In January 1945 Ilya Ehrenburg published a cycle of six poems about memory, mourning, and artistic response to catastrophe in the flagship Moscow literary monthly *Novyi mir* (Erenburg 1945, Stikhi, 16). Ehrenburg’s January 1945 *Novyi mir* cycle constitutes a high point in the history of Jewish-Russian Shoah poetry created and published in the USSR (Shrayer 2011, *Jewish-Russian Poets Bearing Witness to the Shoah, 1941-1946*).

In 1945-1946 a number of Shoah poems by Ehrenburg (1891-1967), Ilya Selvinsky (1899-1968), Pavel Antokolsky (1896-1978), and Lev Ozerov (1914-1996) appeared in three leading Moscow-based “thick journals.” By wartime standards—and by any standards—their official print runs were sizeable: 30,000 for *Novyi Mir* in January 1945, when Ehrenburg’s cycle appeared there; 60,000 for *Znamya* (“Banner”) in 1945-1946, when it published Selvinsky’s “Kerch” and “The Trial in Krasnodar” and Antokolsky’s “Death Camp” and “No Memory Eternal”; 60,000 for *October* in 1946, when Selvinsky’s *Kandava* and Ozerov’s *Babi Yar* appeared (Sel’vinskii 1945, *Kerch’*; Antokol’skii 1945; Sel’vinskii 1945, *Sud v Krasnodare*; Antokol’skii 1946; Sel’vinskii 1946; Ozerov 1946). These poems spoke of the Shoah (Holocaust) to a mass and diverse audience of Soviet readers. They owed their publication mainly to the historical context of the war moving beyond the Soviet borders in 1944-1945 and the liberation of the Nazi death camps. *Zhdanovshchina* began in August 1946, to be followed, in 1948, by the onset of the so-called anticosmopolitan campaign. The brief Soviet interlude of publishing about the Shoah started in the autumn of 1944 and had come to a halt by 1947, with the steam-rolling of the publication of *The Black Book* in the USSR.

Before looking closely at the meaning and significance of Ehrenburg’s cycle, we will first consider some of the details of the writer’s wartime years. Ehrenburg’s voice of anti-Nazi resistance was nowhere as ruthless and articulate as in his wartime journalism and nonfiction that was read and heard by millions. A columnist for *Krasnaya zvezda* (“Red Star”) and a regular writer for *Pravda, Izvestia* and other Soviet mass publications, from the early days of the Nazi invasion and until the spring of 1945, Ehrenburg was and remained one of the principal cultivators of popular hatred against the German invaders. He famously summed up this popular sentiment in his article “*Ubei! / Kill!*” published in *Red Star* on 24 July 1942 as the Nazi armies pushed ahead toward

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Anglicized, reader-friendly spellings of Russian personal and geographical names and titles of periodicals are used in the main text; if a name has already gained a common spelling in English, this spelling is then used (e.g. Ehrenburg, not Erenburg; *Novyi mir*, not *Novy mir*). Translated titles of periodicals are used, unless the original title has already gained recognition (e.g. *Pravda*, not *Truth*). In rendering the Russian-language bibliographical references, a slightly simplified version of the US Library of Congress transliteration system is used. Unless stated otherwise, the translations from the Russian are mine. The complete text of Ilya Ehrenburg’s January 1945 *Novyi mir* cycle in both Russian and English is found in the Appendix.
the Caucasus and Stalingrad. Lauding Ehrenburg on the occasion of Ehrenburg’s decoration with the order of Lenin in 1944, Konstantin Simonov wrote:

I have heard from people who are totally trustworthy that in one of the big, combined partisan troops there was the following article in a handwritten order: ‘After reading, the newspapers are to be used for rolling cigarettes, with the exception of Ilya Ehrenburg’s articles’ (Simonov 1944).

The Nazi invasion and the war on Soviet territories put to the test not only the talents and voices of the poets, but also their sense of historical and cultural identity. Ehrenburg set the tone of the Jewish-Russian response on 24 August 1941, when he read the essay “To the Jews” at a rally of Jewish people in Moscow:

My mother tongue is Russian. I am a Russian writer. Like all Russians, I am now defending my homeland. But the Hitlerites have reminded me of something else: my mother’s name was Hannah. I am a Jew. I say this with pride. Hitler hates us more than anything. And this adorns us (tr. Joshua Rubenstein) (Ehrenburg 2007: 532; Erenburg 1941, Evreiam; Erenburg 1983).

While fighting the Nazis with his quill pen, Ehrenburg arguably did more than any other writer to bring to the Soviet and international radar screen the truth about the atrocities the Nazis committed against the Jews.

From the early days of the Nazi invasion Ehrenburg emerged as the preeminent Soviet writer at war and a key architect of the propaganda effort. While he did make trips to the front, his experience as a witness to the war and Shoah differed from the experience of his literary colleagues such as Vasily Grossman, who spent much of the war’s four years posted as a frontline correspondent in the trenches, or Ilya Selvinsky, who was a combat officer and military writer from the summer of 1941 to the autumn of 1943, and then in the spring-summer of 1945 (see Shroyer 2013). Many of Ehrenburg’s wartime articles and dispatches were based on the information that reached Ehrenburg while he was in Moscow. Yet Ehrenburg’s writings on the war and Shoah that were directly informed by his visits to the then recently-liberated occupied Soviet territories in 1942-1944 are, for the purposes of my investigation, of much greater value.

In the words of Mordekhai Al’tshuler, “more than anything by [1942 – M.D.S.], the theme of the Shoah had come to occupy the thoughts and feelings of Ehrenburg. In 1942 or 1943 while […] he visited the areas liberated from the Nazi occupation, Ehrenburg began to gather material about the annihilation of the Jews, both by bullet and in death camps. He used some of this material in his newspaper articles” (Al’tshuler 1993: 60). In light of what we know today, it is even more difficult to imagine that in the official Soviet conditions of de-Jewifying the Shoah and silencing the valor of Jewish soldiers, partisans, and ghetto fighters, Ehrenburg succeeded in having his essays printed in the central Soviet newspapers and thus reached an audience of millions of his fellow citizens.

Ehrenburg scholars have previously emphasized that he used his exceptional status and influence to share the enormity of the emerging knowledge of the Shoah with the

2 This motif, and the specific mention of the name of the poet’s mother, Hannah, is also found in Ehrenburg’s poem “Brodiat Rakhili, Khaimy, Lii… / Rachels, Hayims, and Leahs wander…”; an earlier version of which originally appeared in Ehrenburg’s 1941 collection “Vernost’ / Loyalty”.

3 For recent studies of the representation of the Shoah in Soviet media, see Arad 2003; Berkhoff 2009; Altshuler 2011.
Soviet readers on both the war and home fronts. Yet he was not always able to do so in the Soviet media, and his dispatches for the Western media often spoke more articulately about Jewish suffering and the Shoah. A case in point is Ehrenburg’s report dated “16 November 1943” and sent for publication in American newspapers: “I want to tell the Americans of what I saw. I have recently returned from the front, and I had the chance to travel a lot in the area recently freed from the occupiers” (Erenburg 1983: 273). In the same dispatch Ehrenburg spoke of the Shoah by bullet in Ukraine:

Vast regions stand empty, like forests in autumn. Hitlerites killed all the Jews. They killed old men. They took infants and knocked their heads against trees or poles. They buried people half-alive. In Piriatin a Ukrainian by the name of Chepurenko told me how he was forced to cover the grave. Eyes filled with blood, the horse attendant Ruderman rose from the grave and yelled: “Finish me off!” I feel justified in saying that on that day the Germans killed not only Ruderman, but also Chepurenko. All across Ukraine, liberated from the Germans, there are not more than one hundred Jews— who had been hiding in the woods. This is the murder of a nation. Hitlerites killed all the Roma. They killed Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians. They murdered entire small towns (Erenburg 1983: 276).

While describing the total annihilation of Jews and Roma in the occupied territories, Ehrenburg subtly alluded to the tabooed subject of collaboration by the local populations.

Several months after the final liberation of Kharkiv by the Soviet troops in August 1943, Ehrenburg reported on the Kharkov trial of 15-18 December 1943, at which a Soviet military court tried and sentenced two Nazi officers, a Nazi soldier, and a Russian collaborator to death (Al’tshuler 1993: 60). A series of Ehrenburg’s reports from the Kharkov trial appeared in Red Star, starting with the article “Sud idet! / All Rise!” (17 December 1943) (Erenburg 1943, Sud idet!). In the segment titled “Witnesses,” Ehrenburg powerfully formulated the theme of the murdered witnesses to Nazi crimes rising from mass graves to give testimony: “Again we relive the tragedy of the Tractor Factory, where thousands of Jews perished— prominent physicians and modest tradesmen, workers and musicians, elderly men who could barely walk to the fateful ravine [yar]” (Erenburg 1944, Svideteli, 160).

In July 1944 Ehrenburg traveled with the Soviet troops as they liberated Vilna (Vilnius). He felt that it was particularly necessary to publicize accounts of Jewish partisan units and Jewish active participation in the anti-Nazi underground within the occupied territories. In the spring of 1944 he published in Novyi mir a short story titled “Konets getto / The End of the Ghetto,” depicting the “liquidation” of a ghetto in a “small Polish town” (Erenburg 1944, Konets getto). This fictional account of the courage of the members of the ghetto’s underground reveals parallels with the real story of the Vilna ghetto, especially with Itsik Vitenberg (Wittenberg), chief commander of the Vilna Ghetto United Guerilla Organization. Soon after visiting Lithuania and meeting with Jewish partisans and survivors, Ehrenburg wrote “The Triumph of Man,” a tribute to Wittenberg and the other Jewish fighters in the Vilna ghetto. It appeared in Pravda on 29 April 1944 and spoke at length of the Yiddish poet and leader of the Vilna partisans Avraham (Avrom) Sutzkever (1913-2010) (Erenburg 1944, Torzhestvo cheloveka). Ehrenburg’s passionate words about Sutzkever also addressed the subject of the Jewish poet’s role in fighting Nazism and bearing witness to the Shoah.

Although as early as 1942-1943 Jewish-Russian writers, most explicitly Selvinsky in poetry and Grossman and Ehrenburg in prose, decried the genocidal atrocities com-
mitted against the Jews in the occupied Soviet territories, a new stage in witnessing and documenting the Shoah opened in the summer of 1944, when Soviet troops began to liberate the Nazi death camps (Shrayer 2011, *Jewish-Russian Poets Bearing Witness to the Shoah*, 1941-1946, 72-73). Ilya Selvinsky’s poetic motto “I Saw It!” first sounded in January 1942, now reverberated through Ehrenburg’s own writings. Ehrenburg wanted to see with his own eyes the aftermath of the Shoah on the recently liberated territories and to speak to eyewitnesses and also to the captured perpetrators. In the article “Nakanune / On the Eve” (7 August 1944) Ehrenburg devoted a paragraph to the Nazi atrocities in the Trostinets (Trostinets) area in Belarus (see Maly Trostinets):

> Half-charred corpses, stocked up like firewood, racks of corpses were still smoking. Children were neatly placed at the end of each row... This was the last shipment [partiia], which they had not finished burning. All around I saw dug up soil and a field of skulls. [...] There they killed Soviet prisoners of war, Belarusians, Jews from Minsk, Vienna, Prague” (Erenburg 1944, *Nakanune*).

Beneath Ehrenburg’s article describing Nazi “fabriki smerti / factories of death” was a harrowing photograph of a field of corpses; the photograph, like the article, bore Ehrenburg’s byline, adding to the totality of his eyewitnessing.

Just how much of a shock the sight of the Nazi camps must have been even for the best-informed among the writers and journalists can be gleaned from Ehrenburg’s panoramic memoir “Liudi, gody, zhizn’ / People, Years, Life”, published mostly between 1960-1965. In the words of Shimon Markish, *People, Years, Life* “had a major role in maintaining and increasing Jewish consciousness, despite all the concessions to the censor, all the subterfuges, ruses, omissions, fictions, attempts and self-justification of which Ehrenburg has been accused and to which he himself has admitted, at least to some degree” (Markish 1991: 222). This account, which reconstructs some of the details Ehrenburg had previously included in the article “On the Eve,” was not deleted by the Soviet censors:

> [...] I saw Trostenets. There Hitlerites buried Jews in the ground – Jews of Minsk and Jews brought from Prague, Vienna. The doomed ones were brought here in mobile gas chambers [...] I saw charred women’s bodies, a little girl, hundreds of corpses. [...] Then I did not yet know about Majdanek, Treblinka, or Auschwitz. I stood there, unable to move [...]. It is hard to write about this – no words (Erenburg 1990, 2: 337; cf. Erenburg 2005, 2: 408; cf. Erenburg 1962-1967, 9: 394).^5

Seeking and being unable to find fitting words to document the aftermath of the Shoah was a leitmotif in the works by writer-witnesses.

Throughout the war, working tirelessly as a journalist and leading Soviet anti-Nazi propagandist, Ehrenburg continued to compose lyrical poetry. Ehrenburg’s biographers, Joshua Rubenstein most eloquently, have chronicled his experiences in reporting on the Shoah in articles for both Soviet and foreign media, in his speeches and works of fiction, as well as the role Ehrenburg played in the “Chernaia kniga / Black Book” project. Less has been made of the role of his wartime poetry in disseminating the facts of the Shoah.

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^4 For the details of the creation and publication of Selvinsky’s *Ia eto videl!* see Shrayer 2013.

^5 In the essay “Khvatit! / Enough!” published in Pravda in April 1945, Ehrenburg gave a short list of sites of mass executions and death camps; their names speak louder than commentary: “I do not have the words to remind the world once again of what the Germans have done with my land. Perhaps it would be better to repeat the names alone: Babi Yar, Trostenets, Kerch, Ponary, Belżec” (Erenburg 1945, *Khvatit!*).
And yet in 1940-1946 Ehrenburg wrote and published a number of poems with both explicit and coded references to the decimation of European Jewry. Commenting on Ehrenburg’s 1940 poem “V esto getto liudi ne pridut... / To this ghetto people will not come...,” also known as “V pol’skom getto / In a Polish Ghetto” and unpublished until 1959, Al’tshuler wrote of the sense of “Jewish aloneness and exceptional fate” that suffuses the wartime poems of Ehrenburg, Antokolsky and other Jewish-Russian writers (Al’tshuler 1993: 61).

Let us return to Ehrenburg’s January 1945 Novy mir cycle. Of the six poems published in Novyi mir in January 1945, Ehrenburg had composed at least two in 1944, and the rest in early January 1945. Originally, the cycle that Ehrenburg had submitted consisted of at least seven poems, the earliest of which was composed in 1943. As of early January 1945, Soviet troops had not yet liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau. They would approach the complex in the middle of January and liberate the camp on 27 January 1945. The minutes of the 16 January 1945 meeting of Novyi mir’s editorial board have preserved some details of the cycle’s publication history: “Discussed: About Ehrenburg’s poems. [K.] Fedin: The poems are publicistic. They are suitable for publicication. […] [V.] Shcherbina: To drop the poem “Byl chas odin – dusha oslabla......” [“There was an hour (when) the soul had grown weak...”]. In this poem the author appears to be taking upon himself some blame for the world war.”

Among the six short poems in the cycle was Ehrenburg’s poem about Babi Yar (“K chemu slova i chto pero.../ What use are words and quill pens...”), indispensable to students of Shoah memory. Yet Ehrenburg’s Novyi mir cycle has never been examined as a whole or properly contextualized and historicized. In Novyi mir the cycle bore the nondescript title “Stikhi / Poems”; the six poems printed there in January 1945 were all untitled and numbered 1-6 (see Appendix).

During the Soviet period, some but not all of the individual poems in the Novyi mir cycle were subsequently reprinted. Even though Poem 1 appeared – in modified form and under the title “Babi Yar” – in several of Ehrenburg’s poetry collections and editions of his works and became one of his most famous texts, the cycle has never since been reprinted in its entirety, either during Ehrenburg’s lifetime or subsequently. Both

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7 Here and hereafter, I am indebted to Boris Frezinskii’s commentary in his academic edition of Ehrenburg’s poetry, Erenburg 2000; see especially 736-745. See also N. G. Zakharenko’s commentary in Erenburg 1977: 436-440.

8 Quoted in Erenburg 2000, Stikhotvoreniiia i poemy, 740. The dropped poem, “Byl chas odin – dusha oslabla... / There was an hour [when] the soul had grown weak...,” was composed in 1943 and was published in the Leningrad-based magazine Zvezda in the summer of 1945; see Erenburg 1945, Stikhi voennykh let; see also Erenburg 2000: 743.

9 Following their original publication in January 1945 in Novyi mir, the cycle’s six numbered poems appeared in Ehrenburg’s principal collections, volumes, and editions as follows: 1 (K chemu slova i chto pero...): as K chemu slova i chto pero..., in Erenburg 1946: 45-46; Babii Iar in Erenburg 1952-1954, 4, 605; Babii Iar in Erenburg 1959: 72-73; Babii Iar in Erenburg 1977: 187; Babii Iar in Erenburg 1962-1967, 3, 455; Babii Iar in Erenburg 2000, 512, 2 (Rakety salitov...): as Rakety salitov... in Erenburg 1946: 83; Rakety salitov... in Erenburg 1959: 76; Rakety salitov... in Erenburg 1962-1967, 3, 458; Rakety salitov... in Erenburg 2000, 518, 3 (Chuzhoe gore, ono, kak ovod...): as Chuzhoe gore, ono, kak ovod..., in Erenburg 1946: 81; Chuzhoe gore, ono, kak ovod..., poem 3 of an 8-part cycle in Erenburg 1952-1954, 4, 634; Chuzhoe gore, ono, kak ovod..., in Erenburg 1959: 85; Chuzhoe gore, ono, kak ovod..., in Erenburg 1962-1967, 3, 470; Chuzhoe gore, ono, kak ovod..., in Erenburg 2000, 518, 4 (Budet
circumstances attest to the cycle’s paramount significance in the canon of Shoah literature.

As published in the January 1945 Novy mir cycle, Ehrenburg’s poems were not arranged in simple chronological order. Both the versification in the individual poems and their order and structural arrangement reveal a deliberateness of arrangement, an internal logic which augments the cycle’s rhetorical structure. One way of experien-

soltse v tot den’ ili dozh’d, ili sneg...): as Budet solntse v tot den’ ili dozh’d, ili sneg..., poem 4 of a 4-part cycle, V fevrale 1945, in Erenburg 1946: 84; Budet solntse v tot den’ ili dozh’d, ili sneg..., poem 1 of a 4-part cycle, V fevrale 1945, in Erenburg 2000, 519, 5 (Den’ pridet, i slavok gromkii khor...): as Den’ pridet, i slavok gromkii khor..., poem 2 of a 4-part cycle, V fevrale 1945, in Erenburg 1946: 84-85; Den’ pridet, i slavok gromkii khor..., poem 1 of a 2-part cycle, V fevrale 1945, in Erenburg 1962-1967, 3, 464; Den’ pridet, i slavok gromkii khor..., as poem 2 of a 4-part cycle, V fevrale 1945, in Erenburg 2000, 519, 6 (Proshu ne dlia sebia, dlia tekhh...): as Proshu ne dlia sebia, dlia tekhh..., poem 4 of a 4-part cycle, V fevrale 1945, in Erenburg 1962-1967, 3, 466; as Proshu ne dlia sebia, dlia tekhh..., poem 3 of a 3-part cycle, 9 maia 1945, in Erenburg 1962-1967, 3, 466; as Proshu ne dlia sebia, dlia tekhh..., poem 4 of a 4-part cycle, V fevrale 1945, in Erenburg 2000: 520.

Ehrenburg’s own arrangement of the cycle’s six poems in the subsequent collected editions published in his lifetime may have added to the textological conundrum. In volume 4 of his 5-volume Sochineniia (1953), Poem 1 was published as Babi Yar, whereas Poem 3 appeared under the same number in a selection of eight numbered poems, which did not feature any other poems from the January 1945 Novyi mir cycle. In Stikhi 1938-1958 (1959), three of the cycle’s six poems were reprinted, but neither one appeared as part of a numbered cycle or selection. In volume 3 of Ehrenburg’s 9-volume Sobranie sochinenii (1964), four of the Novyi mir cycle’s six poems were reprinted, two as stand-alone poems, and two in different cycles: Poem 5 as the first of two numbered poems in a cycle titled “V fevrale 1945” / In February 1945”, and poem 6 as the third of three numbered poems in a cycle titled “9 maia 1945 / 9 May 1945”.

One way of experi-

A major landmark in the publication history of Ehrenburg’s poetry was the 1977 edition of his Poems in “Biblioteka poeta / Poet’s Library”. Prepared and edited by the Jewish-Russian critic Benedikt Sarnov, who would later write a book about Ehrenburg, and by the bibliographer N. G. Zakhenenko, who had coedited the 1972 Poet’s Library edition of Selvinsky’s poetry, the 1977 volume took stock of Ehrenburg’s many collected volumes and periodical publications and also referenced Ehrenburg’s archival manuscripts and typescripts. In the Sarnov/Zakhenenko edition, Poem 2 preceded Poem 1, but was followed by Poem 3 and Poem 4, all four appearing as stand-alone texts, with other stand-alone poems placed between them, without any indication that Poems 1, 2, 3, and 4 might be connected or related. At the same time, Poem 5 appeared as 1 in a two-poem cycle “In February 1945,” exactly as it was published in volume 3 (1964) of Sobranie sochinenii (1962-1967), whereas Poem 6 was included as No. 3 in the cycle “9 May 1945.”

Ehrenburg’s papers contained a typescript with a selection of poems titled “Stikhi fevralia 1945 / Poems of February 1945”; this selection included Poem 4, Poems 5, and Poem 6 of the 1945 Novyi mir cycle along with other texts. B. Ia. Frezinski’s 2000 edition of Ehrenburg’s poetry superseded all previous academic editions; yet it did not reconstruct Ehrenburg’s January 1945 Novyi mir cycle. Further textological considerations go beyond the scope of this investigation.

10 In Poem 1, the 24 lines of Ia4 consist of 2 quatrains, followed by a couplet (lines 9-10), 3 quatrains, and a closing couplet; the placement of both couplets underscores the poems’ crucial statements about the victims of Babi Yar. Although in all the poems of the cycle, consistent with his general predelections and especially the practice of his latter decades, Ehrenburg did not separate stanzas with breaks, Poem 1 logically falls into two parts, the first 10 lines and the last 14 lines. Within the first 10 lines, 2 quatrains of alternating AbAb rhyming are followed by a couplet with masculine rhymes; consisting as it does of 3 quatrains of alternating aBaB rhyming and a couplet of feminine rhymes, the last 14 lines form an English (Shakespearean) sonnet. Poem 2, which may be described as a variety of a sixain, features 6 lines of Am4 with consecutive (couplet) rhyming, all masculine rhymes. Within the cycle, poem 3 is metrically the most unusual, being a logaoedic iambic tetrameter (with a caesura and an extra syllable before it; I thank
cing the cycle’s compositional unity is to identify some of its recurrent verbal motifs. For instance, the word yar, repeated twice in a row in Poem 1 and pointing to Babi Yar in Kiev, finds a not so distant echo in the adjective yarkii / bright in Poem 5; yar / ravine and yarkii / bright are not etymologically related. One of the most striking motifs is that of the Shoah as “someone else’s” legacy – pamiat’ / memory, put’ / path, and gore / woe. Forms of the adjective chuzhoi / someone else’s; another’s punctuate Poems 1-3: “Я волочу чужую память / I carry someone else’s memory” (1); “You light someone else’s path with yourself” (2); “То ты на минуту чужие пути,/ Как эта ракета, собой освети / Then just for a minute, like this rocket steadfast,/ Someone else’s woe – like a gadfly”; “А что с ним делать – оно чужое / And what to do with it – someone else’s” (both in 3). Another recurrent verbal motif has to do with the physicality of the memories of desire and love. A reference to the poet’s imagined kissing of the hands of a woman who had died in the Shoah (“Я этой женщины любимой/ Когда-то руки целовал / The hands of this beloved woman/ I used to kiss, a long time ago”) travels from Poem 1 to Poem 5, where the poet sounds out a promise of physical enactment of desire: “Будут руки, чтобы обнимать,/ Будут губы, чтобы целовать / There will be hands to hold and embrace,/ There will be lips to kiss….” Both the noun ruki / hands and the verb tselovat’ / to kiss appear in Poem 1 and Poem 5. Then there is the motif of fireworks, signaling an imminent celebration of victory over Nazism; this motif notably connects Poem 2 and Poem 4.

As Russia’s leading Ehrenburg scholar Boris Frezinskii remarked, referencing Poem 3 (“Chuzhoe gore, ono, kak ovod… / Someone else’s woe – like a gadfly…”), Ehrenburg understood perfectly well that “to the [Soviet] state the Shoah was ‘someone else’s woe” (Frezinskii 2000: 57). Indeed, we should take stock of the absence of the word “Jew” and its cognates from the cycle. Ehrenburg withheld an explicit reference to Babi Yar, communicating it through the use and repetition of the word yar, yet broadened the scope of memorialization of the Shoah from annihilation by bullet in the occupied Soviet territories to the industrialized murder of Jews in the Nazi death camps.

Kiev and Babi Yar occupied a special place in Ehrenburg’s wartime writings. With great difficulty, Ehrenburg was able to speak in print about the fall of Kiev to Nazi armies, in a short Red Star article published on 27 September 1941: “We will liberate Kiev. The enemy’s blood will wash the enemy’s footprints (tr. Joshua Rubenstein)”
(Rubenstein 1996: 191; cf. Erenburg 1941, Kiev). Kiev – and Babi Yar – were also a personal wound for Ehrenburg. Ehrenburg was born in Kiev in 1891 but grew up in Moscow, where his father, an engineer, moved the family in 1894. Following the February 1917 Revolution, Ehrenburg returned to Russia. He did not accept the Bolshevik coup and moved to Kiev, where he witnessed civil war violence, including a pogrom. In Kiev Ehrenburg met and married Lyubov Kozintseva.

At Babi Yar outside Kiev, over 33,000 Jews were murdered on 29-30 September 1941, and altogether as many as 100,000 people, about 90,000 of them Jewish, were killed throughout the Nazi occupation (Arad 2009: 175; Ro’i 2008). As one of the best informed Soviet figures, Ehrenburg had known of Babi Yar early on. But he had to wait two years before he was able to visit Kiev and bear witness – soon after the Soviet troops liberated it on 6 November 1943 (see Rubenstein 1996: 209-210). Before setting foot on Babi Yar in the autumn of 1943, Ehrenburg had been making references to it in his articles, and he continued to do so throughout 1943-1945. Notably, in the reports on the Kharkov Trial, he spoke of the “dead [who] would rise from ditches and ravines [iz rvoi yarovi]” to bear witness – in the liberated Soviet cities (Erenburg 1944, Voina, 160). In the essay “Nationkillers,” published in Banner in early 1944, Ehrenburg conjures up a famous image of a little Kievan girl, thrown by the Nazis into a grave: “‘Why are you pouring sand in my eyes?’ I hear this child’s scream at night. All the people hear it. Our conscience is filled with indignation, and our conscience would not leave us be. It demands: Death to the nationkillers” (Erenburg 1944, Narodoubiitsy, 185). Echoes of Babi Yar resound through the text of Ehrenburg’s article “To Remember!” published in Pravda on 17 December 1944, only weeks before the completion of the Novyi mir cycle: “In the countries and areas that they occupied the Germans murdered all the Jews [even] old people and infants. Ask a captured German, why his countrymen annihilated six million innocent people, and he will answer: ‘They are Jews. They are black (or red-haired). They have different blood.’ This started with vapid jokes, with street urchins’ yelling, with graffiti on the fences, and it led to Majdanek, Babi Yar, Treblinka, to ditches filled with corpses of children….” (Erenburg 1944, Pomnit’!). In the article Ehrenburg put an accurate number on the toll of the Shoah, presented the murder of Jews in the occupied Soviet territories and in the death camps in Poland as part of the same genocidal Nazi plan, and steeped the Shoah in the long history of antisemitism. Having previously written about Babi Yar in his news reports and articles, Ehrenburg did not commemorate the victims of Babi Yar in poetry until 1944. This deferral of poetic commemoration of Babi Yar must have had something to do with an imperative to witness the aftermath before writing about it in poetry. Additionally, one should consider the disgust and horror with which Ehrenburg reacted to what he heard regarding a surge of antisemitism in Kiev during and after the occupation. Hirsh Smolar, a partisan commander from Minsk, recalled visiting Ehrenburg in Moscow in 1944: “Ehrenburg had just returned from Kiev and he was in a rotten mood […]. ‘This was my hometown,’ he told me, ‘and I will never go back there.’” (Quoted in Rubenstein 1996: 208-209). Previously other eyewitnesses, and more recently Shoah historians, have written about the shock of recognizing – or not recognizing – Kiev after the Nazi occupation.11

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11 For a new assessment, with a particular focus on Kiev, see Khiterer, “We Did Not Recognize Our Country….”
The extensive cultural legacy of Babi Yar has received previous critical attention. Let us note in passing that Soviet authors, both Jewish and non-Jewish, turned to the subject of Babi Yar during the wartime years, several as early as 1942-44. Among the early examples are the Ukrainian poem *Abraham* (1943) by Sava Holovanivskyi (1910-1989), a 1944 article and a 1947 story in Yiddish by Itsik Kipnis (1896-1974), and episodes in the Yiddish-language epic *Milkhome / War* (first complete book edition 1948) by Perets Markish (1895-1952). In the postwar years, the commemoration—or, rather, the official non-commemoration—of the Babi Yar massacre became a cause célèbre of Soviet culture; in the West the public awareness of Soviet artists’ response to Babi Yar still tends to be limited to Evgeny Evtushenko’s poem *Babi Yar* (1961) and Dmitry Shostakovich Symphony No. 13 (1962) based in part on Evtushenko’s poem, and, to a lesser degree, to Anatoly Kuznetsov’s docunovel *Babi Yar* (1966).

Ehrenburg’s record was to publish the first Russian-language poem about Babi Yar in January 1945. While in 1944-1945 Lev Ozerov, Ehrenburg’s younger contemporary, composed his *Babi Yar*, a long and detailed account of the September 1941 massacre, it was not published until the spring of 1946. Ehrenburg would subsequently return to the subject of Babi Yar in a scene in his novel *Storm* (1947), which was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1948.

As I have argued elsewhere, Jewish-Russian writers paid a price for being able to tell the world in print about the Shoah in the occupied Soviet territories (see Shraier 2011, *Jewish-Russian Poets Bearing Witness to the Shoah, 1941-1946*, especially 71-73; 100-102). In the wartime years, as the official position shifted from a partial obfuscation of the Shoah to a virtual ban on discussing Jewish victims apart from generalized Soviet losses, the price tended to be a compromistic rhetoric mixing historical truth with some historical fiction. In Selvinsky’s landmark poem “*Ia eto vidiel! / I Saw It!*” (1942), murdered “Jews” (“Semités” in some versions) and “Slavs” lie side by side in the so-called Bagerovo anti-tank ditch outside Kerch, a site where thousands of Jews were murdered by bullet. In Grossman’s short story “The Old Teacher” (1943), Ukrainian collaboration with the Nazis is an exceptional, singular occurrence, and the vast majority of the local population in the occupied Ukrainian territories displays empathy or support for the Jews who are being annihilated (see Shraier 2011, *Bearing Witness: The War, the Shoah and the Legacy of Vasily Grossman*). To reiterate, one of the remarkable aspects of Ehrenburg’s *Novyi mir* cycle of January 1945 is that Ehrenburg spoke of the Shoah in code: the word Jew is nowhere mentioned, while obvious signs of the victims’ identity are missing throughout the cycle’s six poems. And yet, Babi Yar served as the historical, moral and aesthetic tuning fork of Ehrenburg’s January 1945 *Novyi mir* cycle.

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12 Ideological and cultural issues surrounding the commemoration of Babi Yar in postwar Soviet culture and society are considered in Sheldon 1988. See also a more recent study: Czerny 2004. Of note is an anthology of Shoah poetry, featuring Russian- and Ukrainian-language poetry, as well as translations, published in Kyiv (Kiev) in 2001, Levitas 2001. Clowes (2005: 161-162) offers brief observations on poem 1 of Ehrenburg’s *Novyi mir* cycle (*Babi Yar*) as published in Derevo / Tree; she erroneously claims that Ehrenburg’s poem was “the first known Soviet work to commemorate the Holocaust on Soviet soil.”

13 The poetic cycle *Kirillovskie iary* (1942) by the half-Russian, half-German Olga Anstei (1912-1985), who was in Kiev during the September 1941 Babi Yar massacre and left the occupied USSR during the war, was first published in 1948 in Munich. Note also that Liudmila Titova had apparently written about Babi Yar in 1941, but her poem was not discovered and published until the 1990s.
The power of the cycle’s opening poem comes from the construction of the poet’s physical connection to the victims of Babi Yar, and especially from the devastating note of desire, imagined, re-envisioned, reconstructed. The language of desire burns the lips of the mourning Jewish-Russian poet – and of the reader who whispers along. Yet the victims in the poem are unmarked in either ethnic or religious terms. In the original publication, line 19 of Poem 1 reads: “Ia govoriu za mertvykh, vstanem / I speak for the dead, let’s rise or “I speak for the dead. We shall rise.” In the version of the poem published during Khrushchev’s Thaw in the collection Poems 1953-1958 (1959) and subsequently, Ehrenburg restored the title “Babi Yar.” However, line 19 now reads as: “My podnatzhiimsia i vstanem / We shall gather strength and rise” (Erenburg 1959: 72-73). The change cuts both ways. In one respect, it makes for a more Jewishly articulated call for action, consistent with Ehrenburg’s previous call for the Jews murdered in the Shoah to rise and bear witness to Nazi crimes. Yet the absence of the bluntly pro-programmatic words “I speak for the dead” signals an economy of loss in Ehrenburg’s republication of his “Babi Yar” poem. The loss of Judaic meaning in the revised version of poem 1 becomes especially poignant if one considers the subterranean references to Ezekiel 37 and the prophesy upon the valley of dry bones:

Я говорю за мертвых. Встанем,
Костями застучим – туда,
Где дышат хлебом и духами
Еще живые города.

I speak for the dead. We shall rise,
Rattling our bones we’ll go – there,
Where cities, battered but still alive,
Mix bread and perfumes in the air.

According to Ehrenburg’s poem, the rite of mourning demands that the lights be turned off and the flags lowered, and this could also be read to mean that there is no nationality or citizenship for those lying in Babi Yar, only their victimhood. Is this Ehrenburg’s necessary allegiance to the official Soviet refusal to “divide the dead” or the opposite, a bestowal onto the dead Jews lying at Babi Yar of a poetic matzevah in place of a missing physical marker or monument? The final spark of Ehrenburg’s poetic imagination occurs in the second half of the final line: “My k vam prishli, ne my – ovragi” / We’ve come to you, not we – but graves” [literally, “not we – but ravines,” although Ehrenburg uses not yar but ovrag, a different word for ravine)]. Paronomastically, the poem suggests an alternative phrasing and reading: ne my (not we) can also be reimagined as nemy ([are] mute). Mute – or muted – are the voices of the victims lying in Babi Yar, but in the USSR the voice of the Jewish-Russian poet is also muted in the devoiced Jewishness of the response to the Shoah. Despite the deeply personal, lyrical tone, and despite its evocation of desire, of a woman’s body and past love, in this poem the Jewishly personal is depersonalized and made outwardly not Jewish, and especially so if you imagine the act of reading this poem in 1945 by a mainstream Soviet audience: an untitled poem numbered “1” in a selection of six heart-rending poems about response to loss.

Poem 2 of the cycle negotiates between a heady rhetoric of Soviet victory, then still several months and hundreds of thousands of lives away in January 1945, and a subdued reckoning of losses. While “fireworks” illuminating a black sky metonymize celebrations of victory over Nazism, the “passion of those ravaged days” directs the reader
away from jubilation. Referring to the brutally murdered victims, the Russian adjective “rasterzannykh” (ravaged, harrowed, literally “torn apart”), also occurs in Ehrenburg’s wartime articles (see the 1944 article “The Great Day”), even the same grammatical structure, genitive plural, of the adjectives and nouns underscores the parallelism between the “ravaged children” ("rasterzannykh detei") at Babi Yar and the “ravaged days” (rasterzannykh dnei), as does the echoing rhyme of the nouns (dnei-detei [days-children]) (Erenburg 1944, Velikii den’). The burning rockets not only celebrate victory, but also invoke the burning corpses at the sites of Nazi massacres. Ehrenburg’s diction in line 2 of Poem 2 is couched in the language of Christ’s Passion and martyrdom. In 1911 Ehrenburg had gone through a phase of fascination with Catholic medieval mysticism. Echoes of a Christian – specifically Catholic – sensibility continued to inform Ehrenburg’s poetic vocabulary. It is conceivable that the invocation of the Passion of Christ in Ehrenburg’s poem about the Shoah compensates for his inability to introduce specifically Judaic references in every poem of the cycle.

Poem 3 shows that a major change in Ehrenburg’s perspective on Shoah memory had occurred by the end of 1944. The visits to the liberated Soviet territories had expanded and darkly animated Ehrenburg’s knowledge of the Shoah. At the same time, another major factor, which Poem 3 registers with layered precision, was Ehrenburg’s growing bitterness over the rise of popular antisemitism during the war, in the occupied territories and elsewhere in the USSR, and by the concerted official efforts to conceal both Shoah by bullet and local collaboration with the Nazis. In conjuring up a tumultuous, feverish image of Soviet memory of the Shoah, Ehrenburg saves the best for last in this poem of eight lines. In the original Russian gore / woe, a noun of the neuter gender, is likened to a klikusha, a feminine noun with a complex meaning and pedigree. First, “someone else’s woe,” here contextually understood as Jewish Shoah woe, is compared to a ovod / gadfly – something of a popular cliché, in which an unrelenting insect attacking and biting horses and cattle is transformed into a person unhinging the status quo. Used figuratively and applied to society, the term gadfly occurs in cornerstone religious and philosophical texts. Plato, in the Apology of Socrates, has Socrates comment during his trial that a dissenting person or opinion is like a gadfly (see: Social Gadfly). (In the Soviet imagination, the term gadfly gained much popularity with the widely read Russian translation of the 1897 novel The Gadfly by Ethel Lilian Voynich.) Ehrenburg presents the memory of the Shoah as a popular irritant, peddled by Jews yet unwanted by the rest of the Soviet population now focused on victory and jubilation. In keeping with the cycle’s close reliance on images of weather and atmospheric conditions, the poem’s second tier renders the Soviet memory of the Shoah as “горячий и мокрый воздух / hot and muggy air.” Here Ehrenburg’s subtlety lies not only in suggesting that one can never do justice to the memory of the Shoah as the void can never be undone, just as the authorial persona cannot catch enough air and keeps suffocating with the knowledge of the Shoah saturating his memory. But likening the memory of the Shoah to “hot air” might also underscore its irrelevance to the lives of the indifferent Soviet mainstream.

At the same time, the Russian folk term klikusha may be literally translated as “shrieker.” According to various Russian popular beliefs, klikushi are females possessed by demons; blessings and other religious rituals have the power to drive the unclean spirit out of them. The term klikusha (and its cognate klikushestvo) may have referred to
what was once termed “feminine hysteria,” to a spectrum of neurological conditions, and to psychic conditions resulting from trauma or abuse (see: Klikushi). Figuratively, in the Russian language the term klikusha may refer to speakers and polemicists who are viewed as intemperate and unstoppable. Ehrenburg sounds one of the cycle’s most disturbing notes: You cannot get away from the memory of the Shoah, yet no public options are available to deal with this someone else’s (read: Jewish) woe in the Soviet Union of 1945.

Both Poem 4 and Poem 5, when read outside the context of the January 1945 Novyi mir cycle as stand-alone texts, are the least marked by coded references to the Shoah. This is not surprising. Here Ehrenburg outwardly addresses a topic to which many other Soviet writers turned in late 1944 and 1945: the soldier’s return from the war. In Poem 4, the most general and abstract of terms, chelovek / person; human being occurs in reference to a returnee from the war and its horrors. This returnee, a Soviet every-(service)man, could be anybody. In the cycle’s semiotic system, the absence of his or her ethnic markedness brings home the idea that memory of the Shoah inadvertently rests in all of the Soviet survivors of the war: soldiers and generals, former prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates, Russians, Ukrainians, Jews et al. All of them, whether they know it or not, are witnesses to the Shoah and bearers of its memory, and they are all in need of nature’s idyllic setting – both as a refuge of peace and a source of consolation. A key motif pulsing through Poem 4 is human silence and nature’s voices and sounds as a respite from human rhetoric. While on the surface, the motif of peace/respite after years of war and devastation brings Poem 4 in line with the numerous Soviet poems written and published in 1944-1945 and depicting a soldier’s return to what remains of his prewar home, we should also note a striking difference of both tone and message in Ehrenburg’s cycle. The failure of the victorious Soviet grandiloquence to make room for the Shoah troubles Ehrenburg, as it also troubles other Jewish-Russian poet-witnesses, among them Selvinsky, Antokolsky, and Ozerov. It seems incredible that the censors let stand Ehrenburg’s daring juxtapositions of victory’s gunfire and the healing silence cloaking the minds of the returnees. That the happiness of having survived is coached not in words but in “water and grass,” in nature’s primordial elements, negates the ability of a brandishing rhetoric to accord a modicum of peace after four years of war. By pointing to the vulnerability of birds, butterflies and moths, Ehrenburg strikes an otherworldly note while also underscoring the fragility of the memory of the Shoah.

This triple motif – silence, defiance of rhetoric, and nature’s embrace of both the victims and the rememberers – continues in the opening part of Poem 5. Ornithological and entomological references – warblers and dragonflies – carry over from Poem 4 into Poem 5. Furthermore, a euphonically rich tautology in line 6 of Poem 5 carries implied references to bees and beekeeping: “A Medyn’ dlia z vonkikh medunits / And Medyn’ for clear-ringing lungworts.” The name of Medyn’, a district center in the north of the Kaluga Province, is derived etymologically from the word med / honey, for which the area had probably once been known. During the war the area was briefly occupied from October 1941 to January 1942 and devastated. Medunitsa, the Russian name of the flower lungwort, also derives etymologically from the Russian word for honey. Thus, both the place and the flower communicate connections to honey; it would be impossible to do this line justice in translating it into verse. The poem signals that the
war destroys such traditional rural professions as beekeeping. Ehrenburg relies on bees as a trope for Jews, a trope familiar to Jewish-Russian authors describing the destruction of Jewish life.

Ehrenburg, like Isaac Babel writing about Ukraine in 1920, refused to disavow artistry when speaking about the decimation of the Jewish population in the occupied territories. The second half of Poem 5 recalls the cycle’s opening poem by bringing back memories of desire, love, and the body’s physicality. There is mystery in the lines connecting the opening of Poem 5, with its trappings of an idyll and a semblance of a poem for children, to the poem’s latter half. Who are the ones who are “moonlit even without the moon”? The victims themselves? The survivors? The bereaved ones performing the rituals of mourning? Ehrenburg does not tell the reader. But the logic of the poem links those who are “dimmed at noon” with memories of their prewar – and pre-Shoah – living. That which in Poem 1 recalled Ehrenburg’s lyrical voice through the prism of his individual destiny in the past tense (“The hands of this beloved woman/ I used to kiss, a long time ago”) is now presented as a collective promise and reassurance to all the readers, whom the poem positions as survivors of catastrophe (“There will be hands to hold and embrace,/ There will be lips to kiss…”). It is specifically under the terms of this vague promise that poetry itself is textualized for the first time in the entire cycle. These Shoah verses of consolation and sorrow are recited by the wind, textualized yet unprinted – unprinted along with much of what Ehrenburg and fellow Jewish-Russian poets could not say in public.

Ehrenburg’s status enabled him to speak softly, in those loudspeaking days, about victims and survivors. The opening line of Poem 6, the conclusion of the cycle, throws a bridge of memory to Poem 1 (known later as Babi Yar) by restoring the I/eye-witness identity of the lyrical voice. It was the beginning of January 1945, and another prominent European cultural figure of Jewish origin, Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), had not yet written his often-miscontextualized and contested dictum about writing and reading poetry after Auschwitz. A sociologist, philosopher, and cultural critic and a prominent member of the Frankfurt School, Adorno was the son of a Jewish father who converted to Protestantism, and a Catholic mother. He spent the years 1938-1949 in America, and he wrote An Essay on Cultural Criticism and Society (1949) based on his American years of safety but relative public obscurity, which in the postwar years would be followed by his great influence and acclaim in Frankfurt. In the finale of the essay, two sentences before the end, Adorno stated: “Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today” (Adorno 1967: 34). Other Jewish-Russian poets who fought in World War II and lived through Stalinism, among them Yuri Levitansky (1922-1996), would later take issue with Adorno. But here, in the context of Ehrenburg’s Novyi mir cycle of 1945, we are talking about an anticipatory polemic, an imaginary polemic, a polemic of spirits and intellects by two contemporaries who had a number of things in common.

There is no evidence that they knew each other personally, although Adorno referenced Ehrenburg’s works. On 28 June 1926 he wrote to Alban and Helen Berg: “Read

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14 We note in passing that Adorno would later modify his position on several occasions, in the essay “Commitment” and elsewhere.
Ilya Ehrenburg: Julio Jurenito and T.D.E. It is not great, but amusing and destructive in a good way, and there is some truth to it” (Adorno 2005: 61-62). Was Adorno referring to the famous chapter 11 of Julio Jurenito, “The Teacher’s Prophecy Concerning the Destinies of the Tribe of Judah”? In a letter to Walter Benjamin dated 27 November 1937, Adorno drew on Ehrenburg to describe the position of the surviving intellectuals exiled from Nazi Germany: “Dear Walter, […] In all seriousness, I can hardly imagine our relationship to Europe as other than that of Ehrenburg’s travel company rummaging its way through her devastated cities” (Adorno 1999: 227-229).

We do not have anything on the Ehrenburg side, but there is also a gap in our knowledge; Ehrenburg burned his archive in Paris in the summer of 1940, and most of the letters addressed to him were irretrievably lost. In People, Years, Life Adorno did not make even a cameo appearance. Regardless of whether or not they knew each other personally (and they most likely did not), Adorno and Ehrenburg shared connections to the international art scene in Europe as well as to left-leaning European artists and intellectuals, many of them Jewish. But elective – or should one say, elected – affinities aside, we should note important differences. Adorno was a critic and scholar, not a poet or fiction writer. And Adorno did not have to correct for the ideological climate and for censorship, either during his prewar period, or in the postwar years, when he first wrote about poetry after Auschwitz. Unlike Ehrenburg, Adorno was writing without fear that his words may have dire consequences for him.

To return to Ehrenburg’s argument about art after the Shoah, I would like to propose that in his programmatic cycle of 1945, Ehrenburg articulated a point of view that was diametrically opposed to the one Adorno would make in 1949. It is remarkable that as early as January 1945 Ehrenburg was already asking in print, in a cycle published in a leading Soviet literary and cultural review, that both the poets and the victims of the Shoah be granted a modicum of remembrance and salvation through art and in art, however muted the art’s expression of Jewish losses.

And I would like to mention one more aspect of the imaginary dialogue between Ehrenburg and Adorno. In the same essay, just a few sentences before the comment about poetry after Auschwitz, Adorno remarked: “Neutralized and ready-made, traditional culture has become worthless today. Through an irrevocable process its heritage, hypocritically reclaimed by the Russians, has become expendable to the highest degree, superfluous, trash” (Adorno 1967: 34). To Adorno circa 1949, “the Russians” were synonymous with Soviet Russia, which at that point Adorno equated with the totalitarian art of Stalinism. As one rereads Ehrenburg’s Novyi mir cycle with the afterknowledge of Adorno’s dictum, one is struck by the growing formal perfection of the cycle’s poems from Poem 1 to Poem 6. This growing artistry can be measured, for instance, by the quality of rhyming. Even more stridently, in Poems 2 and 3, one finds lapses of taste and formal perfection which an educated author like Ehrenburg – and a competent editor – would have weeded out: kak eta [raketa] / like this [rocket] in Poem 2; kak ovod / like a gadfly in Poem 3 (italics added in both examples). These are things unpleasant to the Russian ear, and yet they were left standing. Why? Ehrenburg’s Shoah cycle showcased a deliberate progression toward aesthetic perfection. Poem 6, the most artistically accomplished in the cycle, is also the one to articulate Ehrenburg’s plea for art: great art, pure art, tremulous art.
The epithet smutnoe, which modifies the word iskusstvo / art in the penultimate line, means or can mean “tremulous,” “vague,” “uncertain,” and “inaarticulate.” But Ehrenburg also invokes the idea of art in “the time of troubles” (smutnoe vremia, in the Russian), a term specifically referring to the period in the history of Russia (Muscovy) at the very end of the 16th and the start of the 17th century, when Russia was overwhelmed by the Polish and Swedish invasion and in the midst of a dynastic crisis. With his gift of historical clairvoyance (consider again the terrifying prophesy of the Shoah in Julio Jurenito), Ehrenburg may have been alluding to a dynastic uncertainty of late Stalinism while also anticipating a time of troubles for Soviet Jewry.

Echoing Rubenstein’s characterization of Poem 1 as a “Kaddish,” Frezinskii referred to Poem 6 of the Novyi mir cycle as a “prayer” and suggested that after Stalin’s death this prayer “could [finally] become a program of action” for the commencing Thaw, in which Ehrenburg was a key figure (Frezinskii 2000: 61). Yet one would be remiss not to note that the implied addressee of Ehrenburg’s poem and of the entire cycle could be further historicized. The line “I beg [you] not for me, for those / Proshu ne dlaia seibia”, dla tekh” gains further poignancy if one reads it at the intersection of Ehrenburg’s biography and the history of the Shoah. If Ehrenburg is indeed begging Stalin himself, Stalin the tyrant who dallied in poetry and marked literary texts with an ink pencil, is Ehrenburg thereby paying the price, through both implied praise and directed plea, for being able to speak of the Shoah in print?

Nazism, the war, and the Shoah had put to the final test Ehrenburg’s principal métier: a polemicist and a witness of his times. The deceiving simplicity of the cycle’s classical prosody, coupled with Ehrenburg’s self-contorting plea for “tremulous art” in a “time of troubles,” represents something of a break with his artistic past. In the January 1945 Novy mir cycle Ehrenburg called for art to be free of stylistic obligations, read: ideological commitments. Such a plea for tremulous art, voiced in a cycle of poems about the memory of the Shoah, was an open challenge to Stalinist Russo-Soviet culture.

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15 There is, perhaps, a misprint in the text of Frezinskii’s introduction as Frezinskii dates the poem, published in the January 1945 issue of Novyi mir, as “May 1945.”
Ilya Ehrenburg’s January 1945 Novy mir cycle: Russian original and English translation.

ИЛЬЯ ЭРЕНБУРГ

СТИХИ

1.
К чему слова и что перо,
Когда на сердце этот камень,
Когда, как каторжник ядро,
Я волочу чужую память?
Я жил когда-то в городах,
И были мне живые миль,
Теперь на тусклых пустырях
Я должен разрывать могилы,
Теперь мне каждый яр знаком,
И каждый яр теперь мне дом.
Я этой женщины любимой
Когда-то руки целовал,
Хотя, когда я был с живыми,
Я этой женщины не знал.
Мое дитя! Мои румяна!
Моя несметная родня!
Я слышу, как из каждой ямы
Вы окликаете меня.
Я говорю за мертвых. Встанем,
Костями застучим — туда,
Где дышат хлебом и духами
Еще живые города.
Задуйте свет. Спустите флаги.
Мы к вам пришли. Не мы — овраги.

2.
Ракеты салютов. Чем небо чернеет,
Тем больше в них страсти растерзанных дней.
Летят и сгорают. А небо черно.
И если тебя пережить не дано,
То ты на минуту чужие пути,
Как эта ракета, собой освети.

3.
Чужое горе, оно, как овод,
Ты отмахнешься — и сядет снова.
Захочешь выйти, а выйти поздно,
Оно — горячий и мокрый воздух;
И как ни дышишь, все так же душно.
Оно не слышит, оно — кликуча,
Оно приходит и ночью носит,
А что с ним делать — оно чужое.

ILIYA EHRENBURG

POEMS

1.
What use are words and quill pens
When on my heart this rock weighs heavy?
A convict dragging his restraints,
I carry someone else’s memory.
I used to live in cities grand
And love the company of the living,
But now I must dig up graves
In fields and valleys of oblivion.
Now every yar is known to me,
And every yar is home to me.
The hands of this beloved woman
I used to kiss, a long time ago,
Even though when I was with the living
I didn’t even know her.
My darling sweetheart! My red blushes!
My countless family, kith and kin!
I hear you calling me from the ditches,
Your voices reach me from the pits.
I speak for the dead. We shall rise,
Rattling our bones we’ll go — there,
Where cities, battered but still alive,
Mix bread and perfumes in the air.
Blow out the candles. Drop all the flags.
We’ve come to you, not we — but graves.

2.
Rockets; fireworks. The blacker the skies,
The darker the passion of those ravaged days.
They fly and they burn. And the sky stays black.
And if you don’t survive an attack,
Then just for a minute, like this rocket steadfast,
You light someone else’s path with yourself.

3.
Someone else’s woe – like a gadfly;
You wave it off, but it gets right back at you,
You’d like to go out but it’s late already,
The woe’s hot and muggy air,
No matter how you breathe, suffocating.
The woe doesn’t hear, a nagging hysteric,
It comes at night, moaning, aching.
And what to do with it – someone else’s.
4.
Будет солнце в тот день или дождь, или снег,
Тишина удивит. К ней придет человек.
Тишиной начинается всё. Как во сне,
Человек возвращается вновь к тишине.
О, победы последний салют! Не слова
Нам расскажут о счастье — вода и трава,
Не орудья отметят сражений конец,
А биение крохотных птичьих сердец.
Мы услышим, как тихо летит мотылек,
Если ветер улегся и вечер далек.

5.
День придет, и славок громкий хор
Хорошо прославит птичий вздох,
И, смеху, наденет стрекоз
Выходные яркие глаза,
Будут снова небеса для птиц,
А Медынь для звонких медуниц,
Будут только те затемнены,
У кого луна и без луны,
Будут руки, чтобы обнимать,
Будут губы, чтобы целовать,
Даже ветер, прочитав стихи,
Заночует у своей ольхи.

6.
Прошу не для себя, для тех,
Кто жил в крови, кто дольше всех
Не слышал ни любви, ни скрипок,
Ни роз не видел, ни зеркал,
Под кем и пол в сенях не скрипнул,
Кого и сон не окликал.
Прошу для тех: и цвет, и щебет,
Чтоб было звонко и пестро,
Чтоб, умирая, день, как лебедь,
Ронял из горла серебро.
Прошу до слёз, до безрассудства,
Дойдя, войдя и перейдя,
Немного смутного искусства
За лёгким пологом дождя.

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