Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement: An Institutional and Individual Approach

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Hitler's Operation Barbarossa in June of 1941 brought the war with Germany to the Soviet home front.[1] The rapid advance of the German army and the ill-preparedness of the Soviet government caused factions of Soviets to form small militias and take up arms against the invading forces in what would become known as the Soviet partisan movement.[2] In the beginning, the partisans consisted primarily of Soviet party members, stray Red Army soldiers, and members of the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs—a secret police agency). But as the war progressed, the partisan movement expanded to encompass former Soviet POWs and refugees.[3] It gained government recognition in Stalin's first official address to the USSR after the invasion began in which he urged civilians to take up arms against the Nazis and form partisan groups.[4] The original goal of the partisan movement was to maintain an ideological grip on the isolated, rural areas of the Soviet Union that government officials were concerned would adopt fascist ideals.[5] However, as the war progressed, the Soviet government created offices to directly supervise and organize the partisans into a cohesive military faction.[6] The partisans then engaged in activities

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[1] Edgar M. Howell, *The Soviet Partisan Movement 1941-1944* (Washington: Department of the Army, 1956), 9, 26.

[2] Howell, *The Soviet Partisan Movement*, 15, 42.

[3] Alexander Statiev, "Soviet Partisan Violence against Soviet Civilians: Targeting Their Own," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol 66, no 9, (2014), 1537, https://web-s-ebscohost-com.turing.library.northwestern.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=875751a5-8947-4c31-9b52-0c080d0c5012%40redis. See also Howell, *The Soviet Partisans Movement*, 42.

[4] Howell, *The Soviet Partisans Movement*, 45-46.

[5] Howell, *The Soviet Partisans Movement* 46.

[6] Howell, *The Soviet Partisans Movement*, 47, 65, 137.

like intelligence gathering and attacking key German transportation and communication lines, while still maintaining their ideological function.[7]

It is undeniable that the Soviet partisan movement emerged as a direct result of Nazi activity.[8] However, it is unclear if and to what extent the partisans opposed Nazi ideals, in particular antisemitism. In investigating the presence of antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement, it is important to consider two distinct levels: institutional and individual antisemitism. This paper begins by exploring institutional antisemitism within partisan policy to show that while antisemitism was present, it was not the driving force behind most partisan policies. Then, this paper will examine antisemitism within individual partisan groups with the intent of showing that no sweeping generalizations can be made about the presence, or lack thereof, of antisemitism on the individual level; each individual's story is unique with its own experiences that cannot be summed up in a definitive statement. This paper comments on the ambiguity in interpretation and the importance of acknowledging individual experiences.

Antisemitism at the Institutional Level

There is minimal contention over the fact that the Soviet government did little to acknowledge Jews as the primary victims of Nazi atrocities and did nothing to offer them aid.[9] Official statements regarding Nazi crimes focused on Slavic citizens as the primary targets.[10] However, there is debate on whether this neutrality proves the presence of antisemitism in the Soviet government or if this neutrality was a byproduct of a greater policy. By examining—primarily through the use of works by Leonid Smilovitsky and Alexander Statiev—the official stances of the government, the officially sanctioned response of partisan groups to Jewish refugees, government response to antisemitism within the partisans, and the composition of partisan groups, I aim to show that while antisemitism was

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[7] Howell, *The Soviet Partisans Movement*, 79-80, 141-142.

[8] Howell, *The Soviet Partisans Movement*, 42.

[9] Leonid Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement, 1941–1944: The Case of Belorussia," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Volume 20, Issue 2, (2006), 208-210, https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcl002.

[10] Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 208-210.

present in the Soviet partisan movement, both independently and by virtue of its association with the government, the main factor that contributed to Jewish suffering at the hands of partisan groups was the fact that the Soviet government made little to no effort to save the lives of any citizens, including Jewish Soviets.

Discussing antisemitism at the institutional level of the Soviet partisan movement would be incomplete without acknowledging the government's stance on Nazi atrocities since the partisan movement was brought under the control of the central government.[11] As mentioned above, the government rarely acknowledged the unique suffering of Jewish Soviets under Nazi occupation.[12] There are three unique cases in which Jewish suffering was acknowledged, all taking place in 1942: a statement by the People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs Viacheslav Molotov where he acknowledged the massacre of Jews at Babi Yar, a joint statement with the other Allies that acknowledged German crimes against Jews, and a Soviet statement acknowledging Nazi crimes against Jews (this statement was issued two days after the initial joint statement from the Allies).[13] Notably, all of these acknowledgments came approximately a year after the initial invasion, despite the fact that statements from Stalin in particular imply that the government understood the scale of the violence as early as November of 1941.[14] It could be argued that the Soviet government's erasure of Jewish victims is due to the fact that communism itself does not acknowledge religion; a fundamental aspect of communism is the erasure of divisions like religion.[15] However, even if the Soviet government did not acknowledge Judaism as a defining characteristic of a group of people, they were still aware that it was a criterion the Nazis were using to eradicate Soviet

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[11] Howell, *The Soviet Partisans Movement*, 47.

[12] Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 208-210.

[13] Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 208-210.

[14] Howell, *The Soviet Partisans Movement*, 9, 26; Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 208-210.

[15] Karl Marx; et al. *Communist Manifesto of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 51, https://heinonline-org.turing.library.northwestern.edu/HOL/Page?collection=cow&handle=hein.cow/comanif0001&id=63&men_tab=srchresults.

citizens.[16] At the very least, this shows a lack of care for the lives of Soviet citizens in the name of ideology. This disregard was proof of antisemitism within the government since this lack of acknowledgment made it more difficult for Jewish refugees to receive priority aid.[17]

When focusing on the Soviet partisan movement in particular, it should be noted that the movement itself never made an official acknowledgment of Nazi antisemitism, and combatting that antisemitism was not mentioned in the movement's goals.[18] Because of this, the partisans rarely made an effort to aid Jewish refugees unless those refugees were capable of fighting or aiding the partisans in some capacity. Often, Jewish families would escape into the woods in hopes of finding safety with the partisans only for the men to be accepted by the partisans while the elderly, women, and children were turned away and left to their fate at the hands of the Nazis.[19] These families were generally not turned away because they were Jewish, they were turned away because it was believed that they could not contribute to the movement. For example, Slavic women and children were often left to the same fate as their Jewish counterparts when they tried to seek refuge with the partisans.[20] Therefore, the driving force behind this specific policy does not imply overt antisemitism, but rather just a general disregard for civilian lives.

Another aspect of partisan policy that was often associated with antisemitism was the execution of refugees, often Jewish, on the grounds that they were German spies. For example, a Jewish family of three that escaped the Orsha ghetto in 1941 was nearly executed by the partisan "saviors" after joining the group because of the fear of German spies.[21] While this fear of German spies could be seen as a thinly veiled excuse for antisemitism, Jews were not the only targets of this policy. Non-Jewish POWs who tried to join the partisans were often accused of the same crime,

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[16] Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 208-210.

[17] Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 208.

[18] Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 211.

[19] Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 213.

[20] Statiev, "Soviet Partisan Violence against Soviet Civilians," 1538.

[21] Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 213.

thus implying that proximity to Germans was a greater driving force behind who was accused of being a spy than religion.[22] This policy of execution was not entirely rooted in paranoia, even if German spies were not as common as the partisans feared; the partisans had found concrete evidence of German spies among refugees trying to join partisan groups.[23] Overall, overarching partisan policies that harmed Jewish refugees seem to be more directly related to the prioritization of partisan offense over the lives of civilians than antisemitism.

While there were no laws within the partisan movement that legalized antisemitism in any form since the government did not acknowledge its Jewish citizens, there were cases of both antisemitism going unpunished and being punished as harshly as any other crime.[24] One instance of antisemitism that was justly punished was when Semen Rudnev, commissar of the Kovpak partisan brigade, publicly punished a partisan for calling a Jewish woman a slur.[25] Additionally, there were several executions on partisan records for antisemitic crimes.[26] However, there were just as many stories of antisemitism going unpunished. For example, partisan groups often robbed Jewish refugees of all of their valuables before abandoning them in the woods.[27] Jewish refugees aiming to join the partisans would often be met with antisemitic remarks and general hostility from other partisans that would go unpunished.[28] Overall, the institutional response to antisemitism within the movement was unreliable; it was highly dependent on the individual groups rather than being a universally enforced policy.

There was significant Jewish participation in the partisan movement. Exact numbers are difficult to find because not all of the information has

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[22] Statiev, "Soviet Partisan Violence against Soviet Civilians," 1537.

[23] Statiev, "Soviet Partisan Violence against Soviet Civilians," 1537.

[24] Statiev, "Soviet Partisan Violence against Soviet Civilians," 1539-1540; Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 213-215.

[25] Statiev, "Soviet Partisan Violence against Soviet Civilians," 1539.

[26] Statiev, "Soviet Partisan Violence against Soviet Civilians," 1539.

[27] Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 213-214.

[28] Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 214.

been declassified, but, from what is available, it is clear that there was significant Jewish participation in the movement. 10% of the partisan unit commanders and commissars in Ukraine were Jewish.[29] In Belorussia, it is estimated that 15,000 Jews were members of partisan movements.[30] Not only were Jewish citizens a prominent force among the partisans, but their contributions were also recognized by the government. Government medals were often awarded to Jewish partisans for their contributions to the war effort.[31] While the struggle of Jewish Soviets was not often recognized, the efforts of individual Jewish partisans were recognized and rewarded. The fact that Jewish partisans were such a prominent part of the movement and honored for their involvement implies that, at the very least, antisemitism was not profound at the institutional level.

Through close examination of institutional aspects of the Soviet Partisan Movement, from refugee policies to the makeup of the partisans, it is difficult to say definitively whether the policies that directly harmed Jews were driven by antisemitism. It is undeniable that the movement's general refusal to aid refugees and its hostility towards potential members hurt Jews. However, they were not the only group on the receiving end of the partisans' maltreatment. The partisans denied aid to all groups they deemed unfit to aid the movement, regardless of who they were. Additionally, all groups that encountered Germans tended to be treated with suspicion, regardless of their identity. Overall, these aspects of the movement imply that a general disregard for civilian life was the more likely explanation for partisan policies than antisemitism. However, it is also important to note how antisemitism within the movement was punished sporadically; the allowance of acts of antisemitism implies, at least in part, the acceptance of such actions. Overall, the evidence suggests that antisemitism was not a driving force behind partisan policies at the institutional level, but it still existed to a significant extent.

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[29] Statiev, "Soviet Partisan Violence against Soviet Civilians," 1539.

[30] Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement," 217.

[31] Statiev, "Soviet Partisan Violence against Soviet Civilians," 1539.

Antisemitism at the Individual Level: The Stories of Sara Weis, Sonia Orbuch, and Shalom Yoran

Exploring antisemitism at the individual level presents unique difficulties that the institutional level does not. The institutional level had general policies and actions, while the individual level was highly dependent on personal factors, location, and various other circumstances. Through the evaluation of personal accounts, this section will show that it is impossible to make a sweeping generalization about the antisemitism within every individual group of partisans. However, by examining the testimonies of Jewish partisans in various areas of the Soviet Union, we can gain a better understanding of how different circumstances could be for partisans and what kinds of issues and events occurred in the daily lives of Jewish partisans. Therefore, the next section of this paper will examine interviews with Jewish partisans from the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive to examine antisemitism at the individual level.

The first testimony comes from Sara Weis. Sara Weis was a Jewish woman who joined a Soviet partisan group in Belarus in 1942 after escaping German-occupied territory; she was a member of the partisan group for approximately 2 years.[32] She joined a fairly large partisan group (over 100 members) that had no association with any of the all-Jewish partisan groups that formed.[33] Despite the fact that they had no Jewish association, Weis did not hide her identity; she said that the group was fully aware that she was Jewish when she joined.[34] The fact that the group let her join, knowing fully well that she was Jewish, disputes the idea that every partisan group was overrun with antisemitism.

As mentioned previously, partisan groups tended to only allow people to join if they could contribute to the group.[35] During her time with the group, Weis worked with the group's doctor to treat wounded partisans

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[32] Sara Weis, "Interview 19447," Interview by Anna Epstein. *Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation,* (1996) Accessed June 1, 2023. https://vha-usc-edu.turing.library.northwestern.edu/testimony/19447.

[33] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[34] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[35] Statiev, "Soviet Partisan Violence against Soviet Civilians," 1538.

and later worked in the kitchen before returning to medicine.[36] Weis was never asked or pressured to take a combat position within the group.[37]

Because Weis was one of few women in a large group of men, she found refuge with the other women in the partisan group.[38] She was the only Jewish woman in the group, yet she recalled feeling completely welcomed by the Russian women; they protected each other from the men's advances.[39] This further emphasized the lack of tension between Jewish and non-Jewish partisans; Weis was not made to feel isolated from the other women just because she was Jewish. Again, while this does not prove the complete absence of antisemitism in every partisan group, it does show that it was not a universal phenomenon.

In her interview, Weis was asked specifically if she ever had any issues with antisemitism.[40] While she said it was not usually a problem in her group, she did recall one instance of severe antisemitism that she was victim to.[41] Once, the commander of the partisan group Weis was a part of, Yezhov, tried to force all of the Jews, women, and "unfit" partisans to leave the group.[42] Yezhov forced them to march through the forest for days before abandoning them.[43] However, this act did not go unnoticed by the Soviet government; once the head of the partisans found out about the incident, Yezhov was sent back to Soviet Russia and Weis' group was reunited with the rest of the partisans.[44] It was unclear if Yezhov would have been punished meaningfully for the incident because his plane crashed before it could ever make it to its destination.[45] However, the mere fact that he was

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[36] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[37] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[38] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[39] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[40] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[41] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[42] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[43] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[44] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[45] Weis, "Interview 19447."

removed from his post for his antisemitic actions implies a certain level of intolerance for antisemitism by the partisan movement.

Towards the end of her time with the partisan group, Weis swam across the River Pripyat to escape Nazi-occupied territory.[46] It was a dangerous feat due to bombardment from German planes.[47] Weis and the rest of the partisans were awarded medals by the Soviet government for their bravery.[48] Weis was not excluded from this reward for being Jewish (or for being a noncombatant for that matter). This further emphasizes the lack of overt antisemitism on the institution's part.

Overall, this piece of Weis's story highlights a fairly accepting group of partisans. There were clear points of struggle, but, for the most part, Weis did not face many problems because she was Jewish. However, this was the story of one individual; it cannot speak for every Jewish partisan. Current literature tends to collect thematically similar testimonies to take polarized stances on the issue of antisemitism in the Partisan Movement, so it is important to look at several unique perspectives, like this testimony and the ones to follow, to avoid making overgeneralizations.[49]

The second testimony comes from Sonia Orbuch, a Jewish woman who joined a partisan group in Ukraine in 1943 with several of her family members after escaping a ghetto together and hiding in the countryside.[50] Orbuch recalled the uncertainty of whether or not the partisan group would accept Jews; their guide, a man named Tikhon, said he could not tell if the group was one that was friendly to Jews or killed them.[51] The fact that being killed automatically for being Jewish was even an option implies at least a level of antisemitism within the individual partisan groups. Eventually, the

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[46] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[47] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[48] Weis, "Interview 19447."

[49] Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement."

[50] Sonia Orbuch, "Interview 41647," Interview by Yvonne Walter. *Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation*, (1998), Accessed June 1, 2023. https://vha-usc-edu.turing.library.northwestern.edu/testimony/41647'.

[51] Orbuch, "Interview 41647."

family was interviewed by the partisans.[52] Orbuch recalled that they had nothing to offer the partisan group, no weapons, no money, and no experience, except for her uncle's scouting knowledge.[53] Despite this, the partisans allowed them to join and kept the family together.[54]

Each family member had their own job amongst the partisans. Orbuch herself helped take care of sick partisans, while her mother cooked food for the sick, her uncle went with the commanders to perform scouting duties, and her father went to local villages to collect food for the group.[55]

Orbuch recalled life with the partisans as great.[56] She remembered how good it felt to be treated as an equal and not as a Jew.[57] She found joy in her partisan identity, particularly the fact that now she would be killed for being a partisan rather than for being Jewish.[58] She also found many friends with the partisans, notably a Jewish man named Piotr Menaker, with whom she found time to connect with and share their stories openly.[59] The fact that Orbuch felt so safe within the group and that she was not treated any differently because she was Jewish shows that the antisemitism within this particular partisan group was minimal to nonexistent.

Orbuch's uncle would later be killed fighting with the partisans.[60] Although her uncle was the main reason the family was initially allowed with the partisans, they were not made to leave after his death.[61] Instead, the commander comforted the grieving family and assured them that he died an

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[52] Orbuch, "Interview 41647."

[53] Orbuch, "Interview 41647."

[54] Orbuch, "Interview 41647."

[55] Orbuch, "Interview 41647."

[56] Orbuch, "Interview 41647."

[57] Orbuch, "Interview 41647."

[58] Orbuch, "Interview 41647."

[59] Orbuch, "Interview 41647."

[60] Orbuch, "Interview 41647."

[61] Orbuch, "Interview 41647."

honorable death as a partisan.[62] This treatment further refutes the idea that partisan groups were rampant with antisemitism (additionally, it refutes the idea that partisan groups were generally uncaring towards people).

Thus far, the available testimonies have shown the partisan groups in a favorable light. However, this should not be taken as proof that every partisan group was accepting of Jews. There were several potential reasons that it is easier to find testimonies in favor of the partisan groups. One notable reason being that only people who survived the war could give testimonies after the fact; some Jews who encountered antisemitic partisan groups most likely did not live to tell the tale. Despite the lack of long testimonies, it was not difficult to find isolated incidents of antisemitism within the groups, like the one mentioned by Sara Weis. An additional example of isolated antisemitism comes from the testimony of Shalom Yoran, who spoke about how difficult it was to find a partisan group to join, despite being relatively capable of fighting, simply because he was Jewish; several groups turned him away, citing that having Jewish members was undesirable.[63] This shows that, despite the generally favorable testimonies examined in this paper, not every partisan group was welcoming towards Jewish people.

Examining the testimonies of Jewish partisans offers invaluable insight into antisemitism within the Soviet partisan movement at the individual level. Weis's testimony of isolated incidents of antisemitism reveals that her partisan group did not have high levels of antisemitism on the whole. On the other hand, the testimony of Sonia Orbuch demonstrated how welcoming the partisans could be; they did not care who joined the group as long as they were willing to live and die for the movement. Despite these favorable views on the partisans, Shalom Yoran's story showed that antisemitism had the potential to be prominent in the selection process of certain partisan groups. No overarching statement can be made about antisemitism at the individual partisan group level because each group was unique; whether or not Jewish partisans experienced antisemitism was highly dependent on the groups they encountered.

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[62] Orbuch, "Interview 41647."

[63] Shalom Yoran, "Interview 5154,". Interview by Larry Rosenberg. *Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation*, (2001), Accessed June 1, 2023. https://vha-usc-edu.turing.library.northwestern.edu/testimony/51545.

Overall, this highlights the importance of examining individual stories and not generalizing about large groups in vastly different circumstances.

While antisemitism was present in many underlying actions of the Soviet partisan movement, the main reason Jewish refugees suffered under the movement was because of its general lack of regard for civilians. However, this is not meant to be taken as definitive proof that antisemitism was absent from the movement entirely, as seen by the experiences of individual Jewish partisans. By examining the testimonies of Sara Weis, Sonia Orbuch, and Shalom Yoran, it is clear to see that no generalization can be made about antisemitism on the individual level; each person's experience is unique, and the level of antisemitism they experienced was highly dependent on their individual circumstances. Overall, while this paper was not able to make a definitive statement regarding the presence of antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement, it highlights the importance of interpretation and considering individual circumstances when conducting research and making claims about large groups of people.