

**For many**, the Holocaust has become the most important historical event of the twentieth century. Indeed, it has become part of the American experience, providing Americans a point of reference firmer even than the Civil War or Pearl Harbor.<sup>1</sup> As an extreme of human behavior, it informs not only the understanding of history but also contemporary politics as the international community strives to comprehend, prevent, or prosecute programs of genocide, a term itself coined to describe the Nazis' attempted extermination of the Jews.

Images, especially cinematic ones, have been a crucial means for inculcating public awareness of the Holocaust. Indeed, widespread Western skepticism about Nazi crimes was decisively defeated by screening newsreels of the camps at the end of the war. More recently, several popular films, including Marvin J. Chomsky's *Holocaust* television miniseries (1978) and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), further raised mass consciousness about the Holocaust. While these are reconstructions, audiences are also familiar with fragments of the original newsreel images, which have been recycled for both authorial films, such as Alain Resnais's seminal *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard* [1955]), and TV documentaries, such as the final two parts of Thames TV's 1973 *World at War* ("The Final Solution," directed by Michael Darlow), to name but two.

Yet rarely do we pause to reflect on the genesis of the newsreel images. This oversight masks an extraordinary ignorance about the first mov-

ing images to depict the Holocaust not taken by perpetrators themselves. These little-considered films were made and shown before the newsreels showing U.S. and British soldiers liberating camps in Germany in 1945, usually regarded as the “first” films of the Holocaust. The neglected images—Soviet wartime films—are cinema’s initial attempts to represent the Holocaust, the subject of this study.

Above all, identifying and examining these movies will shed new light on the apparently familiar subject of humanity’s first encounter with images of the Holocaust. By shifting the focus away from the familiar territory of the 1945 U.S. and British newsreels and to that of Soviet newsreels, documentaries, and features, we can better observe how the unprecedented sights of brutality were grasped within established narrative frameworks. For the Soviets, this meant adapting representations of Nazi atrocities so as to convey a “Soviet” version of the Holocaust, to “Sovietize” it, to claim the victims as their own, a process that can be compared to American filmmakers’ later tendency to “Americanize” the same events. By analyzing how Soviet filmmakers shaped and distorted their discoveries, we can better understand and guard against analogous appropriations of the Holocaust by other factions.

Such an analysis not only reveals a great deal about the effects of cultural, political, and ideological biases on Holocaust film but also illuminates the process of cinematically representing the Holocaust, the ways in which narrative tropes for its representation were elaborated. This comprises the passage from eyewitness testimony and firsthand accounts, on the one hand, to the reportorial gathering information and shaping narratives, on the other.

Finally, focusing on this body of films also enables a greater understanding of less-considered dimensions of history proper—specifically, of the initial stage of the Holocaust, the Nazis’ mass murder of Soviet Jews, which began in 1941, before the construction of the death camps and gas chambers. It likewise enables a rare insight into the unique culture of the wartime Soviet Union, which experienced a distinct moment of “spontaneous de-Stalinization.”<sup>2</sup>

## **The Soviet Union and the Holocaust**

Investigating Soviet wartime cinema’s depiction of the Holocaust may seem a deliberately paradoxical and provocative endeavor. For one thing, it is anachronistic in that the filmmakers did not perceive these works as

depicting the fate solely of Jews and certainly not as documenting the “Holocaust,” for that term became widespread even in the English-speaking world only beginning in the 1960s. Indeed, Soviet authorities rejected the very notion of the Holocaust and restricted the representation and discussion of the fate of Jewish victims of the Nazis’ genocidal activities as being separate from that of Soviet citizens more generally and other occupied peoples.<sup>3</sup> In the context of the Soviet rejection of the word, it is worth considering its coinage. This word is a deeply problematic one in that it bears long-standing Christian associations and implies sacrifice, a repellent notion when used to describe the Nazis’ murder of Jews. As the philosopher Giorgio Agamben has shown persuasively, the term *Holocaust* used as a label for these horrific events possesses “a semantic heredity that is from its inception anti-Semitic.”<sup>4</sup> Other candidates, however, have their own difficulties. The main rival term, *Shoah*, a Hebrew word for “catastrophe” that dominates usage in France and elsewhere, has unwarranted suggestions of divine retribution,<sup>5</sup> and the metonym *Auschwitz*, which Agamben employs, itself has the unfortunate effect of distracting attention from the millions of Jews not killed in the death camps. Consequently, I will employ the inadequate term *Holocaust* because, despite its unfortunate and unwarranted associations, it enjoys wide acceptance in the English language, especially since the 2005 U.N. resolution on Holocaust remembrance.<sup>6</sup>

Like many historical terms, this one is further problematic in the time-frame of events it designates. Although few serious historians would dispute that the murder of 6 million of Europe’s 8 million Jews constitutes the central event that Holocaust film must strive to convey, this atrocity formed the culmination of a process that can be traced back to earlier Nazi policies of expelling Jews from German public life and ultimately from the country itself. Indeed, the roots of the Holocaust may be traced further back, to the deeply entrenched anti-Semitism that has marked Europe’s Christian culture for centuries. Yet this cultural context yielded a systematic policy to kill all Jews only in Nazi Germany, so that we must seek the immediate roots of the Holocaust in the Nazis’ acquisition and exercise of power after 1933.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, I begin my study with Soviet depictions of the Nazis’ prewar persecution of Jews.

The notion that Soviet Russia may have played a pivotal role in exposing the Holocaust may seem strange. After all, popular perceptions in the English-speaking world link Russia and anti-Semitism: *pogrom* is

one of few Russian-language loan words in English. This association has been passed on through folk memory as important Jewish immigrant communities came to the United States in particular: Jews made up some 80 percent of the approximately 1,288,000 who left the Russian Empire between 1897 and 1915, perceiving it as a place that violently persecuted, humiliated, and discriminated against Jews.<sup>8</sup> As Yuri Slezkine has pointed out, czarist Russia legally discriminated against everyone apart from the czar since it conferred no universal rights on citizens, but Jews nonetheless faced particular problems. Long-standing enmities toward Jews increased as industrial modernization began to destroy their traditional economic roles and crafts in the 1880s, leading them to migrate to urban centers. Once there, they met anti-Semitic barriers such as residency restrictions and quotas limiting entry to higher education, preventing Jews from seizing the opportunities generated by the ongoing changes to society.<sup>9</sup> In consequence, Jews were disproportionately attracted to the revolutionary movements and played an important part in the Russian Revolution. Even though the Bolshevik Party possessed a smaller Jewish membership (4 percent) than did the other socialist parties, some of its most prominent members, such as Lev Trotskii, Iakov Sverdlov, Lev Kamenev, and Grigorii Zinov'ev, were Jews.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, despite hostility to the Bolsheviks from the wider Jewish population, the Whites actively fomented anti-Semitism and conducted pogroms against Jews under their control, using the prominence of Jewish Bolsheviks as a key element in their propaganda.<sup>11</sup> When much of the prerevolutionary intelligentsia emigrated, the revolution offered previously undreamed of opportunities for educated Jews in particular; as an additional attraction, their loyalty was assured, for they could hardly harbor secret sympathies for the anti-Semitic Whites.

While the revolution interrupted the pattern of legal discrimination against Jews, this did little to alter grassroots anti-Semitism. Indeed, the association of Jews with the Soviet state aggravated such sentiments, even though the Bolsheviks took care to monitor, repress, and publicly deprecate such views.<sup>12</sup> Jews within the political elite suffered as much as others did during the Great Terror of the late 1930s, but their lack of any other homeland, which distinguished them from Germans or Poles, for example, meant that the NKVD was less likely to see Jews as potential foreign spies.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, those who replaced purged Jews in the state and party apparatus tended to come from the emerging generation of

Soviet-educated ethnic Russians, and a renewed focus on Russian cultural identity gained momentum.<sup>14</sup>

It is sometimes thought that Stalin was throughout an anti-Semite and that the anti-Semitic policies adopted toward the end of World War II expressed his true intentions. The evidence for this is contradictory, however, and has been effectively countered by the Russian historian Genadii Kostyrchenko, who sets out a far more convincing narrative in which these policies reflected the Stalin regime's abandonment of internationalism in favor of a growing Russian nationalism and imperial chauvinism—a populist rather than personal agenda.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union was indisputably the site of the Germans' first mass killings of Jews, which followed the Nazi invasion of 22 June 1941. Russia itself, the territory of the contemporary Russian Federation, is seldom seen as a center of Nazi killing, and compared to Poland it was not. Nonetheless, more Russian Jews were murdered than Dutch or French, although the fate of Russian Jews has been far less extensively represented or discussed than has that of their Western European counterparts, a situation that began to change only with the end of the cold war.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it is possible to find even recently published books, Web sites, and so on that entirely exclude any testimony relating to the first stage of the killings, the mass shootings that claimed the lives of approximately 1.5 million Soviet Jews.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, a common historical sleight of hand calculates the death toll of Jews in Poland according to that nation's pre-September 1939 borders, yielding a figure of 3 million, rather than to those of the postwar state. In consequence, western Ukraine, which was incorporated into the Soviet Union in September 1939 and invaded by Germany as being part of the Soviet Union in 1941 (and which is now part of the post-Soviet state of Ukraine), still has its half a million Jewish dead conventionally added to those of Poland. The Russian historian Il'ia Al'tman goes further, arguing that the Jews living in the formerly Polish, Baltic, and Romanian territories might all more plausibly be defined as Soviet dead, since the invading Nazis began killing these 3 million Soviet citizens because they were not just Jews but *Soviet* Jews. The resulting figure of Soviet Jews killed is nearer to 3 million, approximately half of all the Jews killed, rather than the conventional figure of 1.5 million.<sup>18</sup> While it may seem macabre to dispute the "citizenship" of the dead in this manner, such figures nevertheless help show more broadly where and

why the Holocaust occurred. The Soviet Union was the site of a brutal initial stage of the genocidal killings and as such was in a privileged position to see and represent the unfolding horror in journalism, literature, photography, and film. Recently, representations of the Holocaust in these other media have attracted public attention; examples of such representations include a major retrospective of the graphic art of Zinovii Tolkachev, whose albums contain eyewitness portrayals of the liberation of Majdanek and Auschwitz;<sup>19</sup> a book devoted to the Soviet Jewish photographers' depictions of the Holocaust;<sup>20</sup> and new studies of and translations of works by the journalists Vasilii Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the *Black Book of Russian Jewry* itself has been published in English and other languages, including Russian. But Soviet wartime cinema's depictions of the Holocaust have until now been all but forgotten.

### **Soviet Cinema**

Soviet montage cinema from the 1920s was and still is internationally acclaimed (e.g., the works of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov), but the nation's cinematic culture from the 1930s and 1940s has received far less attention; many film critics have assumed that the coming of sound obstructed contemporary international reception of these films, whose lack of artistic worth warrants their obscurity in any event. As a number of studies have shown, however, this is at best partially true. Despite the Soviet Union's increasingly oppressive internal climate of show trials and the Great Terror, a small but influential audience in large cosmopolitan cities, such as New York and London, still saw Soviet films and associated them with sophisticated technique and the morally serious use of cinema.<sup>22</sup> Soviet cinema's ongoing reputation enabled these works to continue to reach Western audiences right up to and, in countries not occupied by the Nazis, throughout the war, forming a chapter in film history now largely forgotten, especially in the West.

Nevertheless, despite the almost universal ignorance of its filmic depictions of the Holocaust, the Soviet Union was the only anti-Nazi power to be occupied but still free to make and distribute its own films, uniquely positioning it to make the first cinematic depictions of liberation from Nazi occupation. Indeed, the Soviets had depicted Nazi persecution of the Jews prior the war, at least until the August 1939 Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact. With the invasion of 22 June 1941, they began first to mention Nazi atrocities and then to make films recording them. The earliest of

these films dates from the initial liberation of the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don in November 1941, during the Soviets' first defeat of the Germans, in the Battle of Moscow. Soviet filmmakers continued to make such newsreels throughout the rest of the war, culminating in records of the death camp at Majdanek following its liberation in July 1944 and the one at Auschwitz in January 1945. Although the Soviet productions almost always deliberately understate the distinct fate of Jews by lumping together all the Nazis' victims, including Soviet Jews, non-Jewish Soviet citizens, those of other nationalities, and political prisoners, they occasionally do explicitly identify Jewish victims. This footage thus constitutes both a visual record and an initial effort, albeit one deeply flawed and sometimes reluctant, to grasp and reconstruct the events of the Holocaust and to come to terms with its ramifications. The newsreels may be seen as a cinematic equivalent of Vasilii Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg's *Black Book of Russian Jewry*, a compilation of documents on the Nazi extermination of Soviet Jews that was banned in 1946.<sup>23</sup> As the first examples of an important genre of cinema, these films deserve to be rescued from oblivion, reviewed, reconcontextualized, and reconsidered.

### **Cinema's First Confrontation with the Holocaust**

The historiography of the Holocaust contains a large number of accounts that trace Western society's first confrontation with the tragic events therein. Many of these accounts relate to the prewar period, as does the historian Tony Kushner's indicatively titled book *The Holocaust and the Western Liberal Imagination*. Such studies ask what Western society knew, when it knew this, and what more it might have done to save Jews from the Nazis.<sup>24</sup> This is of course an instructive and important line of inquiry, but curiously, such studies never discuss the Soviet Union's efforts to help the Jews—or the lack thereof. This is frustrating, for Soviet actions played an important part in the events of the Holocaust. On the one hand, the Soviets occupied a pivotal role in defeating the Nazis and thus arresting their attempt to kill all Europe's Jews; on the other, however, the Soviets' earlier failure to stop the Nazis and their signing of the nonaggression pact contributed to the Nazis' advances at least as much as Western actions did. Indeed, the partition of Poland, which resulted directly from the pact, led to the first Nazi-imposed Jewish ghettos in German-controlled Poland.

This flaw in historical focus is understandable; after all, the 1930s Soviet Union was a deeply oppressive and thoroughly illiberal society that

many people would have wanted to flee, since those who took refuge there, especially from Nazi Germany, remained at risk. At the same time, however, the narrative of reactions to and representations of the situation in Germany cannot be properly understood without reference to the Soviet picture. Soviet prewar film portrayals of the Nazi persecution of Jews are a great deal more candid than either British or American images, and had they not been systematically marginalized and ignored, they might have triggered a more timely response to the international political and refugee crises faced in the last years of interwar peace.

The process by which these works were obscured was briefly interrupted to a degree during the war but has since resumed through historians' claims, for example, that the British public during World War II was sheltered from images of death and atrocity in newsreels.<sup>25</sup> Similar sorts of claims have been made of the United States. Yet these assertions are predicated on analyses of only British or American films.<sup>26</sup> They ignore the fact that Soviet films depicting atrocity had already been shown to large numbers of spectators in both countries, including the Oscar-winning *Moscow Strikes Back* (1942).

Some studies do mention that the Soviets represented the camps before British and Americans did, but they discount the footage as being "pale" (Abzug), as unauthenticated and therefore lacking "impact" (Caven), or as less immediate and entirely staged (Delage).<sup>27</sup> These interpretations of the Soviet films appear to be based on little or no knowledge of them, however, and seem to assume that they were not widely seen in the West, consequently had little impact, and must therefore have been poor pieces of filmmaking.

Whatever the rationale, the conclusions are not sound, for the Soviets had been showing images of Nazi atrocities since 1941, both screening them at home and sending them abroad. These were significant films that elaborated a set of conventions for representing such horrific sights. Soviet filmmakers also documented the two still-remaining death camps they discovered. When the December 1944 Soviet film of the Majdanek camp reached the West, however, it was censored, notably in France. Even where it was shown, such footage was treated with an enormous degree of suspicion,<sup>28</sup> for it differed in important ways from the newsreels made by the British and the Americans. For example, the Soviet films of Majdanek and Auschwitz showed fewer bodies because they depicted extermination camps in which corpses had been incinerated on a mass scale. Thus the



Soviet filmmakers had to confront a central problem in representing the Holocaust: extrapolating the scale of the dead from a killing process that destroyed almost all traces of the victims—except, as both of these films tellingly show, their material effects: clothes, shoes, and so on. To this day, museums employ such artifacts to evoke the nature and scale of the catastrophe. Moreover, the Soviet films avoid an error common in Western films, that of treating concentration camps as the epicenter of the Nazi killing machine. Instead, while they do not explain the factors, especially ethnicity, determining the different fates of those who entered the camps, they suggest that the death camps' extermination function was primary in all camps.

These films also help us understand how filmmakers and photographers among the Western liberators reacted when confronting the camps, for many of their accounts may be compared with similar reactions by Soviet camera operators. The dichotomy between witnessing these scenes and fulfilling the role of the reporter is evident in the account of Roman Karmen, who recalls himself and his colleagues overcoming their emotions as they recorded images of civilians killed by the Nazis near Moscow in 1941 and 1942 but weeping as they saw the rushes. Similarly, the American photographer Margaret Bourke-White, on an assignment for *Life* magazine, recalls truly registering the sights for the first time only on seeing the eventual prints, when “the protective veil” had been lifted.<sup>29</sup>

The comparison with Soviet representations of Nazi atrocities also betrays a gulf in attitudes. For instance, the British journalist Edwin Tetlow recalled: “Writing my story emptied me of emotion, restoring me to a realization that I was not a participant in the horror but a professional observer with the duty of telling others what Belsen was like.”<sup>30</sup> By contrast, Soviet media people, from their first such experiences in Russia in the winter of 1941 to the liberation of Auschwitz in January 1945, unfailingly stressed their identification with the dead as part of their professional function. Moreover, if Soviet camera operators or photographers felt disgust at their own searching for effective compositions in the scenes before them, as the British photographer George Rodger did when filming Belsen, they did not act as Rodger did, abandoning their assignments as a war correspondent, nor would they have been allowed to do so.<sup>31</sup> The Soviets were less sympathetic to the expression of private, unpoliticized distress or trauma.

## Impossibility of Witnessing

Humanity's first reactions when discovering the true scale of Nazi atrocities can be understood in theoretical terms as well as from the previously articulated historical perspective. Any theorization of film representations of the Holocaust confronts a fundamental problem: apart from a few reels of film and still photographs that the Nazi mobile killing squads took of their victims in Soviet territory, as well as a handful of photographs taken in the camps, no direct documentation of the killings exists. This catastrophe continues to challenge notions of memory, history, and their representation.<sup>32</sup> Thus, all films of the Holocaust are in some sense reconstructions, whether capturing direct witness testimony from survivors and perpetrators or filtering material into a subsequent commentary by the immediate liberators or others.<sup>33</sup> Visual images recording the immediate aftermath of the liberation essentially have this same quality of secondhand reconstruction, although they may also record evidence: the corpses and other traces of the dead, as well as the scene and means of murder. In each case, the moments of the Holocaust's nearly six millions killings were not recorded, and memory intervenes between the moment of seeing an atrocity, of witnessing it, and that of recounting it in testimony, whether verbal, visual, or a combination of both in film.<sup>34</sup>

This gap between the event and its representation has been described in the psychoanalytically inflected notions of trauma and the *Nachträglichkeit*, or belatedness, of its expression. The most significant films addressing the Holocaust, starting with Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*, did not appear until over a decade after the events.<sup>35</sup> Yet this breach between the event and images of it applies very differently to the films I will discuss. More recently, the project of mapping ethical concerns onto those of film studies, undertaken notably by Libby Saxton, has shifted the focus to the manner in which films depict such events, onto the "gaps, ellipses, silences and lacunae" in the films themselves rather than in film history. What they do not show is held to grant the greatest insight into the filmmaker's ethical vision.<sup>36</sup>

Yet the greatest film of the Holocaust, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), deliberately foregrounds such ellipses, the unrecorded images that haunt the visible ones, so as to push spectators to imagine the terrible reality that persists in the memory of those interviewed and to grasp that the most important scenes are those *not* recorded. In contrast, the films I

examine here attempt to cover up and repress their lacunae. Hence, one of my main tasks in this book is to locate and begin to scrutinize these blank and blanked-out spots. Such equal attention to both the manner of depiction and the substance depicted relates to the theoretical paradigm of film and ethics; nonetheless, the work required to identify the films' significant silences about the Holocaust is considerable, and the project of doing so occupies more of the book than does explicit analysis through the vocabulary of the poststructural approach to ethics.

While the filmmakers did, in three or four instances, strive to openly depict the fate of Jews as Jews, the political climate of the wartime Soviet film industry made these exceptions rare. Even when filmmakers attempted this, they tended to avoid making Jews the exclusive focus of their films, implying or suggesting more than they showed or stated. For the most part, the filmmakers went along with the dominant wartime discourse, wherein victims were designated as Soviet, as was resistance, and both were implicitly Russian.<sup>37</sup> Even so, several fiction films mention the fate of the Jews or Nazi attitudes toward the Jews either at initial script stages or peripherally in the final film. Finally, some films document Nazi atrocities, in particular showing the victims of shootings and their mass graves in Russia and Ukraine or the death camps in Poland. Final films in this category sometimes mention that most of these victims were Jewish, and sometimes the initial footage clearly indicates this, but more frequently they keep silent on the matter.

In each instance, through a careful search of recently published or as yet unpublished archival materials, the silences of these films can be made to tell a significant and rarely heard story of the Holocaust. The film archives contain never released, discarded newsreel footage from camps liberated by the Soviets that identifies the victims as predominantly Jewish (in Majdanek, Klooga, and Auschwitz). The various paper archives contain camera operators' itemizations of their footage (i.e., "montazhnye listy," or dope sheets), correspondence between frontline camera operators and the studios, and earlier script versions of many of the newsreel and both documentary and fiction films, as well as internal discussions of some of the final films, all of which enable us to trace the process that Soviet attempts to represent the Holocaust had to negotiate before appearing on screen. All these sources, as well as the films themselves, can likewise be made more revealing when compared with other accounts of the events they represent, be they in government statements, journalism, literature,

art, memoirs, or historiographic works. When contextualized in this manner, the films' clichés become more evident and their silences more telling. They grant us an insight into the difficulties faced and paths taken when filmmakers first attempted to portray the Holocaust. To understand this process, we need to understand how the Soviet media adapted the portrayals to their own persuasional needs—how, that is, they “Sovietized” the Holocaust.

### **Sovietization of the Holocaust**

In recent times scholars have described the “Americanization” of the Holocaust, a term meant to indicate the Holocaust’s changing role in the United States. As Doneson points out, “the Holocaust played little if any role in the lives of most Americans, Jew or Gentile,” during the events themselves, but since the 1960s it has become a central symbol in the American imagination.<sup>38</sup> The powerful influence of American culture, especially cinema, has meant that this process has been echoed elsewhere, especially Western Europe, to a greater or lesser extent. In the Soviet Union, almost the opposite occurred. Even though 1.5–3 million Soviet citizens perished at the hands of the Nazis for being Jewish, this aspect of Nazi crimes is glossed over or subsumed into the collective memory of the even larger number, over 27 million, of Soviet war dead: 8.7 million combatants and 18.3 million civilians.<sup>39</sup> The Holocaust is overshadowed by a narrative of heroic Soviet resistance, and this narrative is still important for post-Soviet Russia.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, the Sovietization and Americanization of the Holocaust have much in common: specifically, a denial of the otherness of the Eastern European Jews, who were the Nazis’ primary victims. In the case of American-made films, this entails stripping the victims of linguistic difference by making their filmic representations speak English, as well as filtering out any trace of communist politics among Jews. For example, the characters of the *Holocaust* miniseries act like postwar American or Israeli Jews rather than the German Jews they portray, let alone the wartime Polish or Ukrainian Jews who were the prime victims of the Holocaust, a characterization meant to enable spectators in the United States to identify with the victims.<sup>41</sup> To an extent, moreover, this Americanization involves imposing a certain optimistic construction on the material and avoiding the most gruesome aspect of the realities depicted.<sup>42</sup> Yet despite the partial

erasure of cultural difference all this involves, the characters nevertheless retain their identities as Jews.

The Sovietization of the Holocaust in Soviet wartime film similarly involved depriving victims and eyewitnesses of language: for example, despite being photographed, no Jews were recorded in synchronous sound interviews recounting why their counterparts had died. Soviet atrocity footage frequently shows victims' suffering in a graphic manner; for example, the filmmakers often photographed the faces of the dead so as enable spectator identification, something Susan Sontag has argued to be atypical of images of the dead in the Western media.<sup>43</sup> But the purpose of this identification was to move the spectator to act, for the dead are presented not as an alien spectacle but as people like the spectator with whom solidarity is required. The films address the spectator, demanding a response to suffering in a contribution to the war effort figured as vengeance.<sup>44</sup> To rouse Soviet soldiers to avenge the dead, however, filmmakers thought it necessary to downplay the victims' Jewish identities so as to avoid confirming the Nazi propaganda leaflets' claims that the common Russian soldier was being exploited to fight for the Jews. Sovietizing the Holocaust meant editing images of Jews to appeal as widely as possible to the Soviet population, whose feared and presumed anti-Semitism might otherwise cause this call for vengeance to founder.<sup>45</sup> As one underground communist resister in occupied Belorussia put it: "Reckoning with the mood of the population, it was not possible in agitational work to directly and openly defend the Jews as this undoubtedly could have provoked a negative attitude to our leaflets even from our own, pro-Soviet people, or people close to us. We had to touch upon this matter obliquely."<sup>46</sup>

While this cautious attitude strictly rationed film images of Jewish victims as such, it also enabled Soviets to record and depict the atrocities far more widely than could U.S. and British filmmakers, whose logistical circumstances initially required them to refrain from photographing such things. This stance may be called propagandistic provided we remember that Soviet film's principal *raison d'être* was propaganda, a term Lenin and his disciples used habitually without negative connotations.<sup>47</sup> Soviet cinema's willingness to use film as propaganda, as a tool of persuasion and not just entertainment, was influential in the war, and its assertion of the right to represent atrocities for the purposes of propaganda influenced similar decisions by other nations. Nevertheless, the accusation that Soviet docu-

mentary film is all about propaganda, implying that it cannot be believed, constitutes a central reason these Soviet wartime representations of Nazi atrocities have been largely if not totally ignored by the Western public in general and film historians in particular.<sup>48</sup> True, these works include posed shots and reconstructions without ever describing them as such, but the Nazis (and their various collaborators) did indeed commit the atrocities shown in these Soviet films, with the exception of Irina Setkina's shameful 1943 film about Katyn, *Tragedy in the Katyn Wood* (*Tragediia v Katynskom lesu*). Yet the notion that the Soviet films are nothing but distortions seems born from a cold war hangover or a simplistic tendency to think that a documentary is either a faithful report or a complete distortion.

Indeed, the very sense of a completely reliable documentary representation is problematic, for all documentary makers shape their material and elicit performances from their subjects. Documentarians are more fruitfully seen as employing a greater or lesser degree of reconstruction, as Brian Winston has argued.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, such filmic representations are inherently insubstantial and must be cross-referenced with other sources. Just as, according to Walter Benjamin, the meaning of a still photograph is indeterminate without a caption,<sup>50</sup> much of the meaning of newsreel footage depends on the verbal characterizations that accompany it, whether the dope sheets that cameramen submit along with their original footage or the voiceover commentary later added to the newsreels or subsequent documentaries for which the images are used. In this respect, the subsequent discussions in this book will supply another verbalized contextualization to guide understanding of the films, as well as adding rarely seen images to our visual inventory of the Holocaust. But the crucial difference is that the book you hold in your hands attempts to interrogate the process by which these frames were produced.

### **Testimony and Authorship in Soviet Wartime Film**

These images, especially the documentary footage of Nazi atrocities, are so appalling that one might expect them to exclude the concerns of aesthetics. To consider this footage critically, however, and not just use it unreflectively as illustrative material for a predetermined narrative, we must examine the images as filmic constructs and see them as interpretations, never forgetting what is at stake ethically in these attempts to represent the Holocaust. This means asking how these images were produced, by whom, and to what purpose, as well as investigating their relation to

Soviet and wider representational traditions. Such questions enable us to overcome both the naïve presumption that the footage is a complete record and the suspicion it was faked, since a reconstructed or posed shot is no longer so misleading once it has been identified as such and when the reasons for the reconstruction have been considered.

This shift in perspective enables a refocusing on “the gaps or breaks in testimony,”<sup>51</sup> the discrepancies between accounts. It permits us to see that beyond Soviet films’ reconstructions lies an attempt both to record and to interpret significant sites of Nazi atrocity. Nevertheless, even when we overcome the crude prejudices of viewing Soviet film as solely propaganda, we must recognize that these films do mold what they record, especially because the filmmakers had to decide what to film and how to describe events in terms of the reigning Soviet message, making the dead into martyrs whose sacrifices would be recuperated by victorious socialism.

Despite their graphic images of atrocity, then, these Soviet films shield us from the reality they portray.<sup>52</sup> Or rather, they place one unpleasant reality in front of an even bigger one: the Jewish deaths were not, after the logic of the socialist funeral, a martyrdom, a meaningful sacrifice or down payment on future happiness.<sup>53</sup>

Alongside persuasion, another key motivation behind Soviet film representations of Nazi atrocities is the logic of proof: to gather evidence of the crimes committed. Yet it is precisely this rationale, construing images of crimes as guaranteeing their own authenticity, that Lanzmann’s *Shoah* rejects.<sup>54</sup> Such films ask whether they have the right to represent these things and are, in Jay Cantor’s words, “self-examining instruments [. . .] warning us against art, uncovering its own implications.”<sup>55</sup> A key strategy for such reflexive Holocaust films is to privilege testimony, especially oral testimony, rather than “archive images.” Testimony is privileged precisely for its capacity to highlight the weak points in the broad, smooth narrative of history, especially comfortably optimistic narratives.<sup>56</sup> This relates to both Americanized and Sovietized constructions. In analyzing Soviet wartime films, my purpose is to extract them from their initial Sovietizing drive not just to employ them as archive images illustrating an alternative narrative of the Holocaust but also to look for any personal testimony they incorporate. This means paying particular attention to the films’ silences, gaps, and ellipses as constituting attempts to bear witness to the Holocaust that were themselves silenced, erased, and ignored. The film

testimony, whether expressed in the first or third person, is cut off from the moment of witnessing as it follows the acts depicted. Nevertheless, in a small number of instances, filmmakers were able to express an immediate, personal response to the Holocaust.

### **Representational System versus Individual Testimony**

While Soviet wartime documentaries and features quickly established an impersonal, collective idiom of conventions and clichés for depicting Nazi atrocities, including the Red funeral, calls for vengeance, and the Sovietization of the victims, these tropes sometimes fail to completely erase traces of either the Holocaust or the filmmakers' own attitudes to it. These echoes of the event become audible especially if we examine documents that chart the films' progress, from the initial accounts and reports in camera operators' letters or diaries and newspaper articles to the reworking of material into scripts and treatments; the finished film; subsequent internal studio discussions; and finally, published reviews. Each of these stages reveals attempts to fit the event to the standard Soviet narrative of the occupation and the war. Each step mitigates individual witness testimony and distinct authorship. In a number of instances, however, screenwriters and directors managed to leave discernible individual imprints on their films' depictions of and reflections on the Nazi genocide in the East. I will pay particular attention to these as instances where filmmakers to some degree succeeded in using the medium to shape a response that is not simply the standard Soviet instrumentalization of Nazi atrocities but rather a representation using carefully selected stylistic means or deploying a particular symbolic idiom. Particularly significant here is Boris Barnet's *Priceless Head* (*Bestsennaia golova* [1942]) and Mark Donskoi's *Unvanquished* (*Nepokorennye* [1945]), which both dare to identify the Nazis' specific persecution of the Jews. This group also includes Aleksandr Dovzhenko's completed wartime documentaries and unrealized film projects, even though those works marginalize the fate of Ukraine's Jews so as to foreground Nazi violence against Ukraine and Ukrainians. Despite this grave shortcoming, however, Dovzhenko's depictions of the Nazis' genocidal actions reject the normal Soviet blandishments in favor of a bitter, intensely personal vision born of his firsthand experience of the immediate aftermath of liberation, and do so in distinct and innovative ways. These three cases yield art of lasting value that continues to grant insight, albeit fragmentary, into both the Holocaust itself and the dangers and difficulties of representing it.



In addition, however, a further category of depictions of Nazi atrocity resists being recuperated by the habitual Soviet narrative: synchronously recorded eyewitness testimony, which, since the 1961 Eichmann trial and especially since Lanzmann's *Shoah*, has become the most privileged filmic form for representing the Holocaust. As Shoshana Felman has put it: "The testimonial approach was necessary for the full disclosure of the thought-defying magnitude of the offense against the victims, and was particularly suitable to the valorization of the victims' narrative perspective."<sup>57</sup> Soviet cinema, however, systematically marginalized the victims' voices, and with them their perspectives, so as to better articulate the standardized Soviet interpretation of Nazi atrocities.<sup>58</sup> A similar filtering of testimony is evident in the work of the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission on War Crimes (ChGK), created in November 1942 to collate information about Nazi atrocities for an intended postwar trial of the perpetrators. The commission produced reports for public consumption that summarized witness testimony but systematically distorted it to fit Soviet political requirements, notably by altering witnesses' identifications of victims as Jews to characterizations as "Soviet citizens." Nevertheless, the voices of witnesses to the occupation were sometimes recorded on film, and in subsequent pages I will pay particular attention to such recordings as early forays into what has become the most important form for representing the Holocaust.

In opening our ears and eyes to these earliest cinematic representations of Nazi atrocities in the East, we can discern, beyond the constructed conventions of Soviet cinema, the testimonial power of sounds and images, where key ongoing issues in the representation of genocide were being confronted in the first films of the Holocaust.