup>189</sup> However, there are still fragments of the old narrative, for example, the museums section on the Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust includes the recognition of Jews as both victims and as heroes of the war and includes women as active members of the resistance and in the Red Army. But while it includes the story and the history of women's involvement, there is still a focus on the heroic and noble parts of the partisan movement and the army. Gershenson explains, "Such memorialization would have been unthinkable in Soviet times, and yet its framing retains Soviet strategies. Jews are simply added to the heroic Soviet story."<sup>190</sup> While progress is being made to include the Jewish narrative in the history of World War II is evident in Russia today, the loss and destruction involved in the Jewish narrative is still largely omitted.

### **Commemoration in the "Partisan Republic"**

Belorussia, now modern Belarus, has had its own relationship with the politics of memory. Much of the early postwar years were spent celebrating the "Partisan Republic" of the Soviet Union, Soviet scholars centered the narrative of Belarus on the resistance that took place there.<sup>191</sup> During the Soviet era, this partisan republic was also greatly celebrated and was used as a sort of capital for universal suffering. The

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<sup>189</sup> According to Gershenson, Putin donated a month's salary towards the development of the museum. "How Russia Created a Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center even Vladimir Putin can Tolerate."

<sup>190</sup> Gershenson, "How Russia Created a Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center even Vladimir Putin can Tolerate."

<sup>191</sup> Alexandra Goujon, "Memorial Narratives of WWII Partisans and Genocide in Belarus," *East European Politics and Societies* 24, no. 1 (2010) 6.

nationalized memory focused on an East-Slavic peoples who experienced collective suffering at the hands of the Nazis.

During perestroika and the early years of the deconstruction of the Soviet Union, Belarus experienced a shift in the national memory of the Second World War that strayed from Soviet historiography of the war. For example, crimes of the Soviet regime and the mistreatment of the Belorussian people were incorporated into the war memory.<sup>192</sup> The victory narrative of the Soviet state was largely neglected during this time and was replaced with a focus on both German *and* Soviet atrocities. Films like *Come and See* in 1985 were profoundly influential because of the way they contradicted official Soviet history. Such films were commended for giving citizens and the world an honest and quite brutal portrayal of the yet unexplored Soviet theatre of World War II. This period allowed for a different history to emerge, one that finally acknowledged the suffering of various groups of people.

The official state narrative after the 1994 election of President Alexander Lukashenko destroyed this short period of Belarussian independence narratives and has returned to the universalist approach.<sup>193</sup> Once again, it does not emphasize a targeted Jewish extermination, but instead describes a Nazi genocidal policy against all Soviet people. A reinforcement of the heroisms of the partisan movement and de-emphasis of Nazi crimes has been established. Although the number of human lives and material goods that were taken or destroyed by the Nazis was recorded by the Soviets, the Nazi crimes against the Jewish population, for example, was not

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 7.

memorialized by any means. Jewish loss was not counted for. Outside of new museums and archives that work towards making the Jewish experience known, nationalist Belarussians continue to fight against this universalist commemoration practice and attempt to bring light to the stories of those who fell victim of both the Nazi and Soviet regimes during WWII, and seek to prove a “Soviet genocidal policy” towards Belorussian citizens.<sup>194</sup>

### **Western Representations of the Holocaust and Jewish Resistance**

The recent increase of Western museums and archives dedicated to Jewish resistance, especially resistance that took place in the Soviet Union, is unmistakable, yet it has not been widely explored by historians. Before the 1980s, scholarship, films, and other portrayals of the Holocaust tend to have focused on the camps, especially Auschwitz, and the genocidal policies in Western Europe.<sup>195</sup> Western interest in the Soviet theatre of war was overshadowed by the Cold War – until the 1990s there was little empathy towards Soviet destruction during World War II.<sup>196</sup> With the lift of Soviet bans and censorship in the 1980s and then the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Western scholars were able to travel to eastern Europe to conduct oral history interviews and to explore disclosed documents that remained unavailable for almost half of a century. The oral history projects revealed a new narrative for Soviet Jews, one that the West previously ignored.

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>195</sup> Further reading on the recent criticisms of this tendency include Alvin H. Rosenfeld’s article, “The Assault on Holocaust Memory,” *KulturPoetik* 2, no. 1 (2002): 82-101.

<sup>196</sup> Walke, “Split Memory,” 26.

Museums and archives like the Blavatnik Archive and the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation were some that have been established in the last two decades and have focused on providing educational tools and resources for scholars in an attempt to further explore this new Soviet Jewish narrative. The museums and archives that I have used to make my arguments in this thesis have been established in the last twenty years and have shifted the focal setting from the camps to the forests and the front lines in the Soviet Union. Like some postwar Soviet films, the construction of the four major online repositories of Holocaust testimony in the United States and Israel, the Blavatnik Archive, the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, serve both as opposition to the myth of Jewish passivity during the war and also as opposition to official Soviet histories of the war where Jewish suffering was not deserving or distinctive enough to be remembered on its own. I argue that although some museums and archives share similar themes with contemporary Russian commemorative narratives, particularly in terms of the omissions that characterize their websites and oral history processes, they nonetheless serve as a sort of counter-history.

Arguably one of the most famous museums dedicated to the subject in the West is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. The museum's website seemingly prioritizes the function of the museum to educate as well as to confront Holocaust denial.<sup>197</sup> The terms 'evidence' and 'witness' are used frequently in

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<sup>197</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed online on February 21, 2019. <https://www.ushmm.org>



both the titles of the exhibits and in the historical summaries. The five permanent exhibits include a narrative history of the Holocaust, an exhibit on the American response to the genocide and Nazism, an exhibit called “American Witnesses” which details the direct American encounter with Nazi concentration camps upon liberation, and a history of the Holocaust from the perspective of a Jewish child. This last exhibit reflects the museum’s more recent objective to include the history of other genocides and atrocities throughout the world. Although the USHMM’s website offers a database of primary source documents, many of which relate to the experiences of Jewish partisans and women, women as a separate category of victims do not appear in the narrative sections of the website.

When Jewish women do appear in the USHMM’s exhibits and website, the focus is on Jewish women who were incarcerated and brutalized in the camps and films. Scholars have debated and criticized the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for its lack of inclusion of women’s experiences. In *Gender and Catastrophe*, Joan Ringelheim reflects on the USHMM’s inclusion of other victims of the genocide, such as Roma and Sinti, Homosexuals, and Political Prisoners, but deeply examines the lack of dedication to individualized women’s experiences. She includes a quote from Andrea Dworkin’s piece in *Ms* magazine. Dworkin explains:

In the museum, the story of women is missing. Women are conceptually invisible: in the design of the permanent exhibition, by which I mean its purpose, its fundamental meaning; in its conception of the Jewish people. Antisemites do not ignore the specific meaning or presence of women, nor how to stigmatize or physically hurt women as such, nor do those who commit genocide forget that to destroy a people, one must destroy the women. So how can this museum, dedicated to memory, forget to say what happened to Jewish women?<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Ringelheim, “Genocide and Gender: A Split Memory,” 28.

I have proven in the last chapter that women experienced different traumas than men, yet in both academic scholarship and in museums, they are still sometimes merged into one narrative of a single victim group. This is the case for both Russian and Western commemoration sites.

The Yad Vashem Archive in Israel is the oldest Western commemorative project that documents Holocaust memory and survivor testimony. Its mission, since 1953, is to “collect, examine and publish testimony of the disaster and the heroism it called fourth...”<sup>199</sup> Interestingly, the collection of testimony and documents for archival purposes began before 1953, when Jews around the world recognized what was happening during the Holocaust and chose to document their experiences.<sup>200</sup> Officially beginning its collections in 1946, the museum and archive contains a vast amount of oral histories and testimony, a photo archive, and a Shoah names database. The collection is the largest that I explored in this research, but while there are abundant resources provided by Yad Vashem, the emphasis still remains on the atrocities of Nazi camps and ghettos and provide only a glimpse of Jewish life in the forests of the Eastern Front.

The oral history projects of Yad Vashem do include Jewish men and women survivors from the Soviet Union, but are structured so that they are compiled clips of testimony, similar to the style of the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation’s video testimony. Instead of providing a video of one survivor discussing their experiences in an expanded interview, the videos provided in the Video Testimony Resource Center

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<sup>199</sup> “Yad Vashem – The World Holocaust Remembrance Center,” Yad Vashem. Accessed online on February 21, 2019. <https://www.yadvashem.org/archive/about.html>

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

are mainly short clips of two or three survivors explaining a similar topic related to the Holocaust. For example, in one film titled, "Holocaust Survivor Testimonies: In the Ranks of the Partisans," four partisan veterans tell their stories for a little over a minute each. While the testimony and the stories that the partisans choose to discuss are important, the structure and short duration of the video is difficult for those who hope to get a more explicit understanding of life in the partisans. The videos compiled and presented by the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation are similar in length and structure.

The JPEF was founded in the year 2000 by Mitch Braff after his first encounter with a Jewish Partisan. When he realized that he had never heard of the Jewish partisans during his education at American Hebrew and religious schools, he was shocked and became motivated to create a film.<sup>201</sup> In addition to the collection of testimony and the production of these educational films, the foundation became widely successful in the creation of RESIST, an education curriculum for teachers of grades 6-12 meant to teach Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.<sup>202</sup> The JPEF is certainly one of a kind in that its primary focus is the Holocaust in the forests of eastern Europe as well as Jewish partisans in places like France and Italy. While it is an excellent tool for an introduction to the Jewish partisan movement, the film clips give the researcher only a brief glimpse into life as a partisan. Because they are produced and fitted so that they are appropriate for children in grade school, topics such as sexual violence and marginalization are alluded to, but not described in detail.

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<sup>201</sup> Sheri Rosenblum, interviewed by author, telephone interview, January 18, 2019.

<sup>202</sup> Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation. Accessed online on February 21, 2019.  
<http://www.jewishpartisans.org>

Other archives in the United States, like the Blavatnik archive, seem to take this education priority a step further, by providing scholars with educational clips as well as the full video interview from which the clips came. It also provides scholars with more mature and extensive historical content that may be uncomfortable for younger groups of students.

Founded in 2005, the Blavatnik Archive in New York is unique in that it merges Jewish and Russian archival materials that have otherwise been presented as two different experience groups. Olga Golovanova, archive and exhibition coordinator at the archive, described the Blavatnik archive as a modern link between the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, which centers its collections on the Jewish experience, and Russian commemorative websites of the Second World War, which tends to focus on the patriotic sacrifices of veterans. The Blavatnik archive focuses on Jewish veterans and partisans who fought against the Germans in the war.<sup>203</sup> The archive's intended user is a student or scholar, but the archive can also serve as a source for non-academics as well because of its diverse primary source collection.<sup>204</sup>

Alongside visual sources, such as post cards, letters, and photographs, the Blavatnik Archive's Veteran Oral History Project now serves as the largest repository for the testimony of Jewish veterans of the Soviet armed forces, which includes Jewish partisans.<sup>205</sup> Notably, the archive's website is available in both Russian and English, and the testimonial interview videos come with translated transcripts, which make

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<sup>203</sup> Olga Golovanova, interviewed by author, telephone interview, December 20, 2018.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Blavatnik Archive, Blavatnik Archive Foundation. Accessed online on February 10, 2019. <http://www.blavatnikarchive.org>

research efforts much more simple for those who do not speak the language of the interviewee.

One reason that the story of Jewish resistance in the partisans is largely unfamiliar to the public, at least in the United States, is because of language barriers. It is true that language can present itself as a challenge for researchers who use oral histories in their work. For someone using the Blavatnik archive, exposure to the language along with the ability to read along with a transcript in English is beneficial and in some cases, necessary for the retrieval of information.

The way language impacts research in these cases is telling of how archives choose to display information to their intended users, or more specifically, what audience archive directors expect will be using the site. Funding is also an issue for many archives, as some choose to spend money on travel in order to collect testimony from across the world instead of spending money to provide viewers with translated transcripts of the interviews. These are all examples of how partisan experiences have been limited, especially to the public.

The USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive (VHA) is an archive that presents researchers with potential language barriers as there are no translations, captions, or transcriptions for interviews conducted in foreign languages.<sup>206</sup> While there is much more variety as to who the interviewees of the USC Shoah Foundation's VHA are and what their experiences in the Holocaust were like, the English speaker is limited

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<sup>206</sup> "Visual History Archive," USC SHOAH Foundation. Accessed online on February 28, 2019. <https://sfi.usc.edu/vha>

to the oral testimonies of mostly survivors from Western Europe; interviews with survivors from Western Europe are for the most part conducted in English.

When Steven Spielberg created the Shoah Foundation's Institute for Visual History and Education in 1994, the essential goal was preservation of Holocaust testimony through videotape.<sup>207</sup> In January of 2006, the Shoah Foundation moved to the University of Southern California and now contains more than 115,000 hours of testimony within 55,000 audio recordings and visual tapes. Much like how the USHMM integrated Syrian victims and survivors into their exhibits and methodology, in 2013 the testimony of Rwandan genocide survivors was added to the Shoah foundation's archives. The motivation of the archive today is found on the foundation's website, "To overcome prejudice, intolerance, and hatred – and the suffering they cause – through the educational use of the Institute's Visual History Archive."<sup>208</sup>

The educational use of archives and museums to prevent further acts of genocide is a key difference between Western commemoration and Soviet and post-Soviet commemoration. Many of the American and Israeli museums and online archives that I have discussed promote the further study of the Jewish Holocaust, especially in the Soviet Union. While the Western museums and archives initially functioned to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, they now function as educational tools to target intolerance and discrimination, and this is apparent through the incorporation of other atrocities around the world besides the Holocaust. In doing so, these archives and

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

museums acknowledge that with intolerance and hatred, genocide can occur in any part of the world, to any group of people.

Unfortunately, with this focus on education, some experiences are further silenced. The experiences of women during the Holocaust, for example, are largely censored or left out due to their graphic and often sexually violent nature. Instead, they are replaced by age-appropriate narratives or stories that children can better grasp. However, if graphic images of naked bodies of victims are presented in the classroom or in a museum exhibit aimed at young students while the narratives of women who experienced sexual violence during the Holocaust are too inappropriate, these narratives will continue to be silenced and eventually forgotten.

While Western commemorative practices are aimed at Holocaust education, contemporary Russian commemorative projects, as I have shown, are still aimed at portraying the memory of victory. Moreover, although Russian political figures are beginning to acknowledge Jewish people as contributors to this victory, Russian memory of the war has still not included Jewish people as a specifically targeted victim group of genocide. Russian archives and museums do not promote the further study of the Jewish Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Whether this is a legacy of the discrimination directed toward Jewish survivors in the postwar period by the Soviet state, or because of the continued universalization of victimhood in the post-Soviet cult of WWII in Russia today, there is much work to be done to incorporate the experiences of both male and female Soviet Jewish survivors, veterans, and partisans into Russian commemoration of World War II.

## Conclusion

Jewish resistance in war historiography compares to the story of Jewish resistance in contemporary Russia - while it has taken a long time to enter the narrative, it is not yet complete. Jewish partisans, although becoming more widely discussed, are still not given the appropriate amount of attention from scholars who focus on the Soviet Union during World War II. Further, topics of gender and commemoration are replaced with military histories and histories of the Holocaust in camps and ghettos. While these arenas of the war and the Holocaust are important, the forest, as a setting for both the war and the Holocaust, is integral to the understanding of the experience of Soviet Jews. Because Jewish narratives were largely omitted from the historiography until the 1980s, I have showed that recent testimonial sources provide a more thorough understanding of the daily lives of Jews in the forest, allowing for a contemporary exploration of World War II and the Holocaust in the east.

Using commemorative and educational archives and museum websites, I was able to focus on the narratives of Jewish women. The unpleasant side of examining the participation of Jewish women in various traditionally masculine military institutions is revealed by these narrations, both in what the women chose to discuss and what they decided to leave out. The decision to focus on Jewish women fighters also allows for a different history because while these women were extremely brave and suffered greatly, their testimony is not a story of complete valor. Straying from the common valorized and heroic historiography surrounding women fighters in the Soviet Union, I attempted to open new discussions regarding uncomfortable topics such as marginalization, sexual violence, and postwar discrimination.



Although scholars cannot know for sure what Raisa Brook or Dora Nimirovskaya were feeling when they experienced their first conflict at the front, or how Maria Gilmovskaya and Vitka Kempner felt when they were planting mines under railroad tracks, the way these women remember their experiences, how they answer the interviewer's questions, and what they decide is important for people to know about their stories provide historians with a narrative that has been long excluded from World War II historiography.

By comparing the narratives of Jewish partisans with Red Army veterans, I have argued that all women's experiences were different, yet there are distinguishable differences between partisans and soldiers. Women who fought with the partisans, according to the testimony, were more susceptible to instances of sexual abuse and violence because while all women were in some way dependent on men, Jewish women who escaped to the forests highly relied on men for protection, food, and shelter. Understanding how women in the forest, those who found themselves in these relationships and those who did not have any connection with a man, felt towards these forest unions shows how unparalleled experiences were. Even though two women may have been in the same partisan unit does not mean that their daily lives included the same duties or relationships with those around them.

Jewish women who fought in the Red Army on the other hand, did not choose to negatively portray the relationships with the men they fought alongside. According to their testimonies, these women felt respected by their fellow soldiers. The "man's world" that partisan Maria Gilmovskaya describes in her testimony does not fit with the

testimony of the female Red Army veterans.<sup>209</sup> According to the sample of veteran testimony, these women did not talk about feeling marginalized or discriminated against by their fellow soldiers. Although they discuss instances of anti-Semitism after the war, the women who I chose to include in this research did not describe any instances of abuse themselves; and while Alexandra Bocharova made mention of a horrible story that she ultimately chose to keep from the interviewer, there is no way to know what this story involved. Unlike the female Jewish partisans, these women felt looked out for by their male counterparts and understood themselves to be part of the Soviet brotherhood.

The inclusion of survivor testimony regarding their postwar lives is also important to the discussion of commemoration in chapter three. I emphasize that the Jewish narrative was purposefully silenced by the Soviet state in various ways, and this directly impacted the way contemporary politics in Russia shape World War II memory. Beginning with postwar life of Jewish veterans provides an introduction of the kinds of struggles veterans were faced with after the war. These struggles include housing restrictions and difficult reintegration in postwar society. Little help from the government left veterans poor, homeless, and unprotected against violence on the street and harsh treatment from neighbors. Additionally, living amongst Nazi collaborators and residing near or directly on a murder site was common for those who attempted to return to their homes after the war. Visiting and commemorating their own family members and loved ones was difficult, and support from the government in terms of memorialization was

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<sup>209</sup> Maria Gilmovskaya, Interview, Digital Collections, Blavatnik Archive, accessed online on January 15, 2019.

limited. Additionally, a series of purges commenced by Stalin created fear and continued the silencing of a veteran group.

I have used film to examine the origins of the World War II myth in the Soviet Union and to show how the progression of censorship in film further silenced the Jewish narrative. Valorizing and emphasizing the “good” side of war, the state urged for commemorative films to include Stalin as the savior of the fatherland and the heroic sacrifices of the Soviet partisans. Films were used to determine and construct a war narrative fit for the state.

The beginning of the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1980s allowed film makers and activists to push for the inclusion of traditionally non-accepted narratives into the memory of World War II. With glasnost and perestroika came access to archives that were previously undisclosed, allowing for unspoken narratives to enter war historiography. It was during this time that Holocaust scholars in the West really began to fight the myth of Jewish passivity by producing histories using narratives of the Jewish partisans. Meanwhile, Soviet and post-Soviet historiography still portrayed the history of the war through a universalist lens, emphasizing the destruction and loss of a common Soviet people. Jews were included in this victim group rather than identified as a separate, targeted group of victims. This universalist policy continued the silencing of the Jewish experience.

The recent construction of museums, online archives, and oral history projects based on the Jewish experience in the last two decades is striking. In this thesis I have shown that the ways in which Western objectives to memorialize and teach the Holocaust differ greatly from Russia’s commemorative practices. The mythical narrative

of World War II under President Vladimir Putin is still heavily based on a universalist policy that even though has included Jewish involvement, continues to accentuate Soviet loss rather than Jewish loss.

I have argued that projects like the Blavatnik Archive, Yad Vashem, and the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation provide scholars with an invaluable amount of sources that these institutions hope will educate the public and be used by scholars in order to fill a void that the Soviet state so greatly fought to silence. While Russian attempts to commemorate Jewish loss and recognize the long history of Judaism in Russia, such as the creation of the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow, do include narratives of Jewish resistance and bravery during World War II, they are again molded into a particular narrative. This narrative hides the many years of discrimination and violence against Jews by the Soviet state and focuses rather on the violence of the German and Polish armies.

Future research calls for new applications and uses of these survivor testimonies that have been collected over the past sixty years. There is room for growth in the field of gender studies; the ways in which men and women experienced the Holocaust and the war can be studied through various settings besides the forests of Belorussia or the death camps in Poland. While a major criticism of Russian commemoration is that it does not include a unique Jewish narrative, a criticism of Western commemoration is that it does not include a unique women's narrative. Additionally, children's experiences may be furthered explored. Although the survivors included in this research were indeed in their late teens and early twenties when they took to the forest or volunteered for the Red Army, the historiography of World War II and the Holocaust would benefit

from a more detailed look at how small children understood what was happening in this time period.

The inclusion of women's narratives in the historiography surrounding World War II in the Soviet Union not only generates a more thorough history, but it also attempts to provide a voice to millions of people who sacrificed and lost their lives in the genocide and in the war. The ways that Russia, Israel, and the United States have sought to compile these narratives through the recent production of open access archives and museums in an attempt to provide scholars and non-academics with sources relating to Jewish resistance in the Soviet Union provides a beneficial platform for diverse historical narratives.

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