Illinois Holocaust Museum: Photos capture World War II, Holocaust through Soviet Jewish eyes
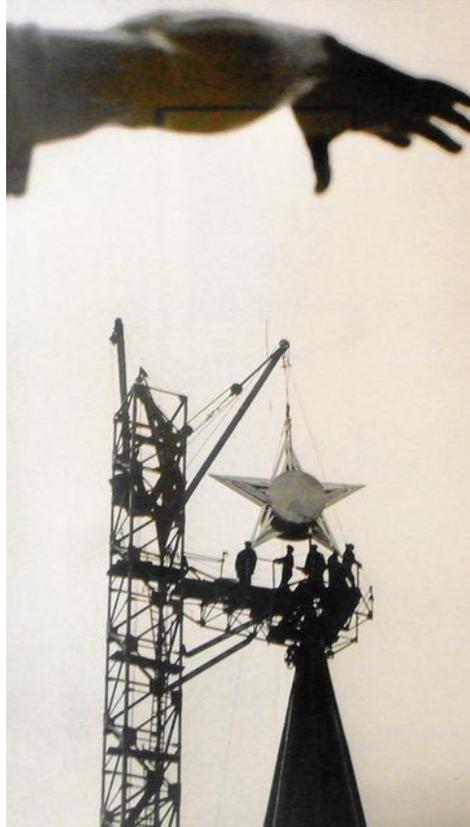

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Seldom seen photos capture Soviet Union during World War II

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T he black-and-white photos in the Illinois Holocaust Museum's new traveling exhibition capture frozen, indelible moments of World War II and the Holocaust, but mostly through an unfamiliar set of lenses.

Russian Jewish photographers took these powerful shots, many of them so carefully and impeccably rendered that their impact stands the test of time. The photos graphically illustrate the sheer devastation and brutality of Germany's rabid aggression inside the former Soviet Union along with the liberation of the camps and ultimate exultant victory — even if they were not widely circulated in America at the time.

Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust, now on display through Sept. 7 at the museum, is based on an eye-opening, award-winning book of photographs by curator David Shneer.

"Soviet Jewish Eyes shows us that by looking through the camera lenses of liberator-photographers in the Soviet Union, we see another chilling image of the Holocaust — one made up of prosaic, intimate landscapes and emptiness that genocide leaves behind," said Shneer.

It's difficult to wrap one's mind around the estimate of 26 million Soviets killed during the war. To put this in some statistical perspective, Poland lost an estimated 5.6 million and the United States an estimated 420,000.

But when you see a stark photo of a barren field, the weather unsparingly brittle and cold, dead Jewish men laying motionless after a massacre, women grieving over or near their lifeless bodies, the solemnity and tragedy of events now seven decades old still take hold; they still feel immediate and palpable.

The works do not necessarily reflect impartial photojournalism; some images had to have been staged, others their compositions altered to heighten their power.

Yet, if some of these photographs are better described as propaganda, that doesn't mean they distort a larger truth. The goal in their collective creation was not only to raise awareness about what could never have been fully comprehensible without them, but also to rally and unite a country fighting for its very survival.

Thoughtfully laid out in the museum's basement exhibition space are more than 60 photographs. They span June 22, 1941 to May 9, 1945, from the days before the brutal war waged between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union to the liberation of the camps in Poland and Victory Day.

Large-scale, dramatic prints are examples of both art and photojournalism, and they sit alongside intimate-scaled vintage prints. Ancillary encasements of artifacts, including some the museum has pulled from its own permanent collection, only add resonance to the photo display, which winds its way through themed sections. The museum has also selected Russian music, most of it classical, to play softly and somberly during a viewer's journey through the exhibition.

A Jewish story

In his book, Shneer reminds readers that photos documenting the brutality imposed by Nazi Germany did not widely circulate in the United States until several years later. He views this story of the emergence of photography in the Soviet Union — especially during such a critically historical time — as a profoundly Jewish one.

"Soviet Jews were some of the most important builders of the profession of Soviet photography — as avant gardists, state photographers and photojournalists," he writes. "Many Soviet Jews created the visual record of the 'building of socialism' under Stalin and then, as liberators, documented and bore witness to its violent destruction during the war and the Holocaust."

It wasn't Americans or the British who ultimately liberated Germany's infamous extermination camps in Poland — Auschwitz-Birkenau and Treblinka and Belzec among them.

In 1945, the Red Army alongside the Polish Army marched into the camps — sometimes referred to as "German death factories" — to free remaining prisoners.

Among the most stunning photos in the exhibition is one of liberation, a concentration camp survivor sitting among a large pile of Nazi-confiscated eyeglasses, searching for a single pair so he can see again, so he can resume a life that can never be the same as before he arrived.

The most prolific of the photographers — Evgenii Khaldei, Georgii Zelma, and Dmitrii Baltermants — are hardly household names in the United States; still, their skill and value in documenting Germany's violent aggression into the former Soviet Union are undeniable.

As is their bravery.

Some of the photos, ones that clearly have not been staged, are up close with men fighting the war. They manage to freeze forever moments of danger and movement — a few troops hunkered down in a crevice as a large tank rolls overhead, for example.

"All these photographs were in the biggest journals and newspapers at the time," said Arielle Weininger, Museum Chief Curator of Collections and Exhibitions.

They were intended to be seen by many, to stir the populace back home as Russian cities and towns were damaged and destroyed during the vicious German siege.

The dozens of photos in the exhibition offer yet another angle on World War II and Holocaust history, so memorable are they that visitors will want to read the explanatory text beside them.

"These photographers took aesthetically arresting war images and also were the first to document Nazi atrocity sites, three years before better known western photographers such as Margaret Bourke White and Lee Miller chronicled the liberation of concentration camps in Germany," the opening panel reads.

Russian text

Although the Illinois Holocaust Museum isn't the first stop for Soviet Jewish Eyes, it is its first showing containing text in Russian as well as English.

That makes sense considering 62 percent of World War II survivors in the Chicago area were born in the former Soviet Union, according to the Holocaust Museum.

The Russian-American population in the United States is nearly 2.9 million people, more than 464,000 of which live in Illinois, 40,000 of which speak Russian and live in the Chicago area.

"This exhibition, which presents the Soviet Jewish experience of the Holocaust, is a unique opportunity not only for our large Russian speaking Jewish population to explore their dual identity, but for people of all backgrounds to recognize the efforts and extend gratitude to those who fought so valiantly," said Michael Polsky, presenting sponsor of the exhibition.

Toward the end of the display is a striking image of victory; a young soldier crawls from a window to plant a Soviet Union flag over a crowded city during a feverish Victory Day .

He is being held by two pair of hands so he doesn't fall. If you look at the original photo, encased in glass below the photo on the wall, you see a watch on each of the arms of the soldier with a grip on the young man, an indication of likely looting in days following the war.

But the finished photo, the one widely circulated in the former Soviet Union, shows only one watch on his arm.

"They wanted this picture of victory and nothing to interfere," Weininger said.

Showing for the first time in the Midwest, Through Soviet Jewish Eyes puts on display unforgettable World War II and Holocaust photos from the former Soviet Union, but it also tells the stories behind them.

"This exhibition is a larger war story, a Jewish story, a Holocaust story," Weininger said. "It makes sense that it has found a home here at the museum."

• *For more information on the exhibition, access http://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/pages/exhibitions/special-exhibitions/*

• *A commemoration of the 70th anniversary of Victory Day in the Soviet Union is scheduled for 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. May 8 at the museum, 9603 Woods Drive, Skokie.*

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