

**WHERE DOES THE WAR END AND THE HOLOCAUST
BEGIN? BERGELSON ON WORLD WAR II AND THE
HOLOCAUST**

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Executive Summary

In the Soviet Union, the story of the Nazi war against the Jews was subsumed into the total war between the Soviet Union and the fascist enemy, a war that took between 20 and 30 million Soviet lives, 2 million of them Jews. We forget that many of those who told the Soviet story of war were themselves Jewish. With Ilya Ehrenburg (1891-1967) and Vasily Grossman (1905-1964) writing for the important military newspaper *Red Star*, Jewish photojournalists visually recording the war, and the many Jews as members of the editorial staff of most major Soviet newspapers, Soviet Jews were the ones charged with telling the war to the entire Soviet audience. And at the same time, this was a Soviet war told in all of the languages of the Soviet Union — in Ukrainian, Georgian, Uzbek, and even in Yiddish, the official language that marked Soviet Jews as a nationality. Ehrenburg and Grossman had been relatively well-known Russian-language journalists before the outbreak of war. Who would be called on to tell the story of the war in Yiddish? That task fell to many important twentieth-century Yiddish writers, among them David Bergelson.

**Where Does the War End and the Holocaust Begin?
Bergelson on World War II and the Holocaust¹**

— *Lo amut ki ekhye. Va'asaper ma'asei yah: yasor yisrani ya velamavet lo netanani.*

— *Ikh vel nit shtarbn nor lebn, un dertseyln di maysim fun yah. Ober tsum toyt hot er
mikh nit gegebn.*

— *I will not die, but will live to tell the great deeds of God. He has not brought me to
death.*

—Psalm 118: 17

(The first four Hebrew words of Psalm 118: 17 formed the title of David Bergelson's
speech made on behalf of the Jewish Antifascist Committee in August 1941.)

In the Soviet Union, the story of the Nazi war against the Jews was subsumed into the total war between the Soviet Union and the fascist enemy, a war that took between 20 and 30 million Soviet lives, 2 million of them Jews. We forget that many of those who told the Soviet story of war were themselves Jewish. With Ilya Ehrenburg (1891-1967) and Vasily Grossman (1905-1964) writing for the important military newspaper *Red Star*, Jewish photojournalists visually recording the war, and the many Jews as members of the editorial staff of most major Soviet newspapers, Soviet Jews were the ones charged with telling the war to the entire Soviet audience. And at the same time, this was a Soviet war told in all of the languages of the Soviet Union — in Ukrainian, Georgian, Uzbek, and even in Yiddish, the official language that marked Soviet Jews as a nationality. Ehrenburg and Grossman had been relatively well-known Russian-language journalists before the outbreak of war. Who would be called on to tell the story of the war in Yiddish? That task fell to many important twentieth-century Yiddish writers, among them David Bergelson.

Bergelson was not a journalist. He had never been trained to write quickly and simply to 'tell the facts,' but in truth, most Soviet journalists were not trained simply to 'tell the facts'. Moreover, the fact that Bergelson had made his reputation as a writer of

¹ Thank you to Harriet Murav and Joseph Sherman for their incisive reading of an earlier version of this paper.

impressionist fiction meant that he had a keen eye for describing, or at least envisioning, scenes, a talent that served him well as a wartime essayist. In his four years of writing in Yiddish about this very Jewish and very Soviet war, Bergelson crafted a narrative that placed the Jewish story at the centre of his Yiddish readership's narrative universe, while also situating it within the universal tragedy unfolding around him. His was a story of victimhood and revenge and ultimately, a story of the loss and destruction that Bergelson personally lived through.

Jewish Heroes and Jewish Victims

On 6 July 1944, as Red Army soldiers crossed the old Soviet border and moved into Poland, Bergelson published an interview with General Yakov Kreyzer (1905-1969), an official Hero of the Soviet Union and the victor of the Battle of Sevastopol who, by 1944, was easily one of the most popular and visible of Soviet Jews. In addition to his military position, Kreyzer was also an honorary member of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFAC), the organization established in 1941, along with four other outreach organizations, to build international support for the Soviet war.² Passing through Moscow in the summer of 1944, Kreyzer attended one of the JAFAC's meetings when Bergelson met him and described their encounter on page two of the JAFAC's newspaper, *Eynikayt* (Unity), **the only remaining national Yiddish newspaper in the country**. Based on his account, Bergelson seemed shy, almost intimidated, by being in the presence of probably the greatest living Soviet Jewish hero, the man who proved that Jews were not weaklings fleeing the front but were leading the Red Army.

Comment [js1]: What happened to *Der emes*? Close down in 1938 after Litvakov's arrest.

Bergelson claims that by 1944, with the eastern front nearing the former frontier of the Soviet Union and the Allies opening a second front in France, the war had turned from one of survival and defence to one of revenge:

² The history of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee has been well documented in recent years. See, for example, Shimon Redlich, *War, Holocaust, and Stalinism: A Documentary Study of the Jewish-Antifascist Committee of the USSR* (Luxemburg: Harwood, 1995); Vladimir Naumov and Joshua Rubenstein (eds.), *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

Zey veysn, az er iz a yid, un az akhuts dem groysn khezhbm, vos er hot mit zey far zayn sovetish land, hot er mit zey a khezhbm far zayn folk.

They [the Germans] know that he [Kreyzer] is a Jew, and that aside from the great need to get even with them for what they did to his Soviet country, he also has to get even with them for his people.³

Although by 1944, revenge was a common trope in the Soviet press, such an article about specifically Jewish revenge would never have appeared in the Russian-language press, which was in general reluctant to highlight the particular suffering of any ethnic group during the war.⁴

One month later, on 17 August 1944, Bergelson wrote about the other side of this very Jewish war — not as one of Jewish pride, but of Jewish victimization and German criminality on a scale unprecedented in history. In ‘The Germans Did This,’ Bergelson writes about Majdanek, the first extermination camp liberated by the Allies on 25 July 1944. This was the only article about the Nazi extermination camps to appear in the Soviet Yiddish press, and it was one of the most powerful pieces Bergelson wrote during the war. Together, these two pieces show how Bergelson crafted a particularly Jewish war in Yiddish out of the universal Soviet experience.

Bergelson as War Essayist and Soviet Jewish Propagandist

During the war, Bergelson was called on to become more than a novelist; he was asked to become a public Jewish cultural figure, and a leader of Soviet Jewry. He began writing essays about the war as soon as it broke out on 22 June 1941 from his home in Moscow, but as the German army reached the outskirts of the capital, he was evacuated

³ Dovid Bergelson, ‘Der general Yakov Kreyzer,’ *Eynikayt*, 6 July 1944, 2. All translations are my own.

⁴ For more on wartime correspondence, see Ilya Ehrenburg, *The War: 1941-1945* (Cleveland: World Publications, 1965); Ehrenburg and Konstantin Simonov, *In One Newspaper: A Chronicle of Unforgettable Years* (New York: Sphinx Press, 1985); V. Grossman, A. Beevor, and Luba Vinogradova, *Vasily Grossman: A Writer At War, 1942-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005).

to Kuibyshev, 500 miles from the capital, in October 1941 with the rest of the JAFC.⁵ There he became one of the editors of *Eynikayt* when it first started appearing in early summer 1942. As the most famous Yiddish writer in Soviet Union, Bergelson took on the responsibility of crafting an account of the war that trod carefully between several emerging narratives. On the one hand Bergelson was a Soviet writer, called upon to write about the violent invasion of his country. On the other hand he was a highly visible Jew in this most Jewish of wars. He synthesized the universal and the particular, the Soviet and the Jewish.

He began by publishing essayistic accounts of the outbreak of war, both in the United States, through the Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union (IKOR), and in the Soviet Union with the *Der Emes* publishing house. His 1941 IKOR pamphlet, 'Jews and the War with Hitler' opens in the style of a short story:

In der nakht fun 21tn afn 22tn yuni [...] es iz geven a regndike nakht. A varemer nebl hot ayngheilt di mayrev-grenetsn fun sovet-rusland. Af ale arumike noente un vayte shtrekes hot gehersht a groyzame un nit geveznshvere shilkayt, akurat vi in groys dervartenish voltn ale mentshn un ale bashefenishn zeyer lang un on oyfher zikh ayngheert alts tifer un tifer in der antshvign-gevorerner nakht.

On the night of 21 and 22 June [...] it was a rainy night. A warm fog enshrouded the western borders of Soviet Russia. In all surrounding directions, near and far, as if in great anticipation, a horrible and unprecedentedly heavy silence reigned. Just as if in great expectation all mankind and all creation were listening long and unceasingly deeper and deeper into the soundless night (3).⁶

⁵ Each edition of the newspaper published the address of the editorial offices, which is one way of tracking where the editorial board, and therefore Bergelson, was located.

⁶ Dovid Bergelson, 'Idn un di milkhome mit hitlern,' (New York: IKOR, ?1941). Date is not printed, but is either late 1941 or early 1942. One database gives the date of publication as 1950, but this clearly a reprint of an essay that circulated early in the Soviet war.

Similarly heightened language depicts the way the Nazi army invades the western frontier, driving Jews from the places they had occupied for centuries, and is followed by Bergelson's brief history of the Jewish Diaspora, from Alexandrian Egypt and Italy to the tsarist empire where, Bergelson argues, Jews were still in exile. Not until the establishment of the Soviet Union were Jews truly set free. Bergelson's rhetoric describing the move from exile to home echoes established Zionist tropes of the move from old to new, even to Zionist denigration of the Jew's body that grew weak in exile: *aza iz geven [...] in Rusland inem tsars tsaytn [...] [der yid] hot gedart fun tog tsu tog, di Brust iz bay im ayngefaln, di pleytse hot zikh ayngeshoykert, di muskuln hobn zikh opgeshvakht*, 'that's how it was in tsarist times [...] Over time the Jew wasted away, his chest sunk in, his shoulders hunched over, and his muscles grew weak.' He even talks about persistent illness among Jewish children. Writing about the contrast between the old and new Jew was a feature common to ideologically driven Jewish modernizing literature of the time, whether socialist or Zionist. With this essay Bergelson was not engaged in a polemic dialogue with Zionism per se, but was instead showing how the Soviet Union built and gave a home to the new Jew: *'In der idisher oytonomer gegnt Biro-bidzhan, in Krim, in gegntn fun Ukraine blien fil hunderter idishe farms*, 'In the Jewish autonomous region of Birobidzhan, in the Crimea, and in areas of Ukraine, hundreds of Jewish farms are blooming [...]' For an American Jewish socialist readership, this foray into Jewish history, with its telos not in Palestinian Zionism, but in Soviet socialism, stirred up support for a war that the United States had still not entered. With Nazism threatening this greatest of experiments in history, Bergelson called on Jewish mothers to send their Jewish sons to the front, and if they themselves were young enough, for these mothers to volunteer as well (10). Further to inspire his readers, Bergelson lists and celebrates Jewish military heroes. Despite rumours that Jews fled the front and were shirkers, Bergelson shows them as important Red Army commanders, with Yakov Kreyzer as the chief example:

Fargest nit, az in di reyen fun der rumfuler royter army shlohn zikh ayere layblekhe brider un kroyvim, vi di laybn, mitn grestn mesyres-nefesh, vi es

past far di heldishe zin fun undzer groysn libn foterland un far di heldishe zin fun unzer idish folk.

Do not forget that in the ranks of the glorious Red Army your flesh and blood brothers and relatives are fighting like lions, with the greatest devotion, as befits the heroic sons of our great beloved fatherland and the heroic sons of our Jewish people (16).

Virtually simultaneously, Bergelson published a pamphlet entitled *Yidn un di foterlendishe milkhome* (Jews and the Fatherland War) in Moscow where, amazingly enough given the harsh conditions of war, the sole Yiddish publishing house *Der Emes*, which also produced *Eynikayt*, continued operating. In the first three months of the war, even as bombs were falling on Moscow, the publisher put out 35 books and pamphlets.⁷

Addressing a Soviet Jewish audience who knew the paradise they lived in, Bergelson urges his readers to stop complaining about wartime hardships and take up arms against the greatest enemy the Jews have ever faced. Bergelson explained Nazi ideology to his readers. Unlike his readers, many of whom were ignorant of it because the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact had virtually cut off any discussion of Hitler and Germany, Bergelson had personally experienced Hitler's rise to power living in Berlin. He pays particular attention to Hitler's racial ideology: If you think the whole concept of racial superiority is bad, he tells his readers, *milyon mol erger bageyen zikh di fashistn mit yidn,* 'the fascist treatment of Jews is a million times worse' (5) — worse than the Inquisition and worse than the tsarist-era pogroms: *dem mentshn-fantazye iz tsu kleyn af oystsumoln zikh di akhzorische maysim, vos zey trakhtn oys. Homen iz geven a hunt akegn zey,* 'The human imagination is too limited to paint a picture of the atrocities they have thought of. Haman was nothing but a dog compared to them' (6). Returning to the theme of Jewish hardship in exile and Jewish salvation in the Soviet Union that he developed

⁷ Leonid Smilovitsky, 'Izдание religioznoi evreiskoi literatury v Sovetskom Soiuzie na primere Belorussii, 1921-1964' (Tel Aviv: Diaspora Research Institute) as found on www.souz.co.il, a Russian-language Israeli website on which Dr. Smilovitsky has posted many of his published and unpublished scholarly articles.

for his American audience, for his Soviet readers Bergelson relies frequently on the words of Stalin to make his point:

Organizirn an umrakhmonesdikn kamf kegn ale, vos dezorganizirn dem til, kegn dezertirn, kegn panikmakher, kegn di, vos farshpreytn klängen, mir darfn farnikhtn di shpionen, diversantn, dem soynim parachutistn [...] s'ara derhoybener nomen — Stalin! — er vet rateven di velt!

We must organize a merciless fight against everyone who destabilises the home front, against deserters, against panic-mongers, against those who spread rumours. We must exterminate the spies, saboteurs, and the enemies' infiltrators [...] Long live the great name —Stalin! — He will save the world (19) ⁸

Regardless of whether his readers were in New York or Moscow, in the first year of the Soviet-German war, Bergelson wrote with conviction about the Jewishness of this war, placing what was happening in Europe — what he repeatedly called a *khurbn*, the Yiddish word that would eventually encompass the Holocaust — into the long history of anti-Jewish persecutions. In a 1941 article entitled, 'The exalted will be victorious,' he compared the Nazi onslaught on European Jewry — significantly *not* the attack on the Soviet Union — to the viciousness of the Inquisition, suggesting that Hitler was worse than anything in the medieval period. He even uses cannibalistic imagery to describe fascism, a trope he repeatedly used throughout the first part of the Soviet war with Germany.⁹

On August 24, 1941, leading Jewish cultural figures, including writers like Ehrenburg and Bergelson, took part in a major rally at Gorky Park in the centre of Moscow to call on the Jews of the world to fight fascism. Like Ehrenburg's,¹⁰

⁸ Dovid Bergelson, 'Yidn un di foterland-milkhome,' (Moscow: Emes Melukhe-farlag, 1941).

⁹ Dovid Bergelson, 'Dos gehoybene vet zign,' as found in *In der sho fun oyspruv* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1985), pp. 3-5.

¹⁰ Ilya Ehrenburg, 'Speech made at the mass Jewish rally in Moscow,' August 24, 1942 as cited in Joshua Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), p. 201.

Bergelson's speech, 'Lo amut ki ekhie,' I will not die but will live,¹¹ was a call to Yiddish-speaking Soviet and American Jewry. Opening with an echo of the Marxist slogan, 'Dear brothers and sisters, Jews of the whole world', Bergelson quickly formulates the tension between a universal ideological war that targeted all 'peace-loving' people of the world and the very particular onslaught on world Jewry: *aza iz oykh zayn plan oystsuretn ale felker, un in der ershter rey—dos yidishe folk*, 'It is also [Hitler's] plan to wipe out all peoples, and in the first place, the Jewish people.' This grammatical phrase, *ale felker un in der ershter rey—dos yidishe folk* 'to all peoples and in the first place, or 'in particular,' the Jewish people, would become the mantra of Bergelson's wartime Soviet writing. It was his way of synthesizing the universal with the particular. Like Ehrenburg, Bergelson expressed Jewish pride throughout his speech, celebrating 'great thinkers' that the Jewish people had given to humanity, among them Spinoza, Heine, Mendelssohn, Brandeis, and Einstein, a who's who of acculturated, assimilated and secular Jews many of whom were German by nationality. Perhaps this was a direct reminder that the true German legacy lay not in crude German nationalism but in German-Jewish universalism.¹² Moreover, the question of Jewish identity profoundly interested Bergelson, especially since Hitler and Nazism had so radically changed the relationship between Jewish self-identity and the way others ascribed identity to Jews. He reminded his listeners that in this new world order, Jewish secular universalism was not enough: *der gazlen Hitler makht derbay nit keyn untersheyd tsvishn arbeter un fabrikantn, tsvishn fraydenkendike un frume, tsvishn yidn asimilirte un nit-asimilirte*, 'the bandit Hitler makes no distinction between workers and manufacturers, between freethinkers and religious people, between assimilated and unassimilated Jews.' This call was specifically intended to create an international sense of unity between American and Soviet Jews, since the destruction of Jews worldwide was Hitler's aim.

The title of Bergelson's speech, 'I will not die but will live,' is taken from Psalm 118, which forms part of the traditional Hallel service, which pays homage to God's

¹¹ Dovid Bergelson, 'Lo amut ki ekhye. Ikh vel nit shtarbn. Ikh vel lebn,' found in *Briders yidn fun der gantser velt* (Moscow: OGIZ, Der Emes farlag, 1941), pp. 17-19.

¹² *Pravda* published excerpts of the speeches made at the Gorky Park rally in the next day's issue. Of Bergelson's speech, the editors included much about the call to arms and even included the list of 'famous Jewish thinkers,' but no mention was made either of Jewish vengeance or of Bergelson's biblical call to live. 'Bratia evrei vsego mira: vystuplenie predstavitelei evreiskogo narod na mitinge, sostoiashchemsii v Moskve 24 avgusta 1941 g.,' *Pravda* August 25, 1941, p.3.

power in the world and is recited on major Jewish holy days.. After the Holocaust this psalm was commonly recited to commemorate its victims and celebrate its survivors and the Jewish people as a whole. The theologian and philosopher Emil Fackenheim even suggested that Psalm 118 should be recited on Israel's Day of Independence.¹³ For Bergelson, living through the Holocaust as it unfolded, it was a bold reminder to his Yiddish-speaking, psalm reading audience that this was, in the words of Lucy Dawidowicz, a war against the Jews, which is why he deliberately evoked the verse first in its original Biblical Hebrew, and then in its translation into the vernacular. Bergelson pressed home his message by turning his worldwide rallying call to live into a play entitled, 'I Will Live,' published originally in 1941.¹⁴ Set in a Russian-Jewish town in 1941, where the inhabitants experience the atrocities of the war, one of the play's characters, Professor Kronblit, a German-Jewish refugee, decides to commit suicide in the face of imminent Nazi destruction. Responding to this bleak reaction to catastrophe, Avraham-Ber, the 'old Jew' of the play responds: 'We, the ordinary Jews, have seen many dead people in our lives [...] Yet the more they multiply, the greater our desire to live [...] they did not commit suicide [...] they did not stop proclaiming, "I shall not die but live".'¹⁵

Writing the Holocaust Narrative

By 1942, the Soviet war effort was looking bleak and for Bergelson, the Jewish catastrophe was running its course with no end in sight. *Eynikayt*, which had been given permission to start appearing in June 1942, became the media outlet that created the Soviet Jewish war narrative in Yiddish.¹⁶ Bergelson's first essay for this newspaper directly engaged with the Jewish catastrophe, the *khurbn*. In 'May the World Be a

¹³ David Blumenthal, '[Emil Fackenheim: Theodicy and the Tikkun of Protest](http://www.js.emory.edu/BLUMENTHAL/Fackenheim.html),' as found on <http://www.js.emory.edu/BLUMENTHAL/Fackenheim.html>.

¹⁴ Shmuel Rozhansky, (ed.), *Dovid Bergelson: Oysgeklibene Verk* (Buenos Aires: YIVO, 1971), p. 8.

¹⁵ Ben Ami Feinold, 'The Hebrew Theatre between the War and the Holocaust,' *Israel Studies* 8.3. (2002), pp. 183-4.

¹⁶ It took nearly a year after the invasion for *Eynikayt* to start appearing. Calls for a central Soviet Yiddish newspaper came from Bergelson and others as early as July 1941. The Soviet Information Agency, Sovinformburo, did not give permission until spring 1942. See Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogroms*, pp. 11-12.

Witness' Bergelson envisioned the kind of revenge Jews would seek once the tide of the war turned. Bergelson imagines Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels pacing in his room in fear.¹⁷ At a time when the Nazi death machinery was in full operation, Bergelson visualizes a world after the Soviet victory, when Jews will be able to rewrite history once again:

Zol-zhe di velt zayn an eydes, az azoy vet zayn. Dos yidishe folk hot amol geshafn a bukh, vos iz in farlof fun toyznter yorn geleyent gevorn mer vi ale andere bikher. Dos zelbe yidishe folk vet gefinen in zikh genug kraft tsu shafn a bukh, vos vet in farlof fun toyznter yorn nit oyffhern tsu dertseyln der velt vegn di fashistishe akhzoriestn umetum, in yeder vinkele fun yene lender, vuhin der natsistisher shtivl iz farkrokhn.

May the world bear witness that the following will take place. The Jewish people once created a book that, for thousands of years, has been read more often than any other book. That same Jewish people will find within itself sufficient strength to create a book that, for thousands of years, will tell the world about fascist atrocities everywhere, in every corner of every country where the Nazi jackboots trampled.

Bergelson calls for revenge by bearing permanent witness to Nazi atrocities through *writing*, a method amply fulfilled by those who compiled memorial volumes or *yizker bikher*, and in the vast body of literature produced each year about the Holocaust by survivors, scholars, and others. The editors of *Eynikayt* illustrated Bergelson's angry call for revenge and textual memory by publishing a photograph of an impoverished, hungry man in the Warsaw Ghetto, the only mention or visualization of Jewish weakness in the entire article. This call for revenge was echoed by many other Soviet — usually Jewish — writers from 1942 through 1944. Ehrenburg, for example, was famous for his bloodthirsty columns published in *Red Star* that, as lore has it, Red Army soldiers would

¹⁷ Dovid Begelson, 'Zol di velt zayn an eydes,' *Eynikayt* no. 6, July 25, 1942, p. 2.

keep in their pockets in order to intensify their anger at the front.¹⁸ But Ehrenburg's Russian-language call was very clearly about Red Army revenge against fascism. Bergelson could speak about Jewish national revenge, about Jewish history, and about the Jewish tradition of bearing witness. Some things could better — or more easily — be said in Yiddish.

By late 1942, the nadir of the Soviet counter-offensive, he turned from demands for revenge to the articulation of deep depression with the state of affairs. In a new series of articles, he began writing the story of the Holocaust, of mass Jewish loss and the need to name the perpetrators. In a piece dated 5 September 1942 entitled 'Gedenkt' (Remember), Bergelson began introducing Holocaust narratives into the general narrative of the war. This two-column article told the story of the city of Vitebsk, in present-day Belarus. It is a grim story of mass.¹⁹ He claims that of the 100,000 Jews in pre-war Vitebsk, the Red Army successfully evacuated 78,000 of them, leaving 22,000 to face the fury of the 'Hitlerite beast.' Here his population statistics were somewhat inflated: according to the 1937 Soviet census there were 77,000 Jews in the entire Vitebsk province.²⁰ I mention this not to show that Bergelson got his facts wrong. No one ever claimed that he was a hard core journalist or that *Eynikayt* had a team of fact checkers correcting reports that were filed. Rather it shows instead Bergelson's vision of what happened. So many Jews were saved, but still there were so many Jews killed. In this mass murder, one of the first to occur after the Nazi invasion, Bergelson discovered a means of representing the Holocaust to his reading public.

A ghetto had been established in Vitebsk immediately after the Nazi invasion in July 1941 and this was 'liquidated' on 8 October 1941.²¹ According to Bergelson, 'By October 12, 1941, not more than eleven people were left alive, mostly medical workers, and of those four managed to escape with help from partisans.' It must have been difficult for Bergelson to detect heroism in September 1942, with the German army on the banks of the Volga at Stalingrad, Leningrad under continued siege, and nearly all of

¹⁸ Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties*, p. 193.

¹⁹ Dovid Bergelson, 'Gedenkt,' *Eynikayt* September 5, 1942, p. 2.

²⁰ Mordechai Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry on the Eve of the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Center for Research on East European Jewry, 1998), p. 222.

²¹ For more on the history of the Holocaust in Vitebsk, see Mikhail Ryvkin and Arkadii Shulman, *Khronika strastnykh dnei* (Vitebsk: UPP, 2004). Thanks to Arkadii Zeltser for this reference.

Ukraine and Belarus under occupation. In celebrating the evacuation of three-quarters of Vitebsk Jewry and reminding his readers that partisans were active in the area, Bergelson did his best. Yet despite this Soviet optimism, the Holocaust overwhelms the heroism. Bergelson interviews two of the Vitebsk survivors, Esther Sverdlov and Khaye Polman, both medical professionals, who related to him the *megiles Vitebsk*, the story of Vitebsk. His description is grim:

Beyde — hoyt un beyn. Zeyere bakn un shterns, farshvartst nit fun zun, hobn lang shoyt zikh opgevoynt fun oyskneytshn a shmeykhl. Zeyere kerpers hobn zikh tsugevoint tsu zitsn gants lang on a shum bavegung — mistome derfar, vos yeder iberiker rir zeyerer hot gekont tsutsien tsu zikh dos oyg fun a fashist, un dos fashistische oyg shtralt oys fun zikh toyt [...] Ester Sverdlov and Chaye Polman hot oysgehalt hunger, kelt, shrek un payn — payn on a breg un on a sof — un zaynen tsu yeder tsayt geven greyt tsu bagegenen durkh di vildste laydn dem toyt, vos kon ale rege on a klap in tir tsu zey araynkumen.

Both are skin and bones. Their cheeks and brows, darkened but not by the sun, have long grown unaccustomed to squeezing out a smile. Their bodies have grown used to sitting for long periods of time without the slightest movement — perhaps because the slightest superfluous movement on their part might have caught the eye of a fascist, and death flashes from a fascist eye [...] Esther Sverdlov and Chaye Polman endured hunger, cold, fear and pain — pain without limit and without end — and they were ready at any moment to encounter, through the most extreme forms of suffering, death that could come sweeping down on them without warning.

Bergelson describes what kind of work each one of them did in service of the Nazis and reminds the reader that although they were nearly worked to death, they still had eyes and ears that could bear witness to Nazi atrocities. He describes ‘German tourists’, usually German soldiers, who would roam through the empty streets laughing

and yelling in German. *Sof yuni hot in Vitebsk zikh ongehoybn der same brenendiker 'turistn sezon'. Zey kumen arop spetsiel zen, viazoi me tsheshist groyse parties mentshn [...] Ale Vitebsker yidn zaynen shoyen geven fartribn afn rekhtn breg fun der Dvine [...]* 'The 'high tourist season' began at the end of June. They come specially to see the shooting of masses of people [...]. All of Vitebsk Jewry had been driven to the right bank of the Dvina [...]' He then moves the story forward and describes the October liquidation of the ghetto:

In farlof fun fir teg — funem 8tn bizn 12tn oktober 1941 — hot eyn [...] shtrof-komisie gemakht a sof [...] fun geplibene vitebsker yidn. Di [...] fashistische turistn [...] zeyere eygene oygn hobn zey gezen [...] eynmol zaynen umgekumen [...] yidn. Vos iz vert aza oygn? [...] fun di farvundete un di kinder, vos vern lebedikerheyt geshlaydert ineynem mit di toyte in 'tulaver roy.' Vos iz vert aza oyer?²²

In the course of four days, from 8 to 12 October 1941, the punishment battalion brought an end to the remaining Vitebsk Jews. The [...] fascist tourists [who had stayed behind] [...] saw the shooting of the [remaining] Jews with their own eyes. What becomes of such eyes? And they heard the cries of the wounded and the screams of children who were thrown alive, along with corpses, into the Tulav Ravine. What becomes of such ears?

He calls on 'Jews from all countries' to remember what kind of eyes, ears, and hands threw living children and elderly people into the ravine that lay on the outskirts of Vitebsk.²³ The essay's title, 'Gedenkt', is a command to the reader, one of the earliest demands for Holocaust memory in the Soviet, and indeed in the global, press. It is shocking to recognise that as early as the autumn of 1942 — with Europe occupied, Jews driven to extermination camps, and ghettos liquidated — that Bergelson is already talking about memory. But unlike what would later come to be called 'Holocaust memory,' or

²² The copy of *Eynikayt* used was cut off on the edge. Thus, the Yiddish text here has gaps where the copy of *Eynikayt* was cut off.

²³ Bergelson, 'Gedenkt', *Eynikayt*, 5 September 1942, p. 2.

remembering the Jewish dead, Bergelson's call is to remember the perpetrators, those who flung living children into a ravine. This is angry memory, retributive not reflective. And this kind of memory made sense in autumn of 1942, especially in a newspaper that potentially reached people in New York, London, and elsewhere.

But Bergelson did not only write about loss. He also began developing a narrative of Jewish pride, vengeance, and heroism. On 7 November 1942, for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution Bergelson published a short story entitled 'The Young Soviet Jew,' which contrasts the Jew from the 'old world' with one from the new. He opens his tale with a quotation from a recent edition of the Communist Party's central newspaper, *Pravda*:

Dray komunistn — leytenant Shoykhet, serzhant Tkachenko un der roytarmeyer Chernetsov — hobn afn Stalingrader front zikh gelozt in shlakht kegn 85 hiterlistn un hobn zey bazigt [...]

On the Stalingrad front, three Communists — Lieutenant Shoykhet, Sergeant Tkachenko, and a Red Army soldier Chernetsov — engaged in battle and defeated 85 Hitlerites. [...]

The narrator invites his Yiddish readers to reminisce with him: *ver fun undz gedenkt nit fun di kinder-yorn in der heym a yidn mit der famliye-nomen shoykhet?*, 'Who of us from our youth in our hometowns didn't know a Jew with the surname Shoykhet?' He himself remembers a Shoykhet, one Moyshe-Leyb, who chopped wood for a living, not meat, which his name shoykhet or (ritual slaughterer) might suggest. He was a *heyser yid*, a devout Jew, 'with beard and *peyes* (sidelocks), who prayed fervently and petitioned God on anyone's behalf' who went off into the forests of Belorussia and came home only for the holy days. The townspeople said that the real Jew Moyshe-Leyb had gone off and become a real Russian but, according to the narrator, *dos iz, farshteyt men, geven a hipsh bisl ibergeztst. Moyshe-Leyb iz geblibn Moyshe-Leyb*, 'obviously this description was a bit overdone. Moyshe-Leyb was still Moyshe-Leyb.'²⁴ Instead, he goes on to discuss what it meant to go from being an old Jew to a new one:

²⁴ Dovid Bergelson, 'Der yunger sovetisher yid,' *Eynikayt* 7 November 1942, p. 2.

Zayn gang iz gevorn mer fest, di bavegung — ruiker, zayn kol — mer
brustik. Er hot baym reydn veyniker gemakht mit di hent, gehaltn di Brust
un di akslen mer oysgeglaykht, getrogn dem yidishn kashket on a zayt un
di bord — breyt tsekemt.[...]

His gait was more assured, his movements calmer, his voice deeper. He
spoke less with his hands, he put his shoulders back and chest out, wore
his Jewish cap cocked to one side, and his beard carefully groomed [...]

Moyshe-Leyb and *Pravda's* hero may have shared common familial roots as
ritual slaughterers, but *zey zaynen dokh vayt eyner funem andern, zayer vayt. Moyshe-*
Leyb Shoykhet hot getrogn af zayne pleytses dem 'tkhum' shtendik [...] der komunist
leytenant Shoykhet hot keynmol in zayne oygn dem 'tkhum' nit ongekukt, 'yet they were
sundered from one another, greatly sundered. Moyshe-Leyb carried the Pale of
Settlement on his shoulders all the time [...] the Communist Lieutenant Shoykhet had
never in his life laid eyes on the Pale.'

Bergelson defines a deep generation gap between those who were born and raised
in the Soviet Union and those, like himself, who will always carry the remnants of their
diasporic, shtetl past with them. In other words, 'the Communist youth Shoykhet will
never have to dream of freedom.' He was born into it. Bergelson then paints two
portraits of these two different Jewish youths. The first would have gone to *kheyder*, had
limited job options, been drafted into the tsar's army. The second would have been an
equal member of the Communist youth and gone on to pursue any career he wanted —
working on a collective farm, a factory, or even qualifying as a professional. This
description of both the physical and mental metamorphosis of the new Soviet Jew is
ironically reminiscent of stories of the same era that celebrated a new Zionist Jewish
youth untainted by the past. Then Bergelson brings the story back to the war — how it is
possible, twenty-five years after the October Revolution, to have a formerly despised Jew
fighting on the front lines side by side with a Ukrainian and a Russian, each of whom is

fighting for the Soviet Union. Idealistically, he suggests that both the new and the old might co-exist in Comrade Shoykhet:

Punkt vi inem fayer un inem mesires-nefesh, mit velkher er nemt fun di hitleristn nekome far zayn foterland un far zayn yidish folk, iz faran epes grintlekh-geyarshnt funem heysn yid Moyshe-Leyb Shoykhet [...]

Just as in the fire and in the self-sacrifice with which he wreaks revenge on the Hitlerites for his fatherland and for his Jewish people, there is something fundamental that he has inherited from the fervent Jew, Moyshe Leyb Shoykhet [...].

The entire piece centres on the tension between old and new, between tradition and innovation, between the Jew as different and the Jew as one of many Soviet peoples. Bergelson does not elide this tension. Instead he argues that this tension is what defines the Soviet Jew, as he fights this Soviet-Jewish war. The narrative's opening address, 'Hey reader, don't you remember that super Jew Moyshe Leyb Shoykhet who now shoots fascists?' suggests a Jewish intimacy expressed openly in Yiddish that lies beneath the seemingly universal *Pravda* headline. Bergelson's Jewish readers know that like the Soviet hero Shoykhet, *all* Soviet Jews have a little bit of Moyshe-Leyb in them.

The story makes no mention of the Holocaust. So distressing a topic would be inappropriate on such an important day of national celebration as the silver jubilee of the Bolshevik Revolution. Instead Bergelson chose to highlight what the Soviet Union gave the Jews — human freedom and physical health. In return the Jews fight wholeheartedly with their compatriots for a shared motherland. Nevertheless, one curious fact is thrown up by the date of this story's publication. We can never know whether this was intentional or not, but Bergelson's Holocaust articles all appeared in September during the Jewish High Holy Days — 'Gedent' itself appeared on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, while the narrative celebration of the new Soviet Jew appeared on the Communist holiday of 7 November. It would seem that Bergelson provided his Yiddish

readership with different Jewish narratives for different Jewish occasions, expressing different aspects of their Soviet Jewish identities.

Ambivalent Liberation

From January 1943 through late 1944, as the course of the war turned dramatically, so too did Bergelson's writing. With the defeat of the German army at Stalingrad on 2 February 1943 and the Germans' rapid retreat, the Soviet Jewish story began to look more optimistic and the picture painted of the enemy became even more graphic and vicious. Bergelson demonized the German enemy, viewing him as evil, inhuman and barbaric, even as he engages in everyday human activities. In one sentence Bergelson called him a cannibal, and in the next, talked about how he sent gifts back to his wife and children back home.

In his January 1943 essay, 'That's him!' he portrays the German Everyman, captured by the Red Army at Stalingrad. This one, Bergelson remarks, is called Helmut, though he could answer just as readily to such names as Erich, Hans or Friedrich. What distinguishes him is the fact that, carefully packed among his belongings and neatly gift-wrapped, is a piece of soap: *afn ort fun an etiket iz [...] geven tsugeklept an oyfshrift mit sikhhtike gotishe bukhshtabn: 'yidishe zeyf'*, 'in place of a label [...] was an inscription in neat Gothic letters: "Jewish soap".' In two words, banality is transformed into horror. Nazi ideology perverts normal human behaviour into bestiality:

Bergelson continues his animalistic description of Helmut:

Bazunders shvakh iz bay Helmutn der zikorn. Gedenken gedenkt er bloyz yene zakhn, vos brengen im perzenlekh nutsn oder shodn. Reflektorish, vi a hunt, gedenkt er, vi azoy es zeen oys di erter, vu er hot fil gefresn, fil geshikert un fil genoyeft, un oykh di erter, vu er hot fil aynvoyner gekoylet [...] Im iz lemoshl zeyer shver tsu dermonen zikh, vi azoy heyst dos ort in Poyln, funvanen er hot mit zikh gebrakht dos 'yidishe shtikl zeyf' [...] bay Helmutn fregt men, vu hot er genumen dos shtikl zeyf. Helmut entfert kalt 'dort.' 'Af a zeyf-fabrik?' 'Ober natirlekh' Fun Helmutn vil men, er zol dertseyln genoy vegn di protsesn dort af der 'fabrik,' vuhin me brengt di

kerpers fun getoyte yidn un me makht zey iber af zeyf. Nor vegn ot di 'protsekn' veyst Helmut gornisht vos tsu zogn. Zey interesirn im nit. Im hot bloyz interesirn tsu bakumen eyns fun di same ershte yidishe shtiklekh zeyf un es, vi an antykl, opshikn zayn Ilzen tsu ir geburtstog un ir mit dem, vi er aleyn iz zikh moyde, 'farshafn shpas.'

Helmut's memory is exceptionally poor. He remembers only those things that were personally useful or painful to him. Instinctively, like a dog, he can visualise only those places where he pigged out, got drunk, and raped, and also those places where he slaughtered many people. [...] But, for example, it is very difficult for him to remember the name of the place in Poland from which he brought his 'piece of Jewish soap' [...] Helmut is asked where he got his soap. Helmut answers coldly, 'Over there.' 'From a soap factory?' 'Of course.' One really wants Helmut to talk more precisely about the process that takes place there in the 'factory' where bodies of dead Jews are brought and converted into soap. But Helmut has little knowledge of these processes. They hold no interest for him. He is simply interested in getting his hands on one of the first pieces of that Jewish soap, so he can send it, as a curiosity, to his Ilse for her birthday and, as he would admit to himself, give her pleasure.'²⁵

Bergelson's prose here is dry, sarcastic, and angry, and at the same time haunting and evocative. Whether or not he actually interviewed a German prisoner of war is beside the point. He is not a reporter, but an essayist depicting what he takes to be the Nazi 'mentality', one that focuses on ends, not means; outcomes, not ethics. The instinctual animal Helmut loves his dear Ilse, and these human feelings create the morally dead monster who is the subject of the essay.

In 1943, the Red Army began the long and painful process of liberating city after city from German occupation. Its discoveries of Nazi atrocities and mass ruin made front page headlines across all the Soviet press. *Eynikayt* viewed these events through its

²⁵ Dovid Bergelson, 'Dos iz er!' *Eynikayt*, 18 January 1943.

particular Soviet Jewish lens. For Bergelson, as for many wartime Soviet writers, liberation did not bring joy. Although he celebrated the Soviet recapture of these centres from Nazi oppression, he questioned whether the stories to be told were acts of joy or of mourning. Of the many accounts of this kind that he wrote, two which touched him most personally are worth close examination here: his essays on the imagined and real liberation of Kiev, the city in which he first developed as a writer, and the liberation of Majdanek, the first extermination camp entered by the Allied forces.

On 1 May 1943, more than six months before the Red Army drove the Germans from the city, Bergelson published his homage to Kiev, an essay that, given its Workers' Day publication date, should have been sheer celebration. Instead, Bergelson gave his readers a mournful portrait of this cultural capital in ruins, opening with a loving description of the city and a lively personification of the Dnyep, the river on the banks of which it is built:

Fun hoykh-hoykhn Kreshchatik lozt men zikh arop tsum zeyer niderikn Podol. Beser iz geyen tsufus eyder forn. Rekhts, baym same rand fun hoykhn breg, bavegt zikh oyf un op der tramvay un zet oys, vi a ritmish-poyzndiker funikulior, a bisl vayter shpilt in der tif der Dnyep. An alter taykh, shoyn afile, dakht zikh, a groyer un dokh a shpilevdiker. Er shpilt mit der zun in heyse zumer-teg. Er shpilt mit di khmares in shpet osyen. Er shpilt mit shifn un mit barzhes, vos glitshn zikh iber im un oykh mit ale klenste shpendlekh, vos vign zikh af zayne khvalies, ven er heybt shoykh on tsu frim. Er iz an alt-yunger taykh. Fun noente hoykhe hoykhkaytn un tife niderikaytn shpiglt zikh op in im Kiev— oykh a shpilevdike shtot, an alt-yunge.

From high up on Kreshchatik one can descend all the way down to Podol. It is better to go on foot rather than drive. On the right, at the very edge of the hill's peak, the trolley car goes up and down, like a rhythmic, creeping funicular. A bit farther away you can see the Dnyep playing with its depths. An old river, perhaps even greying a little, it seems, but

nonetheless still playful. It plays with the sun on hot summer days. It plays with the storm-clouds in late autumn. It plays with ships and barges that glide over it, and it plays with all the smallest splinters that skip along its waves when it is just beginning to freeze over. It is an old-young river, and from its highest of heights and lowest of depths it reflects the image of Kiev, also a playful, old-new city.²⁶

Bergelson's use of 'old-new,' or "alt-neu," echoing the title of the Zionist writer Theodore Hezl's book, like the contrast he drew earlier between old and new Jews, echoes Zionist tropes about the land of Israel. He does this to represent Kiev as a place of ancient roots and modern visions of the future. Bergelson had written about the Soviet Union as the place of the Jewish future, a socialist Zion, since his 1926 essay *Dray tsentrm*, Three Centers, which posited the Soviet Union as the future center of Jewish life. Unlike his writings in the 1930s about Birobidzhan and Jewish colonies, in his description of Kiev he was connecting the old with the new, making the rhetoric resemble Zionist rhetoric. For Bergelson, Kiev was simultaneously the birthplace of both Slavic culture and of Jews in Russia. Making a positive inversion of a phrase from German textbooks and maps that attempted to damn the region because of its large Jewish population, Bergelson celebrates the regions around Kiev in particular, and Ukraine in general, as *gedikht bavoynt mit yidn*, 'densely populated with Jews. His romance with the past includes the traditional Jewish past: 'From the Black Sea to places beyond Kiev, in all cities and towns, every Friday at sunset, at exactly the same hour, at exactly the same minute, at exactly the same instant, Jewish windows were aflame with candlelight.' He dwells on tsarist-era restrictions on Jewish residency that prevented Kiev from becoming as openly Jewish as other cities of Ukraine until, of course, the Soviet Union freed Jews in Kiev to live as they wanted. And then the Germans came, and nothing was left of his beloved city, least of all of the Jewish neighbourhoods of Podol and Demievka:

Puste khurves iz geblibn fun Podol. Fun oysgekrimte balkonen, hengen
arop shtrik un shleyfn fun tliēs. In a grubn lebn yidishn shpitol lign

²⁶ Dovid Bergelson, 'Kiev,' *Eynikayt*, May 1, 1943, p. 2.

Comment [js2]: This is the second time you have pointed out a this parallel with Zionist imagery and thought, but again, you have not taken it further, nor have you drawn any conclusion from this obvious correspondence. Surely B is deliberately making this "Altneuland" correspondence? If you think that he is making/using this in order to point out (yet again) – during the war years as much as he did before the war in his praise for Birobidzhan, that the USSR is the true "national home" of the Jewish people, you should certainly say this – or at least suggest it more explicitly than you have yet done.

I don't want to posit it any more explicitly than this. I don't think Bergelson is engaged in direct polemics with Zionists. Rather I think the Communist writers had used similar literary tropes as Zionist to make the point about an ideologically envisioned Jewish future. Feel free to edit down what I just wrote. I'm not committed to having it in the essay. – ds

dershosn un lebedik-bagrobn zeks un fuftsik toyznt yidn. In Goloseyever vald, in ek Demievke, hobn daytshishe soldatn bay banakhtike fayern bakumen zeyer henkerloyn far trefn in shtam fun a boym mit di keplekh fun hunderter un hunderter geshlayderte yidishe kinder — far yedn tseshmetern kindershyn sharbndl, a fule gloz shnaps. [...] Kiev, shtot gepaynikte, geshokhtene un nit-dershokhtene, af dayne farviste berg! Du vest dokh avade fregn, ‘vu zaynt ir itst, mayne kinder?’

All that’s left of Podol are empty ruins. From twisted balconies hang the ropes and nooses of gallows. In a grave near the Jewish hospital lie sixty-five thousand Jews, shot to death or buried alive. In the Goloseyev Forest at the edge of Demievka, by the glow of nocturnal fires German soldiers received their hangman’s pay for smashing the heads of hundreds and hundreds of Jewish children against the trunks of trees — for each smashed child’s skull, a full glass of schnapps. [...] Oh Kiev, tortured city, slaughtered but at the same time not slaughtered, on your devastated hills! You will surely be asking, ‘Where are you now, my children?’

In this personal expression of grief it is noteworthy that, for the first time, Bergelson designates the subhuman murderers not as fascists, Hitlerites or as any other of the politically correct pejoratives of the day that designated politics and government rather than nations and individuals, but explicitly and unambiguously as Germans. The language he chooses throughout is violent and bleak, and it describes the murder of Jews, not of faceless Soviet beings. The Kiev of Bergelson’s romanticized past is dead but, as he concludes the essay, he promises that it will be newly rebuilt.

Bergelson wrote about Kiev again after the city’s liberation in November 1943, and painted an almost messianic vision of its reconstruction:²⁷

Un vider veln kumen di zumerfarnakhtn, ven di shtot vet zayn ibergefult mit shafung, vi a bekher mit vayn, un ibergisn vet zikh der bekher. Un shtark royshn vet der tsurik-oyfgeboyter Kreshchatik. Finklen veln dort

²⁷ Dovid Bergelson, ‘Undzer Kiev,’ *Eynikayt* November 11, 1943, p. 2.

fun farfri on di fil elektrishe fayern un, tsunoyfgegosh mit der shayn funem farnakht, loykhtn tsuzamen, vi um yontev. Un dakhtn vet zikh alts, az in der tif fun der breyter sheyner gas kumt for ot der groyser yontev — er rukt zikh fun dort, vi a khupe mit likht, in a farkisheft gliklekher melukhe, un dernertert zikh alts ineynem mit shalung fun trompeytn un mitn gehilkh fun litavren.

And summer twilights will come again, when the city will be filled to excess with creativity, like a goblet of wine, and the goblet will overflow. And the newly rebuilt Kreshchatik will rumble noisily. From very early on, many electric lights will twinkle, and, merged with the glow of the sunset, together they will illuminate everything as though on a holiday. And it will seem to everything around that in the depths of the broad, beautiful street this great holiday is taking place. From there it will form a procession like a wedding canopy accompanied with candles, in an enchanted, joyous country, and it will approach in company with the blaring of trumpets and the echoing of drums.

In this vision of liberated Kiev, Bergelson subtly suggests that the outcome of the war may be divinely ordained, like the vengeance both Soviets and Jews will wreak upon their enemy. By introducing clear Biblical references in a story of liberation published during the very month in which the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution was commemorated, Bergelson Judaized the Soviet narrative of liberation to view the rebuilding of Kiev through the prism of Jewish prophecy. As in his Gorky Park speech, his novel *Baym Dnyepri*, and other essays for *Eynikayt*, Bergelson specifically deployed Biblical discourse to render the war between Soviets and Germans as a divine war against the adversaries of God's people.²⁸ The opening image of a city filled to excess with creativity and a goblet overflowing with wine echoes the Prophet Joel's vision of divine retribution on the enemies of Judah:

²⁸ Thank you to Harriet Murav for the reference to *Baym Dnepr*.

Let the nations rouse themselves and march up to the valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit in judgment over all the nations round about. Swing the sickle, for the crop is ripe; come and tread, for the winepress is overfull, the vats are overflowing, for great is their wickedness [...] Egypt shall be a desolation, and Edom a desolate waste, because of the outrage to the people of Judah, in whose land they shed the blood of the innocent. (Joel 4:12-13; 19).

The closing image of trumpets and drums evokes Psalms 149-150, as Bergelson importantly connects the music of praise in Psalm 150 with the thanks offered to God in Psalm 149 for deliverance and for the possibility of revenge:

For God delights in His People. He adorns the lowly with victory. Let the faithful exult in glory; let them shout for joy upon their couches, with paeans to God in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to impose retribution upon the nations, punishment upon the peoples, binding their kings with shackles, their nobles with chains of iron, executing the doom decreed against them. (Psalm 150:3-5)

Bergelson's savage condemnation, not of 'fascists' but unequivocally of Germans, reached its peak in the summer of 1944, when the first extermination camp, situated just outside the Polish city of Lublin, was liberated or, more precisely, revealed to the world. By this stage in the war, the discovery of mass murder, with its sites of hangings and burial pits, must have become almost routine as the Red Army liberated place after place that had formerly been a Jewish centre, but that now lay in ruins. It is clear from the extensive press coverage of Majdanek that the discovery of an extermination camp, with its warehouses packed with human hair, valises, shoes and eyeglasses, was an atrocity on a scale that even these hardened reporters and essayists who had already coined the term *khurban* could not fully grasp. In the Russian language press, Vasily Grossman and Konstantin Simonov both wrote about Majdanek for *Red Star*, although Simonov's stories were the ones published on 12 August 1944. Soviet

Jewish filmmaker Roman Karmen made the first Holocaust film, *Majdanek: Cemetery of Europe*, shortly after the camp's liberation, and Soviet Jewish photographers had their images of empty haunted wastelands published in all the major Soviet newspapers and journals.²⁹ Bergelson was given the task of writing about Majdanek for the Soviet Yiddish press.

'The Germans Did This!', his profoundly outraged essay about Majdanek, turns this first uncovered extermination camp into the grand symbol of German depravity and human loss. It also marked a significant turn in the tone of his Holocaust narrative, one that had been evolving for three years. In mid-1944, Bergelson began the process of universalizing the story of the Holocaust by moving away from speaking only in an angry Jewish voice, as he had often done in his earlier wartime essays, and writing from a more universal perspective in relation to victim and vengeance. He does this, however, not by simply making the crimes against Jews disappear. Instead, he renders crimes against Jews as 'crimes against humanity', foreshadowing the Nuremberg Trials that would do the same shortly after the war.

In zikorn bay der mentsshhayt vet dos zikh shoy'n aynkritisn af eybik...

— In Maydanek!...

Dos iz der shpay in ponem yedn eynem, vos filt un trakht un zet ayn in lebn epes seykhldiks un guts, un gleybt in mentshns meglekhkayt ayntsuordenen dos lebn nokh beser, nokh shener.

— In Maydanek!

This will be engraved on the memory of humanity for ever....

In Majdanek!...

This is the spit in the face of everyone who feels and thinks and sees in life something rational and good, and who believes that it is in man's power to make life better and more beautiful.³⁰

²⁹ David Shneer, "When a Picture is Worth More than a Thousand Words: Holocaust Photography in the Russian and Yiddish Soviet Press," lecture at the Skirball Cultural Museum, Los Angeles, December 2004.

³⁰ Dovid Bergelson, 'Dos hobn geton daytshn!' *Eynikayt*, 14 August 1944, p. 2.

In the first part of the essay, Bergelson never uses the word ‘Jew.’ Instead, rather than focusing on the ethnic or religious identity of the victims, he turns his eye to the perpetrators: *Un muters un lerers veln muzn klor un daytlekh mitn fuln moyl oyfklern di kinder, az dos hobn geton nit keyn mentshn...--Dos hobn geton daytshn!...* ‘Mothers and teachers will have to declare to their children, clearly and explicitly, that this was not done by human beings... It was the Germans who did this!’ He goes on to name the crematorium director who *hot gevoynt in krematorie gufe un hot gezogt, az im gefelt der reyekh fun toyte gepreglte mentshn*, ‘lived inside the crematorium itself, and said that he loved the smell of dead burning people’, and the man who tore a four-year-old child in two. He rages against the *nayntsnyoriker oder tsvantsikyoriker daytsh mitn tsartn meydlishn ponem, vos hot fun tsvishn di umglikleke korbones oysgeklbn a yungn gezunt yidn un im befoyn onbeygn dem kop. Un az yener hot zayn kop ongeboygn, hot er genumen im shlogn mit a shtekn ibern haldz*, ‘nineteen or twenty year-old German with the tender girlish face who selected a healthy young Jew from among the ill-fated victims and ordered him to bow his head. And when the one chosen had indeed bowed his head, he began beating his neck with a rod.’ Bergelson’s descriptions grow ever more crude, more graphic, more seemingly unbelievable, until he reaches his final condemnation: *Zey hobn dokh in zeyer Daytshland heym muters, vayber, kales, eygene un bakante, vos veln zey mit tsheshpreyte orems arumnemen baym tsurikumen aheym un veln zikh mit zey kushn un haldzn*, ‘After all, back home in Germany they all have mothers, wives, brides, relatives and acquaintances, who will welcome them home with open arms and will kiss and embrace them.’

By opening the next section with the assertion, ‘It was the Germans, and only the Germans, who did this,’ Bergelson damns the entire German nation. Until this point in this most powerful article, his tone had changed little from his other angry indictments of Nazi atrocities, indictments that became familiar by mid-1944. How many more bodies, how many more scenes of destruction? But in ‘The Germans Did This,’ Bergelson changed the way he addressed his Jewish reading audience. No longer was the *khurbn* just about Jews:

Shoyn-zhe bloyz Munfeld un bloyz Tuman? Azoy hot gemuzt fregn yeder undzer roytarmeyer baym derzen far zikh a feld, farfleytst mit hunderter toyzenter por shikh fun mentshn, vos zaynen derfirt gevorn biz kukn, vi oyf an oyfleyzung, fun toyt, vos kumt fun an elektrishn shtrom, biz... zikh betn, vi me bet a nedove: 'tut a toyve, hengt mikh oyf' ...

Iz ver ken den in aza moment avekshteln zikh tseyln, vifl por shikh af ot dem feld hobn gehert tsu yidn, un vifl hobn gehert tsu Poliakn, tsu Rusn, tsu Ukrainer, tsu Grikhn, tsu Frantsoyzn, tsu Holender, tsu Norveger un tsu Serbn? Undz, yidn?...

Kimat biz eynem hot er oysgerotn undzere brider in di okupirte gegntn. A pust ort hot er undz gelozt dort, vu gelebt un geshafn hobn poylishe, litvishe, letlendishe yidn, un mit a vildn tsinizm hot er arayngeshribn in ot der putskayt:

- Vilne on yidn!
- Kovne on yidn!
- Varshe on yidn!

Un dokh, nit mir aleyn kenen zayn bekoyekh optsutsoln far undzer groysn brokh, un nit bloyz undzere aleyn iz di plog, vos heyst 'Daytsh,' — zi iz di plog fun a gantser velt.

Was only Manfeld and Tuman [who ran the camp] [who did this]? This is the question each of our Red Army soldiers had to ask himself when bearing witness to a field strewn with hundreds of thousands of people's shoes, soldiers who were led to see a decaying body killed by an electric current, who were led to [...] a person begging, as though for alms, 'Please, hang me.'

Who can, in such a moment, attempt to work out how many pairs of shoes on that field belonged to Jews, and how many belonged to Poles, to Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Frenchmen, Dutchmen, to Norwegians or to Serbs? We Jews?

Almost to the last person he [the German] exterminated our brothers in the occupied regions. In the places where Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian Jews used to live and create, all he left behind was vacancy, and with an abandoned cynicism he inscribed into that vacancy:

- Vilna without Jews!
- Kovno without Jews!
- Warsaw without Jews!

And yet we alone do not have the power to gain restitution for our great tragedy, and the plague called ‘Germans’ is not ours alone. It is a plague on the whole world.

The Soviet authorities used the unprecedented scale of the Majdanek atrocities, available for all to see, to stir the Red Army to anger. . At the same time, the Soviet occupation authorities forced local townspeople and German prisoners of war to bear witness to the remains of Majdanek. For the local townspeople it was to show them what went on in their own backyard. For German POWs, it was to remind them of the nature of the regime for which they were fighting. Bergelson, however, though acknowledging the need for vengeance, also warns his Jewish readership against its tendency to turn revenge and memorialisation into parochialism and nationalism. This was an unusual turn, given how angry Bergelson’s Jewish voice had been until the discovery of Majdanek. His earlier work for the Yiddish-language *Eynikayt* had the tendency to foster Jewish particularism, even as Russian-language journalism was fostering universalism. But with the impending end of the war, and with rising Soviet state suspicion of Jewish national expression, Bergelson tempered his Jewish national voice. Too much nationalism, he now began to argue, would be harmful to the Jews’ own long term interests. Suggesting that Jews are asking the wrong questions about Nazi atrocities, he calls on them to see the mass murder of their European brothers and sisters as a problem for humanity, not for Jews alone, for both ideological and practical reasons. He reminds his Yiddish readers that this war will eventually end, and vengeance would indeed be exacted from Germany only if Jews saw the *khurbn* as a universal problem, an assault against all humanity.

Comment [js3]: Do you mean the SOVIET state’s interest? If so, this point needs to be more explicitly made. Are you saying that B (like all other members of the JAF) knew that the Soviet regime would turn against the Jews and was therefore warning Jews to keep their heads down and their profile as a nation low? If so, say so explicitly – this is very important to clarify the purpose of B’s project in *Eynikayt*, and thus the entire argument of your paper.

I can’t get at motive. In other words, I don’t know if he was telling Jews to keep their heads low. That’s now how I read this essay. I think it was his very clever way of incorporating the Jewish with the universal.

Comment [js4]: This central point needs greater emphasis. How far was this change of course forced on Bergelson by the Party line, and how far was it his own ideological belief?

There’s no way to know if it was forced upon him. We don’t have archival letters saying “I got a notice from the Party, so I changed my essays,” or at least I haven’t seen documents stating that. I’m interpreting his writing, which suggests that he wanted a more complicated approach to Jewish suffering as the war neared its end.

Comment [js5]: Does B issue this warning because he knows how the Party (i.e. Stalin) will react to manifestations of Jewish particularism, or does he unquestioningly share and promote the Party’s ideology? This issue is complicated by the fact that – as you mention below -- *Prints Ruveni*, strongly asserts the very kind of Jewish nationalism you say he is here condemning. Even if no definite answers can be give, some informed speculation would be useful here.

I think I speculate quite a bit about what his motivations might have been. And yes, Reuveni complicates the universalizing tendency in this essay.

Although there was much coverage of the horror in the Russian-language press, Bergelson's article on Majdanek was the only major essay about extermination camps published in *Eynikayt*. In the Soviet press, both Russian and Yiddish, the implication of these camps was universalised. It is true that of all six extermination camps Majdanek was the most 'international; about 50 per cent of its victims were not Jews.'³¹ But something larger was going on. Majdanek began the process of de-Judaizing the *khurbn*. Karmen's film mentioned Jews only in passing; and the Red Army newspaper *Red Star* identified Soviet POWs as a victim group as viciously targeted as Jews. Soviet Jews were themselves drawn into the process of universalizing the Holocaust, in film, photography, and print in both Russian and Yiddish.³² Perhaps by 1944 Bergelson was responding directly to the *Black Book* project, for which Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg were collecting the narratives of Jewish survivors and other remnants of Soviet Jewish communities as a way of documenting the tragedy. Perhaps he now took it upon himself to rein in Jewish national mourning projects that were intensifying at both local and national levels. Perhaps he was instructed by Sovinformburo, the state information organization overseeing *Eynikayt*, that it was time to stop rallying international Jewry and start promoting general Soviet suffering in Yiddish. Perhaps it was because extermination camps, unlike burial sites, were so much more appalling that they *had* to be figured universally rather than particularly. And perhaps the reality was that Red Army soldiers would be more likely to wreak havoc on a Germany that had murdered not merely Jews but Russians, Ukrainians, and other Soviet peoples. Whatever the reason, Bergelson was still developing deeply nationalistic Jewish themes at the same time that he was urging the universal significance of Majdanek. Although his important essay was part of the Soviet regime's move to universalize the *khurbn* in the last year of the war, at the same time — also in 1944 — Bergelson was writing a play entitled *Prince Reuveni* on

³¹ According to Yisroel Gutman, extant lists of prisoner transports, which name 250,000 of the nearly 500,000 people who passed through Majdanek, reveal that 100,000 were Poles, 80,000 Jews, 50,000 Soviets, and 20,000 of other national origin, making Majdanek by far the 'least Jewish' of any extermination camp. Yisroel Gutman (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Volume 3 (New York: Macmillan Library, 1990), pp. 938-39. Note that statistics about the number of deaths at Majdanek vary widely, with some more recent scholarship suggesting that the total number of deaths may have been about 170,000. But all research concurs that the camp held a nearly equal number of non-Jewish Poles as Jews.

³² David Shneer, 'When a Picture is Worth More Than a Thousand Words,' presentation for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, July 2004.

commission from the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre (GOSET), which drew on events in Jewish history to glorify the victory of heroic Jews, united in brotherhood with non-Jews, over a savage common enemy.³³

This much we do know. After the war, the Soviet government went even further not only by universalizing the Nazi death camps, but also by erasing the Jewish specificity of Nazi atrocities, by blocking the publication of Grossman and Ehrenburg's *Black Book*, and by ensuring that *Prince Reuveni* was never staged in the Soviet Union. Bergelson's Jewish *khurbn* had a short window of opportunity to circulate in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, Bergelson was one of the chief creators of a Holocaust narrative that emphasized the Jewish specificity of what was happening for Soviet Yiddish readers. He made this Great Patriotic Soviet war Jewish.

Epilogue

In 1985, the Soviet publishing house Sovetskii Pisatel' published a short collection of Bergelson's wartime writing entitled *In der sho fun oyspruv* (In the Hour of Our Tribulation). This volume contains reprints of many of his articles and essays for *Eynikayt* and from his brochures that circulated before *Eynikayt* came into existence in 1942. For the most part, the essays have been simply cut and pasted. But a number of editorial interventions are designed to make the republished text more 'politically sensitive'. The editors changed the titles of articles, removed many references to Jewish revenge, and most frequently redesignated the enemy throughout as 'fascist', unlike Bergelson's original texts, which alternated between 'fascist', 'Hitlerite', and 'German', depending on Bergelson's mood and purpose. The most egregious and telling rewriting appeared in the reprint of 'The Germans Did This,' which was retitled, 'The Fascists Did This'. The editors rewrote several passages in the article and, importantly, deleted the entire section describing how the Germans had warm, happy families waiting at home for them to tell stories of their bloodthirsty deeds. Even the rhythmic cry in the original, *dos hobn geton daytshn!* 'the Germans did this!' was removed entirely.

³³ Joseph Sherman, 'A Note on Bergelson's "Obsolescence",' *Midstream* Vol. 38, No. 5 (July/August 2002), pp.37-42.

Jewish revenge was a touchy subject after the war, as was blaming the Germans much beyond the 1949 partition of Germany into West and East. Cold War imperatives took precedence, which necessitated the rapid rehabilitation of former enemies. For the West, this meant spending more time talking about totalitarianism and the similarities between Nazism and Stalinism than about the particulars of Germany. And in the Soviet Union, this meant redeeming ‘good’ socialist East Germans by turning the war into an indictment of fascism. Bergelson’s anger at the Germans and his call for Jewish revenge faded into silence. Although the comparison is, in many ways, not totally fair, Bergelson was not the only one to have his Jewish rage silenced. As Naomi Seidman has shown in her comparison of the Yiddish and French versions of *Night*, Wiesel removed short passages about Jews rampaging through Germany that appear at the end of the Yiddish version. Instead, the French 1958 version, from which all subsequent translations have been made, emphasizes existentialism and man’s theological crisis in general. Jewish rage was sublimated into philosophy.³⁴

Soviet literary authorities erased Bergelson’s rage, both immediately after the war and in his literary legacy. But so too have other critics, who find it easier to see Bergelson as a victim of a Soviet regime that silenced him during the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, rather than as an angry patriot stirring up Soviet Jewish anger to get revenge. His rage has been silenced, and so too has his engagement with the war and the Holocaust. Bergelson biographies often either skip over the war period entirely, or merely note Bergelson’s work with the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and perhaps mention his play, *Prince Reuveni*. Yet the war was by no means a break in Bergelson’s productive

³⁴ Naomi Seidman, ‘Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish rage,’ *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, and Society*, Fall 1996, (Volume 3, Number 1), pp. 1-19.

literary career. During the long years of the war, he carved out for his Yiddish readership intellectual, textual, and memorial space for Jewish loss and revenge against the Germans as part of the grand narrative of Soviet victory over Nazi evil.

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