

WHY THEY FOUGHT:

WHAT SOVIET JEWISH SOLDIERS SAW AND HOW IT IS REMEMBERED

An NCEEER Working Paper by

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Executive Summary

In World War Two, about half a million Jews served in the Soviet military—18.3% of the 3,028,538 Jews in the USSR in 1939 and 11 percent of Jews who were Soviet citizens in 1941. More than a third of them were killed in combat. This study examines the motivations for fighting of Soviet Jewish combatants, their knowledge and perceptions of the Holocaust, and the impact of their war experiences on their consciousness as Soviet people and as Jews.

Since Soviet conditions prevented research into these issues, my work relies on post-Soviet publications (memoirs, diaries, studies) and six oral history collections. I found that those Soviet Jews who came from areas Sovietized in 1918-21 were motivated primarily by the same civic patriotism others felt as defenders of what they regarded as their homeland. However, when they discovered what the Nazis and their local collaborators had perpetrated, their Jewish consciousness was activated and a desire for revenge and to “rescue” Jewish honor as fighters and resisters entered the complex of motivations. But, those from territories annexed to the USSR in 1939-40 were more aware of the Holocaust and more impelled to fight by their sense of Jewishness than by their newly-acquired Soviet identity. Both types of Jews frequently mention their desire to refute stereotypes of Jews as shirkers.

All Jewish combatants are proud of their roles and the great majority idealize the war period as one where interethnic relations were good and anti-Semitism condemned. However, in 1943, as the tide of war shifted, they perceived a change in policy whereby Jews were discriminated against in awards and recognition and new draftees were more likely to be anti-Semitic. A survey of three central Soviet newspapers reflects these shifts.

The tragedy of this first and possibly only genuinely “Soviet” generation was that they fought so hard against one form of totalitarianism on behalf of another.

Introduction

The participation of Jews in the military is very important psychologically to many Jews. In many cultures, including Jewish cultures, Jews are seen as weaklings, draft evaders, and cowards.ⁱ This has likely played no small part in the mythology and ideology of Zionism. Max Nordau called for a “*muskuljudentum*” and for about a century the image of Jew as fighter has played an important role in the mythologies of Zionism and the Jewish state. As with all myths, there is some truth behind the idea of Jewish physical weakness. Studies of Jews by ORT in the 1920s in Russia showed that they were shorter, had smaller chests, etc. than their non-Jewish neighbors. Since Jews were forbidden to own or work the land in the Russian Empire and many other countries, they tended not to engage in physical activity and so did not develop physically as peasants did, though their diets were probably better. Either as reason (cause) or rationale (post-factum), a rabbinic ethos developed not in Talmudic times but much later that sports were Hellenistic, “goyish,” and certainly “*bitl toireh*” [a waste of time that could be used to study the Torah]. Interestingly, there is an expression in Yiddish, “*gezunt vi a goy.*” [healthy as a Gentile] Why is a goy healthier than a Jew? *Gezunt* here means strong, as in “*gezunt vi a ferd.*” Deborah Dash Moore asserts, in her impressionistic study of American Jewish soldiers in WWII, that “Some Jews worried that there may be a grain of truth in the image of the Jewish weakling. Behind their self-doubts lay not only decades of anti-Semitic slanders but also the reality of an alternative ideal of masculinity,” that of the ascetic, intellectual yeshiva *bochur* [theological student].ⁱⁱ Presumably because by the twentieth century the vast majority of American Jews originated in the Russian Empire, the image of the Jew as shirker and coward transferred to the United States. One professor at CCNY is reported to have joked in the 1930s, “The Battle Hymn of the Jews is ‘Onward Christian Soldiers,’ we’ll make the uniforms.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Whatever the validity of these beliefs about Jewish physicality, Jews certainly had no army of their own for almost 1900 years. But, contrary to popular belief, they did serve in proportion to their populations in the armies of other peoples and states. This is apparently the case in the 19th/20th century Austro-Hungarian, French, Belgian and German armies (WWI), and perhaps in others. Some have seen Jewish participation in the military as an indicator of emancipation and integration. Apparently, when Joseph II declared in 1788 that Jews should serve in the military, the Hapsburg army agreed to supply uniforms free of *shaatnez*.^{iv}

Jewish conscription began in earnest in the early 19th century. Already in 1789, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau of Prague (*Noda biYehuda*) wrote urging Jewish conscripts to serve with honor. Of course, there were problems of kosher food, inability to fulfill prayer and other obligations at the appropriate time, and issues of Sabbath observance. Conscription or voluntary service in several European armies meant, that like Poles, Ukrainians and others, Jews found themselves fighting their co-ethnics at times, especially in WWI.

In the Russian Empire, Jews became liable for military conscription in 1825 but, in contrast to how they served in many other countries, they often served very reluctantly. Why? 1) they were less secularized than in other countries and so issues of kosher food and Sabbath observance were very important; 2) the Tsars used the military as an instrument of not just acculturation, which every army does, but of assimilation and conversion to Christianity;^v 3) opportunities within the armed forces were very limited and almost no Jews could rise to officer rank (cf. French, Austro-Hungarian armies which apparently had several Jewish generals, and the British, American and other western armies). They were second class citizens with all the obligations but few of the privileges that entailed both in the civilian and military sectors.

This is why we get the popular mythology of “grandpa came to America because he was

fleeing the tsar's draft." As a child, I saw people who had shot or cut off a thumb, trigger finger or toe to avoid conscription, and we know of many people who changed names, birth dates and birth orders in order to do the same. Since the largest concentration of Jews in the world (5.2 million) lived in the Russian Empire in 1900, military service got a bad reputation among Jews, and Jews got a bad reputation among the military. Nevertheless, perhaps half a million Jews served in the Russian Army in World War One.^{vi}

In the U.S. and USSR Jews became citizens equal to all others, and the reasons and rationales for avoiding military service should have disappeared. Indeed, as we shall see, in the 1940s Soviet and American Jews seem to have been eager to dispel the myths, destroy the images and "prove" that "Jews are fighters." A large part of the popularity of Zionism and Israel in the same period and for decades thereafter came from the completely ahistoric image projected by Israel's victories in a succession of wars (1948-1973) and mythologized in a book very popular among Soviet Jews who could get access to it, and among American Jews (who also saw the film), Leon Uris' Exodus. It was only with the first and second Palestinian intifadas, and the dubious war in Lebanon in 1982, that Israel's military prowess created some ambivalence among Jews and non-Jews in the west. In 1967, there was nearly universal admiration, except in the Islamic world, for Israel's surprising victory. Poles claimed that "our boys," such as Moshe Dayan (born in Nahalal, Palestine) had beaten the clients of the hated Russians. Indeed, the widespread popularity of Israel, if not of Jews, in Poland caused Polish Communist Party leader Wladyslaw Gomulka to make his famous anti-Zionist speech in June 1967 wherein he challenged "Zionists" to declare their loyalties either to Poland or to Israel, a speech which led to a wholesale purge of Jews in Poland and their emigration.

Pride in military activities of Jews can be seen here in DC where there is a National

Museum of American Jewish Military History, in publications of the 1940s with titles such as Jews Fight Too!^{vii} and American Jews in WWII (2 vols. 1947).^{viii} As an American Jewish soldier wrote in his diary, He “was keenly sensitive to the common anti-Semitic assumptions that Jews could not be good soldiers or stomach hard physical work” and was “determined to give the lie to these opinions.”^{ix} A British Jewish veteran of WWII who was captured by the Germans told a fellow Jewish POW, “Because I’m Jewish, I fight that much harder, and because I’m Jewish, I take greater risks to prove to other prisoners that Jewish people are just as tough and just as resolute as any British POW—or more so.”^x As we shall see, this is a very prominent theme in the thinking of Soviet Jewish war veterans.

The sensitivity of the issue of Jews as shirkers or fighters is indicated by the flood of books, mostly small and not written by historians, about the role played by Jews in the Soviet armed forces during WWII.^{xi} Soviet Jewish émigrés have published, mostly at their own expenses and not with established publishing houses, large numbers of books about Soviet Jewish heroes,^{xii} multi-volume works listing Soviet Jewish combatants who died during the war,^{xiii} and books of memoirs and brief accounts of what men and women did during the war.^{xiv}

For Soviet Jews it has long been important to show that the Jews did not “fight the war in Tashkent” or “buy their medals at the market.” In 1966 in the Lenin Library in Moscow I would encounter daily a group of people, most of them young, reading *Einigkayt*, the Yiddish newspaper published by the wartime Jewish Antifascist Committee, looking for Jewish war heroes. The myth of Jews not fighting in WWII was so powerful even during the war itself that the Peoples Commissar for State Security of UkSSR (head of secret police in Ukraine), V. Savchenko, could write to Nikita Khrushchev, member of Central Committee of CU Ukraine, as

early as September 18, 1944: “Anti-Soviet elements compare the insignificant proportion of Jews in the ranks of the Red Army to the number of individuals of other nationalities in order to make various judgments which, in the final account, lead to anti-Semitic expressions.”^{xv} Note that he assumes the veracity of “the insignificant proportion of Jews in the ranks of the Red Army.” It is not that the assumption is wrong which troubles Savchenko, but the fear that it could lead to anti-Semitism, and he is probably worried about the social disorders that could result.

What was actual role of Soviet Jews in WWII and how did it compare to that of American Jews?^{xvi} In 1929, Jews were slightly over two percent in the military when they were slightly under two percent in the population as a whole.^{xvii} But eight percent of the political officers were Jews.^{xviii} In 1929 Jews were still one of the most politically reliable elements (no one could suspect them of affection for tsarism) and perhaps the most educated, the two primary requirements for political work in the military. However, it seems that the number of high-ranking Jewish officers (“commanders” at a time the Red Army had abandoned traditional ranks) had declined in the 1930s. According to one source, there were 70 Jewish officers of general rank during the Civil War but only 16 in 1935-36 (before the massive purge of the Red Army). Still, according to this source, there were 134 Jews in “the high command” of the Red Army in 1935-36.^{xix} Many were purged in the following two to four years, but there is no evidence that they were singled out as Jews.^{xx}

In World War Two, about half a million Soviet Jews served—18.3% of the 3,028,538 Jews in the USSR in 1939.^{xxi} If one takes into account the 2.1 million or so Jews who became Soviet citizens in 1939-40 as a result of territorial annexations,^{xxii} the percentage declined to 11 percent (501,000 of 4.2 million). The casualty rate was very high. If it is correct that about 180,000 died, then more than a third of all Soviet Jews in the military (36%) were killed.^{xxiii}

Compare this to the United States: 550,000 Jews served in the US armed forces during the war (11-12% of the Jewish population of about 4.7 million, about 3.5% of all people in US armed forces). About 8,000 American Jews died in combat (though some suggest raising the figure by 15-20%^{xxiv} because the Bureau of War Records was not able “to authenticate the names of all the Jews” who were on lists). Of course, American forces generally did not engage in as fierce combat over as long a period of time as did the Soviets. There was only one Jewish Medal of Honor winner (Raymond Zusman of Detroit) of a total of 464 awarded, 74 DSCs and 37 Navy Crosses. “Twenty three men of Jewish faith reached top-level rank [generals, admirals and 1 Commodore] in the U.S. Army and Navy.”^{xxv}

So a comparison of Soviet and American Jews in the military shows 180,000 killed cf. 8,000 American Jews; 147 Heroes of the Soviet Union^{xxvi} (of a total of about 12,600^{xxvii}, i.e., 1.2 percent of all winners) compared with one of 464 winners of the Congressional Medal; 303 Jewish generals and admirals in the Soviet forces,^{xxviii} compared with 23 Jews of similar rank in the American. Obviously, the numbers are not comparable (what was total number of Soviet generals?) but they may give us some sense of the comparative losses and perhaps roles in the respective militaries. Moreover, as a percentage of the total population of the nationality in the Soviet population, Jewish Heroes ranked third behind Russians and Ossetins (32 Heroes in a wartime population of some 300,000). A fact that many Soviet Jews like to cite is that in absolute numbers Jews ranked behind Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians and Tatars in the number of Heroes, that is in fifth place, whereas they were in eleventh place in the size of their population.^{xxix}

Table 1: Some comparisons of the US and USSR in WWII

	USA	USSR
Jewish population, 1939-41	4.7 million	3 (5) million
Jews in military service	Ca. 550,000	Ca. 501,000
Percentage of Jewish pop.	11-12%	11-18%
Died in combat	8,000	180,000
Casualty rate	1.5%	36%
CMO/Heroes of SU	1/464	147/?
Generals/admirals	23/?	303 (225)/?

It seems there were about 167,000 Jewish officers and 334,000 enlisted men among the Jews in the service. The extraordinarily high proportion of officers is due to the fact that officer rank generally required at least partial secondary education and Jews were generally the best-educated Soviet nationality, along with Georgians.

Recovering the Story as it Was Not Told

All this information about Jews in the Soviet military in the war was compiled long after the war. Almost all the publications appeared only beginning in the 1980s and outside the USSR, but after the collapse of that state in 1991 Jewish participation in the Great Fatherland Patriotic War became not only an admissible but a very popular topic in Russia, and to a far lesser extent in Belarus and Ukraine. In the Soviet period, it would have been politically inadmissible to single out one nationality, perhaps except if happened to be Russians, and talk about their “contribution” to the war effort, since the normative assumption was that the war had been won

by the Soviet people or peoples, even though Stalin in his famous toast in the Kremlin at the end of the war had singled out the Russian people as having taken the lead in the defeat of the fascist invaders. It would have been especially unthinkable to have singled out the Jews and their role in the war, as they had become “enemies of the people” or at least pariahs, at worst, or a tolerated but second class nationality, at best, after the war and to varying degrees right up until the late 1980s.

Thus, Soviet historiography ignored the Jewish role in World War II, as it did the Armenian, Georgian, Kazakh or, perhaps especially, the Ukrainian. Yet the topic is important to Soviet and post-Soviet Jews (as well as to others) partly precisely because it was ignored by the Soviets. As Amir Weiner puts it, “Memory was a key political arena where the exclusion of certain groups from official representation of the Soviet fighting family, along with the denial of their unique suffering, left those groups politically invisible, without official recognition of their distinct, collective identities.”^{xxx} The recovery of history based on memory is vitally important to those who feel that their exclusion from history was deliberate and unjust, as one can see in the ever-growing number of articles and books published on the Shoah (Holocaust) in the former Soviet Union (FSU) and in the Soviet Jewish diaspora.

One way to supplement both scholarly (or at least “official”) and amateur historiography and to fill in gaps in our knowledge is by taking oral testimonies from participants in the war. This has been done successfully by some popular historians in the United States.^{xxx1} In the mid-1990s, I began to gather oral histories of the war from Soviet Jewish veterans, mostly “*frontoviki*,” but including former partisans, ghetto survivors, some in the military who were not at the front, but excluding those who were evacuated beyond the territories where the war took place. Using Soviet immigrants as interviewers, after they had gone through three training

sessions and done two to three pilot interviews, I deployed them in five cities in the United States (Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston) and they gathered about 180 interviews. We then took about 20 interviews in Moscow, mostly from retired generals, and the same number in Jerusalem, attempting to interview non-Ashkenazi Jews. Five interviews were taken among Soviet Jewish veterans who settled in Germany. In addition, I have over 200 interviews that were taken in Ukraine but not under my direction, and many interviews taken by Anna Shternshis in connection with her project on pre-war Soviet Jewish culture, but including material relevant to my concerns. Over 40 interviews were taken from women, most of whom had been in the medical services or partisans, but a few of whom had seen combat, including Genya Peretyatko, a sniper, and Polina Gelman, a navigator in an all-female fighter-bomber squadron who was awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union decoration.

Additional oral testimonies are to be found at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Visual History of the Shoah Archive, the Blavatnik Foundation Archive, and elsewhere.

Oral History—Good for the Jews or Bad for the Jews?

Oral history has serious limitations, of course.^{xxxii} It probably should not be used to establish facts, especially at a distance of more than fifty years and in regard to events fraught with great meanings and emotions. Oral history allows for embellishment, cover-ups, falsifications, and distortions. But as one who has studied Gestapo records observes, “The written records can not be taken as ‘gospel,’ against which the ‘flawed’ spoken testimony can be found wanting,”^{xxxiii} and this is certainly true of Soviet historiography. On the other hand, oral history tempts those who lack the linguistic or disciplinary tools to burrow into archives, read documents, study the historical context in which events take place, and immerse themselves in

the secondary literature in many languages. This is certainly a problem when in some quarters, ignorance of the relevant languages, history, and culture does not deter people from embarking on what they see as interesting and relatively undemanding work. That said, oral history can nevertheless be most useful, especially in establishing perceptions; that is, not so much what happened—though that should not be dismissed—but what people think happened, or now think happened then.^{xxxiv}

The perceptions of the veterans, of their descendants, and of non-Jews in Russia are important because the way the veterans people interpreted what happened profoundly influenced their views of themselves, their fellow citizens, and the country in which they lived. World War II was the most important event of their lives, and it transformed them. Ideally, their understandings and perceptions should have been recorded during or shortly after the war. That was not possible. Therefore, before the wartime generation passes on, it is important to try and recapture their views, however distorted they may be by the dimming of memory, the intrusion of post-war sentiments and the coloration of post-war events. To some extent it is true that “The way people talk and think about recent and distant events is determined by current needs and desires,”^{xxxv} but I submit that it is not entirely true. I suggest that if one is aware of the possibly confounding externalities and is sufficiently familiar with the times, culture and events of the wartime, one can at least mitigate the distortions that would otherwise render the data of dubious value.^{xxxvi} It is not clear to me whether the great significance and life-long remembrance of the wartime events points to more accurate memory or more distorted memory. Some contend that, “There is something like a law of conservation of emotional momentum. The impact of major emotional events does not diminish with the course of time.”^{xxxvii} But is that impact conducive to clarity of memory or distortion of what happened?

Renee Poznanski asked me in a 2006 private conversation whether these interviews are worth anything since even if they are about perceptions, rather than establishing facts, since they are taken 50 years after the event they become “perceptions of perceptions,” or, I might say, memories of memories. That is, they reflect what people think today (or, even more, what they think they should be thinking or what they think the interviewer thinks they should be thinking) about what they thought half a century ago.

My response was that this may very well be. If it is, and it is by no means certain that it is, it might still be interesting and even instructive to see what today’s perception of earlier perceptions was. Why? Because it tells us about how people evaluate the earlier perceptions and the experiences on which they were based. That is, as they near the end of their lives, what sense do they make at present of how things were in the past, as they remember them, or, at a minimum, what sense are they making of the way they saw things in the past. What happened→how it was understood at the time it happened→how one understands one’s previous perception or understanding. Of course, we don’t know stage 2 (how they understood what happened at the time it did).

I think there is another problem. Once a story is told or even construed in one’s head, it will tend to remain that way. There is an inertia and fixity that attaches to it. It’s highly likely that their stories were told several times. Does this mean that what we are hearing today is the story, however inaccurate, that was told 50 years ago and every year since? Would that not solve the previous problem of “perceptions of remembered perceptions?” I think not because for all our respondents, except for those in Moscow, the context in which the story is told has changed and so the “spin” might well have changed. Fifty years ago people still living in the SU would not have said, “I was so naïve then; I really believed in Stalin and the Soviet system” (even if

they were thinking it, they would not have told it so the story would have been told in politically correct terms). Since they say that now, it means that the change in circumstances (emigration, but even destalinization and glasnost) changed their perceptions of the war already years ago. Thus, it is likely that the story has changed, in most cases. Perhaps it has changed more than once; the first time, it was changed by destalinization and glasnost as it was being told within the Soviet Union. The second time it was changed by the new environment acquired after emigration. Perhaps part of the change was made to justify emigration (the system betrayed us), and part to tell themselves and others why their lives were not misspent and wasted despite the fact that they rejected their country. They had done heroic and good things. They were good not only for their country of birth, but for their countries of immigration and for the world as a whole. They may have fought for the Soviet system, but by doing so they fought against Nazism. The Soviet system collapsed of its own; without their heroic efforts, Nazism would not have been stopped.

So the story may be told today in terms that emphasize individual heroism, as many war (and fishing) stories are. But they are very honest about their Soviet patriotism, however mistaken it seems in retrospect. Not a single interviewee says that he or she regrets having fought for the Soviet Union. Not a single one doubts that this was a just and justifiable war. Not a person decries having fought for a system, at least “objectively,” which some came to hate later. The war was just, necessary, and heroic, though some admit that the Soviet Union was unprepared for it and that Soviet military tactics were indifferent to and wasteful of Soviet lives. Yosif Kvasha, born in Medzhibozh, Ukraine, says: “You know what I think? The war years were the purest years of my life. Before the war, nobody cared about anyone else’s nationality. If a person did his job well, he was a good man, and if he didn’t he was a bad man, and it didn’t

matter who or what he was.”^{xxxviii} Reports of “friendship of the peoples” among their own cohort conforms with everything we know about Soviet idealism of youth in the 1920s and 1930s.^{xxxix} They also seem very honest in reporting the lack of Jewish motivation in fighting (and those who report it seem to have had good reason for doing so—they were mostly Zapadniki who had seen the German persecution of Jews). The same is true for reporting on ethnic relations before the war and during it. Certainly, their reports of the change in official and grass roots attitudes in the mid- and late 1940s conforms to everything we have learned about those periods. Therefore, I argue that the “perceptions of perceptions/memories of memories” issue is a serious one, but there is no evidence of politically or socially purposeful distortion of earlier perceptions of memories. What we are left with are the “normal” distortions caused by the passage of time and reflection, but these may not be crucial for our purposes. Why not?

- 1) the large number of interviews which guards against idiosyncrasy. If perceptions are distorted, is it likely that they are all distorted in the same way? Probably not. And since there is a great deal of consensus in the interviews, with the expected and reasonable variations (e.g., Zapadniki vs. heartlanders; people from shtetlekh cf. people from Baku, Leningrad and Moscow), it means that these are very widely shared perceptions and are less likely to be perceptions of perceptions because those would be very variant and all over the place.
- 2) Matters of consensus include good ethnic relations before the war and during the first part of it; worsening *official* attitudes toward Jews in '43-44; the shock of post-war anti-Semitism; Soviet patriotism; the war as a noble cause.

- 3) Respondents took the interviews very seriously. There is no “interview fatigue” (they are not celebrities, public figures, and are also not people who have been surveyed many times).
- 4) For most, this was the most important event in their lives (aside from marriage, children). Their memories are vivid and emotions surrounding events are more easily and accurately recalled. It may be that by sharing their experiences “the script of a private emotional episode is spread across the social group. Feeding the collective mind [sic]...”^{x1} If that is so, then at least our interviews reveal the script of the narrative written not only by the war generation but transmitted to subsequent generations. This, then, becomes if not the story of the Jews in the war but its mythology, that is, fact interpreted in a tendentious and purposive manner. Mythology is not to be dismissed; it is far more important than fact in determining individual behavior, public policy and the way groups conceive of themselves.

Moreover, in the Soviet case oral histories are much more important than in most others because:

a) for a very long time we had little documentation available, cf. the researcher of Britain, France, Germany or the US during WWII. We still don't have enough: is there a policy directive saying that Jews in the military should be given lesser awards and slower promotions? We don't have it and yet there is such widespread perception of this that it must have been given, perhaps orally.

b) there was lots of deliberate, politically and socially motivated suppression or distortion of the experiences of the people we interviewed, i.e., Soviet Jews.

Finally, oral histories—as well as diaries and memoirs—can do what they have done for

the story of the war on the western fronts. They can give us detailed insights into what happened on the micro level.^{xli} What was the experience like for the ordinary soldier, partisan, or ghetto prisoner, and for some extraordinary ones? What, in brief, was the experience of war for Soviet Jews? How, if at all, do they connect their experiences as combatants with the Holocaust? Were they aware of what was being done to Jewish civilians and did that play any part in their motivation to fight or how they conducted their personal wars?

In this paper I focus on but one subject of the interviews, motivations for fighting. The famous battle cry of Soviet soldiers was “*Za rodinu, za Stalina!*” (for the homeland! For Stalin!) Even if this is what they shouted as they charged, is this what they really fought for? A skeptical view of motivations for war was expressed in 2004 by a writer in the *New York Times*.

“In my experience men don’t go to war for abstract reasons, or think about abstractions once they’re there. In a democratic war, which our World War Two was, they go because everybody goes, and because it seems right to go, and they fight because their buddies are fighting.”^{xlii} The Soviet situation may have been different because soldiers could see the immediate, immanent threat to their families and homes. There may have been more of an ideological component also since Stalinist Communism may have been less abstract than “democracy.” Most of “our” veterans talk retrospectively about patriotism and why they fought but it may be that this is a function of reflection, and at the time, they fought because they had to: the state demanded it and they could be punished for not fighting, and once they were in, they were fighting to preserve themselves (with some exceptional people who surrender themselves and their lives either for their buddies or for the cause). Perhaps this is the reason that in his massive two-volume work on the Shoah in the Soviet Union (1,066 pages), Yitzhak Arad does not devote any space to the role of the Jews in the Red Army in his section 11, is titled “armed Jewish opposition.”^{xliii} He wrote

a separate book on Jews in the Soviet military, published in 2008, but it does not address the subject of motivations for fighting.

One of our respondents, Raya Baranova,^{xliv} escaped from the Minsk ghetto on April 28, 1943 and joined a partisan unit. When asked why she fought, she replied “Simply to survive. As Jews and as people. We were fighting for our lives.” This interview, free of high-minded phrases, was given by a woman who was 17 when the war broke out, had attended a Yiddish school, always fasted on Yom Kippur, and lost five of her eight siblings to the Nazis. It seems that she was unconcerned with ideology and politics.

Yitzhak Prikupets,^{xlv} a tank man on the Third Ukrainian Front, said he fought because “As a citizen of the Soviet Union, I understood that I had to fulfill my duty to the homeland, because it was the homeland.” When pressed, “But as a Jew, did you feel that you had to do better, fight harder?” he answered laconically, “I don’t recall anything like that in particular.” This is what we hear often from the veterans: they fought as Soviet citizens, not as Jews. They fought to defend their country, not its ideology and not for its leader. They were patriots more than Communists. We should remember that a significant number, when asked when they first learned of the mass murder of Jews, answered that it was only when they liberated areas in which large numbers of Jews had lived, or, in a few cases, even after the war was over.

Though it seems that most fought as Soviet patriots rather than as Jews, some recall that their motivations changed during the war. Boris Lvov,^{xlvi} born in Ukraine but a Muscovite from 1920, tried to enlist as soon as the war broke out. The *voenkomnat* official, looking at the near-sighted worker and part-time correspondent for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, sneered, “So now what? Abram also wants to fight?...We found ourselves a Jerusalem Cossack!” Lvov nevertheless became a soldier, shot a German sniper and was awarded a medal. He recalls a

German tank attack that he tried to repel with two Molotov cocktails, but slipped and fell and a tank rode over his trench. “This absolutely idiotic thought came into my mind. Her I am, it’s a clear day and I’m lying in this trench. Any minute now, probably, this tank will crush me. And my classmates are strolling along Gorky Street in Moscow, near the *Natsional’* Hotel, and they’re buying pastries for 37 kopecks each and eating them, and I’m going to die at the age of 21. Well, and then I lost consciousness. In the end, the tank attack was beaten back and they dug me out of the trench.”

He, too, fought for his country, he says, and when asked whether Jews had additional motivations to fight, Lvov answers, “The majority probably did. But I can’t speak about the others because we didn’t have such frank conversations. I’ll tell it to you straight. At that time, such talk smelled of nationalism, and it was not encouraged.”

Nevertheless, when he saw what the Nazis had done to Jews in the occupied territories, it “had a frightening effect on me. I decided that if I had to take part in hand-to-hand combat, I would not take any prisoners. Why? It wasn’t because I hated Germans. In my soul I was an internationalist. Our family, in general was international. We had Jews and Georgians, Russians and Ukrainians and even a Chuvash. But I had lost the ability to approach the question analytically. There were other people there who had been drafted by force, and who had very different opinions. It made no difference to me. I did not take any prisoners, even while taking part in group battles.”

The same amalgam of motivations is reported by Dmitry Resin,^{xlvii} born in a shtetl in Gomel oblast and a senior sergeant in the ski troops who returned to combat after being wounded in battle and spending a year in the hospital. “One should serve honestly, willingly, that was understood.” But when he learned in 1942 that both his grandmothers, and his uncles, aunts and

cousins had been murdered, he recalls that, “we fought, feeling that this was a fight for our own blood. That is why we fought. Because the Germans were already killing Jews.” And when they captured Germans, Resin admits, “we didn’t treat them very kindly...knowing that they were killing people, burning villages....They [the soldiers] were just not permitted to kill them and all that.”xlvi

Lev Gonopolsky had learned from Polish refugees in 1941 what the Germans were doing to Jews. As a soldier in the armored corps, “I was carrying out my civic duty and most importantly, I knew that my relatives had stayed in the occupied territory and there was very little hope they would survive. And some time in 1944 I passed through my home area [Kalinovka, Vinnitsa oblast, Ukraine] and came to know for the first time that all of them, not just my parents, but all my relatives had been exterminated....What can I say? I wanted revenge.”

Abram Galko, who was in the army in 1939 and, as he puts it, “participated in the liberation of Bessarabia in 1940 in the advanced detachments,” was a sergeant when the Nazis attacked. He fought because “I considered it my responsibility, my motherland, I had to protect it. But I fought with greater ardor when I learned what the Germans were doing to the Jews,” something he heard about on the radio in 1942.

Then I even read somewhere that Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt warned the Germans because of it. That there is information that Germans are killing the Jews in occupied territories. And I knew it. When I arrived [in Kiev] in 1944, I didn’t even ask. I found our neighbor who told me how she saw them off, told me everything to the smallest detail. That is why I hate the Germans to this day. I began hating the Germans...in general, I did everything against them. I was taking revenge on them. If I had the opportunity, I would

drop the atomic bomb on them, and I would not have any pity. In Kiev, in Babi Yar, on September 29, 1941 were shot: my mother, father, grandfather, my mother's sister-in-law...and many relations. When I came to Kiev I found out that our janitor and his son were arrested later for cooperating with the Germans, that my cousin was turned in by this janitor and was shot. And there were many cases like that.^{xlix}

Even a civilian, the beloved pedagogue Nehama Vaisman, wrote in her diary in January 1942:

They resumed the crusades against the Jews. What is this persecuted, pitiful tribe guilty of? Personally, I always felt myself to be an internationalist; I was always one. And now I am forced to realize that I am a Jew... When will all people be equal, and everyone understand that he is a human being, not an Aryan, Slav, or Jew?^l

Some American Jewish soldiers, most of whom were unaware of relatives being murdered, seem to have felt the same way. Moore asserts, quite rightly, that "Jewish attitudes toward military service ran the gamut from fervent patriots to elaborate efforts to avoid a uniform....Although Jews saw issues concerning the war differently from other Americans, the vast majority, like most Americans, knew that if they were the right age, they would be drafted. They might hope for deferments...but relatively few actually sought out defense work or exemptions."^{li} For some of her fifteen interviewees, "politics and Jewish identity figured in their decision to fight. Jewish imperatives honed the edge of their American patriotism...It was a war for freedom and democracy, a just war, and thus a good war. Most important, it was their war. Hitler's Jewish survivors would be freed, his victims avenged."^{lii}

A relatively small number of the Soviet veterans speak largely or exclusively about revenge as a motivation for fighting. Israel Fuks, who saw combat in the Caucasus, southern Ukraine and Crimea and the Baltics, served in the 51st Army under the Jewish General Yakov Kreizer.^{liii} He is one of the few to acknowledge that, “Frankly speaking, of course, the relations among Jews [in the army] were closer than the relationships between Jews and those of other nationalities.” Fuks says he learned about Nazi atrocities against Jews from articles by Ilya Ehrenburg. “Therefore, we fought selflessly and with pleasure and hatred toward those fascists. To be honest, when we saw how we had destroyed the Germans, I got pleasure from it...When I was a battery commander near the town of Krimsk, I got pleasure when I saw how the Germans came running from all sides of the kitchen at sunrise and had no time to eat. We opened fire and destroyed them. That was the kind of hatred I had towards the Germans, towards those who killed our Jews.”^{liv}

Note that none of these people—nor any other in my group of 227 or so, with the exception of a few Zapadniki—says they fought to defend or avenge the Jewish people. I have the impression that the same holds for those interviewed by others. This seems for most to have been a personal, not collective, issue. It was not the Jewish nation, the Jewish people, “the Jews” who were being avenged. It was *their* Jews, their relatives. And that should be expected from Soviet people, brought up on the idea that Jews are not a nation but an ethnic group, and that they were first Soviet people and only then Russians, Ukrainians, Armenians, Jews and the rest.

A more prominent theme in discussions about why the Soviet veterans fought is the desire to show that stereotypes of Jews as shirkers were calumnies. Veniamin Gordan, raised in Tashkent in a highly acculturated Jewish family and largely ignorant of Jewish culture, volunteered for the service because “As an ardent Jew, when I heard people saying that the Jews

were going into hiding, I went to the *voenkomnat* and put in an application.”^{lv} Nevertheless, he was a fervent Soviet patriot. “Only after I became more or less a mature man did I realize such things” [negative sides of the Soviet Union]. “True, I became somewhat enamored when we entered Germany. I saw how they lived, those Germans. They had those individual farms, in the basements they had lots of preserves. That affected me somewhat. But in principle—[to abandon loyalty to the Soviet Union]—no!”

Another volunteer was Anatoly Vodopyanov, 17 in 1944 and living in Chkalov in the Urals, where his mother, a part-time physician in the NKVD, had been evacuated from Gomel, Belorussia. “The mind-set was that you are a Jew and you have to be there where it is difficult...in order to prove that you are no worse than anyone else and in order to give all you can to your country. That is what prompted me to leave the [Automobile] Institute....It worked for me...I became the best driver in the army, a master. There were fifteen masters in the whole army.”^{lvi}

In sum, Soviet Jews, probably like American Jews, fought to defend their country. Unlike American Jews who might explain their service as being to defend democracy, they do not mention the defense of Communism or the charisma of Stalin, though they might well have done so in the 1940s. This is an instance where retrospection had probably influenced the recollection of feelings and thoughts. Perhaps it has also influenced their recollection of the Jewish motivation for service, though it remains a minor theme for most. Whatever their motivations, there is no doubt that these were the defining years of their lives, those they could be most proud of. As Samuel Hynes wrote about American veterans of WWII, “Being the winners in a just war gave those veterans a quality that was and is still perceptible in them, though it’s hard to define: a confidence, a sense of personal worth, a certainty about their actions in that crucial time when

they were young. One worthy thing done at that age when manhood begins can make the rest of a man's life richer, give it a sustaining value.”lvii

The tragedy of this first and possibly only genuinely “Soviet” generation was that they fought so hard against one form of totalitarianism on behalf of another. The Nazis tried to destroy their people, and largely succeeded. The Soviets tried to destroy their religion, culture and traditions, and largely succeeded. It has been possible for post-Soviet Jews to recover from the Soviet attempt, at least in part. There is no reversing the catastrophic consequences of the Nazi genocide. But were it not for the enormous sacrifices brought by Soviet Jewish combatants and all their fellows in arms, the consequences would have been even more drastic.

- ⁱ See the caricatures on pages 48-9, 95, and 115 in Eduard Fuchs, *Die Juden in der Karikatur* (Munich: Verlag Albert Langen, 1921).
- ⁱⁱ Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War Two Changed a Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 27-28.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ^{iv} This refers to the biblical proscription on mixing wool and linen in a garment.
- ^v On the social and cultural consequences of the draft, see Olga Litvak, *Conscription and the Search for Modern Russian Jewry* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006). One of the most prominent East European rabbis of the twentieth century, Israel Meir HaKohen (the “Hafetz Haim”), wrote a pamphlet instructing Jewish soldiers how to conduct themselves in the military. As he lived in the Russian Empire (Lithuania/Belarus), he was presumably reacting to conditions in the Russian military. See *Sefer Maḥaneh Yiśrael: ‘al ha-balakhot ye-hanahgot ha-shayakhot le-anshe ha-tsava kol yeme heyotam ba-tsava ...* (Bnai Brak, Israel: Tora vaDa’at, 1967/68, reprint).
- ^{vi} Yitzhak Arad, *Toldot hasboah: Brit hamoetsot vebashtakhim bamesupakhim* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004), v.1, 28. The lowest estimate I have seen is 250,000.
- ^{vii} Mac Davis, *Jews Fight Too* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1945).
- ^{viii} I. Kaufman, *American Jews in World War II* (New York: Dial Press, 1947)
- ^{ix} Sy Kahn, *Between Tedium and Terror: A Soldier’s World War II Diary 1943-45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), xxv, quoted in Moore, 101.
- ^x Norman Rubinstein, *The Invisibly Wounded* (Hull: The Wilberforce Council, 1989) 51.
- ^{xi} F.D. Sverdlov, *Podvigi soldat-evreev v boiakh*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1994 and 1998); L.L. Mininberg, *Sovetskie evrei v nauke i promyshlennosti S.S.S.R v period vtoroi mirovoi voiny (1941-1945 gg.)* (Moscow: Its-Garant, 1995)
- ^{xii} Gershon Shapiro, *Evrei—Geroi sovetskogo soiuza* (Tel Aviv, 1982); Aron Abramovich, *V reshaiushchei voine: uchastie i rol’ evreev S.S.R v voine protiv natsizma*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: n.p. 1982) and vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: n.p. 1992); G.S. Shapiro and S.L. Averbukh, *Ocherki evreiskogo gerotizma* (Kiev-Tel Aviv, 1994), 3 vols; F. D.Sverdlov, *Entsiklopedia evreiskogo gerotizma* (Moscow: 2002).
- ^{xiii} E.N. Feiershtein, N.A. Pivovarova, I.S. Sobol, eds., *Kniga pamiati*, 9 volumes. (Moscow: n.p., 1994ff).
- ^{xiv} David Fudim, compiler, *Nam dorogi eti pozabyt’ nel’zia...* (3 vols.) (Jerusalem, 1995); V. Levin and D. Meltser, *Chernaia kniga s krasnymi stranitsami* (Baltimore, 1996, 573 pp.); Faina Fain Vinokurova, *Evrei Vinnichiny v period vtoroi mirovoi voiny*, t. III (Vinnitsa: Vinokurova, *Evrei Vinnichiny v period Vtoroi mirovoi voiny* (Vinnitsa: Anteks, 2000, vol. III); Mosei Rechester, *My srazhalis protiv natsizma, 1941-1945* (New York, 1982); Ts. N. Segal, *Odna na vsekh pobeda: Samarskie evrei na frontakh Velikoi Otechestvennoi* (Samara, 1995).
- ^{xv} “Special Report on Manifestations of Antisemitism in Ukraine,” in Vladimir Khanin, ed., *Documents on Ukrainian Jewish Identity and Emigration, 1944-1990* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 41-2.
- ^{xvi} According to Jasa Romano, 4,572 Jews were in the ranks of the Yugoslav partisan forces and 1,318 of them were killed while in the service. Most had come from Croatia and Bosnia and they included over 300 physicians. Romano, *Jevreji Jugoslavije, 1941-1945*, quoted in Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yigoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, , 605-06.
- ^{xvii} Alec Nove and J.A. Newth, “The Jewish Population: Demographic Trends and Occupational Patterns,” in Lionel Kochan, ed., *The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 158. Based on *Natsional’naya politika VKP(b) v tsifrah, 1930*.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xix} Mark Shteynberg, *Evrei v voinach tysiacheletii* (Brooklyn, NY:1995, 2nd ed.), 176-178. He bases himself on an article in *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal*, 2 (1991).
- ^{xx} The best known were Generals Yona Yakir, Yan Gamarnik, Grigorii Shtern, Feldman, and Yakov Smushkevich. Among those purged, according to Shteynberg, were 5 ‘army commanders of second rank,’ 4 “komkors” or corps commanders, 9 corps commissars, 9 divisional commanders, 2 divisional “intendants,” a division doctor, 4 division jurists, 22 brigade commanders, 43 brigade commissars and 28 “other high-ranking officers.” 184.
- ^{xxi} According to one source, “434,000 Jews were mobilized into the army during the years of the Great Fatherland War.” Iu.I. Reznikov, “Evrei pavlodarskoi oblasti v velikoi otechestvennoi voine 1941-1945 gg.” in *Evrei v Kazakhstane* (Almaty, 2005), 181, citing *Voennoya entsiklopediia v 3kh tomakh* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 2001), vol.5, 182.

xxii Arad, v.1, 100.

xxiii Shteynberg claims that 198,000 were killed according to the records of the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. (p.221). Yitzhak Arad makes the following calculation: Jews were 1.78% of the population, and it is likely that their casualty rate was proportionate (a dubious assumption since most Jewish soldiers were located in the western USSR which bore the brunt of the German blitzkrieg). Then 1.78% of the Soviet military deaths would be 122,000 Jews. He adds to that 75-80,000 who were POWs, the vast majority of whom were killed, and about 7,000 Jewish partisans. His total of Jewish military deaths is therefore 204-209,000. Yitzhak Arad, *B'tsel ha-degel ha-adom* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Defence Publishing House; Yad Vashem, 2008). The number of casualties is intrinsically difficult to calculate because of wartime conditions and the inability or unwillingness of Soviet authorities to document every death. One way of calculating would be to go through the volumes of the *Kniga pamiatii*, which attempts to account for every Jewish military death on the basis of the Ministry of Defense records.

xxiv *American Jews in WWII*, v.2, 28. Shteynberg says that 11,350 American Jews died in the service though it is not clear on what he bases this figure. P. 189.

xxv *American Jews in WWII*, v.I, 350.

xxvi Shteynberg argues that some Heroes have been listed as Jews in such places as *Encyclopedia Judaica* when they were not Jewish (e.g., General Ivan Danilovich Cherniakhovsky who, Shteynberg asserts, was Ukrainian). He believes that 136 Jews, including the Polish Jew Julius Hibner, won the award.

xxvii Shteynberg says 11,700 won the award, and that includes some civilians. P.222.

xxviii Again, Shteynberg's figures are different. He counts 216 generals and 9 admirals, of whom 5 were col.-generals, 29 lieutenants-general, 182 majors-general, a vice-admiral and 8 rear (*konti*) admirals. One hundred seventy-five were in active combat, only eleven of them political officers. Most had fought in Spain, the Far East, Mongolia, Finland, or had participated in the invasion of eastern Poland in 1939. P.275.

xxix According to Shteynberg (p. 224), 45 Jews got the Hero award posthumously and eight others were killed after receiving it. Several were deprived of the award after the war when they applied to emigrate to Israel, but at least four Heroes immigrated as of the mid-1990s.

xxx Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 39.

xxxi See, for example, Stephen Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997); and Ambrose, *D-Day, June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

xxxii I have found very useful the article by Mark Roseman, "Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Testimony," *Journal of Holocaust Education* 8:1 (1999).

The influence of national identity on collective memory is discussed in "Collective Memory and National Identities: German and Polish Memory Cultures: The Forms of Collective Identity," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 28, 7, pp. 255-61.

xxxv James Pennebaker and Becky Banasik, "On the Creation and Maintenance of Collective Memories: History as Social Psychology," in Pennebaker, Dario Paez, and Bernard Rime, eds., *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives*. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997), 3. They base themselves on the research of Tetlock, Peterson, et al, "Assessing Political Group Dynamics: A Test of the Groupthink Model," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1992.

xxxvi Curiously, such considerations are never raised by Deborah Dash Moore in *GI Jews*. Her conclusions are based on 15 extensive interviews with veterans, including her father and his friends, taken mostly in 1995-96 and later.

xxxvii Nico Frijda, "Commemorating," in Pennebaker, et al, 105.

xxxviii interview

xxxix See, for example, Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

xl Bernard Rime and Veronique Christophe, "How Individual Emotional Episodes Feed Collective memory," in Pennebaker, *ibid.*, 133.

xli As in Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

xlii Samuel Hynes, "D-Day, in History and Memory," *New York Times*, June 6, 2004.

xliii Vol.2, pps. 851-962. The section is devoted to Jewish underground organizations in the ghettos and to the partisans.

- xliv Interviewed by Tatiana Polskaya, Detroit, November 10, 1996. No. 002.
- xlvi Interviewed by Genrikh Schiff, Detroit, November 22, 1996. No. 021.
- xlvi Interviewed by Tatiana Polskaya, Detroit, November 1996. No. 023.
- xlvii Interviewed by Lev Kupershtain, Detroit, November 14, 1996. No. 024
- xlviiii Interviewed in Detroit, 1996.
- xlviix Interviewed by Boris [?] Goltser, Ann Arbor, MI, January 3, 1997. Gulko remained in the military and was promoted to Lt.-Col. in 1950 but was denied further promotions.
- ¹ Quoted in N.P. Shenkevets, *Pamiat' serdca: Nekhame Ioanovne Vaysman, drugu i uchiteliu, posviaschaetsia* (Blagoveschensk: Armurskaia iampurka, 2010), 17.
- li Moore, 44-45.
- lii Ibid., 47-48.
- liii Fuks says he met Kreizer twice. "What a brave, smart and clever person he was. If all the generals in our army had been like him, we probably would have ended the war twice as fast." Interviewed by Lev Paransky, Detroit, November 10, 1996. No. 006.
- liv Similar sentiments are expressed by Moisei Grinblat, from Berdichev. Interviewed in Southfield, MI, November 9, 1996.
- lv Interviewed in Oak Park, MI, December 8, 1996.
- lvi Interviewed by Maria Mochulski, Oak Park, December 8, 1996.
- lvii Hynes, op. cit.