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## Russian revisionism: Holocaust denial and the new nationalist historiography<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT** Holocaust denial has appeared in Russia only recently and has attracted almost no attention in the academic sphere, and relatively little from monitoring organizations. The research for this article—examining the place of Holocaust denial in contemporary Russia—was conducted over three months in Russia and on the Internet. The results indicate that the phenomenon remains of marginal significance and that the majority of material is of western origin. While there are several factors that make the development of Holocaust denial probable—the comparatively high level of antisemitism in Russia, post-Soviet suspicion of historiography and lack of education about the Holocaust—the Soviet war experience and associated anti-Nazi feeling arguably act as restraints on those who would propagate it. Rock concludes that Holocaust-denial material is of less importance than other antisemitic revisions of Russian history that have entered the mainstream of contemporary Russian society.

**KEYWORDS** *antisemitism, collective memory, Holocaust denial, Internet, post-Soviet extremism, revisionism, Russia*

It is widely acknowledged that, in the decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russians have had to refashion their identity in a very uncertain world. As part of this process, in both popular and academic spheres, attempts have been made to rehabilitate the pre-Soviet past and to explain the immense upheavals of modern Russian history. Typical of the difficult *glasnost* period are declarations such as historian V. A. Kozlov's: 'We need to write history in a new way—it needs to be cleansed of distortion and suppression'.<sup>2</sup>

Such a revision of 'collective memory',<sup>3</sup> whilst necessary and potentially beneficial, has been characterized in some instances by antisemitic bias and fabrications. Arguably this is a reflection of widespread antisemitism

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2 V. A. Kozlov *et al.*, *Istoricheskii opyt i perestroika* (Moscow: Mysl' 1989), 3.

3 According to Professor Robert E. Johnson of the Stalin-Era Research and Archives Project ([www.utoronto.ca/serap/](http://www.utoronto.ca/serap/)), the term 'revisionism' in Russian historiography is generally used to refer to 'a cohort of scholars who began publishing in the 1970s, offering a view of Soviet

amongst the populace. According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), more than 44 per cent of the Russian population hold strong antisemitic views,<sup>4</sup> in comparison with 12 per cent in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Sociologist Lev Gudkov paints a less dramatic but still negative picture, concluding that 6–10 per cent of Russians ‘harbor aggressive hatred toward Jews’, a further 15 per cent are ‘passively antisemitic’ and 30 per cent are selectively so (they might, for example, be seen to be ‘enjoying work with Jewish colleagues but fretting over the perceived increase of Jews’ influence in government and culture’).<sup>6</sup>

In any case, antisemitic remarks by mainstream politicians are frequent enough and blatant enough to draw criticism from the international community. One recent example of this was the publication in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, a mainstream newspaper, of an article alleging a global Jewish-Masonic plot to control world government, written by the general director of the Analytical Information Agency of the Department of Affairs, part of the presidential administration.<sup>7</sup>

### Western imports

Given this peculiar mix of open antisemitism and the post-Soviet distrust of historiography, one would not be surprised to find in Russia fertile soil for Holocaust-denial propaganda. Currently there is limited ‘native’ denial propaganda circulating in Russia, either in traditional media or on the Internet. In interviews conducted with researchers and representatives of organizations such as Panorama, Memorial, the Moscow Holocaust Centre and the Moscow office of the Anti-Defamation League, differing assessments of the extent of the problem were offered, although all agreed that the Holocaust-denial material that is available is generally western in origin.

The Moscow office of the Anti-Defamation League, which monitors antisemitism and extremism in Russia, stated in September 2000: ‘On the

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social history from the “bottom up”. . . This approach is not connected in any way to the “revisionism” of Holocaust deniers’ (e-mail, 16 July 2001). I use the term here more loosely to refer to any post-Soviet revision of ‘accepted’ history, not necessarily in the academic sphere.

- 4 The ADL Survey on Anti-Semitism and Societal Attitudes in Russia was conducted in 1999 ([www.adl.org/presrele/asint%5F13/3469%5F13.asp](http://www.adl.org/presrele/asint%5F13/3469%5F13.asp), accessed August 2001). It included statements such as: ‘Jews have too much power in the world of business’ (58 per cent agreed); ‘Jews in Russia these days exercise too much power’ (49 per cent); ‘Jews, more than others, are ready to use unscrupulous means to achieve their aims’ (38 per cent). The survey relied on an ‘index of anti-Semitic belief’ developed at the University of California and used in ADL surveys of American attitudes towards Jews.
- 5 The ADL Survey on Anti-Semitism and Prejudice in America was carried out in 1998 ([www.adl.org/presrele/asus%5F12/3284%5F12.asp](http://www.adl.org/presrele/asus%5F12/3284%5F12.asp), accessed August 2001). According to the ADL, those holding ‘strong’ antisemitic views embrace a wide range of stereotypes about Jews, including the notions that ‘Jews have too much power’ and ‘Jews are more loyal to Israel than America’.
- 6 Judith Ingram, ‘Anti-Semitism grows in Russia’, *Detroit News*, 8 June 1998.
- 7 See the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, press release, 11 September 2000; see also Aleksandr Ignatov, ‘Strategiia “Globalizitsionnogo liderstva” dlia Rossii’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 7 September 2000.

whole, revisionist propaganda in Russian publications at present is generally confined to expositions or translations of the works of foreign neo-Nazi ideologists.<sup>8</sup> Western Holocaust deniers would appear to have good contacts with their Russian admirers. Swiss denier Jürgen Graf was interviewed last year in the extreme nationalist newspaper *Russkii vestnik* (which has a press run of 60,000) along with the Italian ‘revisionist’ Carlo Mattogno. In May 2000 Graf and Mattogno visited Moscow for the third time, apparently to continue work in Soviet archives. In the published interview, *Russkii vestnik* correspondent Anatolii Mikhailovich Ivanov—who identifies himself as a ‘historian’—observed that the Canadian-based Holocaust denier Ernst Zundel had also visited Moscow.<sup>9</sup>

In 1996 the editors of another extreme nationalist newspaper, *Za russkoe delo*, issued a special edition to publish a Russian translation of *Six Million ‘Lost’ and Found*, the work of Richard Harwood, also known as Richard Verrall, a leading member of the British National Front. The translation was republished as part of the Library of the Russian Patriot series by Vitiaz’ in 1999.<sup>10</sup> This same series includes a Russian translation of Captain Archibald H. M. Ramsey’s great conspiracy saga, *The Nameless War*,<sup>11</sup> first published in London in 1952. These editions are cheap and relatively easy to obtain in Moscow: there are two infamous stalls, one by the Kremlin and one in a large and popular video and music market, as well as several ‘specialist’ bookshops.

### The impact of the Great Patriotic War

The most popular Holocaust-denial tract in circulation appears to be Graf’s *Myth of the Holocaust*, perhaps because of the activities of the *Russkii vestnik* editorial board. In 1996, the whole of issue no. 32–4 was devoted to a translation of Graf’s work,<sup>12</sup> and this text is now available in a cheap booklet edition published by Vitiaz’ in 2000.<sup>13</sup> The foreword and publisher’s notes to the book edition are written by Oleg Platonov, the author of several widely distributed antisemitic books and a member of the Institute for Historical Review’s *Journal of Historical Review* editorial advisory board since 1997.<sup>14</sup> Platonov introduces the subject delicately, reflecting the need to maintain Hitler’s sta-

8 *Antisemitizm i ksenofobiia v Rossiiskoi Federatsii: informatsionno-analiticheskii biulleten* (Antisemitism and Xenophobia in the Russian Federation, a bulletin of the ADL/Russian Jewish Congress), no. 6, September 2000, 4 (my translation, as are all quotations in this article unless otherwise specified).

9 ‘Za shto na zapade presleduiut uchenykh’, *Russkii vestnik*, no. 37–8, 2000.

10 R. Harwood, *Shest’ millionov—poteriany i naideny*, trans. V. Luk’ianenko (Moscow: Vitiaz’ 1999).

11 A. Ramsey, *Bezymiannaia voina*, trans. A. Grishchenko (Moscow: Vitiaz’ 1999).

12 M. M. Krasnosel’skii, ‘The theme of the Holocaust in the contemporary periodical publications of Russian extremists’, in *The Shadow of the Holocaust; Second International Symposium ‘Lessons of the Holocaust and Contemporary Russia’ Moscow, May 4–7, 1997* (Moscow: Fond ‘Holocaust’ 1998), 168.

13 J. Graf, *Mif o kholokoste: pravda o sud’be evreev vo vtoroi mirovoi voine* (Moscow: Vitiaz’ 2000).

14 My grateful thanks to John Klier for alerting me to this fact.

tus as enemy and acknowledging the immense suffering he caused the Russian people:

It is well known to the attentive reader that the work of Jürgen Graf touches upon a very painful subject. The theory and practice of Hitler's fascism had as its aim the enslavement of many peoples. The most miserable fate awaited the Slavs, above all, the Russians.<sup>15</sup>

The theory that western Holocaust-denial material is in part aimed at rehabilitating National Socialism is not one that transfers comfortably to the Russian context.<sup>16</sup> Historians agree that, whilst the number of civilian and military dead is debated, of all the major Second World War participants the Soviet Union suffered the greatest losses. Soviet historians estimate the number of civilian dead at around 10 million (with another 10 million military losses); Richard Overy offers a total figure of 17 million civilian casualties, including those murdered and starved to death during this period as a result of 'Soviet brutalities', with a further 8.6 million military dead.<sup>17</sup> Other western historians have suggested 13.6 million military dead and 7.7 million civilians killed—about 11 per cent of the total Soviet population in 1941.<sup>18</sup> The figure currently used in the Russian media is 26 or 27 million dead in total.<sup>19</sup>

Whichever statistics one chooses to accept, the number of Soviet dead is enormous, and the suffering experienced during the war is engraved on the consciousness of the Russian people, partly as a result of the omnipresent Soviet idealization of the Great Patriotic War. The war is commemorated twice annually: on the Soviet-instituted holiday of Victory Day (9 May) and on the Day of Remembrance and Sorrow (22 June), which President Boris Yeltsin established in June 1996, shortly before the 55th anniversary of Germany's attack on the USSR.<sup>20</sup> Seventy-four per cent of Russians surveyed in 2001 wanted 22 June to be made a day of national mourning for the Soviet war dead.<sup>21</sup>

The Soviet war experience has a two-fold impact on the propagation of Holocaust-denial propaganda. First, the vast number of dead and the degree of civilian suffering experienced during the war make it easy for Russian

15 O. A. Platonov, 'From the publisher', in Graf, *Mif o kholokoste*, i.

16 See, for example, Fabian Virchow's 'German revisionism ain't dead, but living in exile', in Kate Taylor (ed.), *Holocaust Denial: The David Irving Trial and International Revisionism* (London: Searchlight Educational Trust 2000). My thanks to Rebekah Webb for this reference.

17 R. Overy, *Russia's War* (London: Penguin 1998), 287–8.

18 See, for example, Michael Heller and Aleksandr Nekrich, *L'utopie au pouvoir* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy 1982).

19 See, for example, 'The price of victory', *Russian Observer* ([www.russianobserver.com](http://www.russianobserver.com)), 21 June 2001 (an English-language Internet magazine published by the independent national news service Strana.ru).

20 Ibid; see also the report of Putin's speech to veterans of the Second World War, *Russian Observer* ([www.russianobserver.com](http://www.russianobserver.com)), 8 May 2001.

21 'Three-fourths of Russians suggest making June 22 day of mourning, poll', *Russian Observer* ([www.russianobserver.com](http://www.russianobserver.com)), 21 June 2001.

propagators of denial material to distort and minimize by relativism. Platonov's justification for publishing Graf's book makes use of this central theme of 'Holocaust revisionism':

Mankind paid for this war with 55 million lives, among which is the genuine and not the mythologized portion of the Jewish people, consisting not of six million, as shown in the calculations of specialists, but around 500,000 people. Of course, even this number is very great and stirs deep sympathy in our hearts. However, can one really talk about the special sacrifice of the Jews, when the portion of Russian people (including little Russians and Byelorussians) included in these 55 million victims is no less than 27 million men and women, children and old people?<sup>22</sup>

Conversely, this collective memory of the Russian war experience ensures that Hitler is such an arch-fiend in popular consciousness that extreme nationalist groups who have any aspirations to political power or participation are obliged to deny all connections with German National Socialism. For example, groups that use variations on the swastika often emphasize that they do so because they are true Slav nationalists, not because they are fascists or Nazis, exploiting early Christian use of the symbol or fabricating myths about pagan symbols of pre-Christian Rus'.<sup>23</sup> Of course there are exceptions to this rule: individuals and groups who have no hope of achieving popularity or political influence, like Konstantin Kasimovsky, leader of Russian Action (previously the Russian National Socialist Party) and the former chief editor of *Shturmovik*, who announced: 'Hitler, of course, had a good solution to the problem of semitism . . . But as it happened, Adolf Hitler did not try hard enough, he solved the problem of semitism in a slipshod manner . . . we will not do that, we will not spare the gas . . .'<sup>24</sup>

### Russian forms of Holocaust denial

Open supporters of Hitler's National Socialism, such as Kasimovsky, remain marginal within the national-patriotic movement. The majority of nationalist antisemites, like Platonov, tread more carefully. Platonov resorts to a favourite Soviet device of levelling accusations at 'Zionists' rather than openly attacking Jews, which allows him to defend Graf's tract by accusing Zionists of capitalizing on the suffering of their own people:

Serious crimes were perpetrated by Hitlerites also against the Jews. Their suffering, like that of the representatives of other peoples, was immense. Therefore the attempt by extremist forces, above all linked with Zionism, to use this suffering for the achievement of dirty political ends, demands firm condemnation.<sup>25</sup>

22 O. A. Platonov, 'Foreword', in Graf, *Mif o kholokoste*, 1–2.

23 See, for example, Yury Lesman's analysis of "'Patrioticheskaiia" simbolika' in *Bar'er*, no. 2, 1993, 8.

24 'Natsional'naia revoliutsiia Kasimovskogo', *Russkaia mysl'*, 20 November 1997; also mentioned in *Antisemitizm i ksenofobiia v Rossiiskoi Federatsii: informatsionno-analiticheskii biulleten* (see note 8), no. 6, September 2000.

25 Platonov, 'From the publisher', i.

The theme of Jews (or ‘Zionists’) using the Holocaust for political or financial gain is popular in the small amount of ‘native’ Holocaust-denial material that is in circulation. In a recent article published in the Volgograd newspaper *Kolokol*—which is edited by the extreme nationalist Union of Russian People and has a print run of 3,000—V. Pushkin claims: “The myth of the ‘holocaust’ has nothing in common with prayers in memory of the fallen. It is a weapon of enslavement. Thanks to the myth of the ‘holocaust’, a sacrosanct, repressive system is created throughout the world.”<sup>26</sup>

Maria Altman of the Moscow Holocaust Centre suggests that more Holocaust-denial material began to circulate in Russia after the mainstream press reported the Swiss compensation payments to concentration camp survivors in 1996.<sup>27</sup> Her observation is borne out by the materials catalogued by the Moscow branch of the human rights organization Memorial. Their database of over 6,000 articles published in the national-patriotic press between 1992 and 1998 contains only 36 items containing a reference to the Holocaust, not all of which deny or minimize that catastrophe. Of these, 20 were published in 1997 and 6 appeared in 1996, the same year that saw the first translations of Graf and Harwood. For example, the St Petersburg newspaper *Nashe otechestvo* (which has a print run of 9,000) published an article in issue no. 58 (1996) suggesting that the ‘legend’ of the Holocaust was used by Zionists to create a guilt complex in the German people and gain sympathy from other nations,<sup>28</sup> and, in a 1997 issue, a critical article about compensation payments to Holocaust survivors.<sup>29</sup> In the same year *Zavtra*, *Duel*, *Russkii vestnik* and *Ia Russkii* all published negative articles about the compensation payments.<sup>30</sup>

The theme of Jewish exploitation continues to be a popular one. In June 1998 *Kolokol* published a text called ‘About Jewish fascism’ by Boris Mironov, former minister of the press under Yeltsin,<sup>31</sup> and active in both the Union of Russian People and the Russian Patriotic Party. In the article, Mironov states:

The myth of antisemitism—the persecution and oppression of Jews in Russia—like the myth of the Holocaust—the destruction by the Germans of six million Jews—is fantastical, lucrative Jewish trickery, built up lovingly by the Yids in mas-

26 V. Pushkin, ‘Nad Rossiei vzosbla zvezda . . . shestikonchnaia’ (‘Above Russia has risen the star . . . six-pointed’), *Kolokol*, vol. 19, no. 305, 6 October 2000 (cited in *Antisemitizm i ksenofobiia v Rossiiskoi Federatsii: informatsionno-analiticheskii biulleten* (see note 8), no. 7, October 2000, 12).

27 Interview with Maria Altman, November 2000. See Maria Altman’s recently published *Otritsanie Kholokosta: istoriia i sovremennoe tendentsia* (Moscow: Holocaust Foundation and Glasnost’ 2001).

28 Krasnosel’skii, 168.

29 *Nashe otechestvo*, no. 75, 1997.

30 *Zavtra*, no. 30, 1997; *Duel*, vol. 16, no. 38, 1997; *Russkii vestnik*, no. 35–6, 1997; and *Ia Russkii*, no. 2, 1997.

31 ‘Portrait of the Press Minister’, *Post-Soviet Media Law and Policy Newsletter* ([www.vii.org/monroe/issue09/portrait.htm](http://www.vii.org/monroe/issue09/portrait.htm), accessed August 2001), no. 9, 19 July 1994.

terly fashion, from which, out of nothing, out of merely some noise, out of the shaking of air, colossal amounts of money are created.<sup>32</sup>

Fascists, in the doublethink world of the Russian national-patriot movement, are often Jews (particularly the Jewish oligarchy) or Zionists, as is evident in the title of Mironov's article. This strain of Russian denial material tends to compare Zionism to German Fascism or blame the Jews (and/or Zionists) for the Holocaust, and is rooted in Soviet-era anti-Zionist propaganda.<sup>33</sup> The Communist Party of the Russian Federation and related groups still propagate theories about Hitler being a Jewish puppet or in league with the Zionists. A video labelled 'Fooled Hitler, or Judaic war', purchased near Red Square in January 2000 from Communist Party members, explains:

Hitler was in an alliance with Zionists, and his actions can only be explained in this way. Zionists guaranteed Hitler that France and England would not go to war with him. They controlled the press, and wanted to liberate Palestine from the English. Measures were taken to put Jews in concentration camps for their deportation to Palestine.

A similar video called 'The essence of Zionism', a copy of a film apparently made in Moscow in 1973, states:

We should not be surprised at the close relationship of Nazis and Zionists. Both thought they were superhumans. The victims of the Second World War are linked with Zionist gains. Judaism has a ritual of redemptive sacrifice . . . The Zionist bourgeoisie instead of sacrificing themselves sacrificed their brothers . . . They chose whom to save and whom to send to concentration camps.<sup>34</sup>

Dmitri Vasiliev, leader of the oldest and perhaps most notorious right-wing monarchist group, the National-Patriotic Front 'Pamyat', apparently expands on this collaboration theory, claiming that Adolf Hitler, Himmler and Adolph Eichmann were in fact Jews. Nazism and the Holocaust are therefore the result of a 'Zionist conspiracy'. Vasiliev avoids denying the Holocaust, but manages to blame it on the Jews themselves: '. . . in Zionism there is the following doctrine: all Jews, who have not achieved a high position, are to be murdered, leaving only the best—the elite—who are able to rule.'<sup>35</sup>

This is, however, a marginal theory within a marginal field, and currently less popular than the final justification Platonov finds for publishing Graf's work: the murder of the Russian people by the Jews. 'More than that,

32 B. Mironov, 'About Jewish fascism', *Kolokol*, nos 107 and 108, 5 and 12 June 1998 (for this article on-line, see note 43).

33 See John D. Klier, 'Pamyat and the Jewish menace: remembrance of things past', *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 19, no. 2, autumn 1991, 214–27 for a discussion of the historical roots of *glasnost*- and Soviet-era antisemitism.

34 My grateful thanks to Hanna Brightman for transcribing and translating these videos.

35 Paul Midford, 'Pamyat's political platform: myths and reality', *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 19, no. 2, autumn 1991, 185.

not on one page in the *Encyclopaedia of the Holocaust* is there a mention of the tens of millions of victims of the genocide of the Russian people, carried out under the direction of Jewish leaders, in the first two decades after 1917.<sup>36</sup> This bizarre conclusion to Platonov's foreword alludes to a Jewish conspiracy to destroy Russia and the Russian people through the Communist revolution and the establishment of the Soviet state, a common theme in Russian extreme nationalist and antisemitic propaganda. The phrase 'the Russian Holocaust' began to appear in extremist literature during the 1990s, often in direct contrast to 'the Jewish Holocaust' and usually in articles comparing the numbers of Russians and Jews killed in the Second World War, or suggesting that the Jews should pay compensation to the Russians for the 'genocide' inflicted on them by the Soviet regime.<sup>37</sup>

Home-grown denial appears to be limited to these few articles published in the multitude of national-patriot journals, many of which contain only a passing reference to the Holocaust, and none of which could be described as even pseudo-academic, with the exception perhaps of Platonov's own work. Platonov includes a section on the 'myth of the Holocaust' in his *Zagadka sionskikh protokolov* (Conspiracy of the Zionist Protocols), part of a recently published multi-volume series of his work entitled *Ternovyi venets Rossii* (Russia's Crown of Thorns).<sup>38</sup> Platonov appears to have some credibility in academic circles: in January of this year he presented his work on the anti-Russian Masonic conspiracy at an evening hosted at the Central House of Scholars by the Russian Academy of Sciences.<sup>39</sup> However, Maria Altman confirms that Holocaust denial is more evident in the political than the academic sphere, and sees this as a key difference between western and Russian denial material.<sup>40</sup>

### Denial material on the Internet

Internet evidence is similarly limited.<sup>41</sup> With the exception of one anonymous site,<sup>42</sup> I found no Russian-language websites dedicated to Holocaust denial.

36 Platonov, 'Foreword', 2.

37 See, for example, *Slavianskoe edinstvo*, vol. 5, no. 10, 1997, or *Nashe otechestvo*, no. 76, 1997.

38 O. A. Platonov, *Ternovyi venets Rossii: Zagadka sionskikh protokolov* (Moscow: Rodnik 1999), part 4, ch. 47. Platonov is an economist not a historian, but his books have the appearance of being academic works. This hardback, illustrated, footnoted series of his works has been published 'in memory of the late Metropolitan Ioann of St Petersburg', and its frontispiece refers to the numerous archives consulted by the author.

39 'Vstrecha Olega Platonova s chitateliymi', *Russkii vestnik*, no. 1–2, 2001.

40 Interview, November 2000.

41 To search for on-line material I used the Russian search engines Aport and Yandex, and searched using the Russian words for 'Auschwitz' (which delivered several comparisons of NATO with the Nazis, and occasional references on discussion boards), 'Zyklon B' (which brought up no denial material at all), 'catastrophe' and 'Shoah' (which produced mainly Jewish sites), 'Holocaust', then 'Holocaust' and 'zbid' together, the latter being the most common term of abuse in Russian for Jews. I ignored the dozen or so contributions on discussion boards as impossible to integrate into this study.

42 [www.holokost.chat.ru/](http://www.holokost.chat.ru/) (accessed August 2001).

Almost all the denial material found on the Internet consisted of on-line versions of previously printed texts, usually on the websites of the relevant newspapers or journals, and in some cases articles in on-line versions of journals that have been closed down and are no longer producing printed materials. The anonymous denial site contained only the briefest questionnaire ('Do you believe in the Holocaust: yes, no, don't know') and two articles translated into Russian. The first, '66 questions and answers about the Holocaust', is attributed to the Institute for Historical Review, and the second is a zip archive of Graf's *Myth of the Holocaust*.

Graf is as popular on-line as in print, and there are several versions of his text on various sites. There are also several copies of Boris Mironov's 'About Jewish fascism' article. Notably, Mironov's article appears twice on the Rus-Sky website, a respectable-looking site that belongs to a Russian Orthodox web network. It is available in their 'history library' and on Slavianskii Mir's web-pages (another apparently Russian Orthodox group formed for the 'resurrection of Russia') which are hosted on the Rus-Sky site.<sup>43</sup>

The website Russkaia Linia, which describes itself as an 'Orthodox Information Agency' founded by the Society of Supporters of the Memory of Metropolitan Ioann (a notoriously antisemitic cleric who died several years ago), contains denial material that appears to be a translation of an article from *Final Conflict* magazine, entitled 'A byl li kholokost?' ('But was there a holocaust?'). It was published in 1999 in the magazine *Revnitel' pravoslavnogo blagochestiia* (The Zealot of Orthodox Piety), edited by the Hegumen Alexei Prosvirin, which is archived on Russkaia Linia.<sup>44</sup>

Another example of the sort of on-line articles available is from *Shturmovik*'s on-line archive on Russian Action's website. In issue 46 (December 1997) an article entitled 'The Jews against the Catholics: round one' states: 'The Jews impudently began to demand "repentance" from the Catholic Church for the support of National Socialists and fascists in the years of the Second World War, plus the return of the mythical money of the mythical "victims" of the mythical "Holocaust".'<sup>45</sup> This archive includes little material that relates to the Holocaust, perhaps merely because it includes the contents of only half a dozen issues.

Occasionally the websites of right-wing extremist groups (like Pamyat or the skinhead site Rusnazi) maintain links to western denial sites, but this is not a common phenomenon. Even the Pamyat website, which has a huge links page in the English-language option, has a greatly reduced page in Russian, tailored especially for 'Russian nationalists' with no western or denial links. On most right-wing nationalist sites there are no references to the Holocaust, simply because the issue is not a significant one for Russian nationalists.

43 [www.rus-sky.org/history/library/articles/mironov1.htm](http://www.rus-sky.org/history/library/articles/mironov1.htm) (accessed August 2001), also available at [www.rus-sky.com/slavimir/slavimir7.htm](http://www.rus-sky.com/slavimir/slavimir7.htm) (accessed August 2001).

44 [www.rusk.ru/Press/Jealous/Jeal11/jl\\_18.htm](http://www.rusk.ru/Press/Jealous/Jeal11/jl_18.htm) (accessed August 2001).

45 [www.nationalism.org/rnsp/st46.htm](http://www.nationalism.org/rnsp/st46.htm) (accessed August 2001).

### The role of historiography

One of the reasons that the extreme nationalist movement has, thus far, viewed Holocaust denial as of marginal interest is that they have more pressing issues to debate. Many such groups—particularly those of a monarchist and Orthodox Christian persuasion—are concerned with rewriting the Soviet version of events and rehabilitating the Tsarist past. The revolutionary period of 1905–17, the murder of the Romanovs, the upheavals, famines and repressions of the Soviet period, the sudden shock of democracy and unfettered capitalism, the loss of empire and status: these are the historical events that preoccupy the right-wing radicals and nationalists in contemporary Russia, just as they preoccupy, to a great extent, the general public.

However, post-Soviet intellectual debate does incorporate speculation about the true nature of Stalin's role in the war, including the idea that he was as great a criminal as Hitler. The partial opening of Soviet war archives and the 1989 acknowledgement of Soviet responsibility for the Katyn massacre, for example, have further fuelled the debate.<sup>46</sup> Although the issue of academic revision of Soviet war historiography is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that David Irving suggested, in *Hitler's War* (1977), that Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union was pre-emptive. Victor Suvorov's controversial book *The Icebreaker* (first published in 1989) subsequently introduced this idea to the Russian public, who bought millions of copies.<sup>47</sup> A pessimist might argue that Russians are far more likely to be open to unorthodox theories that are viewed with greater scepticism in the West as a result of their realization that Soviet historiography has often provided the reading public with half-truths and dubious interpretations.<sup>48</sup>

A further explanation for the marginality of Holocaust-denial material in Russia might be found in the silences of Soviet historiography. While examining and celebrating the Great Patriotic War in numerous texts, Soviet historians generally made little of the Holocaust. One of the most positive western writers on Soviet historiography of the Holocaust, Zvi Gitelman, observes: 'While most Soviet writers either ignored the Holocaust or submerged it in more general accounts of the period, none denied it, and some did treat it not simply as German atrocities but as a uniquely Jewish fate.'<sup>49</sup> Other observers have been less charitable, and one can say that, as a consequence of this at best muted response to the Jewish Holocaust in Soviet history books, public knowledge and understanding of those events are considerably lower in Russia than in Western Europe.

46 See, for example, R. C. Raack, 'Stalin's role in the coming of World War II: the international debate goes on', *World Affairs*, vol. 159, no. 2, autumn 1996.

47 Suvorov's theory has been contested most recently by Gabriel Gorodetsky, in his *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1999).

48 Interview with Slava Likhachev of Panorama, October 2000.

49 Zvi Gitelman, 'Politics and the historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union', in Zvi Gitelman (ed.), *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1997), 14.

The American Jewish Committee sponsored a survey into Russian attitudes to the Holocaust in 1996, in the course of which a representative sample of 1,581 respondents, aged 18 or over, were interviewed face-to-face in their homes. This survey found that most Russians lack basic factual knowledge of the Holocaust: only 50 per cent of respondents knew what Auschwitz, Dachau and Treblinka were, compared to 92 per cent of Germans, 91 per cent of Poles, 91 per cent of Austrians, 76 per cent of British and 67 per cent of Americans.<sup>50</sup> This same survey also bears out the thesis that denial material is not circulating to nearly the same extent in Russia as elsewhere. In answer to the question, 'Some people claim that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened. Have you heard this claim or not?', only 13 per cent of Russians had heard the claim, compared to 70 per cent of Australians, 67 per cent of French, 60 per cent of Germans, 59 per cent of Austrians, 50 per cent of British and 49 per cent of Americans. The percentage of respondents who were convinced that the Holocaust did happen is similar to other countries: Poland 96 per cent, France 94 per cent, Australia 93 per cent, United States 91 per cent, Russia 90 per cent and Austria 88 per cent.<sup>51</sup>

More recent statistics do not seem to be available, but at a Holocaust education conference held at the Swedish embassy in Moscow in June 2000, Mikhail Steklov, a history professor from Smolensk, reportedly stated that, when he asked students to explain the Holocaust, 'only 5 per cent of 200 understood the word'.<sup>52</sup> In fact, this does not exclude the possibility that these students knew about the historical event, as there is another phrase that translates as 'mass destruction' that is also used to describe Hitler's genocide; but Holocaust studies and serious research in this field are certainly a very new phenomenon in Russia. While public knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust remain low, awareness is probably higher now as there are repeated references to and positive coverage of the Holocaust in the mainstream media.<sup>53</sup> It is clearly not coincidence that some of the earliest Russian denial articles were written in response to the Steven Spielberg film *Schindler's List*, and that the volume of such articles increased with more widespread mainstream press coverage of compensation payments to Holocaust survivors. This is no doubt simply because knowledge of the Holocaust has provided another issue for extremists to twist into antisemitic propaganda.

### **A fragile mainstream?**

A gloomy prognosis suggests that with greater awareness of the Holocaust will come further interest in denial material amongst extremist groups. Maria

50 'Current Russian attitudes towards Jews and the Holocaust: a public-opinion survey', conducted for the American Jewish Committee by ROMIR Public Opinion and Market Research, Moscow, 12 January–7 February 1996. Margin of error: plus or minus 3 per cent.

51 Ibid.

52 Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin, 5 June 2000.

53 Confirmed by Dr Ilya Altman of the Holocaust Centre, Moscow (October 2000).

Altman argues that the younger generation, who have been educated since the breakdown of the Soviet Union and therefore missed the strong anti-fascist education of the Soviet system, with its school war museums and tradition of remembrance, are far more susceptible to the neo-fascist strain of nationalism, including Holocaust denial. This may account for the popularity of some of the most extreme nationalist groups among the young, like Barkashov's Russian National Unity, but it could equally well be explained by the free military and martial arts training such parties offer to potential recruits. Students also have greater access to the Internet than other sections of the Russian population and, in Maria Altman's opinion, the Russian-language information to be found there about the Holocaust is more likely to be negative than positive.<sup>54</sup>

The Moscow branch of the Anti-Defamation League shares the Holocaust Centre's concern. 'Our prognosis is that in the next few years, denial of the Holocaust, "revisionism", will become one of the major motifs in antisemitic publications and pseudo-academic research in Russia.'<sup>55</sup> However, the extreme nationalist revisionism of modern Russian history, with its conspiracy theories and scapegoating of the Jews for everything from the revolution and murder of the Tsar to the current economic travails of ordinary people, is a much bigger issue. The tactic of blaming the Jews for the nation's woes has been witnessed in mainstream politics, in the mass media and in academia, to a far greater extent than denial of the Holocaust.

Dom Knigi, a mainstream chain of bookshops, offers for sale on its history shelves a Russian translation of Robert Wilton's *The Last Days of the Romanovs*, published by the National-Patriot Front 'Pamyat' in 1998. The front cover illustration clearly indicates the nature of the book: the Tsar's family are surrounded by gun barrels with Star of David sights trained upon them. Wilton, needless to say, interprets the death of the Romanovs and the Bolshevik revolution as the result of a Jewish 'invasion' of Russia. The foreword by Dmitri Vasiliev, the leader of Pamyat, stresses that the murder of the Tsar was a ritual act, and the group's publication of this text is part of an epic struggle to purify history: 'Today's heightened interest in the origin of the RUSSIAN TRAGEDY is blocked by her direct organizers—Zionists and worldwide Masons—who endeavour to hide the truth, to cover over the true face of history.'<sup>56</sup>

This sort of 'revisionism' is not, alas, confined to the margins of Russian society. In the history faculty at the University of St Petersburg, students—including many who will certainly go on to become teachers themselves—are

54 Maria Altman, interview, November 2000.

55 *Antisemitizm i ksenofobiia v Rossiiskoi Federatsii: informatsionno-analiticheskii biulleten* (see note 8), no. 6, September 2000.

56 'Introductory word by the leader of the National-Patriot Front "Pamyat" Dmitri Dmitrievich Vasiliev', in Robert Wilton, *Poslednie dni Romanovykh* (Moscow: National-Patriotic Front 'Pamyat' 1998), 3.

being taught about an international anti-Russian conspiracy that has been damaging the motherland for three centuries.<sup>57</sup> With racist history books,<sup>58</sup> including Platonov's,<sup>59</sup> finding their way into schools and Dom Knigi selling Jewish-Masonic plots as authentic history, antisemitic historical 'revisionism' is in danger of becoming part of mainstream Russian historiography. The consequences of that are not only that Russians will fail to come to terms with and learn from their past, but that antisemitism will become an integral part of post-Soviet Russian identity.

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57 On Igor Iakovlevich Froianov, dean of the history faculty at the university and author of several antisemitic texts, see Tat'iana Vol'tskaia, 'Istericheskii fakul'tet', *Itogi*, 28 November 2000, 69–71.

58 Victor Shnirelman, 'V poiskakh prestizhnykh predkov: etnonatsionalizm i shkolnye učebniki', in Karl Pellens *et al.* (eds), *Otvetstvennost' istorika. Prepodavanie istorii v globaliziruiushchemia obshchestve. Materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii. Moskva 15-17 sentiabria 1998* (Moscow: Evropeiskii Universitet, Institut Vseobshchei Istorii RAN 2000).

59 Maria Altman, interview, November 2000.