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An Essay on Archival Sources to Study the Soviet Army's Response to the Holocaust

Abstract

This essay reflects on the sources that are available for the study of the Red Army's encounter with the Holocaust. It discusses the accessibility of various archives in Russia and focusses on informational reports, a type of intelligence documents that the Soviet armed forces produced about the newly occupied territories.

Archives

There are two principal depositories for the Soviet Union's Red Army: the Tsentral'nyy arkhiv Ministerstva oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii (TsAMO RF) (Central Archive of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation) in Podolsk, just outside Moscow, and the Rossiiskii Gosudarstvenni Voennyi Arkhiv (RGVA) (Russian State Military Archive) in the capital city.¹ The Red Army documents from the 'Great Patriotic War', as the Axis-Soviet war was known in the Soviet Union, are held at TsAMO, as are all post-war military materials.

TsAMO remains under the jurisdiction of Russia's conservative Ministry of Defence, which is usually not open to working with foreigners. In addition, the Ministry of Defence has a strong interest in defending the Red Army's supposedly heroic wartime role. For these two reasons, foreigners have not been allowed to work in TsAMO, although there have been a few exceptions.² Russian historians, by contrast, are allowed access to TsAMO. However, they require recommendations from well-established Russian historians. It is important to note that according to Russian historians who have worked in TsAMO, parts of the archive are fully inaccessible to all researchers, including records from military tribunals responsible for the suppression of deserters and criminals in the ranks.³

Historians usually seek to overcome restrictions on research in TsAMO by relying on published documents. The only booklet based on TsAMO documents de-

- 1 The Central Military-Naval Archive, which contains documents from the wartime Soviet sea and river fleets, is a subsidiary of TsAMO, and thus it is also part of the Ministry of Defence.
- 2 British military historian Antony Beevor was given access to TsAMO for his books *Stalingrad*, published in New York 1998, and *Berlin. The Downfall*, published in London 2002. Beevor's fascinating account of how he obtained permission to work in TsAMO and the military authorities' attempts to control his research is available online: The National Archives, Writer of the Month. Stalingrad and Berlin. Researching the Reality of War, <https://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/stalingrad-and-berlin-researching-the-reality-of-war/> (10 August 2019).
- 3 Aleksey Timofejev, *Rusi i drugi svetski rat u Jugoslaviji. Uticaj SSSR-a i ruskih emigranata na događaje u Jugoslaviji 1941–1945* [Russians and the Second World War in Yugoslavia. The Influence of the USSR and Russian Émigrés on Events in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945], Belgrade 2011, 221.

voted solely to the Holocaust, at 130 pages, is rather thin.⁴ The most notable general collection of documents is the Ministry of Defence's ongoing project *Russkii Arkhiv. Velikaia Otechestvennaia* (Russian Archive. The Great Patriotic War), which currently encompasses twelve volumes comprising 24 books and over 5,000 pages. In this large mass of documents, there are a handful references to the Soviet army's response to the Holocaust.⁵

Additionally, TsAMO copied some of its materials and shared these with other institutions and archives around the world. For instance, TsAMO transferred a large number of documents about the liberation of Ukraine from 1943 and 1944 to the Ukrainian Communist Party after the war, and these documents are now available in the Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads'kykh ob'iednan' Ukrainy (TsDAHO) (Central State Archives of Public Organisations of Ukraine), the former archive of the Communist Party, along with other Ukrainian Communist Party records.⁶ Similarly, TsAMO shared with the Yugoslav People's Army some of its documents about the Red Army's operation in Yugoslavia in 1944 and 1945. These materials are now held in the Vojni Arhiv Srbije (Military Archive of Serbia) in Belgrade.⁷ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, TsAMO also shared some of its Holocaust-related materials with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington DC and Yad Vashem Archives in Jerusalem. USHMM holds documents from the Red Army War Crime Commissions (many of which focus on Jewish victims) and numerous Soviet reports on the Holocaust, including informational reports.⁸ Although I has not worked in the Yad Vashem Archives, their collections from TsAMO appear to be even more voluminous and also include informational reports.⁹ It is very likely that other archives across the former Soviet bloc also hold some documents from TsAMO, although I have not personally verified this.

Russia's second Soviet-era military archive, RGVA, holds all military documents dating before 'Operation Barbarossa', including from the Soviet-Finnish Winter War. Especially relevant for the study of the Holocaust is the fact that RGVA also holds documents from the so-called internal troops (*vnutrennie voiska*), under the control of the Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (NKVD) (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs), for the entire period of the Soviet Union's existence, including the Second World War. As part of this collection, RGVA has documents generated by the NKVD Army for the Protection of the Rear of the Red Army (the NKVD Army) during the Second World War, which were under the joint control of the Red Army and the NKVD.¹⁰ The NKVD Army also received many regular Red Army documents, especially orders from the fronts and the high command

4 F. F. (ed.), *Dokumenty obviniaiat. Kholokost: svidetel'stva Krasnoi Armii* [Documents Accuse. The Holocaust: Red Army Testimonials], Moscow 1996.

5 V. A. Zolotarev et al. (ed.), *Russkii Arkhiv. Velikaia Otechestvennaia* [Russian Archive. The Great Patriotic War], Moscow 1993–2001.

6 See for instance: TsDAGO, fund 57, opis 4, delo 96, copies of reports, memoranda, briefs and witness testimonies of Ukrainian Fronts on the state and repairs of railroads, roads, and bridges in the liberated parts of Ukraine and the process of mobilisation in the liberated parts of Ukraine.

7 Vojni Arhiv Srbije, fund NOVJ, kutija 96.

8 These are only some of the collections from TsAMO held at USHMM, for example Military Commissions of the Red Army RG 22.016 and Records Relating to Auschwitz and other camps, RG 22.0008. USHMM also has a much larger collection of documents from the Communist Party and the state archives, but these are distinct from the Red Army documents.

9 See for instance the following description by the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure Description of Yad Vashem TsAMO collections, https://portal.ehri-project.eu/units/il-002798-m_40-map (10 August 2019).

10 For a more detailed discussion of the NKVD Army's relationship to the regular Red Army, see below.

in Moscow. RGVA, in contrast to TsAMO, is under the jurisdiction of the civilian Federal Archival Agency. As such, RGVA materials are easily available to scholars.

The NKVD Army

Given the inaccessibility of TsAMO, my research has been based mostly on sources from RGVA and the NKVD Army, in addition to materials found in Belgrade, Washington DC, and Kiev. It should be noted that my research has focused on the Second and Third Ukrainian Fronts (army groups), a rather small fraction of the total of ten fronts that the Red Army deployed in Europe (three Baltic Fronts, three Belorussian Fronts, and four Ukrainian Fronts) in the last year of the war. Consequently, the author did not work with the majority of NKVD Army documents, including informational reports produced by the NKVD Armies which belonged to eight other army groups in Europe.

To contextualise the discussion surrounding the informational reports produced by the NKVD Army, a brief discussion of the NKVD Army itself is necessary. The Kremlin created the NKVD Army during the war by combining various forces of the Commissariat for Internal Affairs, including border guards, railroad troops, and internal security troops. The NKVD Army followed the regular military in the rear and carried out a wide range of sensitive and important tasks, providing intelligence, handling prisoners of war, enforcing discipline, combatting Axis partisans, and occasionally fighting on the frontlines. The NKVD Army was under the Red Army's operational control, meaning that the army leadership on the fronts could assign it specific tasks, but it had a separate chain of command. It was subordinate to the Chief of the Main Directorate of the NKVD Army for the Protection of the Rear of the Red Army headed by Lieutenant-General Gorbatiuk.¹¹ Gorbatiuk's boss was Lavrenti Beria, the wartime NKVD leader and one of Stalin's most trusted and powerful deputies.

Informational Reports

The following discussion of informational reports is based on RGVA fund 3900 (The NKVD Army for the Protection of the Third Ukrainian Front), file (*delo*) 458, which is called state of the cities (*sostianee gorodov*). File 458 contains dozens of informational reports from 1944 and 1945. Thus, the discussion will focus on informational reports generated by the NKVD Army of the Third Ukrainian Front.

Informational reports – whether produced by the NKVD Army or the regular army – were part of the Soviet army's standard intelligence gathering in the territories that it occupied. The reports recorded the local population's attitude towards the Red Army, the ethnic and social make-up of residents, the local political parties, recent history, and important industrial enterprises. Only a small proportion of the informational reports discussed the fate of wartime Jews and, when they did, it was usually in the context of recent history. The information gathered in the reports was sent up the ranks, all the way from the regimental level to Moscow.

¹¹ RGVA, f. 32900, op. 1, d.172, l. 21.

Soviet officers penned these documents about cities, regions, and sometimes even entire countries within weeks of the Red Army's arrival. The authors of the informational reports seemed to have held the rank of major and higher. They hailed from different branches of the armed forces; among the authors were political officers, unit commanders, and intelligence officers. Although officers did not report their sources, they were presumably based on information obtained from local sources.

I did not find specific guidelines that officers were required to follow in their reports, although they certainly existed. When officers wrote inadequate reports, they were criticised. For instance, Major Mishin, head of the political department of the 25th Border Guard Regiment, wrote an informational report about the city of Belgrade on 12 December 1944. The report was terse and lacked any interesting details. Mishin's boss, Lieutenant-Colonel Naneishvili, the head of the political department of the NKVD Army for the Protection of the Rear of the Third Ukrainian Front, wrote in red crayon on the document: "Well! Very, very vague! One can find more information in an encyclopaedia."¹²

Mishin, evidently, took the criticism seriously. His subsequent informational report on the Hungarian city of Kaposvár was more detailed. It included a discussion of the city's population, its ethnic and class makeup, the city's industrial and economic development, the state of communications and transport, and the political background of the local police force (which was controlled by the Red Army), among other things.¹³ Mishin also went into a detailed discussion of the political parties that were active in Kaposvár prior to the Red Army's arrival, in which he also focussed on the Holocaust. He outlined how the Arrow Cross Party, headed by Ferenc Szálasi, was established in 1938 and argued that the party's main aims included: "Overthrow of the existing order and the establishment in Hungary of a National Socialist order based on the principles of German fascism." The document went on to enumerate the Arrow Cross' main policies, including, "expulsion and destruction of the Jewish population living in the territory of Hungary".¹⁴ It is noteworthy that his superior underlined the sentence on Arrow Cross policies towards Jews, indicating that for him this was an important piece of information.

Lieutenant-Colonel A. Sokolov, deputy commander of the NKVD Army for the Protection of the Rear of the Third Ukrainian Front, also submitted an informational report on Hungary to Naneishvili on 26 December 1944.¹⁵ This was a detailed report, including a discussion of Hungarian post-First World War revisionism towards Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia, Budapest's role in the Axis war against the Soviet Union, economic ties between Germany and Hungary, the administrative division of Hungary, its social, political and economic situation on the eve of the Soviet invasion, the prevailing mood in the Hungarian army, and much more. The report was ten pages long, and Sokolov devoted about half a page to the wartime fate of the Jews. This is what he had to say on the topic:

"The Jewish national question arose in Hungary after laws against Jews were introduced in 1938 and 1939 upon Hitler's demand. Jews' electoral and economic rights were restricted. Jewish capitalists were able to evade these restrictions, but as far as poorer layers of Jewry and the intelligentsia are concerned, their opportunities for at least a bearable existence were gradually diminished. After the occupation of the country, Hitlerites carried out mass

¹² RGVA, f. 32900, op. 1, d. 458, l. 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, ll. 28-30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55-65.

arrests and punishments against Jews, forcing thousands of Jews into concentration camps, confiscating their property, and, according to the Hitlerite method, creating ghettos. In 1944, laws against Jews expanded to include spouses of Jews, as well as children of mixed marriages up to the third generation. Therefore, the total number of victims of persecution under that 'law' exceeded one million people. The Hungarian rulers applied Hitler's trusted method – 'antisemitic poison.'¹⁶

From the perspective of twenty-first century historians, Sokolov's analysis had some flaws. He perhaps overemphasised Hitler's role while minimising the antisemitic attitudes and policies of successive Hungarian governments. Nonetheless, it is interesting that Sokolov stressed the gradual progression of measures against Jews from legal restrictions to mass murder and how these policies impacted various strata of Jewish society in different ways. Overall, his analysis was impressive, given that when Sokolov wrote the report the Red Army had occupied only parts of southern and eastern Hungary. Thus, it was unlikely that Sokolov had comprehensive information on what was happening to Hungarian Jewry in Budapest and other parts of the country.

Informational reports are insufficiently rich in detail to be used as historical sources for the study of the Holocaust itself. Only some informational reports discussed what happened to Jews during the war. Even then, as evident in Mishkin and Sokolov's reports, the topic was addressed rather briefly, in several paragraphs at most. Even though the author has seen only a minority of all the NKVD Army's informational reports (but almost all available reports by the NKVD Armies of the Second and Third Ukrainian Fronts), it is extremely unlikely that any contain information that cannot be learned from the archives of perpetrator countries or personal accounts from victims, bystanders, or perpetrators. However, informational reports are a useful source for understanding the Red Army's relationship to the Holocaust – which is how I use the informational reports in my research. Informational reports can illuminate how much the Red Army knew about the Holocaust and how the Soviets viewed and responded to the mass murder of Jews.

According to several scholars of the Soviet armed forces, there was an increase in popular antisemitism in the Red Army during the war.¹⁷ There were two different reasons for the upsurge in anti-Jewish attitudes. As contemporary Jewish Soviet intellectuals noted – Ilya Ehrenburg (the most prominent wartime Soviet military journalist) and Boris Slutsky (a well-known post-war poet who served in the army during the war), the Nazi propaganda and Russo-centric nationalism bred popular anti-Jewish attitudes.¹⁸ However, there is no real evidence that the Soviet state initiated antisemitic policies, at least not until well after the war in the late 1940s. It is difficult to determine to what degree, if at all, the wave of Russian nationalism from below shaped the Soviet officers' informational reports about European countries. However, Soviet officers, if they discussed the Axis' treatment of Jews at all, always condemned their enemies' antisemitism and their crimes against Jews. At the same time, officers in the majority of informational reports omitted any mention of Jews, indicating that for most of these officers, the Holocaust was not an important issue.

¹⁶ Ibid., 58.

¹⁷ Il'ia Al'tman, *Zhertvy nenavisti. Kholokost v SSSR 1941–1945gg* [Victims of Hatred. The Holocaust in the USSR 1941–1945], Moscow 2002, 405–408; Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War. Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945*, London 2005, 152–153.

¹⁸ On Ehrenburg, see: Mordechai Altshuler, *Jewish Combatants of the Red Army Confront the Holocaust*, in: Harriet Murav/Gennady Estraiikh (ed.), *Soviet Jews in World War II. Fighting, Witnessing, Remembering*, Boston 2014, 30; on Slutsky, see: Boris Slutsky, *Zapiski o Voine. Stikhotvorenniia i ballady* [Notes on the War. Poetry and Ballads], St. Petersburg 2000, 149 and 154.

Conclusion

The Red Army's responses to the Axis genocide against Jews is an understudied topic, especially considering the intense interest in how the Western armies responded to the Holocaust.¹⁹ One of the reasons why there is little information on the Soviet armed forces' response to the genocide is the fact that TsAMO, the Red Army's main wartime archive, is inaccessible to foreign researchers. Historians working on the Red Army usually overcome this challenge by seeking information relating to the Red Army in other Soviet or foreign archives. My solution has been to concentrate on the NKVD Army documents in RGVA while also looking for military documents in different archives. The informational reports offer insights into how the Red Army made sense of the territories falling under its control and, in this context, the informational reports also illuminate the Soviet military's relationship to the Holocaust.

¹⁹ There are numerous books on this topic, the most recent being Mark Celinscak, *Distance From the Belsen Heap. Allied Forces and the Liberation of a Nazi Concentration Camp*, Toronto 2015.

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