

10. Holocaust Education in Russia Today: Its Challenges and Achievements



A monument bearing the names of the Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust in 1942, Gusino, Russia.

Photo Credit: Yad Vashem Photo Archives



Professor Ilya Altman

Professor Ilya Altman (Russia) was born in 1955 in the Soviet Union. He studied history at the Moscow State Historical-Archival Institute (today Russian State University for the Humanities) before going on to receive his doctorate in 1983 from the Leningrad Department of the Institute for the History of the USSR in the Academy of Science of the USSR. He was the head of the Department of the State Archives of the Russian Federation from 1985 to 1990, and then worked as an Assistant Professor at the Russian State University for the Humanities.

Dr. Altman is the founder and co-chairman of the Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Centre, which he started in 1992. In the same year, he started teaching about the Holocaust at the Jewish University of Moscow (part of the Maimonides Academy), the Centre for Jewish Civilization within Moscow State University and the Russian State University for the Humanities.

Dr. Altman has written extensively about the Holocaust and his work has been published in several countries including Belarus, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Russia, Sweden, Ukraine and the United States. He has edited almost 40 books in the series *The Russian Holocaust Library*. He is the author of the monograph *Victims of Hate: The Holocaust in the Soviet Union (1941-1945)* (Moscow, 2002) and the handbook for universities *History of the Holocaust and Jewish Resistance in the Occupied Territory of the Soviet Union*. (Moscow, 2002). Ilya Altman is a project manager and senior editor of the encyclopedia *The Holocaust in the Soviet Territories* (Moscow, 2009) which was presented at United Nations Headquarters in New York in 2010.

Holocaust Education in Russia Today: Its Challenges and Achievements

by Ilya Altman

Professor, Founder and Co-chairman of the Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Centre

In Russia, teaching of the Holocaust began in the 1990s by individual enthusiasts. At that time, the Russian Government had started to declassify archival records and make them available to the general public. Between 1991 and 1994, the Government launched a pilot public education effort that included international exhibits, such as the Anne Frank House (The Netherlands), which were held in Moscow and other cities. In contemporary Russia, two non-governmental organisations — The Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Centre (established in June 1992), and the Holocaust Foundation (established in 1997) — have played a leading role in organising the teaching of the Holocaust. More recently, the Museum of Jewish Heritage and the Holocaust, with funding by the Russian Jewish Congress, has initiated some interesting educational projects, such as the training of evangelical baptist Sunday school teachers.

One of the Holocaust Centre's main objectives is to organise the teaching of Holocaust history in Russian schools and universities. In 1999, the Centre worked with staff members from the Russian Academy of Education, the country's main teaching methodology centre,

to establish a curriculum and write guidelines for the teaching of Holocaust history. The Centre published a teachers' guide, *History of the Holocaust in the Occupied Territory of the Soviet Union*, written three years earlier (1996) by Russian Galina Klokova, which has played an especially important role in the teaching of the Holocaust.

Because Russia has not had a government programme for teaching the subject of the Holocaust, it has been important to develop teaching aids, and expose educators to international experts in the field through educational seminars. To achieve this, the Centre worked with the Holocaust Foundation from 2007 until 2011 to organise six international conferences under the theme *Lessons of the Holocaust and Contemporary Russia* and several regional seminars by *The Living History Forum*. Swedish educators and staff members of the Centre and the Holocaust Foundation were invited to speak at these events, and academic papers from these conferences were published and made available to teachers. It is estimated that tens of thousands of teachers have been reached through these efforts.

The international teacher training courses of the Centre and the Holocaust Foundation served as a collective hub for the study of methods for teaching about the Holocaust. The courses given were created jointly with the Moscow Institute of Open Education, the government agency which oversees teacher certification, and the re-certification of Moscow teachers which is required every five years. Since 2010, these courses have been operating under the auspices of the Federal Academy of Advanced Training and Professional Retraining for Educators.

Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, has also been an instrumental partner for Holocaust education in Russia. Since 2000, the School has conducted summer classes for between 40-50 educators, 25 of whom are sent to seminars in Israel each year. To date, more than 250 educators from Russia have received training in Jerusalem, and have gone on to become regional representatives of the Holocaust Centre in professional development institutions and pedagogical universities. These institutions not only

train school teachers on the subject of the Holocaust, but also participate in international exchanges in Europe and the United States. Over 100 teachers have participated in these programmes, and have visited the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial and Educational Site in Germany, Mémorial de la Shoah in France, and various Holocaust museums in the United States. Unfortunately, all of these trips were funded by the Holocaust Centre and its foreign partners, and not by the Government.

In 2003, the inclusion of the Holocaust in a draft of the official *Russian Standard of History Education* marked a turning point in the teaching of the Holocaust in the country. Although the *Standard* has not yet been fully incorporated in the educational process, it has made Holocaust education a mandatory topic in textbooks, and, to date, almost 20 textbook writers have written a chapter about the Holocaust. In 2010, the prestigious “Russkoe Slovo” publishing house compiled these various chapters of the Holocaust into one publication titled *The Subject of the Holocaust in School Textbooks*, which also gives teachers recommendations on how to use the texts in lessons. In 2011, the Holocaust Centre succeeded in including questions about the Holocaust in the Unified State Examination, which is equivalent to recognition of the importance of the subject by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation.

Today, government institutions for the professional development of educators hold regular lectures and seminars on the subject of the Holocaust for teachers of history and social studies throughout the country. The Moscow Institute of Open Education offers lectures on the Holocaust as part of its professional development programme. In 2010, the Holocaust Centre, together with the Federal Academy of Advanced Training and Professional Retraining for

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Educators, developed a unified educational module on the Holocaust which has been recommended by the Ministry of Education and Science to its local offices.

In schools where the Holocaust is not taught (altogether, only six lessons are devoted to the history of the Second World War in Russian secondary schools), the students' extracurricular work and homework have become fundamental. Many teachers offer elective classes which feature evening discussions with Holocaust witnesses and survivors, and movie screenings followed by discussion periods. In recent years, as children have learned about the Holocaust they have become more active in preserving the memory of it. They have participated in activities such as interviewing witnesses, and have been involved in the maintenance of Holocaust memorial monuments.

For the past 12 years, the Holocaust Centre and the Holocaust Foundation have organised an international competition titled *Memory of the Holocaust – the Path to Tolerance*, and the number of entries submitted by Russian students and teachers has been growing each year. In 2011, 2,000 entries from almost every region in Russia were submitted for the competition. This increase in participation was partly due to a public information campaign conducted by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2010 and 2011. The competition is an excellent way to assess qualitative and quantitative parameters of the teaching of the Holocaust in Russia.

The most interesting entries in the competition have been projects based on local history materials. These entries have included essays, stories, poems, drawings, scripts, and documentary films created from oral history archives, documents from personal archives, and sociological surveys.

Awards are presented to the winners on 27 January, the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, with the United Nations Information Centre in Moscow. Since 2004, student winners have also presented their submissions to UNESCO in Paris. The winning projects have also been published

in eight special volumes titled *We Cannot be Silent: Schoolchildren and Students on the Holocaust*.

From 2001 until 2005, the Federal Government conducted a nationwide programme to promote tolerance titled *Tolerance Awareness and Prevention of Extremism in Russian Society*. Although the programme did not mention the Holocaust, the subject was broadly represented in seminars for educators, and through a series of teaching aids that were produced for the occasion. One of the first teaching aids published under this programme was a textbook titled *History of the Holocaust and Jewish Resistance in the Occupied Territory of the Soviet Union*, by Ilya Altman.

In 2002, 25,000 copies of the textbook titled *History of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, by authors Ilya Altman, Alla Gerber, and David Poltorak, were printed with the Ministry of Education's seal of approval. In 2003, it was translated into German in Austria. The Holocaust Centre issued lesson plans and teaching aids for teachers of Russian literature. The Centre also published a list of extra curricular activities on various Holocaust subjects such as the International Holocaust Remembrance Day (2009), Babi Yar (2006), Kristallnacht (2008) and the Righteous Among the Nations (2005, 2011).

Thus, very interesting experiences have been accumulated in Russia in teaching about the Holocaust in the context of the history of the Second World War. A number of these educational programmes have been supported by grants from international organisations such as the Council of Europe; the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany; the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, as well as local sponsors. Since 2008, the Holocaust Centre's educational programmes have been funded annually by a grant from the President of Russia in the amount of \$70,000–\$80,000. Unfortunately,

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teacher training and participation of official educational institutions in Holocaust education projects have been negatively affected by the fact that Russia is not a member of the “Task Force” and because there has been no formal Government programme for teaching about the Holocaust in the country.

International cooperation—primarily with regard to the exchange of experiences about the culture of memory associated with events of the Second World War—is still an important tool for making the educational community aware of the importance of the Holocaust. It is revealing that the inclusion of the Holocaust as a subject in the Unified State Examination was announced at a meeting of the Ministers of Education of Russia and Israel.

Bringing together Russian educators and leaders of educational institutions in other countries is mutually beneficial. This exchange helps to familiarize Russian educators with ways in which their counterparts are preserving the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. It also enables their counterparts to learn how the Russians are working to preserve the memory of victims and heroes of the Great Patriotic War. This exchange of ideology and methodology helps to address the issue of the universality of the Holocaust.

New opportunities for teaching about the Holocaust in Russia have opened with a new course titled *Principles of World Religions*, which devotes considerable attention to Judaism and the history and culture of the Jewish people. Other topics, such as *The Righteous and Righteousness* (in the context of the title *Righteous among the Nations* bestowed by Yad Vashem) make it possible to introduce information on the Holocaust through the telling of stories about heroic rescuers. In this regard, the latest edition in the Russian Holocaust Library series, *Righteous Among the Nations. Righteous of Russia: 1941–1945* (Moscow: Russkoe Slovo, 2011) has generated a lot of interest among educators and the general public. The preparation of multimedia teaching aids and distribution of them at regional seminars for teachers would help to interest more students and teachers on the subject of the Holocaust.

The training of future educators and young researchers remains a matter of utmost importance in Russia. At the initiative of Professor Efim Pivovarov, President of the Russian State University for the Humanities, a new university course titled *The History of the Holocaust* was introduced at the university and a proposal was made to invite teachers from different regions of Russia to participate in a professional development course on this subject.

In 2011, numerous articles on teaching about the Holocaust appeared in a number of leading Russian pedagogical publications, including *Teaching of History in School*. The articles were written by not only eminent scholars, such as Professor Evgenii Vyazemskii, but also young educators from remote corners of Russia such as Elena Petrova, a young history teacher from the Polyarnye Zori in Murmansk Region.

In 2012, a new Museum of Tolerance, created by the Federation of the Jewish Communities of Russia, and modelled after similar museums in Los Angeles and New York, will open in Moscow. The Museum of Jewish Heritage and the Holocaust at Poklonnaya Gora has also proposed the use of state-of-the-art technologies in its own collection. A Russian branch of The Anne Frank House project (The Netherlands), which trains young tour guides for the *Anne Frank: Lessons of History* exhibit, will also be launched in 2012. Pilot projects in Moscow and St. Petersburg demonstrate that there is an increasing interest in the subject. In recent years, the Holocaust Centre has devoted special attention to “museum pedagogy”, emphasising the creation of exhibits, or partial exhibits, on the subject of the Holocaust in regional local history museums.

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Holocaust memorial events, including the International Holocaust Remembrance Day, in many cities across Russia. However, there are also some troubling trends. In Rostov-on-Don, for the first time in recent post-Soviet history, a memorial plaque in honour of the 20,000 local Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust was recently taken down and replaced with a plaque that makes reference to “the loss of peaceful Soviet citizens”. This event was met with protest from citizens, the academic community, and leading Jewish organisations in the country, and made headlines in leading international papers and media, including the *New York Times*¹ and the *Jerusalem Post*².

The latest initiative of the Holocaust Centre and the Russian Jewish Congress, called “Relay of Memory”, is designed to attract educators and students, in an out-of-school context, to research the names of Holocaust victims, and rescuers, and to preserve important Holocaust artifacts such as letters, diaries and photographs in school museums.

Awareness of the history of the Holocaust as an integral part of the history of our country is one of the most important directions for creating a culture of memory that can counteract any manifestations of anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia in Russia.

Please see page 128 for discussion questions

1 “Russia: Protest by Jewish Group Over Memorial”, *The New York Times* (24 January 2012). Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/25/world/europe/russia-protest-by-jewish-group.html>.

2 “Revisionism Not Remorse”, by Alex Ryvchin, *The Jerusalem Post* (2 February 2012). Available from: <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Opinion/Article.aspx?id=257917>.



Leonid Rozenberg, veteran of the former Soviet army during the Second World War, speaks at the Holocaust memorial ceremony held at the United Nations on 27 January 2009.

Photo Credit: UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras



Students meeting with Professor Ilya Altman at the Museum of Jewish Heritage and the Holocaust in Moscow, July 2012.

Photo Credit: The Museum of Jewish Heritage and the Holocaust, Moscow

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Discussion questions

1. According to the author, when did teaching about the Holocaust begin in Russia?
2. What are the main challenges of teaching the Holocaust in Russia?
3. What is the role of state institutions and non-governmental organisations in promoting Holocaust education?
4. Why are international cooperation and exchanges important elements in Holocaust Education in Russia? Do you have an example?
5. Why do you think Holocaust education should be part of the public school curriculum in Russia?