

THE HOLOCAUST WITHOUT JEWS

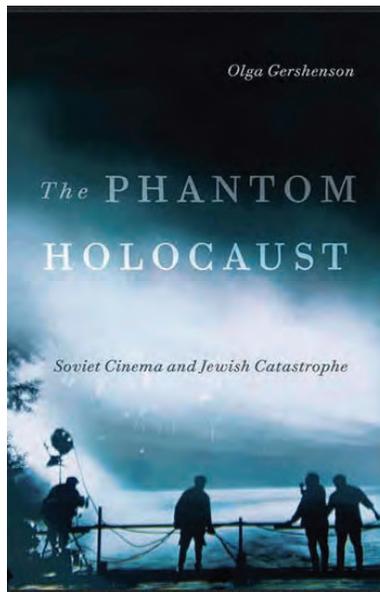
by Susan Welsh



Book by Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Press, 2013)

This fascinating book, which opens up a hitherto largely unexplored area of scholarship, investigates the history of Soviet “phantom” films on the Holocaust (those for which the screenplay was suppressed before a film was produced, or for which the film was mutilated by the censors or banned after production), as well as the few films on this subject that actually saw the light of day. Gershenson’s research sent her to the archives in several former Soviet cities, as well as on an international quest to interview the relevant filmmakers.

Her thesis is that, except for a few early films (before the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939), the Soviet line on Nazi persecution of the Jews was characterized by 1) *Externalization*: If Nazi persecution of Jews is to be shown at all, it must not be shown as occurring within the territory of the Soviet Union. Short clips from concentration camps in the West, in which Jews were identifiable by the Stars of David on their clothing, were sometimes tolerated; but Jewish victims of Nazi atrocities in the USSR had to be described generically, as “peace-loving Soviet citizens.” This is related to 2) *Universalization*: the idea that, since all Soviet citizens suffered horribly from the war, Jews should not



be placed in a special category. These two requirements paralleled rising Soviet state-condoned anti-Semitism during and after the war, to the point that it became increasingly difficult or impossible for films to say anything at all about Jews, to feature a Jewish character, or to have a Jewish director or Jewish actors.

This analysis was confirmed by several ATA Slavic Languages Division members and other Russian and/or Jewish and/or Ukrainian émigrés with whom I spoke and who were kind enough to share their knowledge and experience, for which I thank them.

Gershenson presents abundant documentation through the films she discusses. I also watched a 1947 documentary that she only mentions in passing, *Суд Народов* (*Court of the Peoples*), on the Nuremberg Tribunals, which at one point shows a heap of corpses, while the narrator says: “They killed Russians and Poles, Norwegians and French, old and young, men and women.” But Jews? Not mentioned.

The intertwined requirements of *externalization* and *universalization* are also evident in the most horrifying film I have ever seen on the events of the war in Europe and the Soviet Union, one that Gershenson does not mention: the documentary presented by the

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to achieve additional clarity. Or to remove possible ambiguity?

Perhaps redundancy for additional clarity is a key issue in general. Under the rubric *Их*, Geld gives the example: *Определение железа в цветных металлах и их сплавах...* and renders this as: *The determination of iron in nonferrous metals and alloys...* (p. 48). He is satisfied that his English rendering is unambiguous, as the fact that the “alloys” referred to are of “nonferrous metals,” not alloys in general or alloys of something else (reading his rendering, however, I find myself wondering if that actually is crystal clear), and so is willing to omit the “their.” The Russian is not.

In summary, using or dipping into this little gem of a dictionary can stimulate interesting reflections about the *linguistic/philological implications* of the contrast between Russian and English styles.

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Soviet prosecutors at Nuremberg (which is an extra on the DVD “Nuremberg: Nazis Facing Their Crimes,” dir. Christian Delage, 2006). The hour-long Soviet film, titled “Atrocities Committed by the German Fascists in the USSR,” consists of footage taken by Soviet cameramen “embedded” with the Red Army as it liberated one Soviet town after another from the Nazis, from as early as 1941. The only narration is the laconic—chilling—reporting by the cameramen (as eyewitnesses, legally sworn as such for the purposes of the Court), describing what they saw, giving the names of the deceased and their living relatives, who hurled themselves on the bodies of their loved ones, weeping, once the Nazis had left (often just a short time before the Red Army arrived). All of the deceased are described simply as “Soviet citizens.” There is no soundtrack, no sound at all except the intermittent voice of the narrator, and between narrations, as the camera sweeps across yet another horrific scene: the silence of death. This film, of course, was not shown in theaters, only at the Tribunal.

The thing I find paradoxical is how sharply the “Holocaust without Jews” contrasts with events before the war. Anti-Semitism in Russia dates back to tsarist times, of course; but in the first two decades of the Soviet Union it was officially condemned, even suppressed. In fact, the Soviet government during the 1920s and early 1930s did more than any other government in history to promote the Yiddish language and Jewish culture. I was amazed to learn that Stalin (!) announced a massive public campaign against anti-Semitism at the 15th Communist Party Congress in December 1927, saying, “This evil has to be combated with utmost ruthlessness, comrades.” As late as 1935, people were being sent to labor camps and even shot for anti-Semitic statements or actions (Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* [Princeton University Press, 2004]). And in the spring of 1939, state support was given to the posthumous celebration of the 80th birthday of Sholem Aleichem, with gala readings and performances in Kiev and Moscow (Bernard Wasserstein, *On the Eve: The Jews of Europe Before the Second World War* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012]). This was happening shortly before Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet (Jewish) Commissar of Foreign Affairs, was replaced by Vyacheslav Molotov, with the instruction from Stalin to “purge the ministry of Jews.” Historians agree that this purge was in preparation for the “non-aggression” pact with Germany in August.

Films play a part in the paradox too, as we learn from Gershenson. The first film anywhere in the world about the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany was

the 1934 Soviet *Карьера Рудди* (*Ruddy's Career*). This was while Hollywood wouldn't touch the issue with a 10-foot pole. Then there was the 1938 Soviet film *Профессор Мамлок* (*Professor Mamlock*), the first film in the world “to tackle the issue head on,” Gershenson writes. It takes place in Germany, showing the Nazis' rise to power, their battles with the Communists, and their persecution of Jews. The first time the word “Jew” was used in an American film about the Nazis was two years later, in 1940, in Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*—a film that the Hollywood studios tried to block, but whose production was quietly encouraged by President Franklin Roosevelt (see the American DVD “Imaginary Witness: Hollywood and the Holocaust,” dir. Daniel Anker, 2004).

Why the change in Soviet policy? Gershenson, unfortunately, does not address the shift. Having asked all my SLD interlocutors and others about it, and received diverse answers and many suggestions for further research, I set it aside for now, as “too big a question” for this review. The issue of resurgent Russian anti-Semitism during and especially after the war cannot be explained exclusively by Stalin's dictatorial power, anti-Semite though he was. It is a deeper cultural and historical question, as suggested in the remark by physicist Igor Tamm, reported by Andrei Sakharov in his *Memoirs*, that there was “only one foolproof way of telling if someone belongs to the Russian intelligentsia. A true Russian *intelligent* is never an anti-Semite. If he's infected with that virus, then he's something else, something terrible and dangerous.” What is that “something else”? How did anti-Semitism come to dominate a land whose leaders and core ideology had repudiated it? A land in which many Jews of those years recalled the war as a “red line” with regard to their personal experience of anti-Semitism, particularly state-sponsored anti-Semitism? That is the key question that the book prompts the reader to ask but does not attempt to answer.

Where To Find the Films

Gershenson rightly complains that most of the films she describes are not available on DVD and are unknown in the West. She puts a few short clips on her [website](#). Those that I determined to be available on DVD or that have been legally uploaded by Mosfilm to its own YouTube site are the following (I did not search for every film in the book):

1938: *Болотные солдаты* (*Peat Bog Soldiers*), dir. Alexander Macheret; Mosfilm

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1938: *Семья Отпенгейм (The Oppenheim Family)*, dir. Grigorii Roshal, Mosfilm

1943: *Два бойца (Two Fighters)*, Leonid Lukov; Tashkent Film Studio (on DVD in Russia, but not readily available in USA. I found it on eBay).

1964: *До свидания мальчики! (Goodbye, Boys!)*, dir. Mikhail Kalik; Mosfilm (Mosfilm does not have this on its YouTube site, but it can be streamed, for a fee, at www.memocast.com/media.aspx?id=865385).

1965: *Обыкновенный фашизм (Ordinary Fascism; also in English as Triumph over Fascism; Echo of the Jackboot)*, dir. Mikhail Romm; Mosfilm (available in DVD, with English subtitles). Quite a remarkable “film-contemplation,” as Romm called it, including material from Goebbels’ personal video archive, Hitler’s personal photo archive, Nazi propaganda films and newsreels, and children’s drawings from Theresienstadt.

1967: *Хроника пикирующего бомбардировщика (Chronicle of a Dive Bomber)*, dir. Naum Birman; Lenfilm (available in DVD)

1967, but not released until **1988:** *Комиссар (Commissar)*, dir. Aleksandr Askoldov; Gorky Film Studio (available in DVD with English subtitles and interviews with the director and some of the actors). A particularly excellent film, as several SLD members noted. Gershenson’s analysis is sometimes a bit strange (such as that the deceased father of Commissar Vavilova’s child was Jewish, which accounted for her having taken the newborn baby to a destroyed synagogue as well as a church).

1972: *А зори здесь тихие (At Dawn It’s Quiet Here)*, dir. Stanislav Rostotskii; Gorky Film Studio (widely viewed at the time and nominated by the USSR for an Oscar. There is a DVD, with English subtitles, but it is not widely available in the USA. I found it on eBay).

2000: *Дети из бездны (Children of the Abyss)*, dir. Pavel Chukrai; Steven Spielberg and Survivors of the Shoah History Foundation (available on the DVD “Broken Silence,” a five-part TV mini-series of which *Children of the Abyss* is one part).

2004: *Папа (Papa)*, dir. Vladimir Mashkov; TransMashHolding and OAO Rossiiskiye kommunalnye sistemy (on the theme of the play *Матросская тишина [Sailors’ Rest]* by Aleksandr Galich, which had been banned in 1958; available in DVD, with English subtitles).

2012: *Жизнь и Судьба (Life and Fate)*, dir. Sergei Usulyak; Kinokompaniya Moskino, Telekanal Rossiya (based on Vasily Grossman’s novel of the same title; available in DVD. Gershenson reports that the film almost entirely omits the events of the Holocaust).

The following films can be found on the Internet but not otherwise, to my knowledge. I do not know whether they were legally uploaded or not, so I do not provide links:

1938: *Профессор Мамлок (Professor Mamlock)*, dir. Herbert Rappaport and Adolf Minkin; Lenfilm

1945: *Непокорённые (The Unvanquished)*, dir. Marc Donskoi; Kiev Film Studio of Artistic Films

1956: *Солдаты (Soldiers)*, dir. Alexander Ivanov, Lenfilm (based on the book *В окопах Сталинграда [In the Trenches of Stalingrad]*, by Viktor Nekrasov)

1966: *Восточный коридор (Eastern Corridor)*, dir. Valentin Vinogradov; Belarusfilm

1990: *Дамский портной (Ladies’ Tailor)*, dir. Leonid Gorovets; Fora-Film

The author welcomes discussion of these issues and the films mentioned here, and can be reached at welsh_business@verizon.net.



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