

GLOBAL CRISIS IN MEMORY

Russia's State Mobilization of the Holocaust Onscreen – Konstantin Khabensky's Film *Sobibor* (2018)

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Konstantin Khabensky's 2018 film, *Sobibor*, is one of the first Holocaust films of the Russian Federation; for a long time, the Holocaust had been subsumed within the narrative of the 'Great Patriotic War' and the specificity of Jewish suffering had not been emphasized. This article will argue that in *Sobibor*, the character of Alexander Pechersky represents the brave, heroic, victorious Soviet Union, and through association the current Russian Federation, which saved Europe from the so-called yoke of fascism once before and will continue to do so as a Eurasian superpower. On the other hand, the Polish Jews are shown to be weak, subservient prisoners, a recent development in hostile Russo-Polish relations of the last decade.

Until recently, neither the Soviet Union nor an independent Russia sought to highlight the uniqueness of the Holocaust as a phenomenon. For a long time, it had very little visibility; when acknowledged, it was ultimately subsumed within a wider state narrative of the 'Great Patriotic War', and the specificity of Jewish suffering was not emphasized (Gershenson 2). Yet since 2012 this has changed, not as a result of Holocaust memory activism from below, but rather as part of Vladimir Putin's return to power. For the first time the state of the Russian Federation has started to develop a specific Holocaust memory which stresses Soviet heroism, the fascist leaning of former republics and contemporary Russia's supposedly tolerant, multicultural society in which the most painful periods of history are confronted.

This article addresses one of the most recent developments in state Holocaust memory in the Russian Federation by examining Konstantin Khabensky's 2018 film *Sobibor* and its engagement with the theme of Soviet heroism. It argues that the film should be considered a product of state-directed culture, both created and financed by the Russian state, and that *Sobibor* employs the Holocaust story in an attempt to vilify Poland – the latest development in hostile Russo–Polish relations since the Smolensk plane crash in 2010 and the Polish decision to support Ukraine following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. The narrative of the film is closely aligned to other historical narratives used by Putin's government, by highlighting the role played by the Soviet Union in saving Europe from the so-called yoke of fascism. This should be understood as part of a broader anti-Western *Kulturkampf* employed by the Russian state to establish the idea of a distinct Eurasian civilizational space with a distinct value system. Russian adherence to religious Orthodoxy is used to justify its self-classification as the defender of true European values, and the state regularly criticizes a liberal,

multicultural West that supports 'gender ideology', including feminism and LGBTQ issues. While Russia once distinguished itself by marginalizing any claim to the specific importance of the Holocaust in remembering the twentieth century, it now seeks to instrumentalize this memory to assert the idea that it is part of a superior civilizational zone that draws on the Holocaust's legacy and deploys it in many ways both at home and abroad – where it is used to highlight Russian strength as a conservative Eurasian superpower, thereby defending its claim to rewrite history and restoring its international legitimacy after the annexation of Crimea.

It is also important to note that this new memorial culture in the Russian Federation arose in reaction to transnational debates. On one hand, it can be considered a response to what has been termed by scholars such as Levy and Sznajder (*Memory Unbound*) as a 'cosmopolitan' Holocaust memory that has underpinned a Western-dominated human rights regime (Levy and Sznajder, *The institutionalization of cosmopolitan morality* 143) and the identity of the European Union (Kucia 114). The memory of the Holocaust is often invoked to function as 'a frame of reference justifying action', particularly for humanitarian military interventions that seek to 'prevent genocide' (Levy and Sznajder, *The institutionalization of cosmopolitan morality* 143). The EU has contributed towards the institutionalization of this memory (Kucia 98). For example, in 2005 the Day of the Liberation of Auschwitz (27 January) was declared a European day of Holocaust commemoration, thereby rendering participation in Holocaust memory 'part of the entry ticket into the EU' (Assmann 549).

It can also be considered a rebuttal of the memory politics of Central and Eastern Europe. When these states sought accession to the EU in 2005/2008, they too had to engage with the memory of the Holocaust (Neumayer). Once they had joined the EU, however, new populist governments could more explicitly argue that the Holocaust narrative disseminated across Western Europe was irrelevant to the memories and experiences of Central and Eastern Europe (Subotić, "Political memory, ontological security" 299, 300). Such groups, now politically dominant, could, without the pressures of EU conditionality during the accession process, further foreground national identities centred around 'memory of Stalinism and Soviet occupation', as opposed to Holocaust memory (Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star* 11). They have preferred to focus on the suffering of their own nation at the hands of communism, to demonize the criminality of communism and hence, by association, Soviet and Russian hegemony. This has long served as a decolonizing tactic for many nations in the post-Soviet Bloc. The Western understanding of the Holocaust is a critical threat to this narrative (Ibid.), so some countries of the region have instead commemorated the two occupations alongside one another, often using the period of Nazi occupation primarily to demonize the Soviet era by association. This has been achieved through the establishment of the 'double genocide' theory, institutionalized by the 2008 Prague Declaration (Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star* 38, 39).

Russian Holocaust memory can also be viewed as part of a new anti-Western cultural war waged by populists in Eastern Europe – who claim to represent the true Europe. In this sense, this new intervention can be seen as a product of an emerging authoritarian populist internationalism that includes Poland and Hungary. Together, they have told a version of this history that highlights their own innocence – this has been observable since 1989 but has accelerated in its intensity and been given legal form in recent years. For example, in 2018 the Polish government announced that claims that Poland was responsible for crimes committed by the Nazis on Polish territory would be criminalized, rendering acknowledgement of Polish participation in the 1941 Jedwabne pogrom illegal, as well as several other cases of Polish cooperation with Nazi Germany. The crime was shortly after downgraded to a civil, as opposed to a criminal, offence though (Bauer).

Moreover, Viktor Orbán has employed both antisemitic and anti-antisemitic tropes in the name of protecting the Hungarian nation. Like many populists, he looked in both directions,

playing with liberal historical tropes in order to undermine them. On the one hand, Jewish philanthropist George Soros has been demonized by Orbán. Soros has frequently been targeted by the Hungarian populist government, singled out as an enemy of the state because of his funding of pro-democracy and human rights groups, as well as his support of open borders and immigration. This has been openly displayed in state-funded billboards with the slogan 'Let's not allow Soros to have the last laugh' (Baker). On the other hand, Holocaust memory has also been promoted in Hungary, for example in the new Holocaust museum, the House of Fates. Yet, this is a repackaged form of Holocaust memory: it asserts that Christian Hungarians were innocent of participation in the atrocity. Concern about this new Holocaust memory was expressed by Israeli Holocaust researcher, Yehuda Bauer, regarding the involvement of the Public Foundation for the Research of Central and East European History and Society in the museum. Bauer argued that the Head of the Foundation, Maria Schmidt, 'claims that the moment the Germans entered Hungary, the Hungarians had no way to oppose them' (Aderet). Moreover, Holocaust memory is now advocated as a vital tool in the fight against the Islamification of Europe since the 'migrant crisis' in 2015. The Orbán government argues that the lessons of the Holocaust now lie in the protection of white European culture from the Islamic invader. There is a long history of Jewishness being on the boundaries of European whiteness, but in the case of Hungary, in order to justify the revival of the political rhetoric of protection of the nation from the Orient, 'white European culture' *does* include the Jewish community and Jews have now been recast as fully Hungarian. They deserve to be protected in the present, now threatened by an antisemitic Islamic world.

Unsurprisingly, this ethnonationalization of Holocaust memory in Hungary has not gone unnoticed in Israel, and it has been particularly unpopular among Israeli left and centrist politicians (Friedman). Yet, the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has supported the ethnonationalist development in Hungary. The Hungarian government spokesperson Zoltán Kovács explained this alliance as the product of the joint values shared by Netanyahu and Orbán, namely their dedication to political pragmatism, as they are both in charge of small countries surrounded by much larger regional powers. However, their allegiance extends beyond geopolitical similarities. Netanyahu and Orbán both hope to disrupt EU policy, and Netanyahu also sought to court Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia to achieve this. Netanyahu turned a blind eye to antisemitism and Holocaust revisionism in Central and Eastern Europe because he intended to use these EU members as a proxy for obstruction of EU condemnations of Israel, such as outrage over the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem in 2018 (Pfeffer). The Netanyahu–Orbán relationship can also be attributed to shared anti-Islamism (Friedman).

It is therefore evident that ethnonationalist links are being established between populist partners in Hungary, Poland and Israel who seek to line up alongside a historical memory that is at odds with the values of a 'liberal West'. New forms of nationalist Holocaust memory are being constructed as an alternative to the transnational liberal cosmopolitan 'Never Again' form that has dominated since the 1990s. Russian Holocaust memory should also be considered part of this right-wing, authoritarian transnational alliance.

In the film *Sobibor*, the Russian state has sought to write a positivist history of the Holocaust. On one hand it revived a now very well-established trope of the Soviets as heroic saviours of Europe from fascism, while placing such narratives in a new context – that of the specificity of Soviet *Jewish* heroism and the role of these individuals as liberators of camps. Konstantin Khabensky's *Sobibor* is part of this transnational struggle over culture and memory.

The preservation of the memory of the heroism of those who led the Sobibór revolt on 14 October 1943 reached interstate level in 2012 when, during a trip to Israel, Putin and the Minister of Information and Diaspora of the State of Israel Yuli Edelstein agreed to work together ("The Foundation of Alexander Pechersky"; Lipshiz). They agreed to cooperate in

commemorating the 75th anniversary of the uprising, and this started the process that eventually resulted in the film *Sobibor* (Lipshiz). This was a brave venture, given the lack of Holocaust films and limited representation of the lives of Soviet Jewish soldiers and Soviet prisoners of war in the cultural sphere of the Russian Federation. This film was one of the first in the Russian Federation to truly confront all these themes, and the decision to engage with these previously marginalized memories must be considered a state-endorsed initiative, given Putin's role in the process and the Ministry of Culture's funding of the project – the latter fact confirmed by the director Khabensky (“Konstantin Khabensky – about the nomination of the film ‘Sobibor’”).

The Sobibór revolt's leader Alexander Pechersky has only come to acquire a prominent role in national commemorations in Russia in the 2010s. Prior to this, the camp and the revolt were barely acknowledged. Soviet authorities could not commemorate Pechersky's heroism for two principal reasons: neither his Jewish heritage nor his status as a Soviet prisoner of war fitted the Soviet commemorative narrative in the aftermath of the war (Lipshiz). The Soviet government sought to universalize the suffering of the Holocaust, focusing on the tragedy experienced by *all* Soviet citizens during the war and refusing to acknowledge the specificity of Jewish suffering (Gershenson 2). It also struggled with commemoration of Soviet prisoners of war, having presumed that they had been “contaminated” by the enemy' (Polian 124).

Yet, since 2011, in line with the increased engagement with the Holocaust in the Russian Federation, Pechersky's identity has shifted in the eyes of the Russian state from one of a shameful Jewish prisoner of war to a Soviet hero whose bravery must be officially recognized. The *Fond Aleksandra Pecherskogo* was set up in 2011 as an organization that fights for the official recognition of heroes of the revolt and the popularization of their actions (“About”). A monument has been built in Pechersky's honour in Rostov-on-Don, his hometown (“In Rostov-on-don”), the Kremlin rights council requested that Pechersky receive the Hero of Russia award (Sheva) and an exhibition on the extermination camp was displayed at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Centre in Moscow in January 2018 (“Sobibor: Victorious over Death”).

The Russian state was also keen to commemorate the Sobibór uprising beyond its borders, as it provided a site through which to narrate the state's version of the Holocaust to an international audience. It also wished to contest the way in which Sobibór has been represented by others: most notably, Russia's exclusion from a committee dedicated to the renovation of the museum at the site of the camp. While originally invited in 2013 to participate, alongside representatives from Poland, Israel, the Netherlands and Slovakia, Russia never actually managed to successfully join the committee. In 2017, Poland decided to exclude Russia officially from the process, having established several conditions to Russia's participation that, according to the Russian Foreign Ministry, were never communicated (Ministerstvo inostrannikh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii). The Foreign Ministry responded to this exclusion with the following statement:

We consider the adoption of such a decision immoral from the point of view of historical truth. It is difficult to deny that Russia's participation in the creation of the updated Museum-Memorial ‘Sobibór’ is absolutely justified [...] The intention behind preventing Russian participation in the project is part of a Russophobia that has been openly demonstrated of late in Warsaw and the desire of the Poles to impose their vision of history, diminishing the liberating role of the USSR and the Red Army in World War II. (Ministerstvo inostrannikh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii, my own translation)

It is precisely within this context of Russo–Polish tension that the film positions itself: as a means of reaffirming Russian 'ownership' of the Sobibór revolt and as a recent development in the ongoing Russo–Polish antagonism of the 2010s.

In the film itself, Jewish victimization and passivity are externalized and nationalized; it is only Polish Jews who are shown as passive, weak individuals, such as Chaim Engel, the submissive recipient of incessant SS beatings. The Polish Jews do not fight back against the Nazi enemy. Drawing on a long tradition of the presentation of Jewish passivity by Western films such as *Schindler's List* (1993) and Israeli post-war films, Polish Jews in *Sobibor* are portrayed as weak and gullible, going like sheep to the slaughter. The role that Polish Jews played in the revolt is severely downplayed in Khabensky's production. It seems that they do not deserve to be credited properly for their participation in (and leadership of) the revolt. This is particularly noticeable with the case of Polish Jew Leon Feldhendler. Despite the existence of a wealth of literature that attests to the prominent role he played in the revolt's organization and execution,¹ his role is diminished in the film. Indeed, Samuel Lerer, in his 1995 testimony housed at the Shoah Visual History Archive, argued that Feldhendler was the more significant leader of the escape, rather than Pechersky. Feldhendler had the connections and inside knowledge of how Sobibór worked; he was the brains behind the escape operation, whereas the Russians were its muscles (Leydesdorff 115). Yet, in the film Feldhendler's role is so depreciated that 'Leo', as he is referred to in the credits, is even killed during the revolt. However, Leon Feldhendler in fact survived until 1945 when he was murdered in Lublin (Rashke 357). This is one of several factual errors in the film. In a similar way to 'Leo', other Polish Jews are also not given the privilege of a surname in the film's credits, with Chaim Engel solely referenced as 'Khaim'. They are thus reduced to the status of insignificant individuals, who do not deserve to be acknowledged properly with a surname.

By contrast, it is only the heroism of the Soviet leaders that enables the revolt to take place; however, for one of the first times in Russian film, it is specifically the Soviet *Jewish* fighter who embodies the Soviet mission to rid Europe of fascism. This is a surprising phenomenon given that before 2018 the specificity of Jewish contributions to the Soviet war effort in either communist or post-communist memory was not picked out. This rebranding of Pechersky must be considered within Putin's broader engagement with the Jewish community in the Russian Federation and attempts to enhance Russo–Israeli international relations after a fraught year because of the Syrian Civil War. A fragment of the film was indeed shown to Netanyahu on International Holocaust Remembrance Day 2018, as a means of highlighting Russian dedication to the preservation of the memory of the Jewish tragedy ("Escape from a Nazi death camp").

In the film, Soviet Jews are presented as part of a heroic Great Patriotic War myth of the brave Soviet fighter, a framing that has continued into post-communism. Pechersky is used to illustrate this point – a potential resistance leader who is so aware of the Nazi threat that he decides that his only chance at survival is through orchestrating an uprising. The audience is first introduced to him when he is threatened with a knife because other prisoners do not believe that he is truly a Jew. He decides to drop his trousers and demonstrate his 'Jewishness' to all, which could be interpreted as either a sign of Russian machismo or merely as the sole way for him to prove his heritage to those around him. It is not clear in Khabensky's interviews thus far where this imagery originates.

¹ Examples include: Bartrop, Paul R. *Resisting the Holocaust: Upstanders, Partisans, and Survivors*. ABC-CLIO, 2016; Gilbert, Martin. *The Second World War: A Complete History*. Rosetta Books, 2014; Rashke, Richard. *Escape from Sobibor*. University of Illinois Press, 1995; Schelvis, Jules. *Sobibor: A History of a Nazi Death Camp*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014.

Throughout the film, Pechersky's strength and masculinity are irrefutable: his work as a carpenter, compared to the Polish Jews who sift through jewellery; his bravery in chopping up a tree stump in under five minutes to save his fellow prisoners; his survival of the Nazis' game of pony, in which the prisoners must act as if they were horses and carry the SS officers in circles at a Nazi party. This scene is important in that it shows the impact of the genre of Nazisploitation on the film.² The SS officers are portrayed as feminized, homosexual individuals, who seek sexual gratification from inflicting pain upon others – a characterization that alludes to the feminization of a liberal Western multicultural Europe. This is in sharp contrast to the traditional values adhered to by the film's Soviet Jewish soldiers, above all Pechersky, whose strength and courage are most profoundly displayed in the final scene.

Not only does Pechersky lead the revolt, both in its organization and execution, but his bravery is most explicitly depicted in his decision to return to the camp to find Luka, a female prisoner who had kissed him in a previous scene. In contrast to the Jews who submissively tip their hats as a sign of respect to the Nazi officer Karl Frenzel during their hour of escape, Pechersky runs against the flow of traffic, returning to the cacophony of gunfire to find Luka's dead body, and slowly carries her through the fields, defiant in the face of possible death at the hands of the Nazi guards. Pechersky is the valiant, heroic leader who puts the needs of others before himself, protecting those around him, and it is this image of the Soviet Union that Russia wants to show the world. This is an interesting case, once again, of Russia claiming to be the true, stronger, more masculine Europe and as defender of European values; now, however, it takes the Holocaust and remakes it in its own state-sponsored images to make this point. Russia is using such stories to imply that it can be trusted to protect Europe from what are considered fascist-nationalist revivals in former republics, most notably in Ukraine. In this sense, this new Holocaust memory is also shaped by the politics of the conflict over Crimea.

In conclusion, the film *Sobibor* must be considered within the broader right-wing invocations of the Holocaust taking place in the post-communist world: not only in Russia but also in Poland and Hungary. Such countries are attempting to rewrite history in order to redefine their geopolitical roles and place in Europe.

In the film, Pechersky represents the brave, heroic, victorious Soviet Union, and through association the current Russian Federation, which protected Europe once before and will continue to do so as a Eurasian superpower. On the other hand, the Polish Jews are shown to be weak, subservient prisoners who only manage to escape Sobibór camp thanks to the courage and heroism of the Soviet Jews. This classification of the Polish Jews echoes the idea that EU countries, such as Poland, who have since embraced NATO and Western integration, are also weak and that they have sacrificed their dedication to true European Christian values in pursuit of such Western-centric agendas. To the East, a newly emerging populist, masculine authoritarian Europe has now started to legitimize itself internationally through drawing on Holocaust memory. The Russian state are 'standard bearers' of this offensive (Mark et al. 304).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor James Mark and Dr Nicholas Terry for their incredibly helpful discussions about this topic, and comments and suggestions on previous versions of this article.

² For further reading about Nazisploitation, see *Nazisploitation!: The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, edited by Daniel H. Magilow, Elizabeth Bridges and Kristin T. Vander Lugt. Continuum, 2012.

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How to cite this article: Sawkins, I 2020 Russia's State Mobilization of the Holocaust Onscreen – Konstantin Khabensky's Film *Sobibor* (2018). *Modern Languages Open*, 2020(1): 23 pp. 1–8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.314>

Published: 04 August 2020

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