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## Soviet Commemoration and Myth-Making of the Nazi Extermination Camps: Case Studies on Treblinka, Sobibór, and Majdanek

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**Soviet Commemoration and Myth-Making of the Nazi  
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William & Mary

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## Abstract

The Nazi extermination camps of Treblinka, Sobibór, and Majdanek, all located in Eastern Europe, are understudied, underdiscussed, and undermemorialized in public and scholarly memory. In this paper, I seek to conduct case studies of these three camps, their histories, and their commemoration efforts. Ultimately, four main factors prevented these camps from achieving the solemn recognizability they deserve and from having their victims' stories adequately told; little remains of these camps compared to concentration camps in Germany, fewer individuals survived them to emphasize their importance, the Soviet Union possessed near complete control of their study and commemoration, which allowed for them to be intentionally neglected by Soviet and Polish authorities due to certain ideological difficulties they epitomized to Soviet narratives of the Second World War.

The Nazi extermination camps in Eastern Europe, notably Treblinka, Sobibór, and to a lesser degree Majdanek, are critically understudied in modern literature and scholarship on the Holocaust. With the exception of Auschwitz, both public and scholarly foci have been primarily on the liberation and commemoration of concentration camps in Germany, such as Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, and Buchenwald.<sup>1</sup> There are a number of reasons for this lack of attention given to extermination camps in what became the Soviet Bloc, primarily a lack of Soviet and

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<sup>1</sup> Anita Kondoyanidi, "The Liberating Experience: War Correspondents, Red Army Soldiers, and the Nazi Extermination Camps," *The Russian Review* 69, no. 3 (July 2010): 439.

communist Polish interest in these camps, their inaccessibility for Western scholars during the Cold War period, and fewer numbers of survivors to draw attention to them. Additionally, Treblinka, Sobibor, and Majdanek present a more brutal reality than the concentration camps in Germany due to their nature as extermination camps, making them more difficult to stomach and acknowledge. Auschwitz is the one notable exception to these observations, however this is primarily due to its larger scope than Treblinka, Sobibór, and Majdanek. Better preservation and memorialization of the site, far larger numbers of survivors able to vividly write about their experiences, and the infamous status of being the largest and deadliest of both the concentration and extermination camps allowed commemoration of Auschwitz to occur to a much greater degree than other extermination camps.

In the past decade or two however, interest in these camps has been on the rise. In her 2010 paper *The Liberating Experience: War Correspondents, Red Army Soldiers, and the Nazi Extermination Camps*, historian Anita Kondoyanidi identifies this deficit in scholarship and examines accounts of Soviet soldiers who liberated Majdanek, Auschwitz, and to a lesser extent Treblinka and Sobibór. She also shines light on the large publicity Majdanek was given relative to other camps that were liberated later by Soviet troops, such as Auschwitz, or had more specific narratives, such as Treblinka and Sobibór. Kondoyanidi ultimately determined that Majdanek's discovery was more widely publicized and the site more widely visited by soldiers and local Poles because it presented a more convenient myth<sup>2</sup> for the Soviet Union, but one that was still horrifying and angering.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the term 'myth' refers to a collective narrative or memory of events and how those events exist within the public mind. It does not refer to the accuracy or inaccuracy of the narrative about these events.

In 2015, David Shneer discussed the importance of eyewitness testimony over photographic evidence in believing the authenticity of Majdanek and Treblinka in his piece *Is Seeing Believing? Photographs, Eyewitness Testimony, and Evidence of the Holocaust*. Timothy Snyder in his book, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, shows how the intended Soviet postwar narrative could not be reconciled with the Holocaust, so information about Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Sobibór was suppressed and ignored. Finally, in a 2020 article titled *Soviet Russia's Reaction to the Nazi Holocaust and the Implications of the Suppression of Jewish Suffering*, Mike Pratt seeks to separate the Holocaust from Auschwitz specifically. He instead aims to focus on the histories of Majdanek, Sobibór, Treblinka, and Bełzec and how these were suppressed by the Soviet government to control the post-war narrative.

Modern approaches to studying these camps still fail, however. Kondoyanidi, Pratt, Snyder, and much of the modern public mind still can't help but discuss and compare Treblinka, Majdanek, Sobibór, and the many other camps to the looming image that is Auschwitz. While discussing the tragedy and horror of Auschwitz is extremely important – if only one camp can be focused on, it should certainly be the combined compound of Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau – comparing the other extermination camps to, or at least discussing them alongside, the most infamous Nazi camp can distort their narratives. Numbers, images, and stories of Majdanek, Treblinka, and Sobibór are not as jarring or startling alongside those of Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau. These sites are less preserved and far less studied than Auschwitz, and continuing to discuss them under that camp's shadow diminishes their significance as historical sites and limits the benefits that can be gleaned from studying and memorializing them further.

Pratt in particular tries to remedy this problem, claiming that “the death camps Treblinka, Bełzec, Sobibór, and Majdanek are... addressed as the main focus for Holocaust discussion” in

his paper and that “Auschwitz, not the death camps, retains the focus,” in the public and scholarly minds.<sup>3</sup> He fails in this pursuit however, ultimately discussing Auschwitz more than these camps, and using its history as a more central aspect in asserting his thesis than either Majdanek, Sobibór, or Belzec. Of the authors discussed above, Shneer is the only one to examine Majdanek and Treblinka on their own, without comparisons to Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Even then, Shneer devotes only two-thirds of a page to Treblinka out of his total eleven; this is understandable given his paper’s focuses on photographic and eyewitness testimony of the Holocaust, both areas in which Treblinka, as an extermination camp, is lacking.

In this paper, I seek to analyze Treblinka, Sobibór, and Majdanek as individual camps, conducting a survey of their purposes, histories, and commemorations. The general public has a significantly lower familiarity with these camps than with Auschwitz and many of the concentration camps in Germany. This is largely due to four factors: there is generally less remaining of the extermination camps to be commemorated and memorialized; fewer individuals survived these death factories than Auschwitz or the concentration camps in Western Europe; the camps fell behind the iron curtain of the Communist Bloc which allowed for greater Soviet control over their research and commemoration; and the communist Polish government intentionally neglected the sites due to their irreconcilability with the desired Soviet myth.

## **Treblinka**

Treblinka is probably the best known of the six Nazi extermination camps<sup>4</sup> aside from Auschwitz-Birkenau. Located roughly 60 miles northeast of Warsaw, the camp was deliberately

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<sup>3</sup> Mike Pratt, “Soviet Russia’s Reaction to the Nazi Holocaust and the Implications of the Suppression of Jewish Suffering,” *The Saber and Scroll Journal* 8, no. 3 (Spring 2020): 17.

<sup>4</sup> The six extermination camps are Chełmno, Belzec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and debatably Majdanek, a discussion of the categorization of which can be found later in this paper.

built in a sparsely populated area to conceal the crimes occurring there and maintain its lie as a “transit camp” to incoming prisoners. It was constructed in the summer of 1942 as a part of Operation Reinhard, the Nazi’s plan to kill as many Jews as possible through the use of *Vernichtungslager* (extermination camps). Highly efficient and streamlined, an estimated 876,000 individuals, approximately 874,000 of which were Jews and 2,000 of which were Roma, perished at the hands of the Nazis in a ten-month period. The camp was manned by roughly 20-30 SS officers, 90-120 Ukrainian soldiers, and a constantly rotating team of Jewish worker-prisoners, termed *Sonderkommando*, who were killed and replaced every few days or weeks. The camp was divided into two main sections. Living areas for the camp staff and the *Sonderkommando* were housed in a smaller camp known as Treblinka I, while the death camp, known as Treblinka II, featured large open-air crematoria and three original gas chambers, later supplemented with an additional ten as the need increased.<sup>5</sup>

To maximize efficiency, the camp’s physical layout was designed to function as a conveyor system; those entering Treblinka followed a path that led only to the gas chambers.<sup>6</sup> After disembarking from cramped, filthy train cars, prisoners were directed into a courtyard, where they were informed they were at “a transit camp where they would take showers, have their clothes disinfected, and then travel on to various labor camps.”<sup>7</sup> Any belongings they had were collected and systematically plundered and sorted as the prisoners were documented, had their heads shorn, and were stripped of their clothing. Intent on preserving the ruse until the very end, the Nazis harassed and attacked the naked, defenseless Jews in the last leg of the journey,

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<sup>5</sup> “Treblinka,” אודות השואה, Yad Vashem, 1-3, accessed December, 2021, [https://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205886.pdf](https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205886.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova, ed., *A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army, 1941-1945*, trans. Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005) 293.

<sup>7</sup> Yad Vashem, “Treblinka,” 2.

colloquially known as the “Path of No Return.” This 120-meter-long sand path lined with flowers and trees ended at “the showers.”<sup>8</sup> Designed to look like communal showers, prisoners were packed so tightly into the gas chambers that, after the room was flooded with carbon monoxide, killing those inside over a period of 30 minutes, the bodies remained standing up, unable to fall to the ground. From the time they disembarked to the point in which carbon monoxide flooded into the gas chambers, the camp was entirely designed to provide the illusion that the Jewish prisoners were merely at a layover stop, albeit a particularly abusive one.

On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1943, a prisoner uprising conducted by a semi-stable group of 735 non-rotating prisoners erupted. Fighting ensued, resulting in the burning and destruction of some buildings, the deaths of approximately 530 prisoners, and the deaths of an indeterminate number of SS officers and Ukrainian soldiers. An estimated 200 prisoners escaped, although only 86 have been documented as having survived the Nazi search parties and the rest of the war.<sup>9</sup>

The last transport of Jews arrived and was gassed on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1943, after which point Treblinka I and II were deconstructed and razed, and the remnants of the *Sonderkommando* were shot and cremated. This process lasted until November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1943. The camp was then ploughed over, planted with lupine, and made to resemble a farm. The family of one of the Ukrainian camp guards relocated onto the grounds of the former camp. They remained on the site until July 1944, when the Soviet Red Army’s approach prompted them to burn down the farm buildings and flee.<sup>10</sup> It is unclear when exactly the camp was discovered by Soviet troops,

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<sup>8</sup> Beevor and Vinogradova, “A Writer at War,” 293-294.

<sup>9</sup> “Treblinka II – Resistance and Uprising,” Muzeum Treblinka, accessed December, 2021, <https://muzeumtreblinka.eu/en/informacje/resistance-and-uprising/>.

<sup>10</sup> “Treblinka II – Liquidation of the Camp,” Muzeum Treblinka, accessed December, 2021, <https://muzeumtreblinka.eu/en/informacje/liquidation-of-the-camp/>.



although it is estimated to have been around the same time as Majdanek (mid-July 1944), the army having been alerted to its existence through tips from local civilians.

In August of 1944, Soviet forensic investigators led by Vasily Grossman, a Soviet war correspondent of Jewish heritage, visited the empty, forested field of Treblinka. They documented whatever evidence could be found: taking photographs, interviewing the remaining Ukrainian guards and survivors they could find, and recording the tragedies of the camp. Through his diligent work, Grossman was able to piece together a remarkably vivid picture of the camp. He drafted two rough maps of how Treblinka was likely arranged and wrote his gripping piece, *The Hell of Treblinka*, for the Soviet magazine *Znamya* in November of 1944.<sup>11</sup> This 23-page feature included a history of the camp, a description of it, and a hypothetical prisoner's likely experience of it; it was the first full-length article about a concentration or extermination camp, and went on to serve as evidence of the Nazi crimes in the Nuremberg Military Tribunals.<sup>12</sup>

However, despite Grossman's diligent work at the Treblinka site and his article's historic significance, Treblinka languished unattended for eleven years. Although it was likely discovered within a month or two of Majdanek's liberation, the camp was barely discussed in the media outside of Grossman's article. As the discussion of Majdanek later in this paper will show, the Red Army took definitive and specific steps to preserve that camp and ensure dissemination of the knowledge of its existence. This was not done in the case of Treblinka: a camp that epitomized the brutal reality of the Nazi's actions to a far greater extent than Majdanek.

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<sup>11</sup> David Shneer, "Is Seeing Believing? Photographs, Eyewitness Testimony, and Evidence of the Holocaust," *East European Jewish Affairs* 45, no. 1 (2015): 74-75.

<sup>12</sup> Beevor and Vinogradova, "A Writer at War," 281.

A number of factors certainly made memorialization of Treblinka more difficult than Majdanek. The thorough destruction of the former and the predisposition to leave fewer survivors based on the function of the camp made memorializing efforts a larger challenge, as there was less to commemorate and many fewer individuals to attest to its horrors. However, this served to benefit the Soviet myth; it left the narrative of the camp more open to manipulation, especially suppression. Being an extermination camp for nearly exclusively Jews, the camp's reality did not align with the primary Soviet myth of the war, namely that Soviet peoples, Russians chief among them, were its the greatest victims. Little forced Soviet authorities to publicly confront Treblinka and little evidence from it could be used to justify the Soviet myth. As a result, the camp was largely neglected for eleven years.

In 1955, Poland's Central Board of Museums and Monuments of the Ministry of Culture and Art began the project of commemorating the site; planning and construction were not finished until the 1960s. The sprawling memorial now covers 22,000 square meters, or 236,806 square feet, and is comprised of 17,000 stones. Meant to symbolize Jewish headstones, called matzevot, 216 of the stones bear the names of the places from where Jews were deported. At the center, an enormous granite block is meant to represent the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Treblinka II – Commemoration," Muzeum Treblinka, accessed December, 2021, <https://muzeumtreblinka.eu/en/informacje/commemoration/>.



*The memorial at Treblinka II in 2013.*<sup>14</sup>

## **Sobibór**

Sobibór was built in March 1942 on the Polish side of the modern border between Poland and Ukraine as a part of Operation Reinhard. Responsible for the deaths of 250,000 Jews until the camp's closure in October 1943, Sobibór was similar in design to Treblinka in that it featured administrative, reception, and extermination sections. Upon arrival, prisoners were documented, stripped down, and gassed in a matter of hours. Similar to Treblinka, Sobibór was manned by a team of 20-30 SS officers, 90-120 Ukrainian guards, and a rotating *Sonderkommando*, and its arrivals were similarly told they had reached a transit camp for disinfection.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Adrian Grycuk, *Treblinka Memorial 2013*, photograph, Wikimedia, December 18, 2021, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Treblinka\\_Memorial\\_2013\\_01.JPG](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Treblinka_Memorial_2013_01.JPG).

<sup>15</sup> "Sobibór," אודות השואה, Yad Vashem, 1, accessed December, 2021, [https://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206030.pdf](https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206030.pdf).

Operating for 16 months, with a brief two-month delay in August and September of 1942, Sobibór served as a prototype that the other Operation Reinhard camps, including Treblinka, were later based on. At the end of 1942, the camp staff was instructed to exhume the 90,000-100,000 bodies already buried in mass graves at the site and cremate them, all while additional ‘shipments’ of Jews flowed into the camp to be exterminated and cremated. After Heinrich Himmler’s visit to the camp in February 1943, the plans for Sobibór were changed; it was to finish its job of exhuming and killing Jews and be turned into a concentration camp.<sup>16</sup>

These efforts did not last long, however. The last transport of prisoners arrived in September of 1943 and, on October 14<sup>th</sup> of that same year, the prisoners tasked with the camps’ transition revolted, killing a few SS officers and Ukrainian guards. Of the hundred or so prisoners who lived in the camp at the time of the revolt, an estimated 60 of those escaped and survived the war. Immediately following the revolt, Nazi officials decided to dismantle the camp instead of continuing its transformation. They killed the remaining prisoners and turned the area into a farm, just as would later happen at the Treblinka site.<sup>17</sup> It is unclear when exactly the camp was discovered by Soviet troops, and even after it was, the severity of the site was greatly minimized. Soldiers who did hear about the camp were taught that “crematoria were never installed at Sobibór,” and the victims “were all labeled as non-Jews” by the Soviet press.<sup>18</sup>

Sobibór epitomizes Soviet neglect of Holocaust sites and the intentional minimizing of Jews as the primary victims of the Holocaust. The site was completely neglected until a small monument was unveiled by the Regional Committee for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites in Lublin on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1965. The sculpture depicted a mother with her arms

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<sup>16</sup> Yad Vashem, “Sobibór,” 2-3.

<sup>17</sup> “History of the Camp,” Muzeum i Miejsce Pamięci w Sobiborze, accessed December, 2021, [https://www.sobibor-memorial.eu/en/history/history\\_of\\_the\\_camp/3](https://www.sobibor-memorial.eu/en/history/history_of_the_camp/3).

<sup>18</sup> Pratt, “Soviet Russia’s Reaction,” 25.

around a child, meant to represent a family at the edge of the Sobibór gas chambers. The statue was accompanied by a plaque claiming that 250,000 Soviet prisoners-of-war (POWs) had been killed at Sobibór.<sup>19</sup>



*The original Sobibór memorial, constructed in 1965<sup>20</sup>*

Despite this attempt to contextualize the Sobibór site, it still failed in a number of ways. Little effort was made to preserve the area of the former camp, its iconography was vague and unexplained on-site, and most significantly, the information about the events of Sobibór was outright false. Roughly 251,000 individuals had perished at the extermination camp, however they were almost entirely Jewish origin (250,000 were Jews and the remaining 1,000 were Poles). The gross inaccuracy of this memorialization exemplifies what the purpose of that memorialization was, at least partially, aiming to do: minimize the camp's reality in favor of the

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<sup>19</sup> "Museum History," About the Museum, Muzeum i Miejsce Pamięci w Sobiborze, accessed December, 2021, <https://www.sobibor-memorial.eu/en/mission#>.

<sup>20</sup> CC Sgvb, *Sobibór Statue Front View*, photograph, Wikimedia, December 18, 2021, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/68/Sobibor\\_statue%2C\\_front\\_view.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/68/Sobibor_statue%2C_front_view.jpg).

Soviet narrative about the Second World War and the Holocaust, namely that the Soviet Union and Russian people were the greatest victims of the war.

This remained the only commemoration of the site until 1993, 50 years after the Sobibór uprising. At this time, the plaque, which intentionally represented the camp's history incorrectly, was removed. A new plaque replaced the old one, acknowledging Jews as the primary victims of Sobibór and commemorating the prisoner uprising. Additional memorialization efforts were later implemented in 2003 (a new memorial), 2012 (a museum and memorial that mimic the original layout of Sobibór), and 2020 (a new permanent exhibit titled “SS-Sonderkommando Sobibór: German Death Camp 1942-1943”).<sup>21</sup>



*The 2003 Sobibór memorial<sup>22</sup>*

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<sup>21</sup> Muzeum i Miejsce Pamięci w Sobiborze, “Museum History.”

<sup>22</sup> CC Sgvb, *Sobibór*, photograph, Wikimedia, December 18, 2021, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5f/Sobibor.JPG>.

## **Majdanek**

Majdanek, located in a southeast suburb of Lublin, Poland, was the first major camp to be liberated by Allied forces. It operated from October 1941 to July 1944, when the Nazis destroyed the camp's most incriminating buildings, liquidated most of its surviving prisoners, and forced them to march westward on long "death marches." Majdanek covered an enormous 667 acres: sporting twenty-two barracks for hundreds of prisoners, seven gas chambers, a small crematorium, a large crematorium added in September of 1943, and a wide array of other facilities for the Nazi SS soldiers and Ukrainian collaborators.<sup>23</sup> In total, 360,000 individuals of a wide variety of nationalities and ethnicities were killed at Majdanek, primarily Poles and Jews, but also Belorussians, Ukrainians, and Russians. Unlike at Treblinka & Sobibór, the Nazis destroyed only the most damning evidence of the atrocities committed there, leaving much of the camp still intact when the Soviets arrived. On July 24<sup>th</sup>, the Red Army liberated the camp and found only 480 Soviet POWs, 180 political prisoners, and a handful of SS officers and Polish collaborators serving as camp guards.<sup>24</sup>

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that, unlike the other two camps discussed in this paper, Majdanek is somewhat difficult to categorize. Originally built as a camp for the Nazi's POWs and political prisoners, it is hard to dispute the Nazis' intention for it to serve as a concentration camp; it originally focused on "storing" prisoners, utilizing them for physical labor, and making them suffer over long periods of time until they "expired." Many contemporary authors and scholars, however, also categorize it as an extermination camp due to its later practices of executing some prisoners immediately upon arrival through the use of gas

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<sup>23</sup> "Majdanek," אודות השואה, Yad Vashem, 1, accessed December, 2021, [https://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206622.pdf](https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206622.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Kondoyanidi, "The Liberating Experience," 444.

chambers and other mass extermination methods characteristic of the Nazi death camps. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), Israel's national Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem, and Poland's State Museum at Majdanek categorize it primarily as a concentration camp.<sup>25262728</sup> While this is a seemingly small historiographical point of disagreement, it is an important one to reconcile, as it fundamentally changes how Majdanek is perceived, studied, and remembered. As a result, in order to ensure as accurate a narrative of the camp as possible, for the purposes of this paper I will consider Majdanek a concentration camp that partially fulfilled the purpose of an extermination camp from 1943-1944.

The Red Army reached Lublin in mid-July of 1944 and liberated the camp on July 24<sup>th</sup>. The approaching soldiers of the Third Belorussian Army had no idea of the horrors they were about to encounter. Used to seeing columns of smoke rising from cities following German firebombings and plenty of industrial factories managed through slave labor, the invading Soviet soldiers had difficulty comprehending the true purpose of the compound they were liberating even while they stood inside it, let alone as they were approaching it.<sup>29</sup> Bernhard Storch, a Polish recruit in the Red Army recalls "we entered very, very carefully ... we didn't know it was an extermination camp, nobody told us that ... we thought it was a barracks, military barracks ... we thought [there was] a factory, of course we saw a chimney ... we saw a tremendous amount of ashes but we still didn't know ... maybe that's industrial waste ... we saw showerheads in the

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<sup>25</sup> "Lublin/Majdanek Concentration Camp: Conditions," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed December, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/lublin-majdanek-concentration-camp-conditions>.

<sup>26</sup> Yad Vashem, "Majdanek," 1.

<sup>27</sup> "History of the Camp," General Information, Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, accessed December, 2021, <https://www.majdanek.eu/en/history>.

<sup>28</sup> In contrast to Treblinka and Sobibór, which USHMM, Yad Vashem, and the State Museums at Treblinka and Sobibór all refer to as extermination camps.

<sup>29</sup> Shneer, "Is Seeing Believing?" 69-70.



ceiling, we thought that was water for shower...”<sup>30</sup> For liberating soldiers, Majdanek was unlike anything they had ever experienced, even considering the, at that time still recent, discoveries of massacres at Kerch and Babi Yar.

The horrors of Majdanek were so grave that the Red Army deemed it necessary that all soldiers in the surrounding areas visit the camp and see the evidence of the Nazi atrocities for themselves. The Soviet Information Bureau, or Sovinformburo, sent war correspondents to the camp to extensively report on it and invited foreign diplomats to help bolster the world’s trust of the Soviet’s evidence and by proxy their developing narrative. German POWs were forced to take tours of the camp, presenting them with the harsh, abhorrent acts of their government in undisputable clarity. Locals Poles, who were by that time familiar with the ash and stench of burning flesh wafting on the wind, were given the opportunity to tour the camp at their discretion, forcing them to confront the atrocities some Poles were complicit in facilitating. More importantly for the desired Soviet narrative, encouraging Poles to visit Majdanek encouraged them to view Majdanek as a place of their own victimization.<sup>31</sup> These decisions by Sovinformburo were targeted and deliberate. They were made with the intention of controlling and shaping a broader Soviet myth, one that contrasted the evil of Nazi atrocities to the heroic unity of the Soviet peoples and the selfless, yet tragic sacrifices made primarily by Russians in pursuit of victory.

Majdanek preserved both these narratives in ways that Treblinka and Sobibór could not. Majdanek is a unique case compared to these other two camps for two reasons; it is remarkably well preserved and memorialized, and its primary prisoners were not specifically Jews until later in the war. Even when they were in the camp, Jews rarely lived in the camp for more than a few

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<sup>30</sup> Bernhard Storch, as quoted in Pratt, “Soviet Russia’s Reaction,” 33.

<sup>31</sup> Shneer, “Is Seeing Believing?” 73.

hours or days, at which point they were killed. Historian Catherine Merridale notes that “conveniently... Maidanek was a genuinely mixed-race camp, and its victims included large numbers of Europeans, Russians, and Poles as well as ethnic Jews. That catholicity made it easier to describe in the press.”<sup>32</sup> For this reason, Sovinformburo was able to somewhat truthfully push their own narrative while minimizing the significance of Jews in the Nazi’s Holocaust mission. Because of this, the Soviet Union was able to control the narrative of Majdanek more effectively than those of Treblinka or Sobibór. Since the camp was not originally focused on killing Jews, and many of the survivors found within the camp upon liberation were not Jews, Sovinformburo was able to safely publicize the discovery of the camp more widely.

Ilya Ehrenburg, a beloved war correspondent of Jewish descent, was the first person to publicly mention Majdanek in his August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1944 article *On the Eve* published by the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*.<sup>33</sup> Despite this achievement, Ehrenburg never actually visited the camp. Instead, Konstantin Simonov of the newspaper *Red Star* and Boris Gorbатов of *Pravda* visited and covered Majdanek for the Soviet press, both emphasizing the large ethnic and national diversity of its prisoners. In his article, Gorbатов “wrote that the Germans brought to Majdanek people of different nationalities... Poles, Russians, Jews, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Italians, Frenchmen, Albanians, Croatians, Serbs, Czechs, Norwegians, Germans, Greeks, Dutchmen, and Belgians.”<sup>34</sup> Even then, Gorbатов had intended to create a myth that excluded some of the most victimized groups of Majdanek; he originally excluded Jews,

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<sup>32</sup> Catherine Merridale, *Ivan’s War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1935-1945*, (New York: Picador, 2006), 295.

<sup>33</sup> Kondoyanidi, “The Liberating Experience,” 445.

<sup>34</sup> Kondoyanidi, “The Liberating Experience,” 447-448.

Ukrainians, and Belorussians from his report.<sup>35</sup> Because this enormous diversity of victims was true of Majdanek, although perhaps misleading, the camp's discovery was heavily publicized and its horrors recorded and preserved.

Because the narrative and myth of Majdanek were easier to control, the Soviet Union went to far greater lengths to preserve and memorialize the camp than they did at Treblinka or Sobibór, immediately collecting photographic and forensic evidence for the purposes of future war crime trials against the Nazis.<sup>36</sup> As early as November 1944, the State Museum of Majdanek was established, making it the first memorialization and commemoration effort for Holocaust victims. The museum focused its early efforts on preserving the site and cataloguing evidence, with its first permanent exhibit opening in 1945. Construction on the official museum and monument began in 1965, following a surge in the camp's scholarly, governmental, and civilian popularity in the 1950s.<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that this greater popularity was likely not a result of greater interest in Holocaust studies or Nazi crimes against Jews specifically; the late 1940s and 1950s were marked by increasing government-sponsored antisemitism in the Soviet Union and its satellite states. This increased interest in Nazi camps was not mirrored for Treblinka, Sobibór, or other extermination camps such as Belzec.

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<sup>35</sup> Kondoyanidi, "The Liberating Experiences," 448, footnote 49.

<sup>36</sup> Shneer, "Is Seeing Believing?" 69.

<sup>37</sup> "Museum History," About the Museum, Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, accessed December, 2021, <https://www.majdanek.eu/en/mission>.



*The “Mound of Ash Memorial” at the Majdanek State Museum*<sup>38</sup>

While the work at Majdanek following its liberation was groundbreaking, it was enabled by its cohesion into the broader Soviet myth of the victimization of the Russian and Soviet peoples. Majdanek was also far easier to commemorate than Treblinka and Sobibór for other reasons: the former remained largely intact compared to the latter two, which were entirely demolished or deconstructed by the Nazis; more individuals survived Majdanek and were therefore able to describe the camp and attest to their experiences in it; and Majdanek has greater proximity to populated areas than Treblinka or Sobibór, resulting in greater civilian interest. These are all significant differences that should not be underemphasized in evaluating the commemorative histories of these camps, however they do not overshadow the greater themes of antisemitism and, most importantly, the extermination camps’ challenges to the Soviet narrative of the Second World War.

The Soviet Union also had other reasons for championing Majdanek as a liberated Nazi concentration camp over Treblinka, Sobibór, and even Auschwitz. Because the government of

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<sup>38</sup> I. MesserWoland, *Majdanek Monument*, photograph, Wikimedia, December 18, 2021, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/eb/KZ\\_Majdanek%2C\\_monument.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/eb/KZ_Majdanek%2C_monument.jpg).

the Soviet Union and the Red Army deliberately avoided interfering with, liberating, and uncovering these camps – most famously Auschwitz, which the Red Army had been capable of liberating as early as October 1944 but put off until January 1945 – drawing attention to their existence was a risky endeavor that could easily backfire and result in bad publicity at a time when the world saw the Holocaust, and to a lesser extent the entirety of Nazi atrocities, as primarily Jewish tragedies. Drawing attention to non-Majdanek camps, which featured more difficult myths for the Sovinformburo to control, could easily bring to light the fact that “the Soviets never made rescuing the Jews a military priority.”<sup>39</sup> Historian Harvey Asher also asserts that the Soviet government, military, and press had to worry about affirming Nazi propaganda that claimed the war was instigated by and about the Jews. If the Soviet government addressed the Nazi targeted extermination of Jews in the Holocaust and acted on the injustices they knew were happening, then the war could have devolved into a war over and about the Jews.<sup>40</sup> If Asher’s assessment is correct, then acknowledging the role of Jews in the Holocaust before and after the public discovery of the camps would have not only detracted from the Soviet narrative of the Russians as the biggest victims, but could have also led to an increase in antisemitism resulting in greater damage to Jews.

For these reasons, the discovery of Majdanek, as compared to Sobibór and Treblinka, was far easier for Sovinformburo to publicize, and made post-war commemoration efforts easier for the Soviet and Polish governments to support. Fewer numbers of survivors of the two former camps, differences in the diversity of the camp’s victims, and lack of significant landmarks on-site for years after the end of the war allowed for Majdanek to dominate the stage of Holocaust

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<sup>39</sup> Harvey Asher, “The Soviet Union, the Holocaust, and Auschwitz,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4, no. 4 (Fall, 2003): 895.

<sup>40</sup> Asher. “The Soviet Union, the Holocaust, and Auschwitz,” 895-896.

remembrance in the Communist Bloc. Additionally, the realities of the Iron Curtain allowed the Soviet Union and other Soviet Socialist Republics to solely determine the narratives of these three camps. As a result, Treblinka and Sobibór were commemorated and discussed to a far lesser extent than Majdanek within the Soviet sphere, causing these camps to permeate into the Western conscious to a yet even lesser degree. This meant that the concentration camps in West Germany dominated the public Western conscious while Treblinka and Sobibór were largely ignored in the East, leaving them outside of most public and scholarly spheres.

Recent interest in the extermination camps located in former communist countries such as Russia, Poland, and Ukraine bodes well for the future study of these sites, but the myths surrounding Treblinka, Sobibór, and even Majdanek must still be carefully evaluated to ensure they are not being manipulated in ways that minimize important aspects of the Holocaust. Treblinka in particular has made a greater emergence into Western public and scholarly spheres than Sobibór has, however both camps remain understudied, especially in comparison to names such as Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Buchenwald. The government of the Russian Federation continues to promote mythology around the Second World War, particularly in regard to the suffering and heroism of the Russian people. While there is certainly significant truth in these cultural myths and recognition of those sacrifices should not be diminished, such a myth can easily end up undermining the pains of the other victims of the war and the Holocaust. This result has been actualized in the past and continues presently.

As time distances us from the horrors of Nazi atrocities, the reality becomes even more difficult to comprehend. Proper discussion of the Holocaust and the Nazi extermination camps in Eastern Europe is now more important than ever. Focusing on concentration camps in West Germany over extermination camps in Eastern Europe risks lending credibility to claims of

Holocaust denial and distortion, as the facts of the former cannot possibly account for the brutal realities of the latter. The increased interest in these camps seen in the past decade or two must continue into the future so that these camps' victims, named and anonymous, can be properly honored.

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