The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Tries to Remember the Holocaust

The government supports Holocaust commemoration, but Soviet war narratives die hard.

By Eva Hartog and Matthew Kupfer

January 27, 2017



A ceremony to light candles to commemorate the Holocaust victims on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow, Jan.27, 2016. **Moskva News Agency**

The stage was set. The lights shone bright. The audience watched attentively. On the popular Russian game show "Wildly Beautiful," the host read the first question: "What is the Holocaust?"

Contestants Kseniya and Yevgeniya Karatygina, 19-year-old twin sisters from Moscow, appeared visibly confused. Finally, after a brief discussion, they agreed upon an answer: "It's wallpaper glue."

That moment in 2013 instantly launched the Karatygina sisters to Internet infamy. But it

also illustrated how one of the greatest tragedies in ⊠world history remains a mystery to many Russians.

Now, the Russian government appears intent on changing that.

Since⊠ Jan. 20, Russia has been marking Holocaust Remembrance Week. Movie ⊠theaters in Moscow are showing films about the Holocaust. A theater has ⊠staged an opera about the tragedy. The government held an official ⊠ceremony attended by celebrities and Israeli representatives. Yesterday,⊠ Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev spoke at Moscow's Jewish Museum and ⊠Tolerance Center. And, today, school children around the country will be taught lessons on the Holocaust.

But for all that has changed in the last few years, much has remained the same.

Embed:

> There he is. @MedvedevRussia visits @JewishMuseumMsc for #holocaustremembrance pic.twitter.com/CWZC8HDZKW
>
> — Eva Hartog (@EvaHartog) 26 января 2017 г.

The Universal Genocide

How⊠ could two young women in the Internet age believe the Holocaust to be a⊠ brand of wallpaper paste? The answer lies in the complicated historical⊠ narrative surrounding the Second World War in Russia.

For⊠ Russians, WWII was both a great victory and an enormous catastrophe. ⊠Over 25 million Soviet citizens lost their lives in the fight against ⊠fascism.

Nazi⊠ Germany's genocide of European Jews was seldom discussed publicly in ⊠the Soviet Union. It was virtually never mentioned on an official level.⊠ Even the word "Holocaust" was uncommon. Instead, the Holocaust was ⊠subsumed under the Soviet Union's state narrative of the war, which ⊠emphasized the killing of Soviet citizens.

In a 1956 book on genocide, Soviet scholar Aron Traynin describes the Nazis'⊠ genocide as "the extermination of entire nations and peoples: Poles, ⊠Czechs, Jews, and others." For Traynin and many other scholars like him,⊠ the killing of Jews was part of a larger Nazi project often described ⊠in Russian as *chelovekonanavistnicheskiy* — literally, human-hating.

Contrary views to Traynin's were often suppressed. The Soviet authorities destroyed manuscripts of the "Black Book,"⊠ an attempt by Soviet Jewish journalists Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily ⊠Grossman to document the Nazi atrocities against Jews, after finding ⊠"grave political errors" in the text. Even monuments to the Holocaust's ⊠victims usually referred

only to “Soviet citizens.”

Oleg⊠ Budnitsky knows this suppression well. As a child, he visited ⊠Zmiyovskaya ravine, where the Nazis massacred 27,000 Jews and other ⊠civilians outside Rostov-on-Don. It was the largest mass killing of Jews⊠ on Russian territory, but, under the Soviets, the monument made no ⊠mention that the victims were Jewish.

It⊠ helped little that, from Stalin until perestroika, Jews faced official ⊠discrimination in the Soviet Union. Over these years, the subject of the⊠ Holocaust remained “on the periphery of public attention and historical⊠ research,” says Budnitsky, now a historian focused on WWII at Moscow’s ⊠Higher School of Economics.

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Struggling to Understand

The⊠ collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought the freedom to reevaluate ⊠official Soviet history. The Russian narrative of Hitler’s genocide no ⊠longer existed in isolation from the Western narrative, in which the ⊠Holocaust plays a central role.

Budnitsky now organizes annual international conferences where the Holocaust is one of many aspects of WWII discussed.

But,⊠ for many Russians, understanding of WWII’s Jewish tragedy remains ⊠elusive. Budnitsky blames this, in part, on the demographic realities of⊠ the war. The Nazis killed over 7 million Soviet civilians, of whom 2 to⊠ 2.5 million were Jews.

“The⊠ Soviet Union was one of a few countries in Europe where more non-Jews ⊠were killed than Jews,” he says. “So, some believe that Slavs were ⊠killed more than Jews” in the Holocaust.

What⊠ they fail to understand, Budnitsky says, is that the Nazis intended to ⊠fully exterminate only the Jews, and over half of the Soviet Jewish ⊠population perished in the Holocaust.

Embed:

> #ПодвигЛенинграда Кто в мире помнит про "ленинградскую болезнь"?дистрофия унесла не меньше жизней,чем немецкие артобстрелы!Это тоже Холокост pic.twitter.com/RcOdczkBk8
>
> — elena logunova (@elena_elve) January 27, 2017

Some Russians are less enthuasiastic about the attention given to the Jewish account of the Holocaust rather than the general Soviet losses suffered during WWII. This tweet reads: Who

in the world recalls the "Leningrad disease"? Dystrophy took no fewer lives than German shelling. That's also a Holocaust.

But Alla Gerber, director of the Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Center, takes a more pessimistic view of these misunderstandings.

"Our society doesn't know about the Holocaust and doesn't want to know," she says.

Gerber's organization is working to change that. The Holocaust Center frequently travels to Russia's regions, educating Russians – especially children – about the Nazi genocide of Jews. She has been heartened by the allies the Center has found across the country. Protestant communities have been especially supportive, she notes, and some of the best entries in youth essay contests organized by the Holocaust Center come from rural areas of Russia.

There has also been another significant, if complicated, improvement in Russia's Holocaust awareness. Since 2015, the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, the Kremlin has increased efforts to commemorate the tragedy. That year, Vladimir Putin himself visited the Jewish Museum to honor the memory of the victims.

"Because Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army, it has become an important part of the patriotic spirit that is so active today," Gerber says.

Embed:

> Неужели чтобы поговорить про холокост надо приглашать еврея в шляпе? Русские освобождали Освенцим! Русские лучше могут рассказать как было. pic.twitter.com/ahIbYr8ZQa
>
> — Светлана (@GaninaSA) January 27, 2017

The tweet reads: Surely we don't need to invite Jews in hats to talk about the Holocaust? Russians liberated Auschwitz! Russians could recount a lot better how it was.

New Memorials, New Meanings

This week's commemorations in Moscow were part and parcel of the government's new interest in remembering the Holocaust.

At the Jewish Museum ceremony, Alexander Boroda, president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, told The Moscow Times that he has felt increasingly supported by the government in recent years.

For the first time, the event included a visit from Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who was given a tour around the museum.

“The fact that the prime minister is visiting shows that the government understands the importance of the lessons that can be drawn from the Holocaust,” Boroda told The Moscow Times.

But, judging by the speeches at the commemoration, those lessons appeared to mix both Soviet and modern concerns.

“The Holocaust is not just a tragedy of the Jewish people – it's a tragedy for all of humanity,” Boroda told journalists, echoing Soviet rhetoric, during his speech at the event. He then went on to compare the danger of Islamic extremism to the threat of the Nazis.

With Russia heavily involved in Syria and vulnerable to terror attacks at home, that message is welcomed by the Kremlin.

“Today we see how ethnic and religious xenophobia is taking on a new, ugly side in the form of terrorism,” Medvedev said in his own speech at the center. “It is a similar deadly ideology and shares a similar maniacal desire to kill and destroy.”

The Holocaust may no longer be wallpaper glue in Russia, but it also isn’t free from politics.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/01/27/russia-tries-to-remember-the-holocaust-a56959