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## Exhibiting the Great Patriotic War in Soviet capitals: Moscow, Kyiv, Minsk\*

Великая Отечественная Война на выставках в советских  
столицах: Москва, Киев, Минск

**Abstract.** During World War II, Soviet museums constituted an important part of the war propaganda machine and were used by the Soviet state to mobilize its population and to create a public historical narrative about the war. Staff at Soviet museums began organizing war-related patriotic exhibitions from the very first days of the German invasion in June 1941. This article focuses on two types of war-themed exhibitions and museums that were prominent in the Soviet urban spaces during the war and immediately after: trophy exhibitions and exhibitions and museums that focused on constructing historical narratives about the war. Among the main topics of the latter exhibitions were partisan resistance, German atrocities, and the central role of the Communist Party and Stalin personally. While the creators of these war museums adhered to the ideological frameworks and museum content plans developed by Moscow's professional ideologists, I demonstrate that local museum workers were able, to some extent, to deviate from centrally prescribed narratives and to engage their own agency and creativity, and that the extent of this deviation was largely defined by regional specifics and by individual efforts and local circumstances. The impact of regional differences in the narration of the war is especially evident in the comparison of the representation of the Holocaust in museums in Kyiv and Minsk. Finally, I demonstrate that local circumstances were a major factor in the fate of each museum after the end of the war.

**Keywords:** Second World War, museums, exhibitions, propaganda, partisans

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## Introduction

On June 22, 1943, on the second anniversary of the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, as the Eastern Front of the Second World War is referred to in Russia, a grandiose exhibition opened at Gorky Park in Moscow. The main park of the Soviet capital was transformed into a display of German weapons captured by the Red Army as war booty. Visitors saw German tanks, planes, cannons, and other military equipment. In a private letter, writer Leonid Leonov, who visited the exhibition in July 1943, shortly after his return from evacuation in Tatarstan, described his impression of the incredible strength of the German tanks, noting the adaptability of the people fighting against them:

Эти самые „тигры” очень такая неприятная штука, броня толще кулака, жилплощадь для троих на колесах. И оттуда как фаллос этакая штука железная, скучный предмет, прямо сказать. Но, поскольку и их пробивают, значит, что-то такое произошло с человеком: видимо, и на этот раз привык и приспособился. Вот живуч зверь, а? (cited after: Desâtnikov 399).

Between 1943 and 1948, the exhibition in Gorky Park was one of the most popular sights in Moscow, playing an important role in the Soviet war propaganda machine, both domestic and international. However, when the exhibition was closed in 1948, the bulk of the weapons were recycled as scrap metal. The majority of other war-themed exhibitions and museums that opened during the war or immediately after it and occupied large spaces in the urban landscapes of Soviet cities followed the fate of the Gorky Park exhibition and were quickly shut down during the last years of Stalin's rule.

Drawing on the case studies of three cities, Moscow, Kyiv, and Minsk, this article investigates the museum culture and the associated narratives about the Second World War in the Soviet Union, focusing on wartime exhibitions and museums devoted to two main themes: trophies and local wartime history. These displays played an important role in the Soviet propaganda machine's goals to mobilize the population and to create an accessible, visual, and physical narrative of the war. The museums also worked as mediums for collecting and preserving evidence of the war for posterity and future memory. Despite the increasing centralization of Soviet ideology during late Stalinism, this article demonstrates the significance of local and individual initiatives during the war, which led not only to the creation of a large network of war exhibitions and museums, but also to significant regional variations in the narratives of the war on display. Therefore, I argue, the fates of the war-time exhibitions and museums were defined not only by the central policies of the late Stalinist state, but also by regional and local

differences within the Union. In order to trace these differences, I investigate the ways in which the war museums created and conveyed the public historical narrative. I view the collected objects, art, and documents in semiotic terms as a kind of material language, while the collections are narratives of experiences (Pearce 22, 142). My analytical approach to these exhibitions is to treat them “as narratives told in a particular historical time and space” (Bogumił et al. 1). In order to reconstruct these narratives as they were told in the 1940s, I draw on a variety of sources, including guidebooks, press reviews, archival documents, and photographs, as well as the private accounts of visitors, such as letters and diaries.

The developments surrounding the establishment of the war exhibitions and museums, and the subsequent closure of the majority of them during the last years of Stalin’s rule, directly correlated with shifting regime policies vis-à-vis the commemoration of the war. After the war ended in 1945, Stalin showed little interest in commemorating it or in celebrating its heroes, aside from his own military genius, and instead focused on rebuilding the country while also waging the Cold War. As an example: Victory Day (May 9), considered the most important state holiday in modern Russia, was a working day between 1948 and 1965 and official celebrations were modest, informal, and regionally diverse (Tumarkin 100–105; Gabowitsch 64). Historians connect the emergence of the state’s war cult with developments during the Brezhnev era, when Soviet victory in the war became a new source of the state’s legitimacy (Marples 287–288); Brezhnev also brought back the Stalin-centered narrative of the war (Mann 56).

The commemoration politics of late Stalinism were a large factor in the closure of war-themed exhibitions and museums, including exhibitions of trophy weapons in Moscow, Kyiv, and Minsk. These large projects also required a significant amount of money and other material resources in a country that required infrastructural reconstruction. However, local politics were also a major contributing factor to the fate of each institution. While the exhibition “Ukrainian Partisans” was closed in 1950, the Minsk Museum of the Great Patriotic War has remained open until the present day, albeit changing its names and location. I hypothesize that the explicit narration of the Ukrainian Holocaust and the extensive, albeit negative, coverage of the Ukrainian nationalist organizations negatively affected the fate of Kyiv’s exhibition. In contrast, the Minsk museum did not cover any ideologically dangerous topics and, additionally, was in the patronage network of the Republican party leaders. The emergence of local war narratives and the extent of their differences from the directives developed by Moscow’s ideologists largely depended on the powers and initiatives of the regional party leaders, who in many cases served as patrons for the museums in their respective locales and defined the limits of what was possible.

## The early period: Soviet war exhibitions in 1941–1942

From the very beginning of the German invasion in June 1941, Soviet museum workers began to preserve and display physical and documentary evidence of the war. On July 15, 1941, Narkompros of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) issued an instruction to all staff of the museums in the system to focus their work on the interests of the war effort (*Narodnyj komissariat prosvešeniâ*<sup>1</sup>). First, the museums were to create exhibitions that demonstrated the “heroic past of the peoples of the USSR and the greatness of Russian weaponry”, focusing on Germanic invasions (*Narodnyj komissariat prosvešeniâ* 2). The brochure included a detailed content plan for such exhibitions, recounting historical episodes from the Battle on the Ice of 1242 to the Brusilov Offensive during the First World War. The museums were also to glorify the “great military leaders of the Russian people”, both historical, such as Alexander Nevsky, and contemporary Soviet figures, especially Joseph Stalin (*Narodnyj komissariat prosvešeniâ* 2). This paradigm was directly connected with the ideological framework of Great Russian nationalism, or National Bolshevism, which emerged in the Soviet Union in the 1930s (Brandenberger 43–62).

Second, the directive instructed museums to create special exhibitions about current war events with a focus on local heroes. Finally, museum staff were to collect current war material and artifacts, such as letters from local servicemen, Soviet propaganda materials, documents written by military specialists, and other written testimonies (*Narodnyj komissariat prosvešeniâ* 10). Despite these top-down directives, however, museum staff also implemented their own initiatives from the very first days of the war. While the Narkompros directive was issued on July 15, the museums had begun to mount war-themed exhibitions as early as June 24. As Yulia Kantor puts it, unlike Stalin, who stayed silent for an “unforgivably long time”, museum workers “began a dialogue with their visitors” from the very first days of the war (Kantor 81).

### Trophy exhibitions

As the war progressed and military fortunes shifted after the Battle of Moscow and the subsequent counter-offensive campaign of winter 1941–1942, the content of the exhibitions switched from emphasizing the past to representing the events of the present. The Soviet successes during the Battle of Moscow not only

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<sup>1</sup> Narkompros (*Narodnyj komissariat prosvešeniâ*) was The People’s Commissariat for Education, the Soviet agency in charge of public education and culture between 1918 and 1946.

had strategic importance but were also crucial for the war propaganda machine. Retreating Germans left the Soviets an incredible number of trophies, which increased proportionately with the military fortunes of the Red Army. Army units and various museums organized displays and exhibitions of war booty as a concrete visual demonstration of the enemy's losses. Many displays were mobile and toured factories and villages, attracting thousands of visitors. Trophies were becoming an increasingly prominent feature of war exhibitions across the Union, helping to maintain the belief in the future victory of the Red Army.

### Moscow

The large exhibition "The Defeat of the German Forces near Moscow" opened at the Central House of the Red Army on February 22, 1942 (the eve of the Day of the Red Army). The exhibition narrated the story of the Battle of Moscow in chronological order. In March 1942, the exhibition was reorganized into a Museum of Trophy Weapons at the Central House of the Red Army, under the umbrella of the newly created Trophy Commission (*Ob organizacii sbora i vyvoza trofejnogo imušestva*).

A year later, on April 5, 1943, after the success of the Battle of Stalingrad and the subsequent start of the Soviet counter-offensive campaign, the State Committee of Defense (GKO) reorganized the trophy system again, establishing the Trophy Committee (*O trofejnom komitete pri Gosudarstvennom komitete oborony*). The Committee, headed by Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, was awarded significant powers and resources, since the trophies were not merely scraps and damaged weapons anymore; as the Red Army was winning more battles and advancing further west, the captured trophy property also included factory equipment, trains, horses and other animals, art, and even timber (Kurkotkin 373–385; Schechter).

The resolution on the establishment of the Trophy Committee in April 1943 also included an order to organize a Museum-exhibition of trophy weapons and to close the existing museum at the Central House of the Red Army. Less than a month later, the Trophy Committee submitted a plan of the grandiose Museum-exhibition to the GKO (*O muzee-vystavke trofejnogo vooruženîâ i tehniki*). The goal of the Museum-exhibition was "to show the trophy weaponry and equipment captured by the Red Army, as a demonstration of the force and power of the Red Army" and to remind visitors of the strength of the enemy and the difficult challenge ahead of the country (*O muzee-vystavke trofejnogo vooruženîâ i tehniki* ll. 9–10). In-text comments in this archival document make it clear that Stalin personally reviewed and edited the plan.

When the exhibition of the trophy weapons opened at Gorky Park on June 22, 1943, the display, which was on an incredible scale, had six departments: artillery, aviation, automotive, armored weapons, engineering, and the rear. The largest objects, such as planes, tanks, and other heavy equipment, were placed in the open-air spaces of the park and along the banks of the Moskva River, while smaller items, such as clothing, rifles, and medals, were put on display in two roofed pavilions.

Ilya Ehrenburg, writer and war correspondent of “Krasnaya zvezda”, was arguably the most powerful voice of Soviet wartime propaganda. Ehrenburg’s article about the new exhibition interprets it from a perspective familiar to his reader: Germans are corrupt at their core, and so are their weapons. He asks: how could the Germans, with their “arrogance and cowardice, greed, shamelessness, and stupidity [...] capture ten countries, crawl all the way to Egypt, reach the Caucasus?” He suggests looking for an answer at the exhibition of the trophies, which proved that the enemy was technologically strong and had prepared for the attack for a long time (Ehrenburg 2).

Ehrenburg describes the highlights of the exhibition (tanks and planes), as if they were anthropomorphic personalities, humiliated by the wartime losses, and had zoomorphic features. By animating the deadly machines and weapons, describing the German tanks as “wounded” and the planes as “humiliated bandit birds”, captured right in “their nests”, he treats them as a proxy for the real, human enemy – Hitler and his troops (Ehrenburg 2).

The very sight of the captured weapons and defeated planes and tanks was supposed to proclaim the strength of the Red Army, which was able to overcome and defeat the powerful enemy. The moral inferiority of the enemy was reflected in the defeat of its weapons. Ehrenburg emphasized that the real centre of the exhibition was the Red Army soldiers who captured the trophies and now came to see them: “Но мы знаем теперь, что час расплаты близок. Об этом говорит и обстрелянный, обветренный, обожженный солнцем боец, который, усмехаясь, смотрит на немецкого «Тигра», *попавшего в клетку*” (Ehrenburg 2; emphasis mine).

Similar large trophy exhibitions were established in many Soviet cities, including Kyiv and Minsk, shortly after their liberation from German occupation. The general structure of these exhibitions followed Moscow’s example: large weapons – tanks, planes, and engineering equipment – were kept outdoors, in the public parks or squares, while smaller items were placed in roofed pavilions.

## Kyiv

The Red Army liberated Kyiv from German occupation on November 6, 1943. Four months later, on March 14, the Ukrainian Radnarkom (The Council of People’s Commissars) issued an order to organize the exhibition of trophy weapons

and equipment in Kyiv's Pushkin Park. During the occupation, the park had been used as a cemetery for hundreds of German soldiers. At the beginning of the summer of 1944, German prisoners of war were brought to the park to conduct the job of exhuming their compatriots' bodies and reburying them in communal graves in the Syrets area (Malakov 155), just a few hundred meters away from Babyn Yar, the site of Nazi massacres. After the reburial was completed, trophy tanks, airplanes, and other heavy equipment and weapons were brought to the park. The reburial project therefore not only achieved the goal of reclaiming the urban space of the park by removing the physical bodies of the German occupants but also created a space for showcasing the victories of the Red Army.

The exhibition opened on February 23, 1945, the Day of the Red Army. As in Moscow's Gorky Park, most of the exhibits were placed outside, but there was also a roofed pavilion that displayed small items like documents, flags, banners, clothes, and military decorations. Shortly after its opening, "Pravda Ukrainy" reported that the exhibition had around 5,000 artifacts on display: samples of artillery, heavy armored equipment, aviation, chemical and other types of weapons, and other miscellanea captured from the Germans (Marchenko 3). Visitors walking along the park's alleys saw heavy and anti-aircraft artillery systems, large modern howitzers and outdated cannons from the World War I era, tanks, and armoured personnel carriers. The central square of the park hosted aircraft. As the war theater moved west, tanks and planes began to arrive from battles on German soil. Among the highlights of the exhibition were the V-1 flying bombs, used by the Germans mostly during the London Blitz (Vladimirov 3). On weekdays, the exhibition had an average of 1,200 visitors and as many as 5,000 on the weekends.

## Minsk

The trophy weapons exhibition in Minsk was smaller in scale than those in Moscow and Kyiv, probably because it was organized hastily after the liberation of Minsk in an effort to reclaim the public space of the city after the long German occupation. The employees of the newly founded Belarusian Museum of the Great Patriotic War, the majority of whom had been partisans, put together the "Republican Exhibition of Trophy Weapons", which opened on November 7, 1944 on a large territory adjacent to the House of the Red Army, intended to be transformed into a public park in the future; the space was cleaned up, benches were installed, and bushes and trees were planted.

The exhibition was decorated with Stalin's sculpture, art, banners with slogans exhorting citizens to fight the enemy, and two obelisks that displayed the dates of the liberation of Minsk and of the whole Belarus (*Rèspublikanskaâ vy-*



*staiika* 5). The highlight of the exhibition was the Soviet T-34 tank displayed in front of the enemy's weapons, symbolizing the superiority of the Red Army and honoring the tank division that first arrived in liberated Minsk. The concrete stand on which the tank was mounted was engraved with the phrase "Whoever comes to us with a sword, from a sword will perish", a paraphrase of a Biblical proverb attributed to Alexander Nevsky, which was popularized in Sergei Eisenstein's 1938 film named after the medieval prince. The display featured German Tigers, Panthers, Ferdinands, and other weapons, delivered to the city square straight from the battlefields near Babruysk and Minsk.

## Curating the war: historical exhibitions

### Kyiv

The exhibition of trophy weapons at Pushkin Park was not the only exhibition to commemorate and curate the war in Kyiv. On May 14th, 1944, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, headed by Nikita Khrushchev, adopted a plan to organize a Republican Exhibition "Ukrainian Partisans in the Fight against the German-Fascist Invaders". Soviet propaganda presented the partisans as a mass nation-wide movement fully supported by civilians, which was not always the case, considering that the main goal of the partisans was to actively fight the Germans rather than to help the general population (Brakel; Slepian). Leaders of the partisan movement were praised as folk heroes by the Soviet state, and many held powerful positions after the war (Weiner 342). As demonstrated below, in examples drawn from both Kyiv and Minsk, they were personally invested in their portrayal in the war museums.

Almost a hundred artists were involved in the design of the exhibition and its displays, creating paintings and sculptures for the large exhibition space located in a beautiful historical building in Lypky, a neighbourhood in a prime location of central Kyiv. The exhibition opened on May 30, 1946 with nineteen rooms that displayed approximately 30,000 items to tell the story of the partisan movement in Ukraine in chronological order, starting from pre-war Ukraine and its economic prosperity.

As opposed to the trophy exhibition, the "Ukrainian Partisans" exhibition included more historical and cultural content. The introductory hall, called "The Treacherous Attack of Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union", narrated many military conflicts waged by various principdoms of ancient Rus' and Imperial Russia against foreign invaders. The contemporary war against the Germans was contextualized as the last episode of the eternal battle between the evil foreign forces and



the Slavic army. The exhibition directly followed the content plan in the directive sent out by Narkompros at the beginning of the war and emphasized the historical friendship between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples.

One of the main messages of the exhibition was the leading role of the Communist Party and its leader Joseph Stalin in the partisan movement. However, the exhibition also honored numerous individual members of the underground resistance, displaying their photos, portraits, documents, and personal belongings. Many of the exhibition's displays and artifacts were devoted to highlighting the guerilla activities of the partisan divisions, such as their attacks on railways and ambushes against the Germans.

The exhibition also highlighted the atrocities that the Nazis committed against the civilian population in Ukraine, such as mass murders and deportations to German labor camps; around 2.4 million people were taken from Ukraine to Germany as *Ostarbeiters* [workers from the east] for forced labor (Grinchenko; Olynyk). The demonstration of German atrocities, crimes, and the economic damage caused by their occupation of Ukraine was presented as part of the exhibition's narrative that explained the development of the partisan movement as a united response of the Ukrainian people to the occupation.

The section that highlighted the partisans' fight against the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) led by Stepan Bandera, featured quotations from Dmitro Manuilsky, an old Bolshevik and Ukrainian ideologist who introduced and popularized the somewhat absurd designation of the OUN as "Ukrainian-German nationalists at the service of Fascist Germany". The exhibition's guide narrated that the OUN was acting in collaboration with Nazi Germany to commit crimes against the civilian population, partisans, and the Red Army, unsuccessfully trying to break the "brotherly friendship" of the Ukrainian people with "the Great Russian people" (Kuzovkov, Dub 58).

One of the most important rooms of the exhibition, the Victory Hall, was devoted to the Soviet army heroes and civilians who contributed at the rear, Stalin and his marshals, and the partisans. A large painted panel portrayed heroes of the war, both at the front and in the rear, and notably of both Ukrainian and Russian origins. In a prominent place there was a sculpture of the "genius leader" comrade Stalin, as well as portraits of the Marshals of the Soviet Union (Kuzovkov, Dub 89).

At the end of September 1946, the exhibition received the status of the "Republican Museum of the First Category". The Committee for Cultural and Educational Institutions under the Council of the Ministers of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, now responsible for the exhibition, ordered the procurement of new stamps and seals with the abbreviation "MPU" (Museum of the Ukrainian Partisans) to mark all the exhibition's items, which indirectly suggests an intention to make it a permanent museum (Rodionova 130).

## Minsk

The German occupation of Belarus began with the German invasion on June 22, 1941 and lasted until August 1944. Immediately after the invasion, the leaders of the Belarusian Communist Party began to frantically evacuate themselves, documents and valuables, and factories. The civilian population was also evacuated, especially mothers with young children and children's organizations including schools and summer camps. The evacuation was chaotic, and many people were left behind. The Germans had occupied Minsk by June 28, merely six days after the beginning of the war. During the occupation of Belarus, the Central Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party was based in Moscow. On June 2, 1942, the Central Committee made a decision to organize the Belarusian Republican Commission for the Collection of Materials related to the War (Voronkova 8).

The September 30, 1943 directive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus on the creation of the Museum of the History of the Fight of the Belarusian People against the German-Fascist Occupiers provided a plan for the collection of materials that “characterize the fight of the Belarusian people” (Voronkova 9). The partisan movement, which became a focal point of Soviet wartime propaganda in Belarus, was the central topic of the war museum's content. With the exception of the “documents, photographs, and materials that demonstrate atrocities of the German occupants”, the rest of the plan's nine points contained various materials related to the partisans, including samples of weapons they had made, portraits and sculptures of prominent partisans, and peculiar everyday items of partisans' *byt* (daily life) (Voronkova 10). The officials of the Central Headquarters of the Partisan Movement and of the Communist Party of Belarus began sending requests for materials related to the partisan movement to the local commanders of partisan units, thus giving the partisans themselves agency over how they were represented.

The Museum was assigned one of the few surviving buildings in the centre of Minsk, on Freedom Square. Now officially named the Belarusian State Museum of the Great Patriotic War, it opened on October 22, 1944 with two exhibitions: “Weapons of the Belarusian Partisans” and “The Bolshevik Press of Belarus during the Great Patriotic War”. A “Pravda” journalist narrating about the exhibition emphasized the propagandistic value of the press:

По существу это одна выставка, посвященная единой теме – оружию, которым белорусский народ с такой богатырской силой бил своих мучителей, палачей Тростенца, разрушителей городов и сел, немецко-фашистских захватчиков. Печатное слово было приравнено к пуле и гранате (Zemcov 3).

In the meantime, the Minsk museum continued to expand its scope rapidly, opening new sections in 1945 to 1947. The sections that opened in 1945 were “The Occupying Regime and the Atrocities of the German-Fascist Invaders in Belarus”, the central section “Partisan Movement in Belarus”, and “Rebuilding Belarus”; 1946 saw the opening of “Economics and Culture in Soviet Belarus before the War”, “The Treacherous Attack of Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union and the Heroic Defense of the Soviet People”, “The Liberation of the Soviet Land from the German Occupiers”, and “The Soviet Army – Liberator of the Peoples of Europe from the Hitlerite Slavery”; and in 1947 “The Soviet Rear during the Great Patriotic War” was added. The narrative of these sections was generally very similar to the corresponding sections of the Kyiv Museum of the Partisan movement. However, there were also significant differences, influenced by local initiatives and conditions. One of the most significant distinctions between the two museums was their differing representations of the mass destruction of the Jews.

### **The representation of the Holocaust in the museums of Kyiv and Minsk**

A few months after the opening of the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk, its staff presented a new section of the exposition called “The Occupying Regime and the Atrocities of the German-Fascist Invaders in Belarus”. An article in the newspaper “Sovetskaya Belorussiya” graphically described some of the items of the new exhibition which had been obtained at the death camps in the villages of Maly Trostenets and Mashukovshina and other murder sites in Minsk and its vicinity, along with photographs of these sites. The journalist argued that “Germans are age-old enemies of the Belarusian people”, and that everyone who visits the exhibition would seek revenge on the “fascist murderers” for the death camps (*Istoki* 2). However, the newspaper article about the new exhibition failed to mention that tens of thousands of Maly Trostenets victims were Jews, not only those from Minsk and its vicinity but also those deported from other European locales.

The representation of the Holocaust in the Soviet museums of war was directly dependent on two politico-ideological factors. The first was the way the Soviet authorities handled, reported, and represented all Nazi atrocities on occupied Soviet land<sup>2</sup>. The second was the Soviet treatment of the Holocaust, as a particular atrocity, and its memorialization (Feferman; Zeltser; Gitelman; Berkhoff 2009).

The primary entity responsible for investigating and reporting Nazi war crimes and atrocities against the Soviet population was the Extraordinary State

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<sup>2</sup> For information about the atrocities, see Snyder; Arad; Bartov; Berkhoff (2004).

Commission (ChGK), founded in November 1942. Before the establishment of the commission, official messages and reports about atrocities were given directly by Viacheslav Molotov or Joseph Stalin<sup>3</sup>. Stories and photographs of the different categories of victims, including children, regularly appeared in the Soviet press and were meant to cause an extreme emotional response in readers. Such atrocity propaganda had various goals, including the mobilization of the population, and, a crucial aim in both Ukraine and Belarus, to prevent Soviet people from collaborating with the enemy by demonstrating its crimes against civilians. The reports and official messages were also translated for distribution in the Allied countries.

While the mass murder of the Jewish population in the USSR was generally categorized with other Nazi atrocities, “there was no consistent Soviet ‘party line’ on the Holocaust” (Gitelman 14). A comparison of the war museums in Kyiv and Minsk demonstrates the different and evolving approaches to the representation of the Holocaust that co-existed in the Soviet Union during the war and immediately after. While some events, including the Babyn Yar massacre, were explicitly reported in the Soviet press as an act of murder perpetrated against the Jews, in the first two years of the war the extermination of the Jews was seen more as a matter of foreign policy (Feferman 16–18, 20). By the end of the war, the Jewish death toll was downplayed in the official reports published by the Extraordinary State Commission and the victims of the massacre in Babyn Yar in September 1941 were referred to as “peaceful Soviet citizens” (*Soobšenie ... v gorode Kieve* 10–15). The situation shifted again in 1945–1948, when the Soviets participated in the post-war negotiations and Nuremberg trials. The mass murder of the Jews then became part of the discourse in the international legal arena and was allowed in domestic media, where it was generally discussed by Jewish authors and artists (Feferman 26). It was precisely during this time that the exhibition “Ukrainian Partisans” opened with the section that explicitly presented the Jewish tragedy of Babyn Yar.

Kyiv’s exhibition section “What the Germans Brought to the Ukrainian People” highlighted the atrocities that the Nazis committed against the civilian population of Ukraine, such as mass extermination and deportations to German forced labor camps. Among the documents on display was a copy of an infamous Nazi order, posted in Kyiv in the beginning of occupation on September 29, 1941, that ordered all the Jews in Kyiv to assemble for a supposed resettlement. The assembled people were then massacred in the Babyn Yar ravine. Photographs of the site and the exhumed bodies of the murdered people were also on display. The exhi-

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<sup>3</sup> Stalin himself mentioned murders of the Soviet Jews by the Germans only once referring to the “medieval Jewish pogroms” in his speech on November 6, 1941.

bition's guide estimated that over 70,000 "Kyivites of Jewish nationality"<sup>4</sup> were murdered at Babyn Yar (Kuzovkov, Dub 27).

The Minsk museum's section devoted to Nazi atrocities featured many items from the death camp in the village Maly Trostenets, and even had a model of the camp's entrance. One of the most gruesome exhibits was a glass urn containing the ashes and bones of the Maly Trostenets victims, which had been kept in the museum since 1945<sup>5</sup>. The Trostenets concentration camp initially held Soviet prisoners of war, but by 1942 was used for various categories of people, including local Jews as well as thousands of Jews deported from Austria, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. The Soviets knew about the foreign Jewish victims of the camp at least as early as July 1944 but did not make it public until the 1960s. In the exact same manner as in the above-cited report of the ChGK on Kyiv, all the victims of Maly Trostenets were categorized as "peaceful Soviet people" (*Soobshenie ... v gorode Minsk* 5–6).

Post-occupation Belarus was headed by Panteleimon Ponomarenko, a controversial statesman and a wartime leader of the partisan movement who denounced the Minsk Ghetto underground as a German operation (Epstein 235–236) and who personally curated the museum in Minsk (Voronkova 12)<sup>6</sup>. While the museum briefly displayed materials related to the extermination of the Jews in the Minsk Ghetto after the 1947 opening of the permanent exposition, museum workers were ordered to remove these materials by the ideological officials of the Communist Party of Belarus (Gužaloŭski Chapter 1).

The museums' representation of the Holocaust mirrored the general approach of the Soviet media which rarely highlighted the Jewish tragedy. However, as demonstrated in the Kyiv exhibition example, separate instances of its official memorialization stemming from local initiatives were possible in the immediate post-war years. Arkadi Zeltser argues that "the personal attitude toward Jews and Jewish memorialization on the part of officials at various levels, including republic-level leaders" was the main factor in allowing Jews to erect Holocaust monuments and establish other forms of community memorialization (Zeltser 112)<sup>7</sup>. One of the members of the organizing committee of the exhibition in Kyiv was Mykola Bazhan, a famous philo-Semite who frequently wrote about the Jewish people and their culture in his poetry. Bazhan was among the

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<sup>4</sup> The meaning of the Russian word for "nationality" is closer to "ethnicity" in its English sense.

<sup>5</sup> In 2016, the remains were buried in the crypt of the Minsk Church of All Saints.

<sup>6</sup> Panteleimon Ponomarenko (1902–1984) was the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Belarus from 1938 to 1947, Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars in the Belarusian SSR from 1944 to 1948, and Head of the Central Headquarters of the Partisan Movement from 1942 to 1944 with a short break in the spring of 1943.

<sup>7</sup> About the monument to the victims of the Minsk ghetto see (Zeltser 122–123).

first to visit Babyn Yar after Kyiv's liberation from the Nazis and shortly after he wrote a poem, "Yar", in which he called the tragedy unforgivable (Bažan 65). Perhaps it was he who insisted on the representation of the Jewish tragedy of Babyn Yar at the exhibition.

### **Museums of war after the war**

After the end of the war, Stalin and his ideologists lost interest in large war memorialization projects. Great Patriotic War propaganda ceded to the Cold War and the mortal enemy was now not German Fascists but American Imperialists. In this ideological climate, large war memorialization projects, which required significant money and resources, were, as a Soviet bureaucrat might say, inexpedient, leading to the closure of many war-time museums. In 1948, trophy exhibitions in Moscow and Minsk were dismantled; in 1951, the trophy exhibition in Kyiv was removed as well. Tanks, planes, and other weapons were recycled as scrap metal.

The fate of each historical museum of war, however, depended on local politics and regional developments, which were tied to the patronage networks of Soviet power structures to a significant extent. In Kyiv, the "Ukrainian Partisans" was closed for "reorganization" in September 1950 after a republic-wide audit of the museums; shortly thereafter its collections were absorbed into those of the Kyiv State Historical Museum. After the closure of the exhibition, the Kyiv State Historical Museum became the main Ukrainian institution to present the history of the Great Patriotic War. In 1955, the Museum had thirty rooms of which four were devoted to the war. The guidebook did not mention the Ukrainian nationalists or the mass destruction of the Jews (Lisenko). By 1950, following the official anti-Semitic campaigns that had begun in 1949, both these topics had disappeared from official public discourse.

A permanent museum of the Great Patriotic War was opened in Kyiv only in 1981. In 2015 it was renamed the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, as the Museum's focus and concept shifted to content specific to the Ukrainian people and their stories and experiences. Since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014, and especially since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the museum has exhibited content related to the contemporary conflict, including trophy displays of weapons such as tanks, ammunition, and unmanned aerial vehicles (drones).

The State Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk has never closed since it opened in October 1944 and only moved locations. By 1955, the Minsk Museum of the Great Patriotic War was the only museum of its kind in the Soviet Un-

ion, at least in the major cities. I believe that the museum in Minsk did not close in the immediate post-war years despite the Union-wide trend towards their closure due to the stability of the local Belarusian leadership and its strong investment in the museum, which became an emblem for the myth of Belarus as a “partisan republic” (Lewis 373; Rudling 64; Weiner 8).

The idea of creating a large museum of the war in Moscow was shelved for many years following the closure of the trophy exhibition in Gorky Park. The Museum of the Great Patriotic War (called the Victory Museum since 2017) opened in Moscow on May 9, 1995. Since 2022, the museum has served as a medium for propagandistic exhibitions relating to the Russo-Ukrainian War.

## Conclusion

This article has traced the development of the content and narratives of war exhibitions in Moscow, Kyiv, and Minsk. In accordance with the general propaganda line of National Bolshevism that surged during the war, various Soviet museums organized exhibitions that demonstrated the Soviet people’s connection with the great traditions of pre-revolutionary Russian military victories, especially in their historic wars against the Germans. As the Second World War progressed and military luck shifted to favor the Soviets, trophy weapons became a primary source of content for the exhibitions. Moscow’s exhibition of trophies in Gorky Park was the largest and served as a model for similar exhibitions in other cities of the Union, including Kyiv and Minsk.

Historical war museums and exhibitions included topics that were mostly standardized across the Union: peaceful life and pre-war economic development, the atrocities committed by the occupiers, partisan warfare, liberation, victory over Germany, and post-war reconstruction. These topics were largely based on the content plans written by the Moscow ideologists. However, there were also significant regional differences among various museums, as demonstrated through the examples of Kyiv and Minsk. The former displayed evidence of the Nazis’ deliberate extermination of the Jews at Babyn Yar and extensively covered the Ukrainian nationalist movement, which may have contributed to the museum’s closure in 1950.

This article, therefore, challenges the perception of the monolith Soviet propaganda state and its central mobilization efforts during the war. Despite strict ideological guidelines, local museum workers were able to express a certain level of diverse thought, agency, and creativity, the extent of which was largely defined by regional specifics and by individual efforts and circumstances on the local level.



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