

The Distress of Jews in the Soviet Union in the Wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact¹

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Many studies dealing with the Holocaust consider the question of why more Jews in the Soviet Union, within its borders up to 1939, did not escape after the 1941 German invasion.² The present article addresses this question in terms of two primary issues: what the Jews

- 1 The present article is part of a comprehensive study of “the impact of the Holocaust on the national (ethnic) consciousness of Soviet Jewry,” which is supported by the Israel Science Foundation (650/05).
- 2 Solomon M. Schwarz, *The Jews in the Soviet Union* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1951), p. 310; idem, *Antisemitizm v Sovetskom Soiuze* (New York: Izdatel'stvo imeni Chekhova, 1952), pp. 125–126; idem, *Evrei v Sovetskom Soiuze s nachala Vtoroi Mirovoi Voiny* (New York: Izdanie Amerikanskogo Evreiskogo Rabocheho Komiteta, 1966), pp. 45–47; Salo W. Baron, *The Russian Jew Under Tsars and Soviets* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 249–250, Shmuel Ettinger, *Modern Antisemitism* (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1979), p. 244. In a survey that we carried out in Israel in the early 1970s among immigrants from Eastern Belorussia, a questionnaire was administered to fifty-eight men and women who had lived during pre-World War II in the fourteen localities in which 70% of this republic's Jews lived. Replies to the question “What did you know then [in 1941] about the Germans' attitude to the Jews?” were as follows: 56% knew about discrimination and harassment and abuse of Jews, 36% did not know, eight percent did not reply to this question. As for the question about sources of information referred to by the respondents, the answers were as follows: publications and Soviet cinema — eight percent, refugees from Poland — 20%, 28% did not indicate the sources of their information, thirty-six percent did not know about harassment and abuse of Jews, and eight percent did not reply to the question. In order to examine the subject from another angle, a question was also asked about relatives who did not flee, as follows: “Did your relatives remain under occupation? If yes, why? (You may mark more than one reason.)” The reasons marked were: the sudden nature of the attack — 28.8%, old age or illness — 19.7%, parents of small children — 16.7%, positive attitude toward the Germans — 13.6%, no transport — 12.1%, fear of life as a refugee — 4.5%, fled but came back after the Germans caught up with them — 4.6%. See also my article, “The Evacuation and the Flight of Jews from Eastern Belorussia during the Holocaust Period: June-August 1941” (Hebrew) in *Contemporary Jewry: A Research Annual*, vol. 3 (1986), pp. 119–158.

in the Soviet Union knew during this period about the Nazis' treatment of the Jews in Germany and the occupied areas, and how this information or lack thereof influenced the Jews in light of the non-aggression pact that their country concluded with Nazi Germany.

Because the systematic destruction of all or most of the Jewish population in the areas of Nazi occupation actually began with the invasion of the Soviet Union, the possibility of the Holocaust in this sense, as an outcome of the Nazi occupation, could not have reached the ears of the Jews during the period under review in the present article.³ The article therefore discusses information relevant to that time, and the extent to which it trickled through the Soviet media, or spread by word of mouth, paying special attention to the mental anguish of a considerable number of Jews in the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Media: Stopping the Criticism of Nazi Germany May 1939: Turning Point

Following the Munich Agreement of September 29, 1938, under which Great Britain and France capitulated to all of Hitler's demands and Czechoslovakia was forced to cede the Sudetenland to Germany (to which it was subsequently annexed in full), Stalin grew increasingly suspicious of the western democracies.⁴ The mutual lack of trust

3 Dan Michman, *The Holocaust and Holocaust Research: Conceptualization, Terminology and Basic Issues* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Moreshet/Sifriat Poalim, Yad Vashem, and Ghetto Fighters' House, 1998), pp. 13–42.

4 At the 18th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), March 10–21, 1939, Stalin said, *inter alia*: "Bourgeois politicians know full well that to go to war, we would have to start a war, without taking account of various agreements and public opinion. The Fascist leaders are also perfectly aware of this. Therefore the Fascist leaders have decided, before getting involved in war ... to lie to public opinion ... Is war against the interests of England, France, and the United States? Rubbish! 'We' [said the Fascists] are waging war against the Comintern ... In this way the aggressors sought to deceive public opinion ... This whole cumbersome game is a put-up job ... How did it happen that the non-aggressor states ... gave up their positions and their obligations easily and without any resistance to the benefit of the aggressors?... Together, the non-aggressor, democratic states are undoubtedly stronger than the Fascist states, both economically and militarily." *Oglasheniuiu podlezhit: SSSR-Germaniia, 1939–1941* (Moscow: Terra-knizhnyi Klub, 2004), p. 17. In this and similar statements, Stalin defined the Fascist states (Germany, Italy, and Japan) as aggressor states and the democratic countries as non-aggressive.

between the Soviet Union and Great Britain and France led to the failure of defense pact negotiations held in 1939. The Soviet Union then began to consider more seriously the possibility of concluding a pact with Nazi Germany.⁵ On May 3, 1939, the Soviet Union's foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov, who was of Jewish extraction, was dismissed. His outspoken anti-Nazi speeches and articles were a thorn in the Germans' side.⁶ Vyacheslav Molotov, the prime minister, was appointed as his successor.⁷ A number of senior Foreign Ministry officials were similarly also removed from their positions, and even imprisoned. Litvinov's removal was one of the first public steps intended to signal to Nazi Germany that the Soviet Union was prepared to change its policy, and the Germans understood the message accordingly.⁸ At a meeting

- 5 Some argue that this tendency began several years earlier. See Yosef Govrin, *The Jewish Factor in German-Soviet Relations* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), pp. 69–102.
- 6 Maxim Litvinov (1876–1951) used to declare himself Russian on official forms, although his previous name — Valakh — was manifestly Jewish. In propaganda directed against him, the Nazis underscored his Jewishness. See Genadii Kostyrchenko, *V plenu u krasnogo faraona* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnoshenia, 1994), p. 42. On Litvinov's path as a Soviet diplomat, see Arthur Upham Pope, *Maxim Litvinov* (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1943), and also Zinoviy Sheinis, *Maxim Litvinov* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988).
- 7 It must also be remembered that in the second half of the 1930s, relations between Maxim Litvinov and Prime Minister Vyacheslav Molotov (1890–1986) were strained, with the Prime Minister restricting the Foreign Ministry's moves. This situation is reflected in Litvinov's letters to Stalin ("Ne opravdavshyi nadezhd — K otstavke M.M. Litvinova v 1939 g.," *Rodina*, no. 10 (1993), pp.48–53).
- 8 Researchers do not agree as to whether Litvinov's removal from the Foreign Ministry took place because of his Jewishness, or as perhaps rather a question of "changing horses" — removing those diplomats who were identified with the Soviet Union's previous, anti-Nazi policy vis-à-vis Germany — in the wake of the changing political orientation of the Soviet Union's foreign policy. In this connection see Nora Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), p. 330 (Litvinov was removed in 1939, and not in 1938, as the book says); Kostyrchenko, *V plenu u krasnogo faraona*, p. 196; Ilya Altman, *Zhertvy nenavisti: Kholokost v SSSR 1941–1945* (Moscow: Kovcheg, 2002), pp. 374–375; Dimitrii Volkogonov, *Stalin* (Moscow: Novosti, 1998), vol. 2, p.107. See also German Rozanov, *Stalin, Gitler, Dokumental'nyi ocherk Sovetsko-Germanskikh diplomaticheskikh otnoshenii, 1939–1941 gg.* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia, 1991), pp.61–62. There were also members of the Soviet public who viewed Litvinov's removal as a sign of Soviet foreign policy "being freed" from Jewish influence, as implied by the contents of an anonymous letter sent in 1940 to Andrei Zhdanov and Vyacheslav Molotov: "I relate equally to all human beings," noted the writer, "but I think that the Jews' attitude to our foreign policy is harmful, because

which took place in Berlin on May 9, 1939, attended by the provisional Soviet chargé d'affaires in Berlin, Grigory Astakhov, and the vice director of the department of publication in the German Foreign Office, M. Stumm, the latter defined Litvinov as “the moving spirit behind putting together international stratagems against Germany.”⁹

From early May 1939 on, with Litvinov’s removal from the Soviet Foreign Ministry and, in contrast to their practice since Hitler’s assumption of power, the Soviet media almost stopped publishing critical comments lambasting Nazi Germany, and refrained from mentioning the situation of the Jews in Germany.¹⁰ At the same time, the theaters were banned from putting on plays with anti-German overtones, such as *The Oath (Kliatva)* by Perez Markish (1895–1952). In keeping with the anti-Nazi spirit prevailing in the Soviet Union in 1937–1938, in his play Markish described the life of a Jewish family in Germany who left Germany as a result of their suffering, and immigrated to Eretz Israel. However, even there the family felt out of place, and one of the sons volunteered to serve in the anti-Fascist International Brigade fighting in Spain. At the end of 1938, the authorities issued a permit to put on the play at GOSET (the Moscow State Yiddish Theater). The play was directed by the theater’s artistic director, actor Solomon Mikhoels (1890–1948). The premiere was scheduled for May 1939, but then a ban on the play was imposed.¹¹

throughout history among the Jews there has developed a love of gold, [and] not of the mother country.” See Nikita Lomagin, *Neizvestnaia blokada* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel’skii dom “Neva,” 2002), vol. 2, p. 13.

- 9 Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del SSSR, *God krizisa, 1938–1939, Dokumenty i materialy, vol. 1:29, sentiabria 1938 g.–31 maia 1939 g.* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990), p. 442. The minutes were taken by the Soviet representative, and he stressed that his interlocutor was unable to contain himself and did not refrain from referring to Litvinov’s removal.
- 10 See article on the Soviet media at the time in question, mainly based on memoirs: Ben-Zion Pinchuk, “Soviet Media on the Fate of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Territory (1939–1941),” *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 11 (1976), pp. 221–233.
- 11 Matvei Geizer, *Solomon Mikhoels*, (Moscow: “Prometei”, 1990), p. 153; Jeffrey Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 199. Apparently Peretz Markish is hinting at this play in his letter to the Yiddish writer in the United States, Joseph Opatoshu (1886–1954). See Mordechai Altshuler, ed., *Letters of Soviet Yiddish Writers (Yiddish)* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, Center for Research and Documentation of East European Jewry, 1979), p. 327 (It was not possible to locate the text of the play).

Reports about the Persecution of Jews Filter through to the Press

From May through August 1939, although official information about the situation of the Jews under the Nazi regime was withheld from the Soviet public, reports about antisemitic events and the iniquities committed by the Nazis nevertheless sometimes trickled through into the press.

On May 13, 1939, *Pravda* published a piece about Fascists attacking Jews in the streets of Bratislava, Slovakia, which was under Nazi influence, and beating them up. Some two weeks later, on May 30, *Pravda* reported that the suicide rate in Germany had gone up markedly “in the wake of the pogroms against the Jews last year [*Kristallnacht*].” That month, the paper also reported that in Germany, Polish Jews were being arrested for the purpose of expulsion, and an item also appeared about the intention of enacting anti-Jewish laws in Italy.¹²

On June 12, 1939, *Izvestia*, the official organ of the Soviet government, published an article by I. Zilberfarb, entitled “German Fascism and its Campaign against the French Revolution.” *Inter alia*, Zilberfarb disagreed with the antisemitic claim that the French Revolution was the handiwork of Jews and similar arguments about the Bolshevik October Revolution.¹³

Two weeks later, on June 27, *Izvestia* published a letter written by the renowned Jewish writer, Lion Feuchtwanger, then living in France, to the translator of his books from German to Russian. In the *Izvestia* article, Feuchtwanger was defined by the paper as the “renowned anti-Fascist German writer.” The content of the letter related to the upcoming completion of his book *The Expulsion (Izgnanie)*, which appeared in installments in two Soviet periodicals from August 1938 on. In this novel, Feuchtwanger described the lives of German refugees, including many Jews, who were in France actively opposing the Nazi regime. The Jewish figures in the book stressed their origins and vehemently criticized the Nazi regime. Not long after the letter was published in August 1939, the publication of the novel was halted, both in the Moscow German-language periodical, *Internationale Literatur*, and in the parallel Russian version, *Internatsional'naiia literetura*.¹⁴

12 “Presledovaniia evreev v Germanii,” *Pravda*, May 20, 1939.

13 I. Zil'berfarb, “Germanskii fashizm v pokhode protiv Frantsuskoii revoliutsii.”

14 Lion Feikhtvanger, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1965), Vol. 5, p. 523.

In July 1939, an apparently innocent review of the world movie industry was published in *Izvestia*. The writer of the article also included a description of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, noting that Fascist circles were using threats in an effort to prevent filming of this movie. In this connection, he also referred to a film about a Jewish musician who had been forced to leave Germany because of his Jewishness.¹⁵

From May to August 1939, the Soviet press published items about antisemitic events and the restrictions imposed on Jews in Germany proper¹⁶ as well as in those countries which were under German control, such as the Czech Republic,¹⁷ Slovakia,¹⁸ and Moravia.¹⁹ *Izvestia* also reported on the first trial to be held in Prague on the basis of the racial Nuremberg Laws, which were designed to strip the Jews of all rights.²⁰ From time to time, reports were also published about the fate of Jews who fled or were expelled from the countries under Nazi control.²¹

15 "V mire kino," *Izvestia*, July 12, 1939.

16 "Geto v Berline," *ibid.*, May 27, 1939.

17 On June 18, 1939, *Pravda* published a prominent item about a pogrom against Jews in Brno and the harsh restrictions imposed by the authorities on the Jewish population in the city, under the headline "Evreiskie pogromy v Chekho-Slovakii."

18 A short item published in *Izvestia* on August 14, 1939, reported that "[a] Fascist mob in Bratislava destroyed three synagogues and beat up numerous Jews."

19 "Novyi zakon germanskogo 'protektora,'" *Izvestia*, June 24, 1939, "Antisemitskie zakony v Chekho-Slovakii," *Vechernaia Moscow*, August 19, 1939; an article published in *Izvestia* on August 17, 1939, under the title D.I. [author], "Pod fashistskoi piatoi," about Nazi Germany's takeover of the Protectorate, states that the Jews were removed from all the economic and cultural institutions, together with everyone who was "under Jewish influence." The article also emphasized that the Education Ministry had given instructions for schools not to admit more than four percent of Jewish schoolchildren.

20 On the basis of the Nuremberg Laws, Dr. Herbert Levy was sentenced to two and a half years in jail, and his German wife was given a two-year prison sentence, "Okkupanty nervnichaiut," *Izvestia*, July 16, 1939.

21 "Begstvo evreev iz Chekhoslovakii," *Vechernaia Moskva*, August 10, 1939; "Mytarstva evreev-bezhentsev," *ibid.*, August 19, 1939; on June 8, 1939, *Pravda* published a short item to the effect that an official in the German government was making contacts in London about the planned emigration of Jews from Germany.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and Strict Censorship

After the thawing of relations between them, the Soviet Union and Germany began negotiations on a commercial agreement, during which the Soviet Union also demanded a political arrangement.²² On August 23, 1939, five days after the official signing of the commercial accord, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov and his German counterpart Joachim von Ribbentrop (1893–1946) signed a non-aggression pact between the two countries, pledging neutrality in the case of aggression by a third country. This agreement became known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.²³

A secret protocol was appended to the non-aggression treaty about spheres of influence in Eastern Europe. This stipulated: “In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic states (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and the USSR.” The protocol also specified the Soviet Union’s interests in Bessarabia, and added, “the German side declares its complete political disinterestedness in these areas.” Regarding Poland, the secret protocol stipulated, “In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement of the areas belonging to the Polish state, the spheres of influence of Germany and the USSR shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narew, Vistula, and San.” It also stated, “the question of whether the interests of both parties make desirable the maintenance of an independent Polish state and how such a state should be bounded can only be definitely determined in the course of further political developments.”²⁴

22 Oglasheniui podlezhit, *SSSR-Germaniia, 1939–1941* (Moscow: Terra-Knizhnyi klub, 2004), p. 17. See also David J. Dallin, *Soviet Russia’s Foreign Policy, 1939–1942* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), pp. 55–63.

23 According to Dmitrii Volkogonov, Ribbentrop, during his visit to Moscow on August 23, 1939, suggested that the preamble to the Soviet-German treaty should refer to the friendly relations between Germany and the Soviet Union. When a report reached Stalin about this proposal, he reacted in the following vein: “The Soviet government cannot in all honesty confirm to the Soviet people that there are friendly relations with Germany, after the Nazi government has for six years dumped vast quantities of effluent on the Soviet government.” Dmitrii Volkogonov, *Stalin* (Russian), vol. 2, p. 30.

24 Raymond J. Sontag and James S. Beddie, eds., *Nazi-Soviet Relations: Documents from the Archives of the Foreign Office* (Washington: Department of State, 1948), pp. 76–78.

Following the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the ban in the Soviet Union on publishing official criticism of Germany was tightened. For example, the censor deleted the following sentence from a book of lectures about the typology of technological processes: “Raging Fascism is destroying the progress of science and technology, leading to medieval terror in the countries [over which it has control].”²⁵ The censor banned the dissemination of a detailed curriculum of the University of Leningrad for the 1939–1940 academic year, because Germany was presented in it as an aggressive country, and England and France as countries that were “protecting democratic freedom.”²⁶ In the city of Krasnodar, for example, the censor discovered in a 1940 anti-religious booklet a passage which he defined as “a text that runs counter to our ties with Germany,” and gave instructions for the booklet to be corrected and the page with the objectionable passage to be reprinted.²⁷ In libraries, anti-Nazi books were removed from the shelves and placed in “special storerooms” (*spektskhran*), with access granted to a select few only.²⁸ The Soviet press therefore completely stopped reporting on

25 *Tsenzura v Sovetskom Soiuzе, 1917–1991, Dokumenty* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2004), p.285.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 286.

27 *Istoriia Sovetskoi politicheskoi tsenzury, Dokumenty i kommentarii* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1997), p. 321. Refraining from mentioning Germany at that time sometimes assumed ridiculous dimensions. One such example happened to the Russian-Jewish satirist Il’ia Il’f (1897–1937) — whose real name was Il’ia Fainzil’berg: In his 1937 notes Il’f quoted one of the propagandists in the Soviet Union who said that “today we have Fascism in Germany,” but when the notes were published in 1939 the word ‘Germany’ was replaced by ‘Italy.’ See Il’ya Il’f, *Zapisnye knizhki* (Moscow: “Tekst,” 2000), pp. 565, 588. In early 1941 the journal *Znamia* published extracts from Ilya Ehrenburg’s novel *The Fall of Paris*, and the censor replaced every occurrence of the word ‘Fascists’ with “reactionaries.” See Mordechai Altshuler, “Erenburg i Evrei, Nabrosok portreta,” in Mordechai Altshuler, Yitzhak Arad, and Shmuel Krakovski, eds., *Sovetskie Evrei pishut Il’e Erenburgu, 1943–1966* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1993), pp. 9–105.

28 For example, N. Korneev’s book *Portraits of the Third Reich*, published in the Soviet Union in 1933, discussed Nazi policy toward the Jews and was removed to the “special storerooms.” The censor who gave the instruction for this step wrote, “Under the current circumstances, the book’s content does not fit in with our foreign policy.” See Arlen Blium, *Evreiskii vopros pod sovetskoi tsenzuroi, 1917–1991* (St. Petersburg: Peterburgskaia iudaika, 1996), p. 84. Another book placed in these “special storerooms” was E. Otval’t’s *Hitler’s Path to Power*, which came out in Moscow in 1933. See also *Tsenzura v Sovetskom Soiuzе, 1917–1991, Dokumenty* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2004), p. 291. Newspapers from overseas, particularly from the United States, which continued to reach the editorial offices of Yiddish papers in

the Nazis' actions in Germany and in the occupied countries, and also ceased to publish news items about the Jews' situation, let alone their persecution, apart from some occasional references to antisemitism in countries combating Germany.²⁹ This situation continued until the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Most of the population was also cut off from external media. However, there was an additional channel of communication that was no less effective, and possibly more so, than the official one when it came to passing on information: word of mouth.

In the early 1950s, a study undertaken in western countries, based on a large sample group of people from the Soviet Union, investigated the sources of information available to them during the period under consideration here. The research indicated that the information transmitted by word of mouth was frequently, even among educated circles, considered more reliable than that published in the official media.³⁰ One witness recounted that she and her family fled from Kiev in sufficient time, long ahead of its occupation by the Germans, as the result of an encounter with a Russian teacher who vigorously urged them to

the Soviet Union, and contained descriptions of the Nazis' oppression of the Jews, were locked away. Many years later an account was given by a journalist and writer from Warsaw, Melech Cherny (Chernov), about an opportunity he was given to look at these papers, when he asked his colleagues in Kiev in 1940 what was going on in Warsaw: "A side door was opened up in the attic [of the editorial offices of *Der Shtern* newspaper] and I was pushed inside ... There were all the Jewish papers — *Forverts*, *Der Tog*, *Der Morgen Journal* ... A Jew was not allowed to read all of this ... There I saw the great destruction ... From the papers I learned about everything — killing, murdering ... ghettos and everything that goes along with them. I lay down and read the headlines, utterly absorbed." Interviewed May 15, 1971, Diaspora Research Institute, Tel Aviv University, p. 12.

29 One article, for example, stated that antisemitic propaganda in France was growing on a daily basis: "The Fascist authorities are forcing the Jews to resign from important positions in the press, banks, and insurance companies," *Izvestia*, August 8, 1940; "Vnutrennee polozhenie Frantsii," "Antisemitskii zakon vo Frantsii," *ibid.*, October 20, 1940.

30 In 1950–1951, 2,700 people from the Soviet Union were interviewed in Europe and the U.S.A. about the sources of information available to them in 1940. The research showed that for around fifty percent of the respondents, word-of-mouth reports were a regular source for obtaining information, and for thirty-three percent they were the most important source of information. Peter H. Rossi and Raymond A. Bauer, "Some Patterns of Soviet Communications Behavior," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 4 (Winter 1952–1953), pp. 653–670; Raymond A. Bauer and David B. Gleicher, "Word-of Mouth Communication in the Soviet Union," *ibid.*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Winter 1953–1954), pp. 297–310.

leave the city immediately: “You know what’s awaiting you!” she said to her. The witness also said that the teacher “knew more from word of mouth than we [knew] from the press.”³¹ This state of affairs should be borne in mind during any discussion of the information available to Jews in the Soviet Union following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact concerning the Nazis’ conduct toward the Jews in the areas which had come under occupation.

The “Boundary and Friendship Treaty” and the Division of Poland

On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland and within a far shorter time than expected, the Polish army collapsed. Germany therefore asked the Soviet Union through diplomatic channels to bring the Red Army into Polish territory, in accordance with the spirit of the text of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.³² However, using a variety of excuses,³³ the Soviet authorities endeavored to postpone such a move, either because they wanted the Germans to first wipe out all of the armed Polish forces, or because they wanted to be convinced that the Polish state had actually ceased to be. Already during a meeting between Molotov and the German ambassador in Moscow that took place on September 10, Molotov was wondering how to explain the Soviet invasion of Poland to the masses without looking like an aggressor. In this connection he said, as reported by the ambassador, that “the Soviet government had intended to take the occasion of the further advance of German troops to declare ... that it was necessary for the Soviet Union, in consequence, to come to the aid of the Ukrainians and the White Russians threatened by Germany.”³⁴ Germany objected

31 Interview with Rita Degtiar, born 1918. She was studying in the Faculty of Biology at Moscow University; when the war between Germany and the Soviet Union broke out, she returned to her parents’ home in Kiev. My thanks to Dr. Leonid Finberg, who enabled me to use material from the Institute of Judaica in Kiev, which in the 1990s conducted over 100 interviews on the subject of “Jewish life in Ukraine in the twentieth century.”

32 See dispatches by the Reich Foreign Minister to the German ambassador in Moscow of September 3 and 9, 1939, in Sontag and Beddie, *Nazi-Soviet Relations, 1939–1941*, pp. 86, 99.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 90, 91.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

to this wording and argued that it contravened the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

On September 14, an article appeared in *Pravda* stating that, *inter alia*, “forty percent [of the Poland’s population] are national minorities, mainly Ukrainians, White Russians, and Jews” who were oppressed by the Poles. On September 17, 1939, the Red Army invaded Poland, claiming that the Soviet Union was liberating their Ukrainian and White Russian brothers who were discriminated against in Poland, which had ceased to exist as a state.

Now, in contrast to the veiled wording of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact concerning the Soviet and German spheres of influence in Poland, a precise delineation was required for the borders between the two states in occupied Poland. This was dealt with in the “Boundary and Friendship Treaty” between the two countries, which was signed in Moscow on September 28, 1939.³⁵ In one of the secret protocols appended to this treaty, it was stipulated “that the territory of the Lithuanian state falls into the sphere of influence of the USSR ... while the province (*Wojewodstwo*) of Lublin and parts of the province of Warsaw fall into the sphere of influence of Germany.”³⁶ Three main reasons which would have appeared to have led the Soviet Union to renounce those Polish areas are: a) an unwillingness to include a large Polish population in an area under its control; b) the strategic importance of Lithuania was greater than that of those parts of Poland; and c) the desire to seemingly confer some legitimacy on the occupation, since the new border between the two countries more or less followed the Curzon Line which the British had set in 1920 as the border of independent Poland.

The protocol appended to this agreement stipulated that German (*Reich*) nationals and other persons of German descent who wished to migrate to Germany or to territories under German jurisdiction could do so, with the same applying to persons of Ukrainian or White Russian descent who wished to migrate to the Soviet sphere of influence. In this agreement, no reference was made to the Jews, although two weeks earlier *Pravda* referred to them as one of the national minorities oppressed by the Polish authorities. On the basis of this statement, a

35 Ibid., pp. 105–106; see also Dallin, *Soviet Russia’s Foreign Policy*, pp. 75–80.

36 Sontag and Beddie, *Nazi-Soviet Relations, 1939–1941*, pp. 105–106.

German-Soviet population exchange committee was set up, with Maxim Litvinov heading the Soviet team on the committee.

In the “Boundary and Friendship Treaty,” it was also stipulated that “[t]he necessary reorganization of public administration will be effected in the areas west of the [border] line ... by the Government of the German Reich, in the areas east of this line by the Government of the USSR.”³⁷ The Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union did indeed resolve, on November 1–2, 1939, to annex the areas of Eastern Poland and to add them to the Republics of Ukraine and White Russia.³⁸

Those who prior to September 1, 1939, were living in those parts of Poland which were annexed to the Soviet Union (including some 1,200,000 Jews) were automatically given Soviet citizenship. In addition to them, in those areas which became known as Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia, there were also several hundred thousand refugees whose permanent places of residence prior to World War II, according to the “Boundary and Friendship Treaty,” were in Germany’s sphere of control. An estimated 150,000–250,000 Jews were among these refugees.

In the first months of the occupation of Eastern Poland, the Soviet authorities tried to convince the refugees to volunteer for work in the USSR in its pre-1939 borders. The majority of the refugees did not respond to this offer, whereupon the authorities presented them

37 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

38 *Polish-Soviet Relations, 1918–1943*, Official Documents (Washington: Polish Embassy, 1943), pp. 102–104. The session of the Supreme Soviet at which the annexation of the territories of Eastern Poland to the Soviet Union was approved was addressed by the representative of Western Belorussia, who falsely claimed that the Poles had closed the Belorussian and Jewish schools (in contrast, in Soviet Eastern Belorussia, the schools which taught in Yiddish were closed down on orders from the authorities as early as 1938). Another representative of Western Belorussia who addressed the session also referred to the discrimination of the Jews under Polish rule, and pointed out that Jewish students were compelled to sit on separate benches in the lecture theaters, and stressed that this phenomenon had now been done away with once and for all. *Izvestia*, November 3, 1939, summary of speeches by Lelina Tirletskii. The Ukrainian writer Aleksander E. Korneichuk, in his address to the Supreme Soviet which decided that Western Ukraine should join the Soviet Union, also referred to the Jews as one of the peoples who were oppressed by the Poles and had now been liberated. One of the laborers from the crude oil workers in the Drohobycz region pointed out on the same occasion that the Ukrainian and Jewish bourgeoisie worked together with their Polish counterparts and oppressed the Ukrainian and Jewish laborers, *Izvestia*, November 2, 1939.

with two options: to accept Soviet citizenship with certain restrictions, or “to go home,” i.e., return to the German sphere of influence. Any refugees who refused to accept Soviet citizenship were exiled (*Spetsposelenets*) to remote areas of the Soviet Union. The deportation took place between June 29 and the second half of July 1940.³⁹ In this operation, 77,228 refugees were deported from Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia;⁴⁰ 84 percent of them were Jews and 11 percent, Poles.⁴¹

The Jewish Refugees: An Eyewitness Account

The Jewish refugees included many who had already experienced the terror of German occupation — either Jews from places which had been briefly occupied by the Germans until the annexation, or refugees who had fled to this area from the Nazi sphere of influence on the western

39 Some 2,200 men from the police and security services were assigned to handle the deportation of the refugees from the city and district of Lwów. Ivan Bilas, *Repressivno-karatel'na sistema v Ukraini, 1917–1953* (Kiev: Libid, 1994), pp. 149–150.

40 With regard to the precise number of refugees who were exiled, there are certain differences in the reports of the Soviet security services. One of the reports, for example, refers to 77,920 people, while the report summarizing the operation gives the figure of 77,710, or even 76,382 individuals. *Ibid.*, pp. 160, 167–168. On July 30, 1941, an agreement was signed between the Polish government-in-exile in London and the Soviet Union. This agreement had an addendum, in which the Soviet Union promised to grant a pardon to Polish citizens, and on August 12 the Supreme Soviet approved the pardon. On the eve of the implementation of the pardon, the Soviet security services reported on the refugee Polish citizens (*bezhtentsy*) with whom they were dealing, and gave the figure of 78,399 people. These were broken down by nationality as follows: 82.4 percent Jews, 10.9 percent Poles, and 6.7 percent other nationalities. Of these refugees, 76,968 people were broken down by age groups as follows: Men and women aged over sixteen years — 72.5 percent (38.2 percent men, 34.3 percent women), teenage boys and girls aged fourteen to sixteen — 5.4 percent, and children up to the age of fourteen — 22.1 percent. *Deportatsii — Zakhidni zemli Ukraini kintsia 30-kh pochatku 50-kh rr. Dokumenti, materialy, spogadi*, (L'viv: Natsional'na akademiia nauk Ukraini, 1996), vol. 1, pp. 150–155.

41 The decision about the deportations was taken by the Soviet Union government on April 10, 1940. In the eight months from the end of July 1940 to April 1, 1941, the number of refugees deported dropped by one-and-half percent as a result of people fleeing, as well as mortality. Viktor Berdinskikh, *Spetsposelentsy, Politicheskaiia ssylka narodov Sovetskoi Rossii* (Moscow, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2005), p.61. In the Volhynia District, 11,771 people (3,567 families) were deported, 75.8 percent Jews and 15.6 percent Poles, *Deportatsii*, p. 105.

side of the new Soviet-German border. During this short period, many of them experienced various forms of persecution, including robbery, murder, and the proclamation of draconian decrees.⁴² Jews began to flee to Poland's eastern border even before the area was transferred to Soviet control, but also after the annexation many Jews took the risk of clandestinely crossing the border in order to escape German violence.⁴³ The numbers of refugees who fled to Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine on their own initiative were also swelled by large numbers of Jews who were expelled to these areas from Poland by the Nazi occupation authorities as part of their policy at the time: to rid the areas under their control of Jews.⁴⁴ This was described as follows by

42 For example, in the seven days during which the Germans controlled the city of Bialystok, they looted Jewish homes and murdered women who refused to remove the gold rings from their fingers. During this same period, around 100 Jews were murdered and some 200 Jewish stores were looted. See Sara Bender, *Facing Death: The Jews of Bialystok, 1939–1943*, (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), pp.64–65; in the Volhynia District, the Germans were in charge of the town of Luboml for a few days, during which time they maltreated the Jewish residents; in the town of Kolna in Western Belorussia, where the Nazis were also in charge for a few days, they dragged the Jews out of the synagogue and forced them to clean their horses; and in towns which came under the authority of the Red Army after being under Nazi occupation for a certain period, this had been the fate suffered by all Jews. See Dov Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Annexed Territories 1939–1941* (Hebrew), published by the Hebrew University and the Ghetto Fighters' House (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1989), p. 36.

43 The violent treatment of the Jews began immediately and was an essential feature of the occupation. The Jews were forced to wear a white band with a Star of David, or a yellow badge or patch; in Warsaw the Jews were expelled from food lines and seized for forced labor, their stores were looted, and their beards were cut off; in Łódź thousands of Jews were murdered in the first months of the occupation; in October 1939, a decree was issued requiring the Jews of the Generalgouvernement to present themselves for forced labor. In November 1939, the ghetto was set up in the city of Piotrków, in December 1939 in Łódź, and in November 1940 in Warsaw – and the Jews were banned from leaving the ghetto.

44 On the expulsion of the Jews from the town of Terespol, in the Lublin area, see Shmuel Spector, *The Holocaust of Volhynian Jews 1941–1944* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and The Federation of Volhynian Jews, 1990) p. 26; on a similar expulsion from the town of Przemyśl, see Iakov Khonigsman, *Katastrofa evreistva Zapadnoi Ukrainy* (Lwów: 1998), pp. 88, 92; on the brutal expulsion of the Jews from Poland to Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine, see also Yosef Litvak, *Polish-Jewish Refugees in the USSR, 1939–1946* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv: The Hebrew University, Ghetto Fighters House, 1988), pp.41–48. “Jewish Refugees from Poland in the USSR, 1939–1946,” in Zvi Gitelman, ed., *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

a Jew who was expelled from Belz and managed to reach the town of Sokal in Western Ukraine:

One day, when it was already autumn [1939] ... a terrible howling was heard from the direction of the bridge over the Bug ... Everybody, including myself, ran to the bridge ... We saw lots of people on the other side, the Germans were pushing them toward the river, toward the bridge. We also saw how every so often the Germans hit these poor wretches with their rifle butts ... We soon found out that the crowd on the other side were Jews who the Germans wanted to make flee ... Late at night, the people being persecuted managed to cross the river.⁴⁵

The Jewish refugees who reached Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine told the Jews whom they met, whether locals or refugees who had preceded them, about what was happening across the border.⁴⁶ In one eyewitness account, for example, a woman reported that “news kept coming all the time to Bialystok from the Generalgouvernement ... These news items aroused great interest first and foremost among the refugees.”⁴⁷ Another eyewitness from Bialystok said that “the connection with Warsaw was maintained as a result of the migration of the refugees across the border and the news which arrived from there increased the worries about one’s nearest and dearest who had remained in that inferno.”⁴⁸ A witness who at that time was in Lvov indicated that

45 Chaim Holtzman, “Belz-Siberia-Bukharia-Belz” (Hebrew), in Yosef Rubin, ed., *Belz — Memorial Book* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Association of Ex-Belzers, 1974), p. 417. The Soviet security services also reported on October 31, 1939, of the violent expulsion of Jews to the Western Ukraine. On November 6, 1939, extensive information, collected from the refugees’ accounts, was provided to the head of the Ukraine NKVD about the Nazis’ maltreatment of the Jews. NKVD head, Ivan Serov (1905–1990), commented on this documentation as follows: “These accounts must be checked again through our agencies worldwide, because very frequently the accounts of those who cross the border illegally are not confirmed. Hence they [the accounts] must be treated with caution.” See “Organy Gosudarstvennoi Bezopastnosti SSSR v Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine,” *Nakanune Sbornik dokumentov*, vol. 1, book 1 (Noianbr’ 1938–Dekabr 1940) (Moscow: Kniga i biznes, 2005), pp. 118–122.

46 Khonigsman, *Katastrofa evreistva Zapadnoi Ukrainy*, p. 99.

47 “Konspiracyjne Arkhium Getta Warszawy,” Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, *Relacje z Kresów*, ed. Andrzej Zbikowski (Polish) (Warsaw: ZIH, 2000), p. 127.

48 Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, p. 191. In his diary entry for July 1, 1941, Belorussian poet Maxim Tank wrote that the writers from Warsaw and Łódź, who were in Bialystok at that time and most of whom were Jewish, said that in the letters received from the German part of occupied Poland, they were advised to move away from the new neighbor. See Maxim Tank, “Dzenniki.” *Polymia* (Minsk: 1996), no. 9, p. 147.

“we knew all the details about the torments undergone by the Jews in the areas of Western Poland [under German occupation].”⁴⁹

A great deal of information about the situation of the Jews in the areas under Nazi occupation also arrived through letters. Both the refugees and the local Jews in Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine had relatives in Poland, and lively correspondence took place between the families by mail or through smugglers. In letters sent by mail, the Jews were careful not to write things explicitly, and recipients had to read between the lines.⁵⁰ In contrast, in letters brought by smugglers, the information was provided in detail and in plain language.⁵¹ The Yiddish writer Itzik (Yitchak) Kipnis (1896–1974) from Kiev related in his memoirs that from time to time he used to receive letters from Poland, from which he realized that “the Civil War-period pogroms were a mere trifle compared with what was now being done to the Jews of Poland.”⁵²

Another channel of information was Polish radio broadcasts, transmitted from Paris and London. These programs also included reports about the situation of Polish Jewry. The Jews who listened to these broadcasts were mainly from educated circles.⁵³

49 Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, p. 694.

50 An eyewitness who was in Bialystok at the time wrote in 1942: “Letters were exchanged continuously and regularly between the [General]gouvernement and the areas occupied by the Soviets. On both sides there was a fear of daring to make comments, or even to hint at political subjects. Use was made of codes, which were so naïve and comprehensible that the German censor did not hesitate to add his comments to the letters.” See Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, p. 128; see also, *ibid.*, p. 171; in his memoirs, one of the eyewitnesses describes the letters which the refugees in Borisov received from their relatives in Poland as follows: “On the letters received from Warsaw there was a stamp with German writing: ‘Special place of residence of the Jews.’ The relatives wrote along these lines: ‘All of the Mendelvicz family have gone to live with Grandma Haya, and the Katsovicz family’s old folk have been taken in by Uncle Reuven.’ The addressees knew perfectly well that Grandma Haya and Uncle Reuven had been resting in the cemetery for a good long while.” See Aleksandr Rozenblium, *Pamiat’ na krovi* (Jerusalem: 1998), p. 17.

51 For more material on the subject, see Litvak, *Polish- Jewish Refugees in the USSR, 1939–1946*, pp. 21–64; Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, p. 191; see also: *Oglasheniuu podlezhit, SSSR-Germaniia*, pp. 167–168.

52 Yitchak Kipnis, “Fun mayne togbikher” (Yiddish), *Sovetish heymland*, no. 1 (1965), p. 73.

53 Tikva Fatal-Knaani, *The Jewish Community in Grodno and Its Vicinity during the Second World War and the Holocaust, 1939–1943* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2001), p. 96.

It can therefore be stated with a fair degree of certainty that although the Soviet media refrained from carrying reports about the desperate plight of the Jews in the areas occupied by the Nazis, most of the Jews in Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine were extremely aware of the state of affairs, mainly as a result of the information that reached them by word of mouth. Did the rumors about the ghettos, about forced labor, about the humiliations and the murders which were the everyday experience of Polish Jewry also reach the ears of Jews in the Soviet Union, those living east of the annexed areas?⁵⁴ This question becomes even more relevant in light of the fact that, despite the annexation, it was impossible to cross the old border from Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine to their eastern counterparts — and vice versa — without a permit.

The Migrations of the “Easterners” and the “Westerners”: A Useful Tool for Transmitting Information

Eyewitness accounts indicate that despite the difficulties, there was movement of Jews in both directions over the old border, in other words, between Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine and their eastern counterparts. Well settled Jewish Soviet citizens, known as the “Easterners” (*Vostochniki*), visited the western area, and sometimes even moved back and forth, while many “Westerners” (*Zapadniki*) migrated eastward to the Soviet Union. Both populations told the Jews in the Soviet Union, in ways which will be described in detail below, the refugees’ stories, including how the Nazis were treating the Jews.

The “Westerners” were primarily refugees who had migrated eastward, especially for work purposes. The “Easterners” included three main groups of Jews who were “responsible” for the word-of-mouth passing on of information: men and officers serving in the Red Army, people in the Soviet apparatus, and “cultural emissaries.”

The Jewish officers, numbering around three thousand, were part of the half a million or so members of the Red Army (men and officers) who invaded Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine and brought

54 Also see my article, “Escape and Evacuation of Soviet Jews at the Time of the Nazi Invasion,” in Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Gurock, eds., *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (New York: Armonk, 1993), pp. 77–104.

these areas under Soviet protection.⁵⁵ In order for local residents not to view them as an “occupying army,” apparently the soldiers, and above all the officers, were given unequivocal orders to treat the residents decently, and even get to know them. The Jewish officers therefore tried to talk to the Jews whom they met in Yiddish, but to their amazement, they discovered that some Jews, especially in Eastern Galicia, did not know the language.

One of the officers recounted that when he and his comrades entered the city of Belz with the army, “groups of Jews gathered round them and the Belzers peppered them with all sorts of questions.”⁵⁶ In the early 1940s, a woman refugee from Warsaw told of an encounter with officers: “In one of the restaurants [in the city of Rovno, Western Ukraine] I once met a number of Jewish officers and talked to them. One of them asked a lot of questions about where I was from and what my living conditions were like.”⁵⁷ A young Jewish soldier described his impressions of the Jews whom he met in Bessarabia in June 1940, saying, “I was particularly struck by the men — not old ones — with their curly sidelocks on the cheeks, dressed in long kaftans and with skull-caps on their heads. I greeted them with “Shalom aleichem,” and most of them answered me out loud, “Aleichem shalom.”⁵⁸ In encounters with

55 According to the population census of January 1939, Jewish officers made up 0.6 percent of the total numbers of those serving in the Red Army. See my article, “A Note on Jews in the Red Army on the Eve of the Second World War,” *Jews and Jewish Topics in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, no. 2, 18 (Jerusalem, 1992), pp. 37–39. It is possible that the percentage of Jewish officers among the Red Army soldiers who invaded Eastern Poland was larger, for the following reasons: first, the units which entered Poland were from the armies of Ukraine and Belorussia wherein, according to many indicators, the percentage of Jews was higher than in other units; second, on the eve of the Soviet invasion of Poland, some of the reservists were called up in Belorussia and the Ukraine, where the percentage of Jews in the population as a whole was relatively high. See N. S. Lebedeva, “Chetvertyi razdel Pol’shi i katynskaia tragedii, *Drugaiia voina, 1939–1945*, Iu. N. Afanas’ev, ed. (Moscow: RGGU, 1996), pp.237–295. See also Dimitrii Tolochko, “Faktor ob”edineniia Belarusi osen’iu 1939 g. v istorii Rechinskigo raiona,” *Chatsviorityia mizhnarodnyia dounaravskiiia chytanni* (Gomel’: 2004), pp. 166–173.

56 Holtzman, “Belz-Siberia-Bukharia-Belz,” p. 415.

57 Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, p. 594. On encounters with Jewish officers cited in the Ringelblum Archive, see also Iuli Margolin, “Sentiabr’ 1939,” *Vremia i my* (Israel: 1977), no. 13, p. 212.

58 Naum Dashevskii, *Vospominaniia bez vesti propavshogo*, (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1990), p. 18. “This is how I remember the events of the time: The day that the Red Army arrived, I was with my parents in the town of Skidel, which is near

members of the various Jewish communities, the officers heard about what was going on in Poland. During leaves and visits, they apparently passed the information on to their relatives and friends at home.

Jewish members of the Communist Party and Komsomol (the Communist Youth Movement) were sent with thousands of their comrades to the annexed areas in order to establish the Soviet government. By early 1940, more than 4,500 Party members and 6,000–8,000 Komsomol members, including a fair number of Jews, had been sent to Western Belorussia. Of the 2,800 activists sent to the central city of Bialystok, for example, 21.5 percent were Jews. In other cities in Western Belorussia, the Jews made up around nine percent of the total number of Party activists sent from the East. Some estimates put the number of people at around 30,000 sent from the official apparatus during the twenty-two months of Soviet rule, including between ten and fifteen percent Jews.⁵⁹ Some of the Jewish activists were especially sent there in order to operate among the Jewish public — in Yiddish.⁶⁰ Based on these figures, and in the absence of direct statistics, it stands to reason that a similar number of activists and of Jews were sent from the East to Western Ukraine.⁶¹ It may therefore be concluded that the total number of people from the Soviet apparatus who were sent from the

Grodno, Western Belorussia. The residents were asked to accommodate Soviet officers and my parents asked two officers to join us for Friday evening. They spoke Yiddish like us [Lithuanian-Belorussian] and were very moved when my mother lit the Sabbath candles and my father made kiddush and they tried to fit in with the Shabbat songs, at least as far as the melodies were concerned.”

59 Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, pp. 34–35.

60 Beinish Shulman, who was a printing worker in Minsk and was very familiar with Yiddish literature and the Soviet reality, was appointed acting editor of the Yiddish paper *Bialystoker Shtern*. A Soviet Jew called Yaakov Zeikin was appointed director of the Jewish theater in Lwów, and he was given actors from Dniepropetrovsk, whose Yiddish theater had been shut down. The Jewish theater in Bialystok acquired a director and group of actors from the city of Baku after the Jewish theater there too was closed down. See Dov Levin, “The Jewish Theatre in the Territories Annexed to the Soviet Union (1939–1941)” (Hebrew) in Mordechai Altshuler, ed., *The Jewish Theater in the Soviet Union* (Jerusalem: 1996), pp. 96–102; Levin, *A Period in Parentheses* (Hebrew), pp. 61–65; Yitzhak Arad, *History of the Holocaust, Soviet Union and Annexed Territories* (Hebrew), 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004), vol. 1, p. 125.

61 It is known that 4,485 activists, including 336 Jews, i.e., 7.5 percent, were sent to the Drohobicz District in Western Ukraine. See S. Filippov, “Deiatel’nost’ organov VKP(b) v zapadnykh oblastiakh Ukrainy i Belorussii v 1939–1941 gg.,” *Repressii protiv poliakov i pol’kikh grazhdan* (Moscow: “Zven’ia,” 1997), p. 47.

East to Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine (excluding the Vilna area) would have been at least 60,000 (in addition to army, police, and security apparatus personnel), of whom between 6,000 and 9,000 would have been Jews.

Since many of the Party activists brought their families with them, it may be reasonably assumed that prior to the Nazi invasion, some 12,000–18,000 Jews would have come to Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine. These people lived in localities in which also came hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Nazi persecution, and there is no doubt that from them they heard reports of the atrocities. The Soviet *apparatchiks*, and especially their family members, frequently traveled back to their homes in the Soviet Union, whether to meet relatives or bring home to the East gifts and hard-to-find consumer items, which they had acquired in the “new” areas. When they met with relatives and friends, who were thirsty for news about what was happening in the “big wide world,” they also spoke about what was happening on the other side of the new Soviet-German border and about the Nazis’ subjugation of Jews in Poland. These accounts reinforced the information recently received (up to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) by Soviet Union citizens, through the press, radio, cinema, and spread by word of mouth among the Jewish population.

Those known as “cultural emissaries” included Yiddish-language writers and other creative and cultural figures as groups of artists sent by the Soviet authorities to the annexed areas so that their residents “would be convinced” of the ostensible flourishing of national cultures in the Soviet Union, including Yiddish culture. Thus the Yiddish Theater from Kiev was sent to put on performances in the cities of Western Ukraine, and the theater from Minsk was sent to perform in Western Belorussia. In addition to these performances, theater actors also held meetings with local cultural activists, and subsequently spread among Jews on the eastern side the accounts that they heard from them about what was happening on the other (western) side of the border.

There were also delegations of writers. Lvov was visited by a delegation of Soviet Yiddish writers. Its members included Dovid Hofshteyn (1889–1952), Motl Talalaevskii (1908–1978), Moyshe Khashchevatskii (1897–1943), and Avraham Walednitzki (1897–1959). In February 1940, Western Belorussia was visited by a large delegation of Yiddish writers, including Leib Kvitko (1890–1952), Shmuel Halkin (1897–1960), Yehezkel Dobrushin (1884–1960), Prof. Yitzhak Nus-

inov (1889–1951), Aharon Kushnirov (1890–1949), Shmuel Godiner (1885–1945), Buzy Olevskii (1908–1941), Eli Gordon (1907–1989), Leib Strongin (1896–1968) — director of the *Der Emes* publishing house — and Hirsch Kamenetskii (1895–1957), secretary of the Jewish Section of the Belorussian Writers Association. The head of the delegation was the poet Peretz Markish.

The following account of what happened to Peretz Markish during the delegation's visit to Bialystok was provided by a Yiddish writer called Yitzhak Yanasovich (born 1909), who had fled there from Warsaw. He writes, "Once, together with Markish and Nusinov, we walked into the hotel lobby and suddenly saw two German officers there, dressed in all their finery with swastikas on their sleeves ... When Markish saw the officers, his legs gave way and if we hadn't have caught him by his arms, he would have passed out."⁶² When they left the hotel, Yanasovich told Markish that Jews who spat after seeing German officers in the city's streets had been arrested and deported. When he heard this, Markish reacted with a typical outburst: "I will still direct the attention of the [Communist] Party's local committee to the fact that the feelings of the Jews should be respected.... Ah well — all right, we have an agreement with them [the Germans], but that doesn't mean that we have to fling our arms round their necks."⁶³ Yonasovich also recounted how Yitzhak Nusinov, who was also a member of the delegation and grasped the implications of what Markish had said, reminded him that he was a Soviet citizen and he should be careful not to interfere in foreign policy. According to Yonasovich, Markish accepted Nusinov's warning wholeheartedly and positively.

During the Yiddish writers' visit, many refugees approached the delegation with requests to help their relatives to flee from the Nazi occupation area in Poland, and described their terrible sufferings to them. In fact, when Markish's delegation returned to Moscow, Nusinov approached Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Solomon Lozovsky (1878–1952) with a request for assistance.⁶⁴

Another delegation of writers which visited Western Belorussia included Zelig Akselrod (1904–1941), Lipe Reznik (1890–1944), and

62 Yitzhak Yanasovich, *With Yiddish Writers in Russia* (Yiddish) (Buenos Aires: 1959), p. 308.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 308.

64 Genadii Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina; Vlast' i Antisemitizm* (Moscow: "Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia," 2003), p. 193.

Eliyahu Kahane (1909–1944). An additional delegation, headed by writer Itzik Feffer (1900–1952), which visited the same area in the fall of 1940, also included Hirsh Orland (1893–1946), Avraham Gontar (1908–1981), and Faivl Sito (1909–1945).⁶⁵ At their public appearances, the writers extolled the cultural activities in the Soviet Union, but in private meetings with local wordsmiths, they spoke openly about the gagging of free speech and the restricting of culture, and warned that a similar situation was likely to come about in the annexed territories. Writer Faivl Sito provided the following account of the depressing reports that the writers heard during their visit:

I will remember my entire life the horrifying tales I heard from refugees [in Bresk-Litovsk in November 1939]. An old Jew who had just come from Warsaw ... told how a German killed his wife before his very eyes and raped his fifteen-year old daughter and then murdered her ... The same Jew recounted how the Hitlerite miscreants forced him to clean the sidewalk in Marszałkowska Street [Warsaw] with his tongue.⁶⁶

When the chairman of the Association of Belorussian Journalists, Yoel Lifshitz, returned to Minsk from his visit to Western Belorussia, he aroused a commotion among the Jews when, according to an account by Hersh Smoliar from Minsk, “he brought from liberated [i.e., annexed to the Soviet Union] Western Belorussia a yellow Star of David which a Warsaw Jew had ripped off his clothes after crossing the Soviet border.”⁶⁷

In 1940 Markish, inspired by such accounts, wrote his poem *To a Jewish Dancer*. In this work the poet referred to the Nazi “monster,” stomping about with an ax. In order to introduce a new order in the world, he carries a corpse with him, branded with a yellow star.... Later in the poem, the poet writes, “Let the graves rise up from Rotterdam to Warsaw, let the graves rise up from every path that has been obliterated.... And there is no sword in the world that has not been

65 Hersh Smoliar, “Jewish Life in Soviet Western Belorussia, 1939–1941: Flourishing and Decline,” *Shvut*, 4 (1976), pp. 126–136; Eliyahu Ionas, *Evrei L’vova v gody Vtoroi Mirovoi Voyny i katastrofy* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia biblioteka Kholokosta, 1999), pp. 71, 79; see also Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, p. 124.

66 Faivl Sito, “To annihilate the Fascist dogs so that they will never rise from the dead,” *Der Shtern* (Yiddish) (Kiev), July 7, 1941.

67 Hersh Smoliar, *From the Ghetto of Minsk* (Yiddish) (Moscow: 1946), p. 4.

sharpened on your body [the Jewish Dancer], and no sword that has not been broken on you.”⁶⁸ Given the Soviet Union’s policy, clearly this poem could not be aired in any public setting, and hence it was only read among the poet’s friends.

In other words, Yiddish cultural figures who visited the annexed areas knew full well what the Nazis were doing, as well as about the Jews’ situation on the other side of the border, but their hands were tied and they were unable to help. Their feelings of distress and frustration in light of their helplessness are clearly reflected in their accounts. It stands to reason that not only Markish expressed his feelings in his writing; other writers and poets must have written about the subject clandestinely, even if so far no traces of such works have been discovered. It can also be safely assumed that these men of letters did not keep to themselves the accounts that they had heard, but shared them in like-minded circles.

Another group which provided word-of-mouth information consisted of the volunteer workers. The hundreds of thousands of refugees in Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine were a heavy burden on the local authorities, which, as early as October 1939, began to put them to work in the original Soviet Union areas. On November 10, 1939, the Politburo — with Stalin’s approval — decided to set up a committee to handle the “exploitation of the refugee labor force.”⁶⁹ Based on this decision, the authorities inaugurated a comprehensive information campaign among the refugees. This campaign continued up to around the end of February 1940, and made use of many different means to persuade people. In the town of Sokal, for example, a Soviet propagandist was sent to the synagogue where many of the refugees prayed. It is noteworthy that no coercive means whatsoever were applied.⁷⁰

Refugees who voluntarily agreed to work in the Soviet Union were sent for careful examinations by medical committees. These check-

68 Peretz Markish, “To a Jewish Dancer,” in Chone Shmeruk, ed., *A Mirror on a Stone* (Yiddish) (Tel Aviv: Y. L. Peretz, 1964), pp. 467–469.

69 The committee members were Lavrenty Berya, Nikolai Bulganin, Nikolai Shvernik, and L. Korniets; see *Deportatsii*, p. 55.

70 See Litvak, *Polish- Jewish Refugees in the USSR, 1939–1946*, p. 100; Holtzman, “Belz-Siberia-Bukharia-Belz,” p. 418.

ups were also required in order to pass the suitability-for-work tests.⁷¹ Those who met the criteria signed an employment contract with the employer — either a factory or a local authority — for a period of one to three years. Most of the refugees who volunteered to go east to work were young; some of them were on their own while others had families. Their chances of finding accommodation or a livelihood in Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine were extremely slim.⁷² Sometimes they had to spend hours in line waiting to be included among those registering for work in the East.⁷³ The description below of one of the convoys leaving Bialystok for work in the Soviet Union — provided by a witness whose brother had joined the convoy — indicates also the authorities' attitude to public expressions of anti-German feeling:

In early December some 3,000 people, mainly men who had decided to go to the interior of Russia, assembled in the courtyard. They had already had their medical checks and signed a contract for one to three years.

... A group of 200 men [including the witness' brother] was assigned to the Moscow District. ... There is a festive atmosphere. The groups line up according to their assignment to different cities and areas. There is an orchestra at the head of the line, as well as a small unit of Red Army soldiers. Next to the line are the accompanying persons — their relatives — and everyone keeps pace with the people who are going. The streets are full of people looking at the people marching, accompanied by an orchestra and singing... The marchers shout slogans against Fascism, which is oppressing the Jewish masses in the areas where their relatives are. When the shouts [of the marchers] were heard, the orchestra and the Red Army people made themselves scarce, knowing that there must be no shouting against friends and allies.⁷⁴

71 This involved volunteering for work inside the Soviet Union proper, something that differed, both fundamentally and in practical terms, from deportation, in contrast to what is implied in one of the articles published in post-Communist Poland. See D. Backowski, "Przesiedlenie ludnosci do wschodnich obwodow Bialoruskiej SRR jesienia 1939 tzw. Biezencow," *Biuletyn Zydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, nr. 1, (1997), pp. 77–96.

72 Litvak, *Polish- Jewish Refugees in the USSR, 1939–1946*, pp. 97–101.

73 On long lines of refugees in the city of Brześć, who wanted to register for work inside the Soviet Union, see Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, p. 237; Levin, *Period in Parentheses*, pp. 202–205.

74 Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, p. 76.

After this public protest, although the festive accompanying of convoys of volunteers was stopped, the numbers of those seeking to go eastward to work did not drop.⁷⁵ According to a number of estimates, more than 15,000 left from Lvov alone, while more than 30,000 volunteers departed Bialystok.⁷⁶ Hence, the total number of these refugee-volunteers who were sent to work in a variety of locations in the Soviet Union would appear to have been between 50,000 and 70,000, mainly Jews. However, it should be noted that after experiencing living conditions in the Soviet Union, quite a few volunteers returned to Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia.

Some of the refugee-volunteers (whose numbers cannot be determined) were sent to areas with small Jewish populations. One can therefore assume that they found little opportunity in such places for talking about the horrors inflicted on Jews under the Nazi regime.⁷⁷ The Jewish volunteers who fetched up in Eastern Belorussia and Eastern Ukraine were in a completely different situation. In those areas, according to the January 1939 census, there were some two million Jews,⁷⁸ mainly Yiddish speakers, and the common language naturally brought about a closeness between the refugees from Poland and the locals.

It is estimated that in late 1939 and early 1940 there were at least 27,000–30,000 Jewish refugee-volunteers in Eastern Belorussia and Eastern Ukraine. This estimate is based on partial figures, as follows:

In February 1940, there were at least 13,000 (or thereabouts) Jewish refugee-volunteers in Eastern Belorussia on the basis of statistics

75 For a description of another convoy that left Bialystok on October 26, 1939, see Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, p. 260. On the large numbers of Jewish refugees in Lwów who wanted to go off to work in the Soviet Union, *ibid.*, p. 687.

76 About Lwów, see *ibid.*, p. 503.

77 Refugees were sent to work in kolkhozes and plants in the Caucasus and the Donbas coal mines, *ibid.*, p. 687; the Urals, *ibid.*, pp. 76, 80, 149; Magnitogorsk, Novosibirsk, and Tashkent, *ibid.*, pp. 76–77; Kirov, see Yehoshua Shtengel, *Problems among Jews in Poland* (Yiddish) (Tel Aviv: Ney-Leben, 1977), p. 207; Rostov-on-Don, see testimony of Shepik, born 1919, Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), 03/1377.

78 According to the January 1939 population census, there were 1,600,000 Jews in the Ukraine, and 375,000 in Belorussia. See Mordechai Altshuler, ed., *Distribution of the Jewish Population of the USSR, 1939* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Center for Research and Documentation of East European Jewry, 1993), pp. 9, 11.

available for the following districts:⁷⁹ in the Vitebsk district — 3,800; in the Mogilev district — 3,600; in the Minsk district — 3,200; in the Gomel district — 1,400; and in the Polesye district — 900. Many of these refugees lived in towns with a Jewish population that made up between a fifth and a third of the population.⁸⁰

In Eastern Ukraine, there were around 14,000 Jewish refugee-volunteers in 1939, out of a total of 32,775 refugees sent to work in the different districts: 35 percent in the Vinnitsa district; 26 percent in the Zhitomir district; 12 percent in the Chernigov district; 11 percent in the Poltava district; seven percent in the Kirovograd district; four percent in the Nikolayev district; and two percent in the three remaining districts in each of the districts — Odessa, Sumy, and Kamenets-Podolski.

The estimate of the number of Jewish refugee-volunteers in Eastern Ukraine is based on distribution by nationality figures known for three districts where the Jews constituted forty-one percent of the total refugee body, assuming that this statistic reflects the distribution by nationality in all the districts.⁸¹

The Jewish volunteers, who were mainly younger than the average age of the refugees and were sent to work with the locals, established social ties with the inhabitants, and even more so with the Jews among them.⁸² After an extended period in which they had been cut

79 Emanuel Ioffe and Viachislav Selemenev, “Jewish Refugees from Poland in Belorussia, 1939–1940”, *Jews in Eastern Europe*, no. 1 (32) (Jerusalem: 1997), pp. 45–60. See also Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, pp. 117, 122–123, 260, 263, 267; Evgenii Rozenblat, “Chuzhdyi element’: evreiskie bezhentsy v Zapadnoi Belorussii” (1930–1941), Oleg Budnitskii and Konstantin Burmistrova, eds., *Istoriia rossiiskogo i vostochno-evropeiskogo evreistva: Novye istochniki, novye podkhody* (Moscow: “Dom evreiskoi knigi,” 2004), pp.333–361.

80 In Gomel (Homel), the Jews constituted 29.4 percent of the town’s population, in Vitebsk 22.2 percent, in Orsha 21.3 percent, and in Moghilev 19.8 percent. See Altshuler, *Distribution*, p. 39. See also testimony by Mikhael Kovlaski, who fled the town of Sejny for Grodno, and from there made his way to Moghilev, YVA, O.3/858.

81 *Deportatsii*, p. 6.

82 Interview with Lyuba Goldberg, held on December 30, 1968, Oral History Documentation Division, Institute of Contemporary Jewry (51), 25; Ster Elisavetskii, born 1929, who lived in the town of Berdichev and studied at a Russian school, related in his testimony that refugees from Krakow and Zamość came to the town and worked in the tailoring and shoemaking factories: from the interviews of the Institute of Judaica in Kiev, p. 21; testimony of Yitzchak Abarbanel, born 1930, who fled with his relatives from German occupied territory and made it to the

off from any knowledge about what was going on outside the Soviet Union, and did not believe in the information which was published in the Soviet media, inhabitants craved to hear every scrap of information and wanted to know what was going on in Poland. One of the volunteers who was sent to work in Kiev reported: “When we appeared in the beautiful Kiev streets, we were a sensation. Groups of people surrounded us, asking all sorts of questions. Interpreters always turned up, unbidden, and translated the questions and answers from Russian and Ukrainian into Polish or Yiddish.”⁸³

The Refugees’ Social Integration as a Vehicle of Communication

Jewish families often invited the refugees into their homes.⁸⁴ Some of the latter even lived in apartments or apartment buildings with local Jews.⁸⁵ An account was given of the refugees’ integration into the

town of Ludmir, Western Belorussia. From there they made their way to the town of Kherson, where they lived until the outbreak of the Soviet-German war, YVA, 975/835. Liubov’ Fainzil’berg, born 1925/6, lived in Uman, testified that shortly after the beginning of the war in Poland refugees arrived from there and lived in her family’s home in Uman. The witness indicated that the refugees told the family members about the Nazis’ persecution of the Jews. From the interviews of the Institute of Judaica in Kiev (pages not numbered). Another witness known only as Feldman, born 1923, recounted how refugees from the Polish territories came to where she lived in El’sk — 30 kilometers from Mazir in Belorussia. Her parents gave them a warm welcome. Oral History Documentation Division, Institute of Contemporary Jewry (58), 9.

83 Shlomo Shtokfish, *In Circle of Rage; My experiences in the second World War* (Yiddish) (Tel Aviv: Israel Buch, 1975), p. 38; see also Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, p. 264; one of the witnesses, a young woman born in 1920, gave the following account: “In 1939 there was the Polish campaign. [Refugees] came here to Kiev and everybody went to look at them.” Raisa Matsievich, from interviews of the Institute of Judaica in Kiev, p. 18.

84 Ringelblum Archive, vol. 3, p. 263.

85 Two women (mother and daughter) from Łódź, seamstresses by trade, lived in the home of Fruma Davidson in Minsk: interview of March 11, 1969, Oral History Documentation Division, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, (51) 22, p. 41; another witness who graduated university in Kharkov and was assigned to work in Yalta testified: “I was in a Jewish company and it had [people] who came from territories which had been annexed to the Soviet Union”: testimony by Miriam Reinbeck, born 1914, given on June 29, 1985, YVA, O.3/4257; see also “An account by M.P., a war refugee,” in Yehuda Slotzky, ed., *Babruysk: A Memorial Book to the Babruysk Community and its Daughters* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Culture and Education, 1967), vol. 2, pp. 727–729.

local Jewish population by Yaakov Ingerman, who was born in 1919 and in September 1939 — a few days after the outbreak of World War II — came to visit the small town where he was born, Shepetovka in Ukraine, near the Polish border:

An influx of Jewish refugees started. The town ... was absolutely flooded with Jewish refugees, and every Jewish house took in refugees... Most of the Jewish refugees were young... They arrived in the Soviet regions ... and spread out to all the houses. Some of them started working in Shepetovka in all kinds of jobs. Craftsmen and people with a trade were immediately taken on, for example, in construction and the sugar factory. But they did not stay in Shepetovka for long. We put up four Jews in our home. One was taken on as a German teacher, and the three others worked in various places... The authorities did not let them stay in Shepetovka.... Those who did stay in town integrated very well and some of them married local girls.⁸⁶

In other small towns as well, young men and women among the refugees married local young Jews.⁸⁷ Writing about the refugees whom he met in 1939 and were engraved in his memory, one witness commented that “for some reason they stuck out ... because of their clothing ... These were mainly Jews who had fled Poland... which had been occupied by the Germans... Many refugees also settled in Borisov ... where they were given refuge and work.”⁸⁸ A woman living in Gorki, Eastern Belorussia, who was born in 1925, wrote, “In 1939 Polish refugees [meaning Jews from Poland] were living in Gorki. They spoke about the cruelties of the Fascists, but everyone thought that these people were panicky and were exaggerating.”⁸⁹

86 Yaakov Ingerman, *Between Despair and Hope* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: self-published, 1997), p. 21.

87 Interview with Assia Breslaver, who married a refugee from Łódź. The interview took place on April 8, 1969, Oral History Documentation Division, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, 7 (58); another interview, held on March 11, 1969, *ibid.*, 22 (51), p. 42.

88 Rozenblium, *Pamiat' na krovi*, p. 17.

89 Reveka Aleeva, “Nashy gody, ‘kak ptitsy letiat...’,” *Mishpokha*, (Vitebsk: 1999), no. 5, p. 35. In her testimony, a witness called Feldman indicated that around the time of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, she travelled from Yelsk to Minsk in order to enquire about the possibility of being admitted to university. In Minsk she met refugees who told her what the Germans were doing to the Jews. Oral History Documentation Division, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, (58), 9.

Even after they had left Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine to work in the Soviet Union, the refugees continued to correspond with their relatives whom they had left behind in Poland under the Nazi occupation. The letters informed the refugees about their difficult situation, and sometimes they sent their relatives food parcels.⁹⁰ It makes no sense to imagine that in their conversations in Yiddish with their “Eastern” hosts the refugees would not have described to them the Nazi outrages against their relatives, or the sufferings they had experienced in person. One of the witnesses, who met these refugees when she was about fourteen years old, said that when the Jews from Poland reached Minsk in 1939, they said that the Germans had beaten them but “we thought that they weren’t telling the truth.”⁹¹

The eyewitness accounts about the refugees’ integration in Jewish society and the groups of Jews who moved back and forth between the western and eastern sides of Belorussia and Ukraine indicate that the reports about Nazi persecution and their conduct toward the Jews were indeed spread among some of the Jews in the Soviet Union. However, it should be noted that there was a gap between the information actually provided and the extent to which the Jews actually trusted it.

The Rumors and the Authorities

As indicated earlier, from August 1939 the Soviet media virtually avoided making any reference to criticism of Germany. Any critical comments in written material, such as books, were deleted. But during the period prior to May 1939, and more specifically following 1933 Hitler’s assumption of power in Germany, the Soviet Union waged an intensive anti-Fascist media campaign. This campaign impacted on a considerable proportion of people in the Soviet establishment. Consequently, many *apparatchiks* and intellectuals in the Soviet Union were

90 Testimony of Benjamin Weil, born 1921, from Łódź, who came to Bialystok and volunteered there to work in the Soviet Union; he worked in Gomel/Homel and Moghilev, YVA, O.3/741. Similar material is given in the testimony of Henrik Frenkel, born 1904, who escaped from Łódź to Lwów, where he volunteered to work in the Soviet Union, and was sent to one of the towns in the Vologda District, from where he sent food and clothing parcels to his family in the Łódź and Kielce ghettos, YVA, O.3/1640.

91 Interview on September 29, 1968 with Yocheved Iverman-Rubinichik, born 1926, Oral History Documentation Division, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, (51) 16, p. 2.

surprised by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact,⁹² but considered it a necessary evil. Some of them believed this “alliance” would not last long.

What went on behind closed doors at various levels of government following the signing of the agreement can be learned from the recently published memoirs of Leonid Brezhnev (1906–1982). At the time, Brezhnev was Party secretary in Dnepropetrovsk Province, with responsibility for military industry. In 1940 the province’s Party secretariat called a meeting of propagandists. In Brezhnev’s memoirs, he wrote about what happened at the meeting:

I can see it in my mind’s eye as if it was yesterday. Suddenly one of the participants, a good lecturer called Sakhno, got to his feet and asked, “Comrade Brezhnev, must we explain that the non-aggression agreement is serious, and anyone who doesn’t believe in it is disseminating provocative material? ... How are we to behave? Are we to explain, or not?”

Time was fairly short, there were 400 people sitting in the auditorium, and they were all expecting an answer from me, and there wasn’t enough time to mull it over. “Of course you must explain,” I said. “Explain, comrades, and keep explaining, until not a single stone of Fascist Germany remains standing.”⁹³

Against the background of such observations, one should not wonder at what was written in his memoirs by a young Jewish man who was active in the Komsomol in Kiev: “In the Party institutions and the Komsomol, they explained the pact as a diplomatic agreement, as an agreement which was necessary because of the situation at that moment; but the criticism of Fascism in the Party institutions and the Komsomol did not change one single jot.”⁹⁴ A Jewish refugee who arrived in the

92 “I remember, as if it were today, the picture of Molotov-Ribbentrop. There was constant propaganda being thrown at us about preparing for the war [against Germany], and I just couldn’t get my head round how this fitted in with the pact [with Germany].” Interview with Y.K., who was born in 1924 in the town of Dzhurin in the Vinnitsa District of Ukraine, where he attended a Yiddish-speaking school and then a Ukrainian one (interview held in October 1988), YVA, O.33/961C, p. 4.

93 Leonid I. Brezhnev, *Vospominania* (Moscow: Leonid Eksmo, 2005), p. 71.

94 Ingerman, *Between Despair and Hope*, p. 22. A witness called Maria Shokhat, who was finishing her studies at the Polytechnic Institute in Kiev when the Soviet-German war broke out (in other words was in her early twenties), was asked, “During the period of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, were the Germans praised?” She replied, “There was never any praising of the Germans.” From interviews conducted by the Institute of Judaica in Kiev, p. 10.

Soviet Union at the end of 1939 came across something similar when he saw what he noted as an abundance of anti-Fascist posters on the walls of the cultural club.⁹⁵

This ambivalent state of mind vis-à-vis Nazi Germany sowed confusion which was reflected, for example, in a letter that a high school teacher in Chkalov wrote to Foreign Minister Molotov in early November 1939. In her letter, the teacher described a lesson on “Germany’s international situation” which took place in the presence of the director of the Communist Party’s Propaganda Department. She wrote how during the class she quoted extracts from Molotov’s speech in which he justified the agreement between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, and emphasized that even though in the past Germany had been portrayed as an aggressive country, while other countries in Europe had been depicted as peace-loving, it would appear that of all of them, it was Germany which was pursuing peace. However, after the lesson, the Party representative observed to her that she had presented the matter incorrectly. Then when she argued that this was how the Soviet Foreign Minister had presented things, he said to her, “Molotov had to say what he said, but we must also tell the students what Comrade Molotov was unable to say about our actual relations with Germany.”⁹⁶

An expression of the Soviet establishment’s ambivalent attitude to Nazi Germany can also be found in a piece by the Jewish Russian writer, Ilya Ehrenburg (1891–1967). During a visit to Kharkov, Eastern Ukraine, on May 6, 1941, Ehrenburg uttered the following sentence to Shapiro, the editor-in-chief of Kharkov’s Socialist newspaper, *Sotsialistichna Kharkovshchina*: “The anti-Fascist foundations in our country are very strong, and they must be preserved so they do not dissipate.”⁹⁷

The authorities also adopted an ambivalent attitude to the information the refugees disseminated among their social and family circles

95 Benjamin Weil, YVA, O.3/741.

96 Aleksandr Livshin and Igor Orlov, eds., *Sovetskaia povsednrvnost’ i massovoe soznanie, 1939–1945* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2003), pp. 17–18.

97 Viachislav Popov, *Il’ia Erenburg: Dela i dni*, vol. IV, (St. Petersburg: Biblioteka Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk, 2001), p. 299; “V nashei strane ochen’ sil’na antifashistskaia zakvaska. I nuzhno chtob ona ne vivetrilas’.” During the same visit, Ehrenburg was not afraid to make the following comments to the Ukrainian writer, Iurii Smolich (1900–1976): “You just can’t live on the same globe with Fascism, you just can’t exist when you know that somewhere, however far away from us it may be, a miniscule seed of Fascism is germinating.” *Ibid.*, p. 301.

concerning the Nazis' conduct. This tallied with the authorities' equivocal stance on Germany. As foreigners who had recently come to the Soviet Union, the refugees were a target for surveillance by the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, which suspected them not only of ideological heresy, but also of espionage.⁹⁸ In the NKVD reports about the refugees, complaints have been found about leaving workplaces without authorization, or about people who had been members of anti-Soviet parties, as well as complaints about refugees who said that life in capitalist Poland was better than in the Soviet Union.⁹⁹ However, to the best of our knowledge based on the material located to date, the NKVD reports did not contain charges about any anti-Nazi criticism voiced by the refugees. It is possible that the Soviet security services (and not just them) thought that the descriptions of the Nazis' persecution of the Jews added to the Soviet Union's status as a tolerant state.

The tale of one Jewish refugee who was incarcerated in Poland as a result of his membership in the Communist Party is indicative of this approach by the authorities. After he fled Poland, he was sent to work in the vicinity of Kiev. The man's wife and two children remained under German rule in the town of Wlodawa, and in their letters they sent him reports describing their dire situation. He therefore decided to ask the then First Secretary of the Communist Party in Ukraine, Nikita Khrushchev, for a special permit to bring his relatives to the Soviet Union. For this reason he went to Kiev. His gave the following account of his visit:

I traveled to Kiev to the Party HQ, and right there in the corridor I ran into a woman with a severe expression, an older woman in spectacles, who asked me intransigently: "Whom do you need, citizen? ... If the citizen does not tell me on what matter he needs him [Khrushchev], he will get nothing." For lack of any other option, I tried to explain the matter to her in broken Russian, until I told her that I was a Jew. "Then you can speak Yiddish to me," she said. I was very happy and told her in detail about the tragic situation of Poland's Jews who fled, leaving the rest of their closest

98 The memoir writer was an activist in the underground Communist youth in Poland, for which he was imprisoned. When he reached the city of Kirov, he was interrogated for a number of months by the Soviet security services on suspicion of spying for Nazi Germany. See Shtengel, *Problems among Jews in Poland*, pp. 222–236.

99 *Deportatsii*, pp. 86–87, 104–105.

relatives in Hitler's clutches. My words appeared to have a great impact on her, because tears welled up in her eyes.¹⁰⁰

These two interesting facts — first, the man was not afraid to speak about this matter in the “holy of holies,” in other words, in the offices of the Secretary of the Communist Party, nor was he afraid to repeat his words to Khrushchev himself; and second, the secretary who knew the establishment inside out did not consider what he said to be anti-Soviet remarks — jointly strengthen the assumption that the authorities did not crack down on such accounts, even though there was a ban on mentioning them in the media. A similar account is given by a refugee who was sent to work in the Urals mining district, and who in a eulogy commemorating one of his comrades did not flinch from making Hitler, with his harsh persecutions of the Jews, responsible for his death.¹⁰¹

In other words, the authorities in the Soviet Union did not prevent the spreading of unofficial reports and accounts about the Nazis' actions in Poland. Spread by word of mouth, these reached broad circles among some of Soviet Jewry within the pre-1939 borders.

How the Soviet Jews Related to the Rumors

How were Soviet Jews affected by the rumors about the suffering of the Jews in the areas under the German regime? Did they realize the extent of the danger that would face them if Germany were to invade their country? There are no unequivocal answers to these questions. And in any case we must remember, as indicated above, that only when the Soviet Union was invaded did the persecutions take on the form of mass extermination, and that the policy of “purging” the Reich of Jews during the preceding period — complete with its violence and cruelty — was less extreme and *inter alia* was manifested in an attempt to expel the Jews from the Reich territories by forcing them under duress to migrate.¹⁰²

100 Shtokfish, *In Circle of Rage*, p.47.

101 Interview with Elihu Dembinsky, April 1982, YVA, O.3/6288.

102 On the Nazis' plans and actions for making the Reich *judenfrei*, see Israel Guttmann, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), vol. 2, pp. 1420–1421. In early 1940, the “Migration Directorate of the Government of the Soviet Union” (*Pereselencheskoe Upravlenie pri SNK SSSR*) — an institution that dealt with migration within the Soviet Union — received two letters whose content was passed on to Prime Minister Vyacheslav Molotov on

However, from the rumors that reached the ears of Soviet Jewry about the terrible mistreatment of the Jews in the shape of deportation, incarceration in ghettos, starvation, forced labor, torture, and murders, it was clear that the Jews had been thrown to the wolves. A day after the Nazis' invasion of the Soviet Union, a non-Jewish employee of a Kiev publishing house said, "It's going to be really hard for us and ours, and particularly for the Yids whom the Germans are shooting in bursts of gunfire, without a trial."¹⁰³ Nevertheless, despite the assumption that the information about the Nazis' actions filtered down to the wider masses among the Soviet Union's Jews, it is impossible to determine to what extent they took the information on board, and what percentage of the Jews actually heard the rumors.¹⁰⁴ Attitudes to the rumors were

February 9, 1940, as follows:

The Migration Directorate of the Government of the Soviet Union has received two letters from the Berlin and Vienna Migration Offices, concerning the organization of the migration of Jews from Germany to the Soviet Union, viz., to Birobidjan and the Western Ukraine. According to the agreement of the government of the Soviet Union with Germany concerning the evacuation of population to Soviet territory, only Ukrainians, Belorussians, Ruthenians, and Russians are to be evacuated. We, therefore, consider that it is not possible to accept the proposals of the aforementioned migration offices.

I request instructions.

Enc. Six pages

Head, Migration Directorate of the Government of the Soviet Union, E.M. Chekmenev

The six pages that were appended to the letter were, apparently, referrals from Vienna and Berlin. From the wording of the letter, it is not clear whether the letters referred solely to Jews from Germany and Austria, or also to Polish Jews in the area under Nazi control. See Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia*, p. 189; Altman, *Zhertvy nenavisti: Kholokost v SSSR, 1941-1945*, p. 379. Altman's statement to the effect that the German authorities were requesting the acceptance of "about one third of the future victims of the Holocaust" must remain unsubstantiated as long as these referrals have not been located and evaluated.

103 Natsional'na Akademiia Nauk Ukraini, Institut istorii Ukraini, *Kiiv u dni natsists'koi navalii za dokumentami radians'kikh spetssluzhb* (Kiev-Lwów: 2003), p. 94.

104 Drawing on Anatoly Kuznetsov's book *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel* (English version), David Floyd, trans. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970) as evidence that nine out of ten Jews in Kiev did not know about the Nazis' brutality toward the Jews cannot be accepted as substantive proof (see Arad, *History of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, vol. 1, p. 181), for the following reasons: first, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, Kuznetsov was 13 (he was born in August 1929); second, since he was not Jewish, he undoubtedly did not witness conversations held between Jews on this subject; and third, this book is a combination of memoir and literary reportage which is not bound to observe any standards of historical accuracy.

not uniform. According to one account, some Jews related "... to the stories of the refugees who had fled the Nazis ... warily. They viewed them as people in the grip of war panic, who insisted on interpreting general suffering ... as deliberately getting at Jews."¹⁰⁵

I would nevertheless argue that it would not be a mistake to assert that many Jews, particularly the educated ones, did understand — based on the information that they received — the danger from Nazi Germany confronting them, and hence their reservations about the pact concluded between the Soviet Union and Germany were stronger than those of other parts of the population.

Emotional Contradiction and Distress — Between Fears and Patriotism

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was generally received positively in the Soviet Union, despite a feeling of unease resulting from the sudden switch from declared hostility to a friendship treaty.¹⁰⁶ As bloody hostilities raged in the world, life in the Soviet Union went on undisturbed. The "purges" of the late 1930s had come to an end, and some of the Gulag inmates were released. Ilya Ehrenburg noted that after the agreement "... there was a prevailing atmosphere of joy in Moscow, as if at a wedding."¹⁰⁷ There were also tiny groups of citizens who admired Hitler for his achievements,¹⁰⁸ and there were also many peasants who hoped for war and the downfall of their country so that the *kolkhozes* would be dismantled.¹⁰⁹

The Jews' reservations about the agreement were more passionate than those of the general population. Their unease ensued from the

105 Shalom Holavski, *In the Storm That Destroyed Everything — Eastern Belorussian Jewry in World War II* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Moreshet, Sifriat Hapoalim, the Hebrew University, 1988), p. 39; also, for testimony on the accounts of the refugees who came to the town of Lechitsy, see YVA, O.33/963C.

106 Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 97–99.

107 Ilya Ehrenburg, *Liudi, godym zhizn'* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatee', 1990), vol. 2, p. 223.

108 Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, pp. 96–97. This sympathetic attitude to the Nazis was reflected in a joke popular in the Soviet Union at the time: "In Germany, every worker has one car, while in our country they have two each: the black crow [i.e., a Black Maria, a vehicle used for prisoner transfers] and an ambulance."

109 Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, pp. 94–95.

fact that their country had entered into a friendship pact with the Jewish people's supreme enemy, and in addition they feared the Nazi threat should war break out.¹¹⁰ While many of the Jews were involved in the Russian cultural elite, and saw themselves as an inseparable part of it, nevertheless even those whose ethnic identity played practically no role in their self-identity knew perfectly well that the Nazi racial doctrine classified them as members of the inferior race, and they found it difficult to go along with the general positive atmosphere. Senior government echelons were aware of this aspect of their being troubled by this state of affairs, as illustrated by the following anecdote. Writer Ilya Ehrenburg left occupied Paris for Moscow, en route passing through Germany. After reaching Moscow on July 29, 1940, he had a meeting with a senior official of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and reported to him about the brutal Nazi policy that he had seen in action. Whereupon he received the following response: "Our foreign policy does not please people of a certain nationality. This we understand. They should please keep their feelings at home."¹¹¹

Thus, Jews were discouraged from expressing their fears and emotions in public. This further heightened their troubled feelings and sense of distress. There were writers and poets who gave free rein to their feelings, by "writing for the drawer," whereas others only wrote about this many years later. Boris Slutskii (1919–1986), the Russian-Jewish poet, wrote a poem about the frustration felt as a result of being gagged and the fact that the press ignored what the Nazis were doing. The poem is called *Year Forty*.¹¹²

110 Interview with Genia Kleinman, born 1915, who lived in the town of Bershad, held in July 1976, YVA, O.3/4148.

111 Ehrenburg, *Liudi, godym zhizn'*, vol. 2, p. 223. In an interview held many years later, Maria Shokhat said that the agreement between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany "of course did not please us." Institute of Judaica in Kiev, p. 10.

112 Boris Slutskii was born in the Donbas District of the Ukraine, in the town of Slaviansk. He graduated from the Gorki Literary Institute, Moscow, in 1941. He published his first poems in 1941, but his other poems were not published until after Stalin's death. His special style, casting the language of poetry close to speech, constituted a major innovation in Soviet poetry and aroused a fair number of reservations. He was one of the outstanding opponents of the Stalinist regime, and a goodly number of his poems were published as *samizdat* works (the clandestine copying and distribution of government-suppressed literature). He was profoundly shaken by the Holocaust and many of his works were devoted to this subject, although he saw himself as a Russian poet and Russia as his homeland.

The day starts with newspapers,	Den' nachinaetsia s gazet,
in which there isn't a single word — not a wordlet,	V nikh ni slovechka — net,
but we still read between the lines,	no vse ravno chitaem mezhdustrok,
how easy is the task of being a prophet!	kakaia dolzhnost' legkaia — prorok!
And between the lines, each man will read his destiny	I mezhdustrok liuboi sud'bu prochtet
and chance will determine everything:	a perspektivy — vse opredeliat:
Year forty.	sorokovoi god.
A powder keg.	Porokhovoi sklad.
Playing Wagner from every stage.	Igraiut Vagnera so vsekh estrad.
And I — I am not happy at this.	A ia etomu — ne rad. ¹¹³

In this verse, the poet described the Jews' efforts to read between the lines in order to learn about the fate awaiting them, and expressed his feelings as both a Russian and a Jewish poet listening to the sound of Wagner's music, the symbol of Nazi antisemitism, from every stage.

In a similar spirit but in more explicit words, Ilya Ehrenburg wrote the following poem in January 1941:

Rachels, Chaims, and Leahs are wandering	Brodiat Rakhili, Khaimy, Lii,
Like lepers, half dead	Kak prokazhennye, poluzhivye
Stones accompany their wanderings, blind and deaf	Kamni ikh traviat, sleepy i glukhi
Barefoot old women are wandering before their deaths,	Brodiat, razuvshis' pred smert'iu, starukhi,
Young people are wandering, having been woken up at night.	Brodiat mladentsy, razbuzheny noch'iu.
Sleep pursues them, the earth does not want them	Gonit ikh son, zemlia ikh ne khochet

113 Boris Slutskii, *Godovaia strelka — Stikhi* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1971), p. 33.

To my horror, the old wound has opened up	Gore, otrkilas' staraia rana
My mother's name was Hannah.	Mat' moi u zvali po imeni — Khana. ¹¹⁴

Being highly attuned to the mindset of the Soviet authorities, poets under the Soviet regime understood that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact did not augur well for them. The Soviet Jewish writer Grigori Baklanov,¹¹⁵ who was a 16-year-old youth living in Moscow with his uncle Max Kantor when the agreement was signed, wrote in his memoirs about his feelings on the day that the pact was announced publicly: "People stood next to the newspaper display cabinet. I also went up to it. The paper was *Pravda*, and there was a photo in it: Molotov and Ribbentrop. Stalin in a white tunic. People standing next to me, looking and reading the announcement in silence. In silence they left, as if nobody saw anybody else."¹¹⁶ The young Baklanov came home to his uncle in silence and said nothing to him about the sensational announcement. Not until the evening, after they had already turned off the lights, did his forty-five year old uncle — who held a senior post in one of the major factories — say, as if casually: "Do you think ... that it's a good thing? No way is it good! ... Didn't you notice that they didn't invite [Lazar] Kaganovich to any of the negotiations?"¹¹⁷

Many years later, Baklanov expressed the Jews' distress during the twenty-two months of the alliance between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in his novel *July 1941*. The feeling of distress is expressed by one of the characters in the book — a Jewish infantry battalion commander called Brovskii, who is serving on the new Soviet-German

114 Ilya Ehrenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1977), p. 167.

115 Grigori Baklanov (Hirsch Friedman) was born in Voronezh in 1923. His mother was a dentist who married a simple man; because of her marriage, her ties with her family were severed. The father died in 1933. There was apparently no Jewish atmosphere whatsoever in the home; at least, this is the conclusion drawn from the writer's memoirs, in which he wrote that when his mother fell ill, he knelt in order to say his prayers. His mother died when he was a child, and her sisters looked after him and his brother, who was two years older. In 1939, Grigori was sent to Moscow to live with his uncle Motia (Maks Grigorevich Kantor).

116 Grigori Baklanov, *Zhizn', podarovannaia dvazhdy* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999), p. 25.

117 Ibid.

border. A few weeks before the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, Brovalskii is given leave and goes off for a visit to Moscow. After his return, as he is sitting in the forest with his comrades-in-arms, one of them asks him, "And how are things in Moscow?" Baklanov gives the following description of Brovalskii's answer:

Brovalskii started pacing the forest nervously. "I don't understand a thing, damn it" ... He suddenly blushed and because everyone saw, it was no longer possible to hide it. He stopped, his face furious and sad, [and told]... That evening [in Moscow] ... he was having dinner at a restaurant with a lady. Their table was near the door, and two German Air Force (*Luftwaffe*) men came into the restaurant. They looked around and went to a table near him, which had free seats. One of them smiled elegantly at the lady, and Brovalskii was inclined to smile. They were guests here, and according to the new agreement — friends, and he was in a certain sense the landlord — the representative of the State... Suddenly the Germans stopped and the one who a moment earlier had been smiling said out loud in German: "Kurt, get up! There's a Jew sitting here — let's get out of here" ... Brovalskii bit his lips until they bled in order not to get up and punch the German in the face. In his heart, he thought about it — something that would not have occurred to him a few years earlier ... '[Red Army] battalion commander strikes a pilot from a friendly power in a restaurant' ... And he sat down, covered in confusion, a man who is not a coward, a man who is physically strong, a Red Army battalion commander. They — the Fascists from a foreign country — are behaving as they do at home, and he, in his own home, was forced to take the undesirable consequences into account ... In his own country he himself experienced the insult of the Fascists, and could not respond.¹¹⁸

The anguish felt by Baklanov's literary hero arising out of his conflicting emotions — his loyalty to his country on the one hand, and his Jewish identity on the other — was something that many Jews experienced

118 Grigorii Baklanov, *Ia ne byl ubit na voine* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1995), pp. 70–71. The novel was initially published in a literary journal in the Soviet Union, and in 1965 came out as a book. For the next 12 years, the censor refused to approve its reprinting. See: Baklanov, *Zhizn', podarovannaia dvazhdy*, p. 176.

during the period following the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. This mental and emotional pressure was relieved in a flash with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.

The Invasion: The Pressure Is Relieved, the Troubles Begin

Ironically, Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, released the valve that had prevented Soviet Jewry from giving free rein to their conflicting fears and emotions. Once the Jewish people's bitter enemy became their country's enemy as well, they felt relieved. The following accounts bear witness to the Jews' reactions on finding out about the invasion.

A Jew, who at the time was a first-year student at the Industrial Institute in Leningrad, wrote in his memoirs about his feelings when he heard of the invasion: "I was not greatly surprised, I didn't become confused — rather, I was pleased: the end of the 'friendship' with Hitler."¹¹⁹ The Jewish researcher Chaim Loitsker¹²⁰ described his feelings on that day as follows: "Now there is no longer a contradiction between our feelings and the actual attitude to Fascist Germany. There were certain feelings toward Hitler in our country, but officially we said other things. Now everything is clear. We will strike and win."¹²¹ On June 27, 1941, Prof. Shloime Bilov¹²² expressed himself in the same spirit: "Finally a stone has been lifted from my heart. I never felt as loyal to the Soviet government as today. For two years, I was oppressed

119 Lev Syrkin, "Ia proidu do samogo kontsa," L. Aizenshtat and A. Zhuravich, eds., *Kniga zhivvykh* (St. Petersburg: Akropol', 1995), p. 55.

120 Chaim Loitsker (1898–1970) started out as a teacher at Yiddish schools and then became a researcher in the fields of education, language, and literature. Loitsker graduated from Moscow University in 1930, and worked at the Institute for Proletarian Jewish Culture at the Science Academy of Ukraine. He was arrested in 1949 and released in the mid-1950s.

121 *Kiiv u dni natsists'koi navali*, pp. 87–88.

122 Shloime Bilov (1888–1949) was born in Brest-Litovsk and after the 1907 pogroms emigrated to the United States, where he studied at college and returned to Russia in 1918. For several years he was an educator at Yiddish schools, and then became a lecturer in Jewish and general literature at institutions of higher education in Ukraine. He was arrested in 1936 but released after interrogation. He continued with his previous employment. During the Soviet-German war he finished up in Sverdlovsk in the Urals, where he became a correspondent for the Sovinformbiu — the main Soviet bureau for current information, which operated during wartime — and for the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee.

by the feeling of our friendship with Hitler — the bearer of darkness, tyranny, and antisemitism. Now all of my thoughts and emotions are in line with my country's thoughts and emotions."¹²³

Prof. Benjamin Levich,¹²⁴ a scientist and one of the heads of the Jewish National Movement in the Soviet Union in the 1970s, made similar observations in his response to a question from the American journalist, Hedrick Smith. Smith asked, "What was the best period in Russian history?" Levich replied, "The best period in our lives was [the period of] the war [the war with Nazi Germany] ... because during that time we all felt closer to our government than we ever had in our lives."¹²⁵ A young researcher called Levit from the Bacteriological Institute in Kiev said, "Finally we will strike at Hitler. We should have long since smashed those bastards to smithereens."¹²⁶ The Yiddish writer Lipe Reznik said optimistically, "I am sure that the Jews in all countries can breathe more easily now, because they know that we will destroy Hitler."¹²⁷ Writer Noah Lurie (1889–1960) was no less optimistic when he said, "In the final analysis, we will destroy Hitler, and I say this not because I am a Jew ... I can breathe more easily because I am sure that victory is ours."¹²⁸ The Jewish Kiev-based theater actor V. Shaikevitch¹²⁹ also welcomed the outbreak of the war: "It is good that this war has started, it is the beginning of the destruction of Fascist Germany."¹³⁰ And a woman writer called Levitina said during the same period: "The inevitable has happened — now let the end of Fascism come about."¹³¹

123 *Kiiv u dni natsists'koi navali*, p. 99.

124 Benjamin Levich (1917–1988) was born in Kharkov, where he graduated from university in 1937. From 1940–1957 he worked at the Institute for Physics and Chemistry at the Ukrainian Science Academy, and in 1958 was made a member of the Soviet Union Academy of Sciences for his scientific achievements. From 1958–1972, he worked at the Electro-Chemistry Institute of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow. In 1972 he submitted an application to immigrate to Israel for which he was dismissed from most of his positions. In 1977, he led a seminar of scientists in Moscow who had been refused permission to emigrate to Israel. In 1987, he immigrated to Israel where he received a chair at Tel Aviv University.

125 Hedrick Smith, *The New Russians* (New York: Avon, 1980), pp. 402–403.

126 *Kiiv u dni natsists'koi navali*, p. 97.

127 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

128 *Ibid.*, p. 92–93.

129 During the Soviet-German war, Shaikevitch was evacuated from Kiev to Ashkhabad, and then spent time in Sverdlovsk.

130 *Kiiv u dni natsists'koi navali*, p. 88.

131 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

These remarks by intellectuals expressed the satisfaction felt by large numbers of Jews in the early days of the invasion, after the discomfiture produced in them by the non-aggression pact that their country concluded with Nazi Germany. The *hoi polloi* also expressed similar sentiments. For example, a worker called Roitman in one of Kiev's factories declared, "We're used to difficulties, and they don't frighten us."¹³²

The relief felt by the Jews with the outbreak of war between Germany and the Soviet Union explains, in part at least, the fact that in the earliest days of the fighting many of them volunteered for the Red Army. Yosel Buchbinder (1909–1993), the Yiddish writer, who was not drafted for health reasons, made the following statement: "I intend to join the Red Army as a volunteer. Better to be killed on the front than in your home..."¹³³

In conclusion, during the period between the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, many Jewish Soviet citizens felt a profound sense of discomfiture at not being able to bridge the yawning abyss between themselves and their country because of the pact that it had concluded with the Nazis. The information that they obtained in a variety of ways, primarily by word of mouth, about what the Nazis were doing to the Jews in the countries that they had occupied aroused feelings of anguish and apprehension in them — feelings which strengthened, in particular, the emotional contradiction and accompanying distress, which they could only share with other Jews.

These feelings on the part of many Jews in pre-World War II borders of the Soviet Union were, ironically, replaced by a sigh of relief when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union — an invasion that put an end to the pact between the two nations, but in practice also marked the beginning of the systematic destruction of European Jewry.

Translated from the Hebrew by Ruth Morris
Language Editing: David Brauner

132 Ibid., p. 88.

133 Ibid., p. 99.