University of Colorado **Boulder**   **Colorado Arts and Sciences Magazine**

Colorado Arts and Sciences Magazine

Through Soviet Jewish eyes, in the Russian tongue

March 5, 2015 • By Clint Talbott *(/asmagazine/clint-talbott)*

Professor David Shneer, left, shares a word with people who attended a gathering of Soviet veterans and Soviet Holocaust survivors last month. Photo courtesy of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Educational Center.

Exhibition of Soviet Holocaust photos curated by CU-Boulder professor strikes a chord in Illinois

CU-Boulder's David Shneer is known for his historical research on photojournalists who chronicled the Holocaust in World War II Soviet Union; they witnessed and recorded the slaughter of Soviet citizens including those who, like the photographers themselves, were Jewish.

*"**Jews from the former Soviet Union approached Shneer and expressed gratitude that, 'Finally, someone who's interested in the Holocaust is interested in our story of the Holocaust.'**"*

But the Nazis' genocidal killing of Soviet Jews was obscured in the dominant Soviet newspapers during the war and was suppressed in the Cold War era, when the Soviet narrative was only that "fascist troops" murdered "peaceful Soviet citizens."

Now, Shneer is curating an exhibition of photographs in the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center *(http://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/pages/exhibitions/special-exhibitions/)*. The exhibition has been on tour for three years, but the Illinois exhibition is the first time it has been displayed in both English and Russian.

The bilingual version is particularly powerful in Illinois, said Shneer, Louis Singer Chair in Jewish History, professor of history and religious studies and director of the Program in Jewish Studies *(http://www.colorado.edu/jewishstudies/)* at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Russian speakers and immigrants are numerous around Chicago. About 62 percent of the Holocaust survivors in the Chicago area were born in the former Soviet Union, the Illinois Holocaust Museum states.

The Russian-American population is about 2.9 million people, more than 464,000 of whom live in Illinois, and 40,000 of whom speak Russian and live near Chicago, the museum reports.

David Shneer stands next to one of the photographs in the exhibition, an image of survivors mourning the loss of family members slaughtered by the Nazis in the Russian city of Kerch in 1942. Photo courtesy of the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center.

Additionally, the Illinois Holocaust Museum is in Skokie, Ill., which was ground zero in a 1978 U.S. Supreme Court case *(http://www.oyez.org/cases/1970-1979/1976/1976_76_1786)* involving neo-Nazis who sought to march in Skokie, whose citizens include many Jewish people and Holocaust survivors.

About 400 people attended the exhibition's opening last month. The day after the opening, which coincided with Russia's Defender of the Fatherland Day, Shneer spoke to a group of Soviet Jewish war veterans as well as Soviet Holocaust survivors.

"Both [the war veteran and Holocaust survivor] are part of the Soviet Jewish story, which makes it one of the very few national stories of World War II where Jews are both 'heroic liberator' like the Americans and 'Holocaust victims' like the Poles."

To the veterans and survivors, Shneer gave a version of the talk he'd given at the exhibition's opening, only this time in Russian, in which he is fluent.

Jews from the former Soviet Union approached Shneer and expressed gratitude that, "Finally, someone who's interested in the Holocaust is interested in our story of the Holocaust."

That story is grim. An estimated 26 million Soviets died during the war, as did 1 million Soviet Jews, according to Yad Vashem *(http://www.yadvashem.org/)*, the world center for Holocaust

research, education and commemoration.

Shneer's research documented that Soviet Jewish photojournalists working for the country's most important newspapers were among the first to document the unfolding Holocaust in their homeland.

Although that truth was obscured in the Soviet era, the Soviet Union's collapse allowed Shneer and other scholars to see a fuller picture of what happened, and to better understand the overlapping narratives of Soviets and Jews.

Shneer emphasizes that scholars have been studying the Holocaust in the Soviet Union for more than a decade, and he is not the first to do so. But articles in scholarly, peer-reviewed journals don't necessarily yield wide, public awareness.

"To me, this is the moment when the scholar assumes the role of the public intellectual in a very culturally nuanced way, in a way good public intellectuals, I would like to think, should be, and it resonated with people," Shneer said.

"Both Russians and the Americans in the audience told me, 'We need to be teaching young people this stuff.'"

And a traveling museum exhibition can bring that education to thousands across the country as opposed to hundreds in classrooms, he said.

The exhibition also underscored another passion of Shneer's: the "importance of having our students know a foreign language."

The exhibition—which draws on material from Shneer's award-winning _(http://www.ajsnet.org/srecipients13.htm)_ 2010 book "Through Soviet Jewish Eyes _(http://www.amazon.com/Through-Soviet-Jewish-Eyes-Photography/dp/0813553938/ref=sr_1_1?_ _ie=UTF8&qid=1353855878&sr=8-1&keywords=through+soviet+jewish+eyes+photography)_"—has been traveling the country since 2011, when it debuted at the CU Art Museum. A donor underwrote the translation of the exhibition into Russian for the Illinois Holocaust Museum.

Shneer's work documents the Soviet treatment of the Nazis' invasion from the beginning:

The German Army invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. Within days, the leading illustrated magazine, Ogonek (the Life magazine of the Soviet Union), published its first atrocity photo. That picture, retrieved from the camera of a dead German soldier, showed Nazis forcing Jewish victims to dig a grave for a pile of corpses.

As Shneer notes in his book, the Soviet Army regularly urged its press to publish stories and photos of "fascist" atrocities.

"This material would function as visual evidence of Nazi crimes and as propaganda to rile up the anger of the population," Shneer writes.

But the photo caption did not specify that the victims were Jewish. Instead, it said, "Those sentenced are forced to dig their own graves."