**The Holocaust Propaganda Machine in Soviet Periodicals, 1941 – 19451**

The USSR entered the Second World War with the world’s most powerful propaganda apparatus, having twenty years of experience and a government monopoly on truth. All publications were subjected to a three-tiered system of censorship: personal, editorial, and official, with the common line of censorship being determined at the highest level. In the Soviet Union at that time there were five primary sources of official information: a) periodical publications, b) fictional literature, c) journalistic writing, d) films, and d) radio broadcasts. In this article, we will only be examining the Russian language periodical press, which was the most widely available print material in the USSR. These sources were entirely aimed at Soviet readers, as opposed to Yiddish language publications, which were in part intended to arouse sympathy in readers abroad.2 Verification of casualty statistics and authenticity of other published information is not a goal of this article.

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Stalin: *“In fact, the Hitler regime is just a copy of the reactionary regime that existed in Russia under the tsars. It is well known that the Nazis…are just as willing to organize medieval Jewish pogroms as the tsars were”.*3

Many researchers who wrote about the Holocaust in Soviet territory believed that the government either hid information about it or wrote very little. A critical review of these assessments was presented by Karel Berkhoff before going on in his article to examine the coverage of these themes by several central newspapers.4 We have no reason to revise his review. We would add only that Mordechai Altshuler, who later researched this theme based on the magazine Znamya and several Russian language newspapers, made his own contribution by asserting that the mention of Jewish victims depended on the author, editor, and censor.5

A more thorough review of periodicals already examined, as well as many other newspapers6 and other pre-war and wartime journalism, allows us to identify many nuances of Soviet media policy. They provide an answer to the following important question: Why did the central authorities grant relative freedom to publications regarding the Holocaust, when it would have been so disadvantageous because of German propaganda about Jewish control of power in the USSR?7 The most likely answer is that writing about the Holocaust, despite the inevitable costs, enabled Soviet propaganda to achieve the more important goal of demonstrating the brutality of its ideological enemy.

Soviet publications set out on the path to war with fascist ideology quite early. In 1923, a collection of articles was published called “World Fascism”, which reported on fascist organizations in Italy and many other countries.8 In 1932, Maxim Gorky, in response to a piece in a Nazi newspaper that stated “We will legally slaughter Jews with the new laws we will enact when we come to power”, replied that “the European bourgeoisie in its current state of mind is fully capable of passing laws that not only authorize the complete extermination of the Jews, but the extermination of all who disagree with her…”.9

The Soviet press did not disregard the actions of Germany in November 1938. They published extracts from English and other foreign newspapers that reported the anti-Jewish pogroms and arrests of Jews that were taking place.10 On 18 November, even the newspaper *Pravda* covered these events in several editorials.11 *Izvestia* published the pointed words of French communist Jacques Sadoul on the persecution of Jews in Germany.12 There was wide coverage of a protest rally against these pogroms organized by the Union of Writers and Architects on 27 November at the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory attracting close to two thousand people. In the following few days, similar rallies were held in Leningrad, Minsk, Kyiv, Tbilisi, Baku, Sverdlovsk, and other cities.13

The Soviet-German non-aggression pact (August 1939) interrupted these anti-fascist activities. In a sharp policy change, Glavlit arranged for the seizure of anti-fascist literature from libraries and bookstores. Even anti-fascist articles in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia were questioned.14 However, it is unlikely that these attempts to rehabilitate Germany were effective since its hostile image had been fostered in the USSR for more than a decade and a half. From the beginning of 1941, when it became apparent that conflict with Germany was unavoidable, the Kremlin returned to anti-German propaganda, albeit in a more moderate form. Gennady Kostyrchenko wrote that the moral unpreparedness for the future war began to seem like a greater danger than the risk of provoking Germany into conflict. The Red Army was again being shown previously banned anti-fascist films. The Sergej Eisenstein film *Alexander Nevsky* about the war with German knights even received the Stalin Prize along with positive press reviews. At the end of April, Stalin even permitted Ilya Ehrenburg to publish *The Fall of Paris* uncensored. A more concrete change of course appeared in early June 1941 in a directive from the head of Glavpur (the Main Political Directorate) and simultaneously from the head of the Propaganda and Agitation Agency of the Central Committee of the Communist Party Alexander Shcherbankov: “Several propagandists have stopped criticizing the fascist ideology hostile to Marxism, accepted the false theory of fascist economists on planned domestic management in Germany and Italy, and stopped exposing the reactionary politics of German imperialism directed at the subjugation and enslavement of other peoples”.16