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Teaching the Holocaust in Russia in the 21st century

by
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About the Holocaust Foundation/Centre

The Foundation was established in 1991, uniting about 200 professional historians, journalists, teachers, researchers, and students. It has branches in 12 cities of Russia and Belarus and boasts an office in the building of the Maimonides State Jewish University, in the center of Moscow, which was placed at its disposal by the Government of the Russian Federation. It represents Russia at (International Association of Holocaust Centers). The Foundation has created a Holocaust Museum in Moscow, the first in the CIS. Since 1992, it has been holding annual Yom ha Shoah remembrance meetings with the participation of all the Jewish organizations of Russia and prominent public figures in the country. It conducts seminars for teachers in the different cities of CIS partly in conjunction with other organizations.

The Foundation offers annually, in conjunction with the Jewish Agency in Russia and other Jewish organizations, a course of lectures for young people who wish to visit the sites of the Holocaust. Over 100 articles on Holocaust-related topics were published by the Foundation in 1998, in conjunction with the Council of Europe, the Ministry of Education RF and "Yad Vashem". It has published, for the first time in the CIS, 10 books in the series, the *Russian Library of the Holocaust*, which includes 4 teaching and study aids for teachers and students. It has also produced 2 documentary, educational films.

The Moscow regional branch is a member of VAAD In conjunction with the Russian Jewish Congress, the branch has arranged a display in the Holocaust Museum in Moscow; exhibits are being collected jointly with the Association of former ghetto inmates and war veterans; the Foundation gives regular help and assistance to the local Jewish communities to immortalize the memory of the Holocaust victims. It cooperates with all the Jewish educational establishments of the CIS and conducted a number of events in Moscow and Rostov in conjunction with the members of progressive Judaism communities and "Esh ha –Torah." An educational seminar for 40 teachers from the CIS was held in conjunction with "Yad Vashem," in Moscow, in 1998 and. seminars are held for teachers of Jewish schools (in Moscow and Kishinev). Representatives of our organization regularly participate in international conferences on the Holocaust in Europe, USA and Israel. Finally two important facts came to light in Russia since the last conference of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem in 1996:

1. In September 1998 the first museum about the Holocaust opened in the newly-built synagogue at the Poklonnaja Gora in Moscow in the presence of Russian president Boris Yeltsin.
2. We launched the project "Lessons of the Holocaust and Contemporary Russia" with the support of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation.

The Work of the Center

The Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Center, founded in early 1992, is the only institution in the CIS to make Holocaust education and the training of Holocaust education teachers a top priority. In the absence of state museums and memorials, official curricula on the Holocaust and textbooks on the subject, our Center, which brings together researchers and teachers from twelve cities in Russia and Belarus; we are the only voluntary organization that makes consistent attempts to introduce the subject of the Holocaust into the curriculum of schools and universities in the CIS.

The history of Holocaust Education in Russia is inextricably linked with the level of Russian scholarship in this field, with access to international academia, with politics and state antisemitism in the Soviet Union. From the mid-1940s until the late 1980s, the Holocaust was omitted from school and university textbooks, encyclopedias, and monographs for exclusively political reasons.

The ideological mechanisms of *forgetting the memory* assumed different forms: omitting it in silence, distorting of historical facts, and direct falsification. This *holocaust of the memory of the Holocaust* was initiated by the Kremlin itself in the draft state report on the Babi Yar tragedy, written in February 1944. The word *Jews* was changed to *peaceful Soviet citizens*. In the USSR much was written and spoken about the Slavs who fell victim to the Nazis, but no special memorials were established in places where Jews were exterminated. The Jewish Holocaust could not be mentioned even on the monuments to war casualties that were erected in Jewish cemeteries. The Eichmann trial, Elie Wiesel's work, and the television mini-series *Holocaust* were not publicized (and are even totally unknown) in the USSR. Beginning in the 1970s attempts by Jewish dissidents to place wreaths on the graves of Holocaust victims were thwarted by militia and accompanied by arrests. Scholarly commentaries on documents from the Nuremberg Trials, collections of documents on SS crimes, and regional archive materials about victims went unpublished in the USSR. In the early 1960s, *The Diary of Anne Frank* was published with a foreword by the famous writer Ilya Ehrenburg, one of the compilers of *The Black Book*. In his foreword, Ehrenburg furnished true, though limited information about the Holocaust and about Anne's fate. The tragedy of Anne and her family was studied in schools, but she became a *German girl* hiding from the Nazis in Amsterdam. In the late 1960s all school and university history books bore photographs of three heroes of the Resistance who were executed in Minsk in the autumn of 1941. One of them was a young woman journalist whose name was Masha Bruskina. Because she appeared to be Jewish, all the publications referred to her as "neizvestnaya" (*unknown*).

I have presented this brief review of the Soviet version of the denial of the Holocaust (or rather, denial of its uniqueness) to demonstrate the problems and difficulties encountered by teachers in the post-Soviet states, especially in Russia, who wish to teach their students about the Holocaust. Modern academic Russian historiography easily dismissed many historical myths (while creating numerous new ones). However, it has hardly touched upon the subject of the Holocaust. Naturally, the followers of this historiography, the authors of the new school and university textbooks, do not cover this subject either (data about the six million Jews massacred in Europe is an exception, and is mentioned in passing, not in the context of the Holocaust in the USSR). Significantly, the name of Masha Bruskina, known all over the world, has not been reinstated even in the main war museum of Belarus.

The absence of study aids and international contacts considerably stifles the initiative of teachers and students, particularly in the provinces. Another factor is *psychological fatigue* on the subject of war. The tragedy of the Soviet people and the Nazi crimes (with no mention of the Jews) dominated films and novels for decades. This probably accounts for Russian cinemagoers' lack of interest in

Schindler's List, which played (despite intense publicity) to half-empty theaters. A subjective factor emerged too: some Jewish leaders believe that teaching the Holocaust in non-Jewish schools may cause an increase in antisemitism. Meanwhile, the ever-expanding systems of Jewish education in the CIS (about forty schools) is wary of any initiative to introduce optional courses and subjects not approved by the Israeli Ministry of Education.

The data cited is the outcome of an analysis carried out by our Center's Education Department, and of our attempts to design a program of activity that will most fully take advantage of the options available in Russia. The long-term program envisages the introduction of the Holocaust into the state curriculum for history and literature. It also outlines the presence of the main Holocaust events in teaching aids and lessons and aims to introduce courses in universities and special optional courses for schools. It also aims to develop a system of training and retraining teachers, mass publication of teaching aids for teachers and students, and the release of educational films.

Our organization, with support from the Russian government, has obtained premises in the center of Moscow, where it is equipping a classroom and library, with the help of the Russian branch of the Joint Distribution Committee and the Soros Foundation. We are also organizing four traveling exhibitions on the Holocaust. with the support of the Tides Foundation (USA) and a team of leading specialists from the Russian Academy of Education has published for the first time Russian-language teaching aids on the Holocaust: a book for teachers, *History of the Holocaust in the Territory of the USSR 1941-45* (161 pages); and a book for pupils, *History of the Holocaust 1933-1945*, containing instructions in methodology and thirty-four documents and photographs. Compiled by Dr. G. Klokova and Dr. D. Poltorak, they have been reviewed and approved by the government and are now being revised for a new edition. We have also published several new books in the series the *Russian Library of the Holocaust*; these books, exhibition catalogues, memoirs, and collection of documents are designed for use in classrooms.

With the support of the Russian Ministry of Education, it was recommended that the Holocaust should be studied in general education schools in the Jewish oblast of Birobidzhan. The Center's representatives held a seminar there at the Institute for the Improvement of Teachers' Qualifications. In addition to Moscow, teaching aids are being introduced most actively in St. Petersburg.

In Moscow, teachers from Jewish and general schools are given weekly training sessions. In accordance with the program to assist history teachers in Jewish schools (supported by the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture), seminars have been held in Kiev and Moscow. All of these schools conduct special classes on the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day and some schools offer elective courses on the Holocaust.

A pedagogical center began to function in March 1997 under the auspices of the Federation of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Russia (with support from the Jewish Agency in Russia). One of the pedagogical center's three programs - on the history of the Holocaust - is taught by representatives of our organization.

Once a month, classes are given using e-mail, under the Center's auspices, for pupils of Moscow schools who are participating in the Copen Foundation project on the Holocaust. Together with our American partners, we have designed an educational program on Babi Yar in which pupils from four schools in Moscow and New York State discuss the topic simultaneously. This program has elicited great interest among teachers in Moscow schools, as international contacts are formed and

the pupils communicate in English. Unfortunately, only a few schools have e-mail facilities. In the future we plan to make the Center's equipment available to Moscow schools.

We intend to offer elective courses on the Holocaust in schools; a syllabus for such courses was prepared and published as early as 1994. Leading periodicals for history teachers were used to encourage the introduction of such courses. One of them, with a circulation of 50.000, devoted to its entire March 1996 issue to the Holocaust.

Progress has recently been made in joint work with the Russian Ministry of Education and the Moscow Department of Education. There is support for the idea of a conference on Holocaust education in the twenty-first century such as that held in Moscow in October 1998 under the auspices of the Council of Europe and Yad Vashem. About 150 teachers took part in this conference. The Moscow Institute for the Improvement of Teachers' Qualifications and the Entosphere Center have included the subject of the Holocaust in their curricula. International conferences entitled *Lessons of the Holocaust and Modern Russia* held in Moscow in 1994 and 1997, included workshops on ethnic and national prejudices in education, in which participants discussed the Holocaust in the context of interethnic relations in the former USSR. The Russian Research and Educational Center strives to get the most important information on the Holocaust included in the syllabi for courses on a regular basis in other cities as well as inviting teachers from other cities to Moscow. Similar seminars abroad either do not invite representatives from Russia or are attended by whoever happens to be there.

We are currently negotiating with several Israeli and American organizations concerning coordination in this field. We want to work with them on preparing Russian-language teaching aids for schoolchildren on the Holocaust in the USSR and Israel; the target population of these aids would be emigrants from the former Soviet Union. Our efforts are also directed at Holocaust education in universities and teacher' colleges. Since 1994, I have given a course of lectures on the Holocaust at the Jewish University in Moscow. Arrangements have been made for a special course to be given at the University in Moscow. Arrangements have also been made for a special course to be given at the Russian State University of the Humanities and the Jewish University in St. Petersburg. It is important for students to submit term papers and theses on the Holocaust, take part in competitions, with publication of the best works. This has been done in Rostov, Minsk, and Brest, among others. The Holocaust is being studied by 2.000 students at the Open University in Israel. But our initial contacts with the directors of this program have unfortunately not been fruitful.

Recently we developed two programs and ideas that we consider especially important for the future of our work: one concerns the Center for young people and Holocaust studies in Brest, which is not far from Warsaw. With this center we intend to show western students and schools pupils as well as teachers, the other unknown *Holocaust* in the USSR. This center should give the possibility to meet with western teachers and students in order to exchange different experiences. Brest is, therefore, an interesting place, as we have many documents, photographs and other archival reminiscences, which document the history of this ghetto. In addition, we plan to issue a teaching aid for Russian Schools, *The History of the Holocaust in the USSR*, which will be of western standards (with illustrations and documents hardly known in western schools books). This teaching aid should be translated into several western European languages so that it can be used in schools there and serve as a source of information for teachers and younger school children as well as students.

We attach great importance to the retraining of university teachers and hope for assistance from our foreign partners in solving this problem and the other problems discussed above. Holocaust

education is taking its first steps in Russia (we regularly cover its progress in our information bulletin); it needs help and support. I trust that our collaboration with all relevant organizations by means of literary exchanges, visits of pupils, teachers, and students to Holocaust sites and memorials and joint conferences will be both fruitful and mutually advantageous.