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*The Shoah in Soviet Popular Imagination: Rereading Anatolii Rybakov's Heavy Sand**

By reexamining Anatolii Rybakov's novel "Tiazhelyi pesok" (Heavy Sand), first published in 1978, this paper considers the place and status of Jewish questions in post-World War II Soviet popular imagination. In order to introduce the subject, I will briefly look at the Jewish thematic presence in Soviet popular culture of the wartime and postwar years.

During World War II, despite the imminent prohibition against writing about the Shoah (the Jewish Holocaust), for the first time since the 1920s—since Isaak Babel', Eduard Bagritskii, Mikhail Kozakov, Il'ia Selvinskii, Andrei Sobol', Iosif Utkin and other Jewish-Russian writers of their generation—Jews in the Soviet mainstream were able to speak about themselves in the pages of mass-produced and widely-distributed Russian-language periodicals and books. During the war Il'ia Erenburg and Vasilii Grossman became collective voices of the fighting Soviet people, and by virtue of that alone they mass-publicized the Jewish experience. The wartime surge of Jewish-Soviet patriotism even engendered a peculiar blend of Soviet and Judaic rhetoric in such works as the epic poem "Your Victory" (1945) by Margarita Aliger, whose autobiographical protagonist is a Jewish Soviet woman.

This wartime story, as well as the postwar one of the strangulation of Jewish culture by Stalin's regime in the late 1940s and early 1950s, is familiar to students of the period. The taboo on writing about the Shoah and about Jewish heroism became official policy during the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign. As Maurice Friedberg so passionately remarked, "Soviet Russian literature was to deny the Jews their one specifically Jewish 'aspiration'—to honor their heroes and martyrs" (Friedberg 1984: 102). It would fall to several non-Jewish authors of the Thaw,

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notably Evgenii Evtushenko and Anatolii Kuznetsov, to offer compensatory accounts of the Jewish martyrdom to millions of Soviet readers.

For Soviet Jewry, the central historical development of the late Soviet period was the massive emigration to Israel and North America. Israel's victory in the Six Day War of 1967 had given Soviet Jews a new boost of pride while summoning in a period of open animosity toward the Jewish state (and, concomitantly, to things Jewish). Emigration split the Soviet Jewish community into the ones "leaving" (or struggling to leave) and the ones "staying" (or intending to stay). By the early 1980s, ideological and cultural antisemitism, particularly as represented by the emergence of the official Russian cultural right and of the grassroots ultranationalist movement *Pamiat'* (Russian for "Memory"), dispelled some of the last false hopes to which the "staying" Jews had clung. The exodus of Soviet Jews in the 1970s also gave new ammunition to the Soviet popularizers of the antisemitic myths. It is in this context that I would suggest viewing the rise, in the 1970s, of popular historical fiction exploiting antisemitic myths (*Valentin Pikul'* is a telling example of such writing). One also observes bouts of racism and bigotry in the works by leading Russian authors of the postwar years, such as Victor Astaf'ev.¹ A dearth of positive—or is it any?—Jewish images was perhaps even greater in Soviet cinema of the "stagnant" years.²

Let me pause and pose a question: When and where did Jews have a chance to tell their own story in popular literature, theater and film of the late Soviet years? (The situation in the visual arts, due in part to the nature of the artistic media and the works' dissemination, might have been more advantageous for Jewish-Soviet artists). In answering this question I would propose, that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in order to counterbalance the Jewish exodus and the *refusenik* movement with their unsanctioned and underground culture, several works produced in the lap of official Soviet culture offered powerful if ideologically tempered treatments of the Shoah, otherwise a tabooed topic. The appearance of such works was even more remarkable—and their impact more significant—because instances of Jewish-Russian writers' being allowed to speak with openness about the Jewish experience were catastrophically few in the pre-reform Soviet mainstream.³

This brings me to the career of Anatolii Rybakov (1911-98). For the purposes of this discussion, it is important to bear in mind that Rybakov was born to an educated Jewish family in Chernigov, a provincial capital in Ukraine, and moved to Moscow in 1919 (for an overview of Rybakov's life and works, see Schilling 1998: 699-702; for a meticulous analysis of "Heavy Sand," see Rosenshield 1996: 240-255). A victim of Stalinist repression in the 1930s, Rybakov fought in World War II and was decorated for valor. In 1946 he turned to writing, adopting his mother's last name (literally, "son of a fisherman," inconspicuous as compared to his father's markedly Jewish Aronov, "son of Aaron"). Published in 1948, Rybakov's adventure novel "Dirk" became a Soviet teenage bestseller.

The book's total printings apparently exceeded 10 million copies. "Dirk" and two other novels, "A Bronze Bird" (1956) and "The Shot" (1975), formed a best-selling trilogy. Rybakov received a Russian Federation Prize for "Minute of Silence" (1971), a screenplay based on his novel "The Unknown Soldier" (1970).

"Drivers" (1950), Rybakov's debut novel for adults, garnered a Stalin Prize in 1951. When Rybakov's timidly anti-Stalinist novel "Summer in Sosniaki" (1964), appeared in Germany in 1965, it was reportedly advertised as a work by a "Russian Graham Greene." Rybakov had a manifest gift for handling elements of suspense and adventure and for constructing contemporary sagas. He would have been a successful commercial writer in the West, but he was no Graham Greene. His literary sensibility and belletristic skills conjoined those of a Soviet Mario Puzo (1920-99) and a Soviet Hermann Wouk (1915). Of course, such comments as the one I have just made reveal an almost unavoidable tendency to treat as similarities the differences between Soviet popular culture and popular culture in the West. And of course we are still coming to grips not only with what is popular and what's literary in Soviet culture, but also with the very parameters of a Jewish presence in it. However, when a novel by a Jewish author is serialized in a monthly with a print run of over two hundred thousand copies, such numbers alone—regardless of other sociological and ideological factors at stake—should qualify such a novel to be considered along with the more obvious and unquestionable cultural phenomena that influenced the popular Soviet imagination.

Jewish themes did not take centerstage in Rybakov's writing until "Heavy Sand." Written in 1975-77, the novel appeared in the moderately conservative Moscow monthly "October" in 1978 (nos. 7-9); at the time of serialization, the magazine claimed a print run of 218,000 copies. In the following year it was published as a book by Sovetskii pisatel', a leading Moscow publisher; the printing totaled 150,000 copies, and the novel was subsequently reprinted in book form.⁴ "Heavy Sand" made Rybakov famous; in the first months after its publication twenty-six countries reportedly contracted to publish it. The English translation appeared in 1981.

In all fairness, Rybakov himself deemed not "Heavy Sand" but "Children of the Arbat," a "anti-Stalinist blockbuster" trilogy (John Schillinger's expression), his principal work. Completed in 1967, a decade before "Heavy Sand," Rybakov's "Children of the Arbat" was first announced as forthcoming in 1969, but was not published until 1988. It appeared in dozens of languages, landing Rybakov on the cover of "Time" magazine in 1988. Interviewed for a CBS special "Seven Days in May" (May 1987), Rybakov told CBS anchorman Dan Rather that he had "never" considered emigrating. "Many times I was offered to publish [the novel "Children of the Arbat"] in the West," Rybakov contended. "But I didn't give it to the West, because this novel is needed by my people, is needed by my country, and must be published at home."

I have drawn a parallel with the Jewish-American author Herman Wouk, thinking of Wouk's two-part epic novel about World War II, "Winds of War" (1971) and "War and Remembrance" (1978), and also the TV mini series based on these works and released in the 1980s. If one takes seriously the parallels between Rybakov and his Jewish contemporaries among popular Anglo-American authors of the time, "Heavy Sand" and "Children of the Arbat" could be seen as Soviet equivalents of Wouk's historical, panoramic, melodramatic fiction. I would further suggest that in envisioning the creative and ideological laboratory of Rybakov's "Heavy Sand," it might be useful to think of an ambitious official Jewish author's temptation to give the Soviet reader what another Western contemporary of Rybakov, Leon Uris (1924-2003), had given the Anglo-American reader in his novel "Exodus" (1958), one of the biggest best-sellers since "Gone with a Wind."⁵

In an interview printed in New York's Russian daily "Novoe russkoe slovo" in January 1997, Rybakov, who divided his last years between Moscow and New York, died in New York and was buried in Moscow, spoke of the time when he wrote "Heavy Sand": "In the 1970s state-sponsored anti-Semitism had resumed in the USSR under the disguise of fighting Zionism. All sorts of nefarious books were being published about the Zionists; they trampled Israel, and I was proud of it [i.e. Israel]. My people had returned to its country" (Kazakova 1997). Note that in the 1987 interview with CBS's Dan Rather, Rybakov had used the exact same expression, "my people" ("moi narod"), but then in reference to the "Soviet people," not the "Jewish people"; Rybakov now used the same expression, "my country," in reference to Israel, and not the USSR. It is now time to consider Rybakov's popular fashioning of Jewish history within the larger, prescribed framework of Soviet historiography.

The title "Heavy Sand" hints at a verse from the Book of Job: "It would be heavier than the sand of the sea" (Job 6: 3).⁶ The sand in Rybakov's best novel is soaked with the blood of murdered Jews and heavy with the compromistic Soviet legacy of its composition and publication. Set in a small town in Rybakov's native Chernigov Province, where the Jews had not settled until after the third partition of Poland in 1795, the novel opens at the beginning of the twentieth century. It takes the reader through the last czarist years and early Soviet decades to conclude in 1972; the novel's main focus are the events of World War II and the Shoah. The narrator's father, Iakov Ivanovskii, a Jewish-Swiss-German young man from Basel, a professor's son, whose grandfather had emigrated to Switzerland from Russia, visits his ancestors' home in Ukraine. He falls in love with and marries the narrator's mother, Rakhil' Rakhlenko (The Soviet reader is supposed not to overlook the presence of the biblical Jacob and Rachel in the first names of the couple). The narrator Boris Ivanovskii is a self-professed "internationalist" who was "raised" that way by "the Soviet system" ("Russian, Jew, Belarusian," he says, "it's all the same to me"). He is

married to an ethnic Russian woman, with whom he has three sons who all married non-Jewish women.

According to the Moscow critic Vladimir Kardin, after agreeing in principle to publish "Heavy Sand" serially, then the editor of "October" Anatolii Anan'ev took the manuscript to the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Kardin 2004: 58-62). The officials there asked for revisions in the treatment of the Stalinist 1930s and of the Jewish theme, and Rybakov, as Kardin reports, made many, ranging from radical changes to superficial grafting. Although in the post-Soviet years Rybakov published an "authoritative" edition, which restored some (self-)censored passages, the 1978 version of "Heavy Sand" is likely to remain the standard text and a witness to its time and epoch.

The issue of whether or not Rybakov had been directly prompted by the powers that be to carry out an ideological commission—to write a sanctioned heroic novel about the Soviet Jews and the Shoah—is not that fascinating to me. One day, a conscientious biographer of Rybakov will examine the surviving manuscripts and will investigate the novel's genesis and archeology. That the official Soviet Jew Rybakov cooperated with the regime over the novel's revisions is hardly surprising. What interests me much more is that in writing "Heavy Sand," Rybakov self-consciously infused the Soviet popular imagination of the late Brezhnev era with a threefold ideological agenda. He created positive and inspiring images of Soviet Jews. He overcame the silencing of the Shoah. And, finally and thirdly, he attempted an antidote to the massive Jewish emigration.

Both the concept of his novel and the timing of its creation and publication suggest a connection with the exodus of Soviet Jewry.⁷ Is it a coincidence or a rhetorical redirection of history that in "Heavy Sand" a Jew returns from the West to regain his roots while tens of thousands of Rybakov's Jewish contemporaries were uprooting themselves in the 1970s, just as Rybakov worked on the novel? And furthermore, was the Party's imprimatur of Rybakov's depiction of the Shoah a carefully calculated concession, both to the wavering Soviet Jews and to the watchful West?

Some of the novel's Western readers—and not all of them writing for neo-conservative publications—were critical of it from the outset. For example, both Walter Laqueur ("Commentary," June 1979) and Josephine Woll ("The New Republic," 30 September 1981) took issue with "Heavy Sand." Others wrote admiringly of "Heavy Sand" and inflated its literary merits and historical aptness. The British translator of "Heavy Sand," Harold Shukman, stated, that "in 1978 [Rybakov] was the first Russian writer of Jewish origin to approach the subject of the Russian Jewish past and of the Holocaust in the USSR [...]" (Shukman 1989: 667). This is, of course, quite incorrect. A consideration of the prose and poetry that Vasilii Grossman, Il'a Erenburg, Boris Iampolskii, Lev Ozerov, and Boris Slutskii, to name five authors, published in the mainstream

Soviet press during and after World War II, should convince one that Rybakov was hardly the "first" to "approach" the subject. It is, by the way, morbidly ironic that Grossman's major novel "Life and Fate," with its central Shoah sequence, appeared in the West in 1980 (English translation, 1985), almost at the same time as "Heavy Sand," but in the USSR not until 1989.

In "Heavy Sand," Rybakov eloquently depicted the Shoah in the occupied Ukraine. While he presented the majority of the local non-Jewish population as actively assisting the Jews and resisting the Nazis, he did write of the collaboration of the local populations with the Nazis (although with less articulateness than had his close contemporary Lev Ginzburg in his overlooked book "Abyss: Narrative Based" on Documents (1966), an account of the Krasnodar trial, and also in his "novel-essay" "Only My Heart Was Broken..." [1980; published 1983]). Additionally, Rybakov hinted at furrows and wrinkles on the face of official Soviet historiography, such as the fact that the anti-Nazi guerilla units in the occupied territories avoided merging with the Jewish partisans. Given the implementation, by the late 1960s, of a *de facto* taboo on the presentation of the Shoah apart from the unspecified losses of the Soviet people, "Heavy Sand" was an achievement, but a limited one. Its main shortcomings stemmed from Rybakov's lip service to the official Soviet rhetoric on the Jewish question.

Maurice Friedberg's verdict comes to mind: "'Heavy Sand' dealt, it is true, at length and with much sympathy, with the subject of the Holocaust. Yet, in the final analysis, it, too, by implication merely advanced the thesis of the desirability of a complete disappearance in the USSR of the Jews as a distract group" (Friedberg 1984: 103).

Rybakov, I believe, sought to alter the popular Soviet perception of the Jews and of the Shoah. In assessing "Heavy Sand," one must therefore be clear about the ideological climate of the middle to late 1970s and the restrictions on what even the officially favored writers were permitted to say in print. Limitations aside, some of Rybakov's pages about Jewish life in the Pale are quite compelling, and the concluding chapters, describing the death of the narrator's mother, Rakhil' Rakhlenko, moving and inspiring.

The novel concludes with an unveiling of a monument on the site of a communal grave where many executed Jews from the protagonist's home town in *chernigovshchina* lie buried. Consider the ending of "Heavy Sand":

A large slab of black granite had been erected above the grave, and on it was engraved, in Russian: "To the eternal memory of the victims of the German Fascist invaders." Below it was an inscription in Hebrew.⁸

Next to me stood Sidorov, an ex-miner, then manager of the shoe factory, then a partisan commander, and now a pensioner. He had been born in the Donbass, but he'd lived here a long time, he knew everything, understood everything through and through.

He pointed to the inscription in Russian and Hebrew and asked me, quietly, "Tell me, Boris, did they translate the Russian text right?"

As a child, probably until I was eight or nine, I had gone to kheder, then I transferred to a Russian school and I'd long ago forgotten the Hebrew characters.

Yet, nearly sixty years later, those letters and those words came back to me from the unknown and eternal depths of my memory, I remembered them, and I read:

"Venikoisi domom loi nikisi."

The meaning of those words is "Everything is forgiven, but those who have spilled innocent blood shall never be forgiven" ["Smysl etikh slov byl takoi: 'Vse proshchaetsia, prolivshim nevinuiu krov' ne prostitsia nikogda'"].

Seeing that I was slow to reply, Sidorov gave me a look, he understood <everything>, and again he asked,

"Well, did they get it right?"

"Yes," I said. "It's right, it's exact" (Rybakov 1979: 380-381).

Note that in Harold Shukman's English translation, the Hebrew is a transliteration of Rybakov's Ashkenazic phonetic reproduction, rendered in the Russian text of "Heavy Sand" in Cyrillic characters, of the Hebrew of Joel 4: 21 (the last verses of the Book of Joel): "Thus I will treat as innocent their blood/ Which I have not treated as innocent;/ And the Lord shall dwell in Zion."⁹ These lines from Joel are traditionally recited in the Sabbath service, as part of the prayer in memory of the departed and martyrs, which explains their choice for the Hebrew inscription commemorating the memory of Shoah victims. Naturally, many Anglo-American readers, especially those conditioned by the King James Bible, are more familiar with an emendation of the first two lines of Joel 4: 21, which reads as: "For I will cleanse their blood that I have not cleansed" or, in the Jewish Publication Society translation of Tanakh, as "their unavenged blood shall be avenged").¹⁰ If the Soviet readers of Rybakov's novel had any memory of the last verses of Joel, it would have trickled down from the Synodic Russian translation of the Old Testament, where the last verse reads as: "Ia smoiu krov' ikh, kotoruiu ne smyl eshche, i Gospod' budet obitat' v Sione"¹¹ (in a literal English translation, "I will cleanse their blood that I have not yet cleansed, and the Lord shall dwell in Zion," as is expected, parallel to the King James text).

The last clause ("And the Lord shall dwell in Zion") of Joel's last verse was omitted in Rybakov's Soviet novel. This is hardly surprising, given not only the long Soviet legacy of anti-Judaism but also the specific historical context of the Soviet *aliya*. In his pioneering essay of 1996, titled "Socialist Realism and the Holocaust: Jewish Life and Death in Anatoly Rybakov's 'Heavy Sand,'" Gary Rosenshield elucidated some of the tensions stemming from the discrepancy between the Hebrew inscription and the Russian translation.¹² The Russian "meaning" that Rybakov's Jewish narrator provides after reading the Hebrew from the gravestone inscription does not "translate" it or correspond to it, but rather truncates and censors the passage in Joel, and does so in such a way as to

omit both the reference to God and to Zion and to obliterate the sense and significance of the reference for those readers who are not familiar with the Bible or with Hebrew.

As Alice Nakhimovsky rightfully remarked, the final scene of “Heavy Sand” “strains credulity.” The “easy use of Hebrew,” Nakhimovsky suggested, “heart-warming” though it may be, “constitutes a rather striking reversal of what usually happened” (Nakhimovsky 1992: 36-37). For Rybakov’s Jewish readers in the USSR, especially those bent on continuing their Soviet lives when many others were trying to emigrate, Rybakov’s token use of Hebrew in the novel’s last lines amounted to something small, albeit real, to sustain those staying in their Jewish lives of (self-)denial.

Notes

¹ For instance, in his novel “Czar-Fish” (1977) Viktor Astaf’ev portrayed the Jew Georgii (Goga) Gertsev as a predator and profiteer destroying Russian nature. I examine this phenomenon in Shrayer 2000: 474-485.

² Even in such counter-cultural works of Soviet cinema as Kira Muratova’s splendid “Brief Encounters” (1967), the two uninspiring Jewish characters are treated with ambivalence. One is an old man accosting people at an open-air café with stories that he once had a wife and children who were murdered by the Nazis, the other a man who speaks with a Jewish accent and demands that the people be allowed to be moved into an unfinished apartment building. Or recall Larisa Shepit’ko’s “Ascent” (1976) where the two partisan protagonists run into a person who is presumably Jewish, an escaped concentration camp inmate who has gone mad and nearly gives them away.

In the 1970s, under a virtual taboo on the equitable treatment of the Jewish experience, even snippets of information about the pressing issues in the lives of Soviet Jews were culturally newsworthy. In Gleb Panfilov’s “Theme” (1979; not released until 1986) a dissident working as a gravedigger in the city of Vladimir (played by Stanislav Liubshin) tells the female protagonist (played by Inna Churikova), in suspiciously hushed tones, that he does not have many options other than “going to my uncle’s in Israel” (“k d’iade v Izrail’”—a coded cliché of the 1970s mass emigration). Consider also Georgii Daneliia’s lyrical comedy “Mimino” (1977) where Datiko, the Georgian protagonist (played by Vakhtang Kikabidze), an airline pilot, tries calling his home, the Kakhetian town of Telavi, from Western Europe. He ends up being connected to Tel Aviv and speaking to a Georgian Jew who had made *aliya* and lives in Israel, and the two of them sing Georgian songs on the phone and speak of vestiges of their shared past; this is supposed to show that ex-Soviet Jews miss their former homeland. But even such warped references were few and betokened great exceptions to what was otherwise a virtual silence. I can well remember

watching these movies as a teenager and young adult in Moscow, and experiencing a *frisson* just because the Jewish references were coming from a public screen in a movie theater.

³ It would not be too difficult to compile a finite list of such publications. The novel "O, Saturday" (1980; "Saturday"[*subbota*] in Russian refers both to the week day and to the Jewish Sabbath) by Dina Kalinovskaia and the story "The Lady's Taylor" (1984; turned into a play and later a film) by Aleksandr Borshchagovskii are frequently cited as examples of such late Soviet works in the official culture.

⁴ Rybakov 1978; the first book edition appeared as Rybakov 1979; the modified version of the novel appeared as Rybakov 1995. I quote the English translation from the British edition of the novel: Rybakov 1981. A parallel American edition appeared as: Rybakov 1981a.

⁵ Also recall the 1960 film by Otto Preminger, a landmark of the representation of Jewish history in popular American culture.

⁶ *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*. Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

⁷ The wave fell in 1975-77 (compared to about 30,000 in both 1972 and 1973) when Rybakov worked on the novel, rose again in 1978 when his novel was first published, reaching its peak in 1979 (about 51,000 emigrants) when the book edition appeared. In 2003 the demographer Mark Tolts provided the following telling statistics on emigration of Jews and "their non-Jewish relatives": total from the former USSR, leaving on exit visas to Israel, but going to all destinations, in 1970-88: 290,800 (50,400 from the Russian Federation); in 1989-98 769,900 (230,500 from the Russian Federation) to Israel and 290,000 (70,900 from the Russian Federation) to the United States; see Tolts 2003: 173-206; Mikaella Kagan analyzed the specifics of the 1970-90s Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union to the USA in Kagan 1996. Kagan cited the statistics of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), according to which from 1970 to 1993, 308,600 Soviet Jews entered the USA as refugees.

⁸ In Rybakov's Russian, "an inscription in Jewish [*nadpis' na evreiskom*], as opposed to *na drevneevreiskom* [in ancient Jewish] or *na ivrite* [in Hebrew], what would have been the correct standard Russian terms for "Hebrew." Rybakov made no changes in the usage in the post-Soviet edition that he meant to become authoritative.

⁹ *Tanakh*, 1013.

¹⁰ See *Tanakh*, 1013, fn. e-e.

¹¹ *Bibliia. Knigi sviashchennogo pisaniia vetkhogo i novogo zaveta*. Moscow, Izdanie moskovskoi patriarkhii, 1992, p. 873.

¹² I am indebted to Rosenshield's discussion of the unveiling scene and the inscription.

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