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The Crystallization of National Identity in Times of War: The Experience of a Soviet Jewish Soldier

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Introduction[1]

Vladimir Natanovich Gelfand was born on March 1, 1923, in Novoarkhangelsk, a village in the eastern part of Ukraine. Both of his parents were Jewish. His mother, Nadezhda Vladimirovna Gorodinskya, was a veteran of the civil war and a party member; his father, Natan Solomonovich Gelfand, was an appreciated worker, *udarnik*, in the metallurgy factory of Dniprodzerzhynsk, Ukraine. Before joining the army Gelfand had finished his education at the Workers Faculty, *rabfak*, of Dnipropetrovsk, where he was active on the school newspaper, engaged in various political activities, and joined the Komsomol. When World War II broke out, he was involved in the project of collecting crops for the war effort, subsequently becoming the best worker in his unit. He was nineteen years old when he joined the fighting Red Army on May 6, 1942.

Gelfand's diary will be central to this paper. Through it I will examine the assumption that a reemergence of Jewish identity occurred as a result of the Soviet advance westward and the encounter of Jewish Red Army soldiers with the Holocaust. Modern studies have addressed the subject of national identity among Soviet Jews in a wide range of contexts, including official Soviet policy and popular culture. Similarly, scholars have also looked at the daily lives of Soviet soldiers, their experiences and reactions to the horrors of war. However, the correlation between national identity formation and daily experiences is virtually absent from the historical research. Not a single monograph has been written on the topic of the Jewishness of the Soviet Jews in the Red Army, or dealt with its dynamics and transformation in the context of their encounter with the Holocaust. My paper attempts to bridge the gap.

The first section will address the meaning of being Soviet, that is, the conceptions that Soviet subjects lived by. The second section will deal with the meaning of being Jewish, particularly the governmental policies applied to the Jewish population before the war and the effect they had on Jewish affiliation. It is important to note that this paper will only focus on the Ashkenazi Jewish population, which formerly was concentrated in the Pale of Settlement. Additionally, Gelfand represents the generation

[1] I would like to thank the European Forum at the Hebrew University and the Mayrock Center for Russian, Euro-Asian and East-European Research for the generous grant which allowed me to conduct my research. I am grateful to Dr. Michael Beizer for his guidance and comments. A debt of gratitude is also owed to my supervisor Prof. Yfaat Weiss.

of 1917, those often referred to as “true Soviet men.” The third section will explore the dynamics of Soviet Jewish identity in its World War II historical context.

"True Soviet Men"

> *"Many people told him it was impossible, but he never forgot what was most important—that he was a Soviet man! A real man! And you must never forget this, never, wherever you are!"* Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra*

Soviet subjectivity has been the focus of many recent studies in the field of Soviet history, which formerly devoted its efforts to the research of policymaking and international politics. Therefore, when addressing the questions of motivation and the reemergence of Jewish identity in times of war, a topic that belongs to the more private sphere, interpretations must be based on these recent findings. What was the meaning of being Soviet? Which ideologies and assumptions guided the young soldier, Gelfand, as he advanced westward with his unit? In this section I will deal with these questions in the context of recent Soviet subjectivity studies.

Keith Michael Baker, in an article on the presumed Foucauldian account of the French Revolution, maintains that politicization of the subject and the moralization of politics accompany the revolutionary dynamics and its power discourse. During the revolutionary period, those who hold power learn to view each individual as a political subject, every action as ideological and a realization of political will.[2] In other words, everything from established politics to the individual's private thoughts is contextualized in political terms. Consequently, the moralization of the subject follows his politicization. All that is politically valid is regarded as moral; all that is not politically expedient is considered crooked and immoral.[3] In this respect, the past, i.e., the *ancien régime*, was viewed as corrupt and immoral, whereas the new one was seen as the true regime with its true politics.[4]

The abovementioned revolutionary characteristics were not only evident in governmental and political policies but also played a prominent role in the formation of the Soviet subject. Through the assimilation of these features, the Soviet individual

[2] Keith Michael Baker, "A Foucauldian French Revolution?" in *Foucault and the Writing of History*, ed. J. Goldstein (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1994), pp. 188-191.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

became politicized, historicized, and moralized, sometimes to the extent of using the same discourse as justification for acts declared illegal by the regime itself.

Jochen Hellbeck argues that historical consciousness was one of the main characteristics of the Soviet subject during the 1930s. It was the perception of living in an influential time, an epic epoch, a revolutionary period which represented a break from the past and an advance toward a bright socialist future.[5] The will of almost every Soviet citizen to participate in constructing that future and breaking free from the tsarist regime is evident in the testimonies from the time. To be a bystander, a mere eyewitness to the changes taking place in society, was to abandon one's duty and purpose as a person.[6] Instead one actively tried to write oneself into history, as is evident from the diary of Nikolai Ustrialov, a law professor from Moscow: "It is difficult to feel like a 'superfluous person' these days, when, it would seem, everyone finds themselves with so much to do. I want to be up to my neck with activity – if only not to be superfluous in our time, at this historic hour – when the fate of our great country, our great revolution, is being decided."[7] To Ustrialov, being superfluous meant being absent from the building of the future. He wanted to be an agent of the historical mission, a carrier of his time and considered it his moral duty.

When the Soviet subject looked for ways to participate in the building of the future socialist society, he hoped to take part in a moralistic construction of society. It interesting to note the Soviet conception of morality. All of life's issues were subjected to the needs of the party, and a private dialogue with one's conscience was deplored of the previous Christian perceptions. Party doctrines were the pillars of faith, and the party's collective judgments were the manifestation of justice.[8] The Russian word for conscience, *sovest*, nearly died out after 1917 and was replaced in common usage by the word for awareness, *soznatelnost*, signifying the moral aspects of ideological awareness.[9]

Bearing this in mind, one can draw conclusions as to the level of enlistment for public causes and the relation between the private and the public spheres in the 1930s

[5] Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 55-67.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., pp. 64-65.
[8] Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Picador, 2007), pp. 97-99.
[9] Ibid.

Soviet Union. Contrary to the liberal view that the private and public spheres are separate and usually opposed and competing, the Soviet subject aspired to make his personal life a continuity of the public one.[10] "To allow a distinction between private life and public life," as Nadezhda Krupskaia, Lenin's wife, once said, "will lead sooner or later to betrayal of Communism."[11] Hence, the lives of Soviet citizens were politicized and the mundane was seen through the prism of social utility. "The young person should be taught to think in terms of we," wrote Anatoly Lunacharsky, the commissar for education in 1918, "and all private interests should be left behind."[12] As for the Soviet subject, he had to seek to make his inner self correspond with his outer, collective self.[13] Private lives became the battlefield of all that was political and moral. The search for inclusion and fear of expulsion were the main concerns with regard to Soviet wellbeing.

[10] Hellbeck, pp. 86-87.
[11] Figes, "Introduction."
[12] Ibid., p. 80.
[13] Jochen Hellbeck, "Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stephan Podlubnyi, 1931-1939," in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. S. Fitzpatrick (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 95.

Jewish Identity

Before their rise to power, Lenin and Stalin referred to the Jews merely as a religious sect, lacking territory but maintaining its own jargon, Yiddish. Nevertheless, the affirmative national policy of the 1920s established a positive attitude toward nations including ex-territorial ones, such as the Jewish nation. Furthermore, when the Bolsheviks rose to power, they discovered strong national sentiments among the former Russian Empire nationalities. The Jews were no different: the Zionist movement was dominant in the Jewish street, to the extent that it received up to 4-4.5 times more votes than the Bund Party, which joined the Mensheviks for the elections in the constituent assembly, planned for the end of 1917.[14] A mere egalitarian approach to the "Jewish problem" was obviously not sufficient for the Jewish street.

Thus, the Bolsheviks realized that they would need to include the Jewish nation in their affirmative policy, that is, the indigenization (*Korenizatsiia)* of the various nations.[15] The Act of Indigenization was promulgated after the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party, held on April 17-25, 1923. Its goal was the fulfillment of nationalism within the Soviet, socialist boundaries. In other words, Jewish nationalism, as all other nationalisms, was to be nationalist in form and socialist in content.[16] The approved act was similar to the Bundist political call for cultural autonomy.[17]

Consequently, three institutions came into being – governmental, party, and public, which were responsible for the nationalist autonomy of the Jewish people in the early Communist period. The Commissariat for Jewish National Affairs (*Evkom*), the Jewish section of the Communist Party (*Evsektsiya*), and various Jewish public organizations were all established to promote Communism and fight various socialist and Zionist parties.[18] This section will focus on the influence of the *Evsektsiya* on the Jewish public; it was the most dominant institution of the three and the center of all legal Jewish

[14] יהודה סלוצקי, "יהדות רוסיה בשנת המהפכה 1917," *העבר*, חוב' 15, 1968, עמ' 55-32.
[15] בנימין פינקוס, יהודי רוסיה וברית המועצות: תולדות מיעוט לאומי, (באר שבע: אוניברסיטת בן גוריון בנגב, תשמ"ו 1986), עמ' 155.
[16] Terry Martin, "An Affirmative Action Empire," in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 74-75.
[17] פינקוס, עמ' 154-151.
[18] שם, 175-161.

activity within the Soviet Union.[19] Moreover, the *Evsektsiya*, as opposed to the *Evkom*, was known for zealous persecution of the Zionist movement.[20]

The *Evsektsiya* was composed of various members of Jewish socialist parties, especially Bund members. Despite their initial rejection of the Bund as a reactionary and bourgeois element, Lenin and Stalin now turned to its members for help. The Bund members were acquainted with the Jewish street, unlike prominent Jewish Bolsheviks such as Leon Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, and Lev Kamenev who considered themselves Soviet and supported full assimilation into Russian society as a means of obtaining equal rights. That being the case, the members of the *Evsektsiya* were Jewish Bolsheviks, and their task was to mediate between the Communist Party and the Jewish public as well as to create a Jewish proletarian culture.[21]

Thus, throughout its years of activity the *Evsektsiya* persecuted the Zionist movement and the Jewish religion. Zionist activists were oppressed and the movement was dismantled by governmental decree; the *cheder*s (Jewish religious schools) were closed and the synagogues turned into clubs and warehouses. Massive propaganda efforts were directed against the religious holidays and the Shabbat.[22] Hebrew, which was naturally associated with the Zionist movement and the Torah, was outlawed, and Yiddish was made the official language of the Jewish nation. Indeed, a network of Yiddish schools was established in 1918 and replaced Jewish individual educational institutions.[23] New proletarian Yiddish literature emerged, and it replaced Hebrew texts, be they new Zionist literature or the Torah. Many Yiddish newspapers and journals were published and circulated in the Jewish street. The first publications were mainly political in the strict sense of the word: translations of the socialist canon. However, with time an independent and creative Yiddish literature arose, along with an increase in Yiddish translations of Russian classics.[24] The recently established Yiddish

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[19] שם, 163.

[20] J.B. Schechtman, "The U.S.S.R, Zionism, and Israel", in *The Jews in Soviet Russia*, ed. by L. Kochan (Oxford paperbacks, 1978) pp. 99-124.

[21] David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 11, 23-26.

[22] מרדכי אלטשולר, היבסקציה בברית המועצות (1918-1930): בין לאומיות לקומוניזם, (תל אביב: המכון ליהדות זמננו, תשמ"א 1980), עמ' 328-327.

[23] For more on the Jewish educational systems during the 1920s and 1930s, see: Аркадий Зельцер, Евреи северо-восточной Белоруссии между мировыми войнами, 1917-1941 / Диссертация на степень доктора философии Иерусалим: Еврейский университет, 2003.

[24] פינקוס, עמ' 234-233.

theater moved from Petrograd to Moscow and quickly gained popularity, to the point that it was allowed to perform abroad. From 1925 the theater was recognized by the state as the official Jewish theater: the GOSET.[25] Likewise, the Jewish public encountered new Jewish proletarian culture in movies, music, and paintings fostered by the same class rationale.[26] In the 1920s, notes Arkadi Zeltser, there was a less sharp dichotomy between nationalism and universality, and the subject had diverse options for the realization of his national feelings.[27]

The 1930s saw the rise of Russian nationalism. The affirmative policy of the 1920s – aiming on the one hand to nurture national sentiments within the various national groups in the Soviet Union, and on the other to discourage chauvinist Russian nationalism – was abandoned. Soviet national policy consolidated: along with the rebirth of Russian patriotism, small national units were canceled and ex-territorial nations including the Jews, Germans, Poles, and Koreans were treated with ongoing suspicion.[28] The national category was included in passports. Hence, by the end of the decade the Soviet national category had biological and territorial attributes.[29] It is a matter of dispute to what extent the expression of nationality was limited, but there is no doubt that Russian nationality had awakened and had taken the form of all the others.

The change in policy affected Jewish cultural life. The *Evsektsiya* closed down as part of a larger act of shutting down all national divisions in the Communist Party; its leaders were killed during the Stalinist purges at the end of the decade.[30] In 1932 the teaching of Jewish history in Yiddish schools was banned and the schoolbooks became very similar to the Russian ones. It was forbidden to teach any Jewish material be it in its Communist content.[31] The summer of 1938 saw the end of the Jewish school

[25] מרדכי אלטשולר, "תיאטרון יידיש והציבור היהודי בברית המועצות," התיאטרון היהודי בברית המועצות, עורך מ' אלטשולר, ירושלים, תשנ"ו (1996), עמ' 62-13.
[26] פינקוס, עמ' 234-233.

[27] Зельцер, p. 410.
[28] מיכאל בייזר, יהודי לנינגרד 1917-1939, תורגם על ידי ברוניה בן יעקב (ירושלים: מרכז זלמן שזר לתולדות ישראל, תשס"ה 2005), עמ' 127-126.
[29] Yuri Slezkin, "The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53:2 (1994): 444.

[30] פינקוס, עמ' 166.
[31] אלטשולר, עמ' 328-327.

system.[32] Most of the Jewish journalism was eliminated by 1939.[33] The Jewish theater just barely continued its activity until 1949, the exception that proved the rule.

What became, then, of Jewish affiliation and identity? Some claim that Communist persecution of everything traditionally Jewish along with emancipation and new social opportunities caused quick acculturation to Russian society and alienation from Jewish affiliation. There is no doubt that during the 1930s Jews, especially those who lived in cities, became a core element of Soviet society. They occupied major positions in science, medicine, law, literature, and bureaucracy. Gradually it became more and more difficult to maintain traditional aspects of Jewish ethnicity.[34] The prominent historian Benjamin Pinkus characterizes the 1920s as a period of acculturation to Russian society, and the 1930s as a period of assimilation where the Jewish public grew attached to Russian culture and language and detached from all that was Jewish. Thus, he concludes, the *Evsektsiya*'s efforts to create a new Jewish proletarian identity mostly failed.[35]

Others disagree on the extent of assimilation to Soviet society. Anna Shternshis argues that the new national policy of the Communists in fact succeeded to create a new cultural identity based on class divisions. The children of 1917 were proud of their Jewishness; to them it meant Yiddish language, theater, newspapers, and schooling. Although they did not observe the religious tradition, they respected it.[36] Arkady Zeltser similarly maintains that the shtetl adopted an ambiguous stance: at home the population preserved its Jewish life and tradition, while on the outside it upheld the Soviet norms. Nevertheless, Zeltser notes that the younger generation migrated to cities; the ambiguous stance characterized Jews who had received a religious education before the revolution.[37]

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[32] Зельцер, p. 391.

[33] פינקוס, עמ' 225.

[34] בייזר, עמ' 145-123.

[35] פינקוס, עמ' 248-247.

[36] Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 43, 182-185.

[37] Arkadi Zeltser, "The Belorussian Shtetl in the 1920s and 1930s," in *Revolution, Repression, and Revival: The Soviet Jewish Experience*, ed. Z. Gitelman and Y. Ro'i (Maryland: Rowman & Littelfield, 2007), pp. 91-111.

In any case, there is no doubt that the meaning of being Jewish changed radically in the 1920s and changed once more during the 1930s. The children of 1917 and onward were for the most part Sovietized and cared little for their Jewish identity.

Diaries

Before turning to the discussion of Vladimir Gelfand's diary, we must consider the question of the authenticity of this particular historical source. To what extent can the historian trust diaries that were written under a totalitarian regime when a personal account could easily turn self-incriminating? Can they be valued as a legitimate historical source? What is the reliability of our particular historical source?

The 1990s marked the beginning of an influx of published private diaries and memoirs in the former Soviet Union. Personal accounts from various age groups – grandfathers, fathers, and sons, the living and the dead, ordinary people and public figures, devoted Stalinists and opponents – overflowed the market. Grassroots or "people's" archives have opened for those who want to submit their personal texts and have no access to publications.[38] Irina Paperno warns young historians to take account of the fact that this material was subjected to editing and commentaries by contemporaries. It is still the case, she notes, that the intelligentsia speaks for ordinary people, and thus it is problematic to differentiate between the two voices and the two spheres of time: past and present. She points out, however, that "there is also an effort to allow 'the people' to speak, a sense of a mission, a paradoxical desire to create access to the voices of the people on behalf of whom the intellectuals always spoke."[39]

A recent debate has focused on the methodological question of how to read and interpret these materials. One of the main protagonists is Jochen Hellbeck, who argues that ideology had a strong and irrevocable hold on the Soviet subject. The subject's conceptualization of private and public spheres differs from the liberal one, in which these two notions are separate and even alternative to one another. The Soviets, he claims, made a distinction between inner self and outer self.[40] One of the main consequences of politicized lives, of a historical conception of reality and the moralization of politics, as discussed above, was the merging of the private and public spheres, and the absorption of the former into the latter.[41] Given the lack of other public discourses, the subject had no other option but to strive for a complete identification

[38] Irina Paperno, "Personal Accounts of the Soviet Experience," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3:4 (2002): 578-579.
[39] Ibid., p. 581.
[40] Hellbeck, "Fashioning the Stalinist Soul," pp. 95-98.
[41] Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin*, pp. 85-98.

with society.[42] Thus, Hellbeck concludes, we should take the content of the diary as it is. Alexander Etkind, however, denies the positive implications of this Soviet subjectivity and argues that the Soviet institutions powerfully affected their subjects. The influence of the Gulag system, personnel departments, and psychiatric hospitals was just as far-reaching as that of Soviet political discourse.[43] In other words, Soviet citizens did not simply embrace this discourse but lived in constant fear.

In one fashion or another, whether a willful act or a mere means of survival, Soviet subjects did assimilate into Communist society. Doubts and criticism would have made their lives unbearable, and a plain belief in the Soviet regime was the way to escape desperation and loneliness. As one "kulak" child who was exiled for long years recalled, "Believing in the justice of Stalin made it easier for us to accept out punishments, and it took away our fear."[44] Hence, Soviet sources can be read as evidence of this kind of subjectivity, and in this regard are just as credible as other sources for historical research.

[42] Ibid.
[43] Aleksandr Etkind, "Soviet Subjectivity: Torture for the Sake of Salvation?" *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6:1 (2005): 171-186.
[44] Figes, "Introduction."

The Diary

Vladimir Gelfand's diary was found after his death in 1983. The copy I have was given to me by Gelfand's son along with scans of his handwriting. The Russian version of the text is a raw material; it has not yet been edited or commented on. For various reasons, the diary has not yet been published in Russian. However, it has been translated and printed in German and Swedish, and received reviews from researchers all over the world.

The year I will be examining in this paper is 1943. This particular year was full of events for the young soldier Vladimir Gelfand. It began in the hospital back at the rear, continued in his reuniting with his former military unit and taking an officers' course, and ended with him returning to his unit as a young officer. Of equal importance was his joining the party on November 26. This order of events allows me to examine his behavior in rapidly changing circumstances; the front and the rear, as a simple soldier and an officer, thus contributing to the understanding of his character.

Having been injured in his left hand on December 28, 1942, in the battle of Stalingrad, Vladimir Gelfand was sent to the hospital. Since the hospital was overcrowded and his injury was relatively minor, he was taken to the home of a peasant woman along with four other soldiers. On February 2 he wrote:

> …After finishing *Huckleberry Finn* two days ago, I devoted my time today to reading the history of the party and the sessions of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR A great deal of the material was already known to me, some was new. I intend to expand my political horizons.

The choice to read about the history of the party and sessions of the Supreme Soviet reflects Gelfand's willpower and determination to become part of society. After describing, in the same entry, conditions of near starvation which included "*800 grams of bread twice a day and half a bowl of liquid called soup*" along with severe pain due to his injury and insufficient treatment – "my wound won't heal; on the contrary it hurts even more. My bandage hasn't been replaced since January 28. There is no treatment. My wart and frozen fingers hurt terribly" – he nonetheless chose to read this material, instead of seeking food and medical assistance or writing letters to his relatives. Gelfand preferred his political and ideological development over physical necessities, thus

demonstrating his devotion to the political struggle and his willpower to fully become a member of Soviet society. It was much more important for him to invest in his political education than to attend to his immediate needs. Hence, exemplifying Gelfand's historical perspective, the future became his point of reference; he saw the hardships of today as the achievements of tomorrow.

The short autobiography Gelfand wrote on November 5 reflects his need to be useful in the building of a bright Communist future, and his great devotion to the public cause. He chose to summarize his life from a political perspective, emphasizing his active role in every organization he had been part of since he graduated from school: the Workers' University (*Rabfak*), the Young Communist League *(Komsomol)*, the auxiliary forces he had joined before enlisting, and different army units. Furthermore, he mentions his parents' political achievements, his mother's participation in the civil war and the party, and his father's status in the factory. This kind of political reading of one's life was a main characteristic of the Soviet subject. All daily life and life's political aspects were highly appreciated as proof of one's social utility. Moreover, his family's Communist heritage along with his acceptance into the party gave him a legitimate and prestigious role in Soviet society.

The need to be part of society is also evident in this entry from April 1:

> …you won't hear the residents of Zenograd referring to the fighting soldiers as the "Russians," as you would hear in other cities such as Kotel'nik and Mechetk; rather, they were called "our soldiers" against the Germans. To them there was no difference between Russians and the rest of the people, the public and the army.

It is also apparent in the children's story Gelfand wrote in his diary after being accepted into the party on November 27. The tale is about a battle between two symbolic animals: the elephant representing Stalin and the wolf representing Hitler. After finding a magical book written in an unfamiliar language, the protagonist of the tale turns to his comrades for help with translation:

> …you could find in our unit many different nationalities: Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Jews, Kazakhs, Turkmen, Greeks, and even one Turk. Yes indeed! Don't make fun of it – imagine representatives from all the Soviet Union's nationalities fighting together till death on the fronts of the great war against fascism.

Both passage deal with the concept of "the friendship of the people." This ethic was propagated in the first years of the war as a means to unite various Soviet nationalities in their fight against the German invader. Traditional Soviet slogans revolving around socialism and the personality cult were deemphasized and replaced with a repertoire that underlined pride, revenge, and the desire to protect family, friends, and the motherland.[45] Patriotism did not undermine the Soviet subject's goal of becoming a full member of society; on the contrary, it gave him another way of expressing the same desire. Gelfand's passages reflect his desire to be part of the full-scale war effort and to fight the war along with other equal members of Soviet society.

The sense of unity and belonging is often apparent among soldiers and veterans. In one of his interviews, *New York Times* reporter Hedrick Smith asked a prominent scientist and a veteran, Ben Levich, what was the best period in Russian history. To his surprise, Levich replied that it was unquestionably the war period. "Because at that time we all felt closer to our government than at any other time in our lives. It was not their country then, but our country. It was not they who wanted this or that to be done, but we who wanted to do it. It was not their war, but our war. It was our country we were defending, our war effort." Furthermore, Levich noted that the war was the only time when he was not afraid of the authorities. The thought of a *chekist* knocking on his door in the middle of the night did not frighten him; Levich knew that the government and he were united in the war against Germany.[46]

This sense of belonging and solidarity, whether real or imagined, gave Gelfand an opportunity to fulfill his need and become useful, and by no means superfluous, to the future of Soviet society. Soviet patriotism depended to a great extent on concepts propagated a decade earlier by the state. "The war had meant death and destruction but it had also demonstrated indestructible unity and invincible power," said Levich during his interview;[47] it was, then, a dream come true for the Soviet subject. Likewise, Yosif

[45] David Brandenberger, "It Is Imperative to Advance Russian Nationalism as the First Priority: Debates within the Stalinist Ideological Establishment, 1941-1945," in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 277.
[46] Hedrick Smith, *The Russians* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), pp. 302-303.
[47] Ibid.

Kvasha from Medzhibozh, Ukraine, testified that the war years were the purest of his life, signifying the moralization of Soviet society and its idea of unity.[48]

One should read Gelfand's accounts of his national affiliation in light of his Soviet conscience. As I will demonstrate, this Soviet logic guided him and very much influenced the way he understood the Holocaust. On March 13, Gelfand arrived at the Dvoinoi railway station near Rostov-on-Don and witnessed the effects of Nazi occupation. He devoted a long passage in his diary to his personal observations, mentioning not only the murder of the Jews but also the extent of local collaboration:

> The local population sympathized with the Germans. And when the latter occupied their territory, they started to hand in Jews, communists and one another to the enemy…

Passing by on the train he took from Dvoinio, he witnessed the ruins of his country:

> I was terribly saddened at the sight of the ruins and filled with fury at Hitler's disgusting beasts. They are the ones who are responsible for the troubles and suffering of our people.
>
> On the home front and on the battlefield, I will fight for my homeland, for my government, who granted me equal rights as a Jew. I will never act like those Ukrainians who betrayed their homeland and are now on the side of our enemies, cleaning their boots, kissing their asses, while they [the Germans] treat them like dogs.

Regardless of the fact that Gelfand knew the Germans were murdering Jews in larger numbers than the rest of the population, he chose to demonstrate his loyalty to his country and government, which gave him equal rights as a Jew. Hence, his Jewish affiliation was very much dependent on his Soviet identity; he swears to fight for the protection of his country and government, and never to betray them like those Ukrainians. Gelfand is fervently loyal to the system. In another case, while conversing with a hostess of the apartment he was staying at, he confessed that he would rather die

[48] Zvi Y. Gitelman, "Internationalism, Patriotism, and Disillusion: Soviet Jewish Veterans Remember World War II and the Holocaust," *Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, occasional paper, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, November 2005, p. 111.

than betray his country and government, his people.[49] Gelfand sees himself first and foremost as a Soviet protecting the Soviet people and his homeland.

By the same token, when Gelfand crossed the countryside on September 7 to get to the front, he witnessed the ruins of the Russian and Ukrainian villages and the clutter the German army had left. In the village of Chutka he found Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda. He chose to keep the leaflets so as to use them in the future against the Nazis, and reflected on the nature of collaborators:

> Those who believe the enemy are the nonbelievers and the traitors. I am going to prove to the Nazi scums who the Soviet Jews are, how they love their homeland, how they hate the fascists and are prepared to sacrifice anything for the sake of victory. I will keep these leaflets for the sake of attaching them to my future prisoner's Nazi forehead.

Gelfand's passage is remarkable because it demonstrates the degree to which the Soviet subject had absorbed Soviet principles. Carrying Nazi propaganda was considered a sign of treason, since it could, in the event of captivity, implicate the soldier as a collaborator. Notwithstanding the prohibition, Gelfand showed no hesitation in taking the leaflets; on the contrary, he was sure of his actions. This situation raises a question: what notion allowed Gelfand, a passionate believer in the Soviet system, to act as he did? The answer lies in the question itself. Soviet subjects were required to believe in the system; as noted earlier, without demonstrating belief one could not be accepted into Soviet society. Hence, Gelfand's action can be seen as a simple demonstration of this principle. It seems that he regarded himself as a true Soviet man, and a full member of society, and could not imagine the possibility of being regarded as a traitor. This naiveté, or what Orlando Figs calls "revolutionary conservatism,"[50] provides an explanation for Gelfand's behavior. The same could explain the similar behavior of writing a diary in wartime. Keeping diaries on the front was forbidden by the authorities, since it was outside the framework of official censorship.[51] Yet, as we have

[49] March 23, 1943.
[50] Figes, *The Whisperers*, p. 27.
[51] Arkadi Zeltser, "How Were Jewish Letters Written by Jews during the War?," unpublished paper presented at the "International Workshop: The Holocaust and the War in the USSR as Reflected in Wartime Letters and Diaries," Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, Jerusalem, November 20, 2012, p. 1.

seen, not only did Gelfand keep a detailed diary, but even wrote in front of his comrades.[52]

The only time Gelfand attended to his Jewish affiliation was when he felt he was being discriminated against by his own people for being a Jew. Before his promotion to an officer rank, he describes numerous anti-Semitic incidents both with the peasants and in his own unit. In fact, it was only at these moments that he tried to get closer to his fellow Jewish soldiers. Specifically at these times, Gelfand's Jewishness took the form of a defensive nationalism, a temporary reaction to anti-Semitism. After realizing his commander was an anti-Semite, Gelfand sought a partner in misfortune:

> There's one Jewish soldier here. Even though there are some things I don't really like about him, like the way he moves his hands excessively when he talks or touches the buttons on people's clothes when he speaks to them, I'm close to him and we're buddies because he's an outcast like me. Both of us aren't liked around here. And although I have the manners of a cultured person, my face looks more Georgian or Armenian than Jewish. My surname gives away my origin.[53]

When he finally received his rank, Gelfand almost ceased to mention the attacks against him and his satisfaction with his unit grew.

That change is noteworthy because one would expect the opposite. The process of reconquering the western territories was also the process of revealing the scale of atrocities committed against the Jews. One would expect Gelfand to take note of this, since the annihilation of Jews was a particular crime which accounted for over ten percent of the estimated twenty-six million Soviet civilian victims of the war (though the Jews were only 2.5 percent of the total population at the beginning of the war).[54] Nevertheless, Gelfand did not become more Jewish after his encounter with the Holocaust but rather seemed to notice his Jewish affiliation less. Experience of battle and the front could only sporadically help obscure national differences, and Gelfand was assaulted from time to time for being a Jew. Gelfand's general lack of interest in his Jewish nationality and the Holocaust could be explained by the strong hold exerted on the individual by Soviet concepts like internationalism, mass enlistment for socialist

[52] Evidence for this is found in the entry from May 20.
[53] The entry from April 13.
[54] Gitelman, p. 99.

causes, and the private sphere as an extension of the public sphere. It was when he was accepted into the party and became an officer that he felt like he truly belonged in Soviet society.

Summary

This project examined the presumption of the reemergence of Jewish identity as a result of the Soviet advance westward in World War II and the encounter of Jews with the Holocaust. "It is no wonder that a Communist of 1933 should have come out of the camps more Communistic than he went in, a Jew more Jewish," wrote Hannah Arendt in *Partisan Review*.[55] The question posed by this paper, therefore, was a paraphrase of Arendt's statement. What effect did the annihilation of Jews in the territories of the Soviet Union have on Jewish soldiers in the Red Army? Did the Jewish soldier become more Jewish as he advanced westward and discovered the scale of the killing?

The first chapter dealt with the meaning of being Soviet. Soviet society underwent processes of historicization, politicization, and moralization. The individual came to understand time in deterministic terms; he wanted to participate in the construction of the future socialist society. All that was private became political, and what used to be "I" became "We." The desire for inclusion in this revolutionary society and the fear of expulsion appear to have been fundamental to the Soviet subject.

The second chapter addressed the topic of national identity among Soviet Jews before the war. Notwithstanding Communist ideology that regarded nationalism as a reactionary and capitalist factor, pragmatic considerations of gaining the support of national minorities brought the regime to adopt a policy of indigenization (*korenizaziya)* that was national in form and Communist in content. Coincident with the persecution of Zionism and Judaism, the traditional forms of Jewish identity, the 1920s government promoted Jewish Yiddish proletarian culture by means of various institutions. The 1930s saw the rise of Russian nationalism and the re-Russification of Soviet society. Consequently, on the eve of World War II, a large segment of the Jewish population was acculturated into Russian society, thus experiencing alienation from its Jewishness. Soviet Jews knew that they were Jewish, but it simply did not matter much to them.

Gelfand's diary reveals the impact that two decades of Sovietization had on the individual. As mentioned, he thought of himself in Soviet concepts, and portrayed his

[55] Hannah Arendt, "The Concentration Camps," *Partisan Review* 15 (1948): 743-776.

life in terms of social utility and socialist advancement. Moreover, Gelfand failed to take account of the pragmatism of the Soviet leadership and seemed to embrace Soviet concepts fervidly without realizing the consequences of breaking the law. As for his Jewish identity, it did not matter very much to him as he felt himself a full member of society. Furthermore, as Gelfand advanced westward with his unit and discovered the scale of Jewish tragedy, he almost stopped mentioning his Jewish identity for the sake of accomplishing more in Soviet society: joining the party and receiving an officer rank. It was only when he felt discriminated against by those he considered to be his own people that he turned to his Jewish affiliation. Gelfand believed in the Soviet system and fought for his homeland, like every other soldier.

In a wider perspective, the case of Gelfand may indicate that the crystallization of national identity of minorities in wartime is very much contingent on the treatment they receive within the society they live in, rather than on external influences. In other words, internal treatment – the degree of inclusion in society and equality of opportunity – has greater effect on the individual than external circumstances of injustice.

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