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# Europe by Numbers: Soviet Investigators Count the Dead during World War II

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## ABSTRACT

Soviet statistics have been the source of extensive foreign criticism, and victim counts for Nazi atrocities are no exception. Much of the suspicion has focused on numbers generated by the Extraordinary State Commission (*Chrezvychainaia gosudarstvennaia komissia*, ChGK), the organization created by Stalin's government on 2 November 1942, to oversee investigations of war crimes. Western scholars accuse the ChGK of engaging in "double bookkeeping" and outright falsification, alternately claiming that Soviet investigators inflated numbers of victims or arbitrarily reduced reported deaths, in particular by disregarding the murders of Jews. Regardless of conclusion, such treatments tend to have two features in common: they compare Soviet figures against German records, presuming that the latter are more authoritative, and they rely on inference to attribute Soviet inaccuracy to the malicious intentions of Stalin's regime.

In this article, I approach the ChGK's accounting of Jewish and Soviet victims as part of a widespread campaign to make sense of the scale of atrocities while World War II was still ongoing. Drawing upon the ChGK's procedural documentation from across the formerly occupied USSR, I examine the myriad ways that Soviet investigators attempted to quantify German massacres, from survivor testimony and forensic excavations to extrapolation and guesswork. I argue that in the vast majority of cases, Soviet fatality estimates were the products of earnest attempts to represent the human cost of the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes. During the war itself, these efforts frequently relied upon western interlocutors to connect with audiences abroad. Where the USSR went "wrong" was in refusing to participate in transnational projects to revise statistics after the defeat of Hitler. When read neither as facts nor fabrications, but rather symbols of the extent to which total war made exact quantification impossible, the ChGK's death tolls are among the most revealing for the Eastern Front.

## KEYWORDS

World War II; Stalinism;  
Soviet Union; Holocaust;  
war crimes; quantification;  
transnational

## Introduction

Numbers had power in the Soviet Union. Questioning production targets in Stalin's five-year plans could lead to arrest.<sup>1</sup> During mass repressions in the

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Harrison, "Foundations of the Soviet Command Economy, 1917–1941," in *The Cambridge History of Communism. Volume I: World Revolution and Socialism in One Country, 1917–1941*, eds. Silvio Pons and Stephen A. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 367–8.

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1930s, meeting arrest quotas drove NKVD operatives to seize innocent people or otherwise face punishment themselves.<sup>2</sup> Numbers took on new meaning after Hitler's invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941. While the numbers of soldiers, military hardware, and ammunition determined the course of the conflict, the numbers of victims imprisoned and murdered shaped support for Stalin's regime on the home front as well as the international stage.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I examine Soviet methods for establishing death tolls on the ground. I argue that contrary to much of the received wisdom dating back to the war itself, Soviet victim counts overwhelmingly constituted earnest attempts at representing unprecedented violence on an unthinkable scale, with Stalinist stakeholders then leveraging foreign conduits to disseminate numbers abroad. Where the USSR went "wrong" was in refusing to participate in transnational efforts to revise statistics once the war was over, instead cleaving to figures that, much like a Victory Day on May 9<sup>th</sup>, were increasingly out of step with the rest of the world.

Soviet numbers for World War II were objects of suspicion from the outset. In September 1941, a *New York Times* report on the first ten weeks of combat on the Eastern Front amplified German claims that Soviet figures for enemy fatalities were roughly 20 times too high.<sup>4</sup> Historians have inherited such misgivings and applied them to Soviet losses, as well as the Red Army's supposed achievements. Much of this skepticism has centered on numbers generated by the Extraordinary State Commission (*Chrezvychainaia gosudarstvennaia komissiiia*, ChGK), the organization created by Stalin's government on 2 November 1942, to oversee investigations of Axis war crimes.<sup>5</sup> Scholars accuse the ChGK of engaging in "double bookkeeping" and attribute discrepancies among reported data to an inferred official order to exaggerate the true numbers of victims. Such theories routinely compare Soviet figures against Nazi records along with Western scholarship based on them, presuming that these non-Soviet options are more authoritative.<sup>6</sup> Yet German wartime documentation comprises thousands of individual reports on mass murder that were neither comprehensive

<sup>2</sup>Paul R. Gregory, *The Political Economy of Stalinism: Evidence from the Soviet Secret Archives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 351–2.

<sup>3</sup>For the complex interdependence of the Soviet front, home front, and wartime propaganda: Brandon M. Schechter, *The Stuff of Soldiers: A History of the Red Army in World War II through Objects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019); Wendy Z. Goldman and Donald Filtzer, *Fortress Dark and Stern: The Soviet Home Front during World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Karel C. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda in World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup>"Nazis Put Losses at Only 402,865; List Their Total as 725 Planes," *New York Times*, 20 September 1941, 3.

<sup>5</sup>The ChGK's full title reads: "Extraordinary State Commission for Ascertaining and Investigating Crimes Perpetrated by the German-Fascist Invaders and Their Accomplices and the Damage Inflicted by Them on Citizens, Collective Farms, Social Organizations, State Enterprises, and Institutions of the USSR." For the founding decree: Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. R-7021, op. 116, d. 1, ll. 1–4.

<sup>6</sup>Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center* (Riga and Washington, D.C.: The Historical Institute of Latvia in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996), 13–4, 18; Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weissrussland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2000), 1158n82; Richards Plavnieks, *Nazi Collaborators on Trial during the Cold War: Viktors Arājs and the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 92–6.

nor consistently preserved.<sup>7</sup> While it is common for Soviet numbers to exceed Nazi death counts, Jewish survivor testimonies often surpass German figures as well.<sup>8</sup> Powered by different methodologies and motivations, no one interest group or institution was equipped to keep accurate track of the human costs of total war on the Soviet-German front.

Debates over the scale of Hitler's massacres dovetail with controversies surrounding the numbers of victims of Stalin's regime. On 4 February 1989, the front page of the *New York Times* broadcast dissident historian Roy Medvedev's conclusion that 20 million people perished due to Stalin's labor camps, executions, forced collectivization, and famine. "Mr. Medvedev's estimates are generally in line with Western calculations," Moscow bureau chief Bill Keller observed. "The estimated number of deaths is about equal to the number of Soviet soldiers believed killed in World War II."<sup>9</sup> The following year Robert Conquest, a proponent of the 20 million figure for over two decades, published a "reassessment" of his analysis that retained the figure, telling friends the volume should be titled, "I Told You So, You Fools."<sup>10</sup> More recently, Timothy Snyder has put forth the significantly lower estimate of six million people murdered during Stalinist rule.<sup>11</sup> The stakes of such assessments remain as high as ever. Some authors attribute at least six million deaths to the Gulag alone and six million or more to the Holodomor (the artificial famine in Ukraine during the years 1932–1933), which other specialists criticize as "transparent" efforts to depict the USSR as the equivalent of, if not worse than Nazi Germany.<sup>12</sup>

When counting the human costs of despotism, both the journey and the destination matter. Six million Jewish victims as the result of the Holocaust has become an iconic number, even though scholars trace its origin to a statement from Adolf Eichmann overheard in August 1944, meaning it could not possibly include all Jews murdered during World War II. Professor of Religious Studies

<sup>7</sup>Franziska Exeler, *Ghosts of War: Nazi Occupation and Its Aftermath in Soviet Belarus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), 246–7.

<sup>8</sup>Anne Speckhard, "Minsk," in *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945. Volume II: Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe, Part B*, eds. Martin Dean and Mel Hecker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 1234.

<sup>9</sup>Bill Keller, "Major Soviet Paper Says 20 Million Died as Victims of Stalin," *New York Times*, 4 February 1989, 1; R. A. Medvedev, "Tragicheskaja statistika," *Argumenty i fakty* 5(434), February 4–10, 1989, 6.

<sup>10</sup>Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (London: Hutchinson, 1990 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1968]); "Robert Conquest, 98 Dies; Chronicled Soviet Horrors," *New York Times*, 5 August 2015, B13. Conquest's obituary notes that the updated facetious title included "a vulgar adjective inserted between the last two words."

<sup>11</sup>Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), xiii, 384.

<sup>12</sup>For examples of such criticism: Wilson T. Bell, "Solzhenitsyn's Legacy: Studying the Gulag in 2019," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 61, no. 1 (2019): 118–9; Omer Bartov, "Conclusion," in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, eds. John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 679[quote]; Sarah Fainberg, "Memory at the Margins: The Shoah in Ukraine (1991–2011)," in *History, Memory and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe: Memory Games*, eds. Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 98. For a comparable discussion on the "smaller" scale of 1.5 million victims of interwar artificial famine in Kazakhstan: Sarah Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

Oren Stier characterizes six million as a “distillation of truth transcending numeric precision.” He notes that an Il’ia Erenburg article in *Pravda* from December 1944 proclaimed six million Jewish deaths a full year before the Eichmann hearsay was made public at Nuremberg, while previously unavailable Soviet documentation has provided data to confirm that, remarkably, the six million number is “about right.”<sup>13</sup> Efforts to substantiate this total exactly, however, have not succeeded. Certain Holocaust researchers advocate for continuing to accept six million on faith, lest questioning this sum serve as ammunition for people who deny the genocide took place.<sup>14</sup> Many specialists on the Soviet Union seem to have taken this advice: scholars who would reflexively treat Stalinist statistics with skepticism invoke six million Holocaust victims as common knowledge that no longer requires citing supporting evidence.<sup>15</sup>

Akin to “*the six million*” and other forms of rhetoric for conveying the horrors of Nazi rule, Soviet death counts should be approached as symbols above all. This means researchers defining terms upfront, tracking changes in use, and acknowledging when extant documentation does not allow for concrete conclusions on decision-making: in essence, interpreting Soviet numbers for what they say about the people performing the calculations rather than the atrocities being tabulated. With investigations of Nazi crimes while World War II was still ongoing, Stalin’s regime was not only documenting violence, but positioning itself as the premier authority in Eastern Europe. As displays of administrative state capacity as well as sacrifices that deserved compensation, victim counts were a means to those ends. Rich in context and subtext, these are quantifications that have proven to be incomprehensible without in-depth qualitative analysis.

To demonstrate the promise in Soviet statistics, I first provide an overview of the ChGK’s passion for numbers before diving deeper into the workflows that drove investigations in the newly “liberated” western borderlands. I discuss the ChGK’s calculations as methods for enhancing Soviet credentials in Poland, as well as over the course of the Trial of the Major War Criminals at Nuremberg. Throughout, I emphasize the importance of Stalinist war crimes documentation for understanding the Shoah in Eastern Europe. I conclude with methodological recommendations for scholars who wish to harness the ChGK’s numbers. When read neither as facts nor falsifications, but rather first

<sup>13</sup>Oren Baruch Stier, *Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 156[quote]-60[quote].

<sup>14</sup>As noted by: Oren Baruch Stier, “The Asymptote of Memory,” paper presented at “Quantifying the Holocaust. Classifying, Counting, Modeling: What Contribution to Holocaust History?” conference, May 14–16, 2024, Paris.

<sup>15</sup>A few examples of such cursory repetition: Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 2001]), xiii; Il’ya Al’tman, “The Holocaust in the Occupied USSR and Its Memorialization in Contemporary Russia,” in *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe*, eds. Alex J. Kay and David Stahel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 227; Willem de Haan, *Tango of Death: The Creation of a Holocaust Legend* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 19. As counterexamples, see the extended treatments that generally coalesce in the (estimated) five-six million range: Alfred Kokh and Pavel Polian, eds., *Denial of the Denial, or the Battle of Auschwitz: The Demography and Geopolitics of the Holocaust: The View from the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Sergeui Silichtchev and Beate Brown (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012).

impressions to bring home mass graves to audiences lucky enough never to visit them, Soviet death tolls are among the most revealing on the Eastern Front.

### **Wartime Numbermania**

Long a signature feature of Stalinist statecraft, quantification was a natural choice for commanding attention in a world at war. On 25 June 1941, the Soviet Information Bureau began publishing daily reports on the front page of the central press that tallied up the USSR's setbacks and accomplishments. In the first three days of combat, for example, the Red Army supposedly lost 374 airplanes but destroyed 381 on the German side. Between five and ten enemy parachutists disguised in Soviet uniforms landed with the goal of damaging military communications, yet an extermination battalion that had been created under the leadership of the NKVD would make short work of attackers like these moving forward.<sup>16</sup> The People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs Viacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov ratcheted up such bluster by several notches when he issued a series of "notes" to countries with which the USSR had diplomatic relations. These messages were reproduced in the Soviet press to ensure that everybody knew the same statistics. The missive published on 7 January 1942, for instance, listed how many homes were burned in villages, numbers of women raped, and totals of people killed in each location via specific methods.<sup>17</sup> Another note from 27 April 1942, was released as part of an English-language booklet alongside gruesome photographs of civilians raped, tortured, and murdered. A two-page spread articulated the "Massacre of the Peaceful Population" of the Soviet Union in round numbers: 52,000 victims slaughtered in Kyiv, 25,000 in Odesa, and so on. "This list could be continued almost indefinitely," the accompanying caption relayed.<sup>18</sup>

On 4 November 1942, the day the ChGK's founding decree appeared on the front page of the Soviet central press, the news was not good.<sup>19</sup> In its regular update, the Soviet Information Bureau enumerated 60 victims shot in one location in the Belarusian SSR and 11 in another. In the city of Nalchik, capital of the Kabardino-Balkar ASSR in the Russian SFSR and one of the few fronts that was moving, German forces attacked three times in succession, eventually managing to "squeeze out our units."<sup>20</sup> War crimes investigations would

<sup>16</sup>"Soobshchenie Sovetskogo informbiuro," *Izvestiia/Krasnaia zvezda/Pravda*, 25 June 1941, 1.

<sup>17</sup>"Nota Narodnogo komissara inostrannykh del tov. V. M. Molotova o povsemestnykh grabezhakh, razorenii naseleniia i chudovishchnykh zverstvakh germanskikh vlastei na zakhvachennykh imi sovetskikh territoriiakh," *Izvestiia/Krasnaia zvezda/Pravda*, 7 January 1942, 1–2.

<sup>18</sup>*We Shall Not Forgive! The Horrors of the German Invasion in Documents and Photographs* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1942). I am grateful to Jared McBride for sharing this booklet with me.

<sup>19</sup>"Ukaz Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR. Ob obrazovanii Chrezvychainoi gosudarstvennoi komissii po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniiu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshchnikov i prichinnogo imi ushcherba grazhdanam, kolkhozam, obshchestvennym organizatsiiam, gosudarstvennym predpriiatiiam i uchrezhdeniiam SSSR," *Izvestiia/Krasnaia zvezda/Pravda*, 4 November 1942, 1.

<sup>20</sup>"Ot Sovetskogo informbiuro," *Izvestiia/Krasnaia zvezda/Pravda*, 4 November 1942, 1.

clearly not be able to change these outcomes. Rather, Stalin's government was adopting a longer view. Reprinted in full by the *New York Times* the following day, the ChGK's founding decree informed allies and enemies alike that the USSR was pursuing "full registration" of war crimes for prosecuting the guilty and obtaining economic compensation.<sup>21</sup> In this way, the ChGK was a wartime project that subtly promised a postwar world in which Stalin's regime could make demands. Debuted during the lead-up to the Red Army's Operation Uranus that sought to turn the tide of the battle of Stalingrad, this was an optimistic position to take, and it was not alone. In an article accompanying the decree, the *New York Times* portrayed the ChGK's mandate as straightforward. Soviet investigators had been "carefully documenting German crimes and sifting evidence" since the first days following the Nazi invasion, Anglophone readers were told. "Commission work will consist mainly of coordination."<sup>22</sup> Yet as was often the case in the USSR, the plans laid and actions taken were two radically different things.

The Red Army recaptured Nalchik on 4 January 1943, as part of a series of offenses in the North Caucasus that continued through the spring.<sup>23</sup> The time had come to showcase the ChGK's data at the first major public trial of World War II, which took place in the Russian city of Krasnodar on 14–17 July 1943. The day before the trial began, the ChGK released a communiqué that functioned as a public-facing indictment, which appeared on the front page of all the major Soviet newspapers as well as within *Soviet War News*, the English-language press organ of the Soviet embassy in London. This report proclaimed that 6,700 people had been murdered by poison gas, with "several thousand corpses" recovered from an anti-tank ditch on the outskirts of the city.<sup>24</sup> The *New York Times* further disseminated the numbers of victims, defendants, and people who watched the executions after all the accused were found guilty.<sup>25</sup> Uniform pronouncements obscured the uncertainty of conclusions. During the Krasnodar trial, the state prosecutor insisted on introducing a ChGK report to remedy the varying victim counts provided by witnesses.<sup>26</sup> Still, the following month, a former military procurator employed by the ChGK objected to evidence advanced in court, demanding that the reports be

<sup>21</sup>"Text of the Soviet Invasion Decree," *New York Times*, 5 November 1942, 10.

<sup>22</sup>"Soviet Names Body to List Damages," *New York Times*, 5 November 1942, 10.

<sup>23</sup>Alexander Werth, *The Year of Stalingrad: An Historical Record and a Study of Russian Mentality, Methods and Policies* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1946), 377.

<sup>24</sup>"Soobshchenie Chrezyvychainoi gosudarstvennoi komissii po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniuu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshchnikov i prichinnennogo imi ushcherba grazhdanam, kolkhozam, obshchestvennym organizatsiam, gosudarstvennym predpriiatiiam i uchrezhdeniiam SSSR o zlodeianiiakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov v gorode Krasnodare i Krasnodarskom krae," *Izvestiia/Krasnaia zvezda*, 13 July 1943, 1; *Pravda*, 14 July 1943, 1; "Report on the Gas Massacre by the German-Fascist Invaders in Krasnodar," *Soviet War News* no. 611, 14 July 1943, 3.

<sup>25</sup>"New Nazi Crime Charged," *New York Times*, 14 July 1943, 4; "11 Russians on Trial as Atrocity Aides," *New York Times*, 16 July 1943, 7; "30,000 Russians See 8 Traitors Hanged," *New York Times*, 19 July 1943, 6.

<sup>26</sup>Tsentral'nyi arkhiv Federal'noi sluzhby bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii, N-16708, t. 13, ll. 250–1/United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), RG-06.025, ii. RG-06.025.0017.00000697–8 ("Vecheerne zasedanie 16 iuliia 1943 g.").

redone.<sup>27</sup> A memorandum sent from Moscow to Krasnodar a few days later was scathing. Here, the ChGK's chief legal expert, Il'ia Pavlovich Trainin observed with evident sarcasm, "One can only guess about the excavation of graves and the counting of corpses, since this is not clearly indicated in the official report."<sup>28</sup>

When faced with similar guessing games, historians have often been at a loss. In the case of Kyiv oblast, Kiril Feferman presumes the existence of a "directive" to alter reported numbers of victims, Jews in particular.<sup>29</sup> Stanislav Aristov pushes back against claims that Soviet death tolls are "contradictory," instead stressing the need to pay attention to what each witness was counting, which could range from the corpses someone saw personally to speculations about the thousands of victims that mass graves contained.<sup>30</sup> It is equally vital to compare multiple testimonies from the same individual. For example, David Iosifovich Budnik was a Jewish survivor of the prisoner brigade forced to burn corpses at Babyn Yar/Babi Yar. He gained prominence for Stalinist leaders during preparations for the Nuremberg trial as a substitute for a ChGK witness who died at the front.<sup>31</sup> The numbers in Budnik's testimonies illustrate myriad tensions in Soviet war crimes documentation. On one end of the spectrum, there exist five renditions of a single questioning of Budnik dated 19 November 1945, alternately carried out by an NKGB major or a deputy procurator, depending on the draft. Here, Budnik's estimate of the number of murdered Soviet prisoners of war he saw for himself shifts from "around 15,000" to "as many as 20,000" and back again twice, with one marked-up version openly including a question mark next to the underlined sum.<sup>32</sup> In the end, the rendition with the higher figure and the deputy procurator was dispatched to Nuremberg.<sup>33</sup> Conversely, when testifying for the KGB in 1967 and 1980, as well as in his memoir published in Germany in 1993, Budnik consistently maintained that 120,000 people were killed at Babyn

<sup>27</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 125, d. 4, l. 60ob (Glinka to ChGK chief secretary Bogoiavlenskii, 30 August 1943).

<sup>28</sup>Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Krasnodarskogo kraia (GAKK), f. R-897, op. 1, d. 10, l. 174 (acting chairman of the ChGK Trainin to deputy chairman of the Krasnodar krai commission Tiuliaev, 4 September 1943).

<sup>29</sup>Kiril Feferman, "Soviet Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the USSR: Documenting the Holocaust," *Journal of Genocide Research* 5, no. 4 (December 2003): esp. 593[quote], 598.

<sup>30</sup>Stanislav Aristov, "Next to Bab Yar: The Syrets Concentration Camp and the Evolution of Nazi Terror in Kiev," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 29, no. 3 (Winter 2015): 447[quote]-9.

<sup>31</sup>Haluzevyi derzhavnyi arkhiv Sluzhby bezpeky Ukraïny (HDA SBU), f. 11, op. 1, spr. 937, t. 3, ark. 261 (head of the NKGB of Kyiv oblast Vondarenko to People's Commissar of State Security of the USSR Savchenko, November 1945). Budnik traveled to Nuremberg but did not actually testify at the trial: Nathalie Moine, "Defining 'War Crimes against Humanity' in the Soviet Union. Nazi Arson of Soviet Villages and the Soviet Narrative on Jewish and Non-Jewish Soviet War Victims, 1941-1947," *Cahiers du monde russe* 52, no. 2-3 (April-September 2011): 463-5.

<sup>32</sup>HDA SBU, f. 11, op. 1, spr. 937, t. 3, ark. 151 ("Protokol doprosa," Budnik, 19 November 1945 ["around 15,000," NKGB major]), ark. 158ob ("Protokol doprosa," Budnik, 19 November 1945 ["as many as 20,000," deputy procurator]), ark. 171 ("Protokol doprosa," Budnik, 19 November 1945 ["around 15,000," NKGB major]), ark. 184 ("Protokol doprosa," Budnik, 19 November 1945 ["as many as 20,000," deputy procurator; with the question mark]).

<sup>33</sup>HDA SBU, f. 7, op. 1, spr. 1, ark. 215 ("Protokol doprosa," Budnik, 19 November 1945 ["as many as 20,000," deputy procurator]).

Yar.<sup>34</sup> This is even more than the 100,000 victims claimed in the ChGK's communiqué, a total that Karel Berkhoff has established is roughly two times too high.<sup>35</sup>

Liberation of the city of Kyiv from the Nazis on 6 November 1943, coincided with a turning point for numbers across the USSR. On this day, the central ChGK in Moscow began compiling "summarized data" on Soviet victims of Hitler's regime, including estimates for territories that were still under Axis occupation. Some figures were more concrete than others. For Krasnodar krai, a recorded 35,406 civilian murders came from a total of 95 official reports that had been submitted to Moscow. In contrast, in Kharkiv oblast, the Ukrainian region where the second major public trial of World War II took place on 15–18 December 1943, a purported total of 40,681 civilian victims were claimed based on only four official reports. In the still-occupied Belarusian SSR, 44,837 civilian deaths were derived from recovered German police battalion records. For the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian SSRs, all of which remained under Nazi rule at the time, the suspiciously round sum of 340,100 civilian victims appeared, attributed vaguely to "materials and documents."<sup>36</sup>

Summarized data for the Baltic region first became available on New Year's Day in 1945, but eyes on the ground were not enough to impose order.<sup>37</sup> At Klooga concentration camp located to the west of the Estonian capital of Tallinn, investigators retrieved a few bodies that had been partially burned at various sites, and then used these to estimate the numbers of completely incinerated corpses.<sup>38</sup> The Russian-language ChGK communiqué published for Estonia in November 1944 listed 2,000 victims, making Klooga's liquidation the largest single massacre in the republic.<sup>39</sup> Released only three days later, the English translation doubled this sum, with the 4,000 figure making its way into a postwar volume of the ChGK's translated reports, and from there

<sup>34</sup>HDA SBU, f. 7, op. 1, spr. 48, ark. 131 ("Protokol doprosa," Budnik, 14 February 1967), ark. 136 ("Protokol doprosa," Budnik, 22 May 1980); David Budnik and Iakov Kaper, *Nichto ne zabyto: evreiskie sud'by v Kieve, 1941–1943* (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre, 1993), 53.

<sup>35</sup>For the ChGK's communiqué about Kyiv: "Soobshchenie Chrezvychainoi gosudarstvennoi komissii po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshchnikov i prichinnogo imi ushcherba grazhdanam, kolkhozam, obshchestvennym organizatsiiam, gosudarstvennym predpriiatiiam i uchrezhdeniiam SSSR o razrusheniakh i zverstvakh, sovershennykh nemetsko-fashistskimi zakhvatchikami v gorode Kieve," *Izvestiia/Krasnaia zvezda*, 29 February 1944, 2; *Pravda*, 1 March 1944, 2. The English translation appeared in two parts: "How the Germans Sacked Kiev," *Soviet War News* no. 800, 1 March 1944, 3–4; "Kiev Evidence," *Soviet War News* no. 802, 3 March 1944, 2–3. For a comprehensive critique of Soviet, German, and other death counts for Babyn Yar: Karel C. Berkhoff, *Babyn Yar: Accounting for the Victims*, forthcoming.

<sup>36</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 125, d. 3, l. 1 (head of the department of crimes registration Kudriavstev, "Obobshchennye dannye o zhertvakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zlodeianii po materialam, postupivshim v Chrezvychainuiu gosudarstvennuiu komissiiu," 6 November 1943). On the Kharkiv trial: *Sudebnyi protsess o zverstvakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov na territorii gor. Khar'kova i Khar'kovskoi oblasti v period ikh vremennoi okkupatsii* ([Moscow]: OGIz Gospolitizdat, 1943).

<sup>37</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 125, d. 3, l. 58 ("Obobshchennye dannye," Kudriavstev, 1 January 1945).

<sup>38</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 97, d. 17a, ll. 12–3 ("Protokol osmotra," Jögi, Vasil'ev, Raus, and Tirusk, 29 September 1944).

<sup>39</sup>"Soobshchenie Chrezvychainoi gosudarstvennoi komissii po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshchnikov o zlodeianiakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov v Estonskoi Sovetskoi Sotsialisticheskoi Respublike," *Izvestiia/Krasnaia zvezda/Pravda*, 26 November 1944, 3. On the relative scale of the Klooga massacre: Anton Weiss-Wendt, *On the Margins: Essays on the History of Jews in Estonia* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2017), 244.

into the secondary literature.<sup>40</sup> Yet the goal hardly seems to have been to deceive Anglophones specifically. A *New York Times* correspondent who visited the crime scene but still would have been dependent on Soviet information variously reported that 2,000 and 3,000 people were murdered at the camp.<sup>41</sup> Surviving prisoners volunteered diverse figures to ChGK investigators.<sup>42</sup> Some also testified for the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee's *Black Book* project, which due to postwar Stalinist anxieties would be published first in Israel in 1980. Here, one survivor claimed that 2,500 prisoners were murdered at the camp.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, his brother stated that 3,000 people died at Klooga.<sup>44</sup> During the Nuremberg trial, the Soviet prosecution adhered to the ChGK's Russian-language published total of 2,000 Klooga victims.<sup>45</sup> In sum, all available evidence points to the discrepancy between the ChGK's official victim counts for Klooga in Russian and English being the result of a mistake that was never corrected.

Death tolls were moving targets while the war was still ongoing in the USSR for good reason. The ChGK investigations at Babyn Yar and Klooga shared the advantage of surviving Jewish eyewitnesses who could help Soviet officials understand the scale of violence during the German occupation. Many locations were not so well-placed. In other regions of the Ukrainian SSR, for instance, the absence of either survivors or Soviet prewar data describing Jewish populations forced investigators to extrapolate from Nazi registration processes and presume that steadily decreasing numbers of Jews signified mass murder.<sup>46</sup> In the Baltic region, the Latvian republic auxiliary of the ChGK encouraged such arithmetic by demanding that local commissions "verify" victim counts and "make [them] more precise" when figures did not fully account for the wartime drop in population.<sup>47</sup> The Belarusian SSR shows how double counting and inconsistent totals became endemic in the ChGK's work.

<sup>40</sup> "What Nazis Did in Soviet Estonia [sic] (2)," *Soviet War News* no. 29 November 1944, 4; *Soviet Government Statements on Nazi Atrocities* (London: Hutchinson, [1946]), 240; Niels Bo Poulsen, "The Soviet Extraordinary State Commission on War Crimes. An Analysis of the Commission's Investigative Work in War and Post-War Stalinist Society" (Ph.D. diss., Copenhagen University and Danish Institute of International Studies, 2004), 129.

<sup>41</sup> W. H. Lawrence, "Germans Accused of Burning 2,000," *New York Times*, 28 September 1944, 8; W. H. Lawrence, "Nazi Death Camp a Scene of Horror," *New York Times*, 6 October 1944, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Estimates from Jewish survivors even only about Jews among the shooting victims ranged from 1,239 to 1,700. GARF, f. R-7021, op. 97, d. 1, l. 143 ("Tunnistaja ülekuulamise protokoll," Genzel', 29 September 1944), l. 103ob ("Tunnistaja ülekuulamise protokoll," Shapiro, 30 September 1944).

<sup>43</sup> Vasilii Grossman and Il'ia Erenburg, eds., *Chernaia kniga o zlodeiskom povsemestnom ubiistve evreev nemetsko-fashistskimi zakhvatshikami vo vremeno-okkupirovannykh raionakh Sovetskogo Soiuzia i v lageriakh unichtozheniia Pol'shi vo vremia voiny 1941–1945 gg.* (Jerusalem: Tarbut, 1980), 349.

<sup>44</sup> Il'ia Altman, ed., *Neizvestnaia Chernaia kniga: materialy k "Chernoii knige" pod redaktsiei Vasilii Grossmana i Il'ia Erenburga* (Moscow: AST, CORPUS, 2015), 340.

<sup>45</sup> International Military Tribunal (IMT), *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945–1 October 1946*, 42 vols. (Nuremberg: n.p., 1947–1949), 1:48, 2:62.

<sup>46</sup> GARF, f. R-7021, op. 60, d. 294, l. 83 (Zhytomyr city inspector of the Central Statistics Bureau Martinenko to the head of the Zhytomyr oblast commission, 5 February 1944); op. 70, d. 1119, l. 8 ("Spravka," head of the Poltava oblast statistical bureau Svistunov, c. October 1943).

<sup>47</sup> Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīva, P-132. f., 29. apr., 9. l., 14. lp. (acting chief secretary of the Latvian republic commission Austrin and NKVD captain Bundzis to chairman of the Daugavpils district commission Zandman and chairman of the Daugavpils city commission Aleksandrov, 4 January 1945); 41. apr., 17. lp. (Austrin and Bundzis to chairman of the Tsesisskii district commission Zal'kain, 4 January 1945).

In Brest oblast, where Jews were brought from one location to another on freight trucks to be shot, summary reports from auxiliary commissions in both places would include the deaths among “their” victims.<sup>48</sup> When a ChGK investigator dispatched from Moscow personally questioned witnesses, one told him that around 100 people were shot, while another said 300.<sup>49</sup> Both might have been incorrect. In the end, perhaps only investigators in Lviv oblast got it right. Here, after tallying up shoes and clothing, and struggling to establish the average volume of ash of a burned human being, ChGK forensic experts concluded: “The measures taken by the German authorities to conceal the traces of their crimes do not allow us to determine exactly how many people were destroyed by them.”<sup>50</sup>

If precise death tolls were impossible, what was the purpose of the ChGK’s counting of victims? Despite the logistical challenges, the ChGK’s published communiqué for Lviv oblast was riddled with figures: 200,000 Soviet civilians shot at the Janowska camp, including 8,000 children in only two months, over 140,000 victims at one prisoner of war camp and 18,000 at another, more than 130,000 ghetto inhabitants slaughtered, and so on.<sup>51</sup> Numbering the dead in Lviv and elsewhere in the western borderlands among Soviet losses obscured the fact that local residents became citizens of the USSR only in 1939–1940 thanks to secret agreements with Hitler’s government, and largely against their own wishes.<sup>52</sup> Once inscribed on the Soviet balance sheet of suffering, Stalin’s regime evidently valued Jews and other victims of Nazi violence more than the Soviet system ever did while they were alive. Western media amplified the ChGK’s statistics but sometimes missed the point: a widely reprinted Associated Press report identified Lviv oblast as still part of Poland.<sup>53</sup> Ironically, it would be Polish territory proper that provided the ideal setting for ChGK calculations to showcase Soviet power as a liberating force.

<sup>48</sup>Dziarzhauy arkhiv Brestskai voblastsi, f. 514, op. 1, d. 60, l. 8 (“Akt,” Aharodniki village commission, 23 October 1944), l. 5ob (“Svodnyi akt,” Vysokae raion commission, 14 December 1944).

<sup>49</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 83, d. 16, l. 5 (“Protokol oprosa,” Ivaniukovich, 17 March 1945), l. 8 (“Protokol oprosa,” Iaroshuk, c. 17 March 1945).

<sup>50</sup>HDA SBU, f. 11, op. 1, spr. 987, t. 3, ark. 6 (“Dokladnaia zapiska o khode rassledovaniia zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh razboinikov v lanovskom lagere i dr., mestakh Zheleznodorozhnogo raiona gor. L’vova,” leader of the investigatory group Goncharenko to Procurator of Lviv oblast Kornetov, 12 September 1944), ark. 50[quote] (“Obshee zakliuchenie sudebno-meditsinskoi ekspertnoi komissii o rezul’tatakh raboty po osmotru i obsledovaniuu mest unichtozheniia i massovogo zakhoreniia zhertv nemetskogo terrora v gorode L’vova i nekotorykh obsledovannykh raionakh L’vovskoi oblasti,” chief forensic expert of the Red Army Avdeev, assistant to the chief forensic expert of the Red Army Pukhnarevich, forensic expert Golaev, expert criminologist Gerasimov, and representative of the ChGK Kuz’min, c. September 1944).

<sup>51</sup>“Soobshchenie Chrezvychainoi gosudarstvennoi komissii po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniuu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov o zlodeianiiakh nemtsev na territorii L’vovskoi oblasti,” *Izvestiia/Krasnaia zvezda/Pravda*, 23 December 1944, 2–3; “The Lvov Evidence,” *Soviet War News* no. 29 December 1046, 1944, 2–4; “The Lvov Evidence (2),” *Soviet War News* no. 30 December 1047, 1944, 2–4.

<sup>52</sup>For the secret protocols: Bronis J. Kaslas, ed., *The USSR-German Aggression against Lithuania* (New York: Robert Speller and Sons, 1973), 109–12, 129–31, 286–7.

<sup>53</sup>“Red Probers Say 700,000 Slain in Poland,” *Washington Post*, 23 December 1944, M4; “700,000 Reported Slain in 3 Camps,” *New York Times*, 23 December 1944, 10; “Nazis Tortured and Killed 700,000 in Extermination Camp in Lwow, Poland,” *Capital Journal*, 23 December 1944, 1.

### **The Battle for Europe**

World War II transformed the role of the USSR on the world stage. In 1940, the Polish government-in-exile was the first to raise the question of punishing war criminals, but this call to action received little attention before Germany invaded the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup> As the only “Big Three” country subjected to Nazi occupation, on the one hand, and the only occupied country that retained a sovereign government on the other, Stalin’s regime was uniquely positioned to gather information about war crimes and mobilize this knowledge, especially as the Red Army began increasingly to win. Such an upside-down wartime hierarchy, in which “backward” Soviet leaders could dictate terms to their counterparts in Europe and the United States, was lost on no one. In February 1945, the UK embassy in the USSR appealed to the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs for help establishing the fates of British citizens detained in the Auschwitz camp system, and then again the following month for details about the camps, especially how many people were sent and murdered there and how many other camps Soviet troops had liberated in Poland and Germany.<sup>55</sup> The ChGK obliged, articulating numbers of survivors by nationality.<sup>56</sup> Other types of information were unfit for international distribution. The Norwegian embassy requested a copy of the laws and decrees promulgated by the Germans for occupied Soviet territories to transfer to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>57</sup> Here, the ChGK refused.<sup>58</sup>

Beneath the commanding heights of interstate diplomacy, foreign observers in the USSR did their best to distinguish truth from finesse. Bill Downs, an American journalist for CBS and *Newsweek*, was part of a group of reporters taken to Kharkiv in February 1943, eight days after the Red Army recaptured the city and two weeks before the *Wehrmacht* took it back again. Clearly sympathetic to the Soviet war effort, Downs nevertheless “re-checked” the official estimate of 18,000 executions with a schoolteacher, a college professor, and four additional surviving residents.<sup>59</sup> Another group of Western correspondents led on a tour of Leningrad soon after the siege was broken in early 1944 complained about receiving “unbelievably low” statistics for victims of shelling and absolutely no figures for people who died from starvation.<sup>60</sup> Even

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<sup>54</sup>Arieh J. Kochavi, *Prelude to Nuremberg: Allied War Crimes Policy and the Question of Punishment* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>55</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 149, d. 68, l. 13 (manager of the 2<sup>nd</sup> European department Novikov to Bogoiavlenskii, 26 February 1945), l. 15 (Deputy People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs Dekanozov to Bogoiavlenskii, 10 March 1945).

<sup>56</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 149, d. 68, l. 14 (Bogoiavlenskii to Novikov, 14 April 1945), l. 16 (Bogoiavlenskii to Dekanozov, 14 April 1945).

<sup>57</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 149, d. 68, l. 126 (manager of the 5<sup>th</sup> European department Abramov to Bogoiavlenskii, 4 December 1945).

<sup>58</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 149, d. 68, l. 127 (Bogoiavlenskii to Abramov, 8 December 1945).

<sup>59</sup>Georgetown University Library Booth Family Center for Special Collections (BFCSC), William R. Downs papers, GTM-780127, b. 1, f. 12 (“CBS Broadcasts: Moscow 1943 #1,” 27 February 1943 and 16 March 1943).

<sup>60</sup>Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Pamela Digby Churchill Hayward Harriman Papers, b. I:21, f. [12] (Harriman to Fisk, 14 February 1944).

so, these beleaguered reporters were better positioned than audiences outside the USSR. Western journalists frequently clashed with Soviet censors opposed to circulating Red Army casualties. On one occasion, Downs was prevented from sharing how many soldiers, guns, and horses contributed to the “first” Battle of Poltava under Peter I, which Downs managed to “dig up” at the Lenin Library to add color to his reporting about ongoing fighting in the region. Soviet censors objected on the grounds that the 1709 statistics still constituted “military information.”<sup>61</sup>

World War II began in Poland, and Poland was where the Stalinist struggle for authority over Nazi death tolls came to a head. Counting was integral to Soviet understandings of Hitler’s extermination camps from the outset. On 13 July 1944, six months before the Red Army reached the city of Oświęcim, the head of the First Directorate of the NKGB Pavel Mikhailovich Fitin contacted the leader of the Soviet Information Bureau, Aleksandr Sergeevich Shcherbakov, to convey a message from a Warsaw informant. “In the Auschwitz camp the Germans poison with gas 10,000–15,000 hungarian Jews per day and burn them in ovens,” Fitin quoted. “Verified exactly, react.”<sup>62</sup> In summer 1944, however, there were other calculations that needed to come first. On 25 July, Moscow correspondent W. H. Lawrence published a report on the front page of the *New York Times* in which it seemed he could barely contain his excitement. “Lublin Captured,” the title read. “Red Army Smashes Past Rail Hub.” Lawrence briskly relayed official Soviet statistics for German losses in the wake of this offensive, apparently never asking himself how it would be possible to tally “539,890 troops on four fronts” within only two days.<sup>63</sup> On 28 July, the ChGK dispatched its head of the department of crimes registration Dmitrii Ivanovich Kudriavtsev to Lublin, the site of the Majdanek camp complex.<sup>64</sup> Lawrence, too, would soon be taking a closer look at what the Nazi occupiers accomplished over nearly five years in Poland.

One of the ChGK’s few personnel with prewar experience working abroad, Kudriavstev was a natural choice for Moscow’s envoy to what became known as the “Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission.”<sup>65</sup> As of summer 1944, Kudriavtsev had already served as the central ChGK’s representative for investigations in Stalino and Odesa oblasts in Ukraine, and he would go on to perform a similar leadership role once the Red Army liberated Auschwitz.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>61</sup>BFCS, William R. Downs papers, GTM-780127, b. 1, f. 8 (Downs to Desmond, 26 December 1951).

<sup>62</sup>Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 17, op. 125, d. 250, l. 89 (Fitin to Shcherbakov, 13 July 1944).

<sup>63</sup>W. H. Lawrence, “Lublin Captured,” *New York Times*, 25 July 1944, 1.

<sup>64</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 116, d. 138, l. 96 (“Rasporiazhenie № 91,” Bogoiavlenskii, 28 July 1944).

<sup>65</sup>In 1925–1926, Kudriavtsev worked as the manager of the department of imports of the Soviet Trade Office in Vienna. GARF, f. R-7021, op. 124, d. 61, l. 120b (“Lichnyi listok po uchetu kadrov,” Kudriavtsev, 1 March 1943).

<sup>66</sup>“Soobshchenie Chrezvychainoi gosudarstvennoi komissii po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniuu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatnikov i ikh soobshchnikov i prichinennogo imi usherba grazhdanam, kolkhozam, obshchestvennym organizatsiiam, gosudarstvennym predpriatiiam i uchrezhdeniiam SSR o razrusheniakh, prichinennykh nemetsko-fashistskimi zakhvatnikami promyshlennosti, gorodskomu khoziastvu, kul’turno-prosvetitel’nym uchrezhdeniiam Stalinskoi oblasti,” *Izvestiia/Krasnaia zvezda/Pravda*, 13 November 1943, 2; “Soobshchenie

A resident of the USSR only since 1943, Lawrence was nevertheless a seasoned observer of mass violence, having previously attended ChGK-led tours of the crime scenes at Babyn Yar and Katyn forest.<sup>67</sup> For the latter visit, it was Kudriavtsev who greeted Lawrence and other foreign correspondents at the train station in Smolensk.<sup>68</sup> Lawrence accepted the massacre of Polish prisoners of war as a Nazi crime, and at Majdanek, he again saw essentially what Stalin's regime wanted him to see. On the front page of the *New York Times* on 30 August 1944, Lawrence reported that "as many as 1,500,000 persons from nearly every country in Europe" were exterminated at the camp. His account acknowledged that it was "impossible" for him to determine for certain the number of victims. "But I have been in a wooden warehouse at the camp," he continued. "I walked across literally tens of thousands of shoes spread across the floor like grain in a half-filled elevator."<sup>69</sup> The ChGK's Russian-language communiqué published roughly three weeks later played up Majdanek's scale by including photographs of the crematoria ovens, a pile of bones, and ongoing excavations of corpses in a forest near the camp.<sup>70</sup> The *Soviet War News* translation that followed three days later did not feature pictures but reiterated the pointed claim that Nazi camp officials escalated the burning of bodies "after the exposure of the German atrocities in Katyn Forest."<sup>71</sup>

Links between the ChGK's work at Majdanek and the falsified investigation of Katyn do not inspire confidence.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, even in mid-1944, Soviet claims in Lublin were met with considerable skepticism. In a first for the newspaper, the *New York Times* published an editorial the day after Lawrence's report that defended him as "a thorough and accurate correspondent."<sup>73</sup> Alexander Werth, a British journalist who visited Katyn and Majdanek alongside Lawrence, had his written account of the death camp rejected by the BBC as "unbelievable," with network decision-makers suspecting a "Russian propaganda stunt."<sup>74</sup> Yet perceptions of the USSR as a "propaganda state" that used

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Chrezvychainoi gosudarstvennoi komissii po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniuu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshchnikov i prichinnenogo imi ushcherba grazhdanam, kolkhozam, obshchestvennym organizatsiiam, gosudarstvennym predpriatiiam i uchrezhdeniiam SSR o zlodeianiiakh, sovershennykh nemetsko-rumynskimi zakhvatchikami v gorode Odesse i raionakh Odesskoi oblasti," *Izvestiia/Krasnaia zvezda/Pravda*, 14 June 1944, 3; "Soobshchenie Chrezvychainoi gosudarstvennoi komissii po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniuu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshchnikov o chudovishchnykh prestupleniakh germanskogo pravitel'stvo v Osventsime," *Pravda*, 7 May 1945, 2; *Izvestiia/Krasnaia zvezda*, 8 May 1945, 2.

<sup>67</sup>W. H. Lawrence, "50,000 Kiev Jews Reported Killed," *New York Times*, 29 November 1943, 3; W. H. Lawrence, "Soviet Blames Foe in Killing of Poles," *New York Times*, 27 January 1944, 3.

<sup>68</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 114, d. 8, l. 13 ("Dnevnik," Makarov, 22 January 1944).

<sup>69</sup>W. H. Lawrence, "Nazi Mass Killings Laid Bare in Camp," *New York Times*, 30 August 1944, 1, 9.

<sup>70</sup>"Kommiunike Pol'sko-Sovetskoi chrezvychainoi komissii po rassledovaniuu zlodeianii nemtsev, sovershennykh v lagere unichtozheniia na Maidaneke v gorode Liublin," *Izvestiia/Krasnaia zvezda/Pravda*, 16 September 1944, 2-3.

<sup>71</sup>"The Maidanek Inferno," *Soviet War News* no. 965, 19 September 1944, 7.

<sup>72</sup>For a sustained look at the ChGK investigation of the Katyn massacre: Paula Chan, "Refractions of Katyn: Photography and Witnessing in Soviet Investigations of Mass Atrocities," *Slavic Review*, 83, no. 2 (Summer 2024): 211-31.

<sup>73</sup>"The Maidanek Horror," *New York Times*, 31 August 1944, 16. According to Lawrence, this was the only occasion on which the *New York Times* felt the need to publish such an editorial. Bill Lawrence, *Six Presidents, Too Many Wars* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), 102.

<sup>74</sup>Alexander Werth, *Russia at War: 1941-1945* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1964), 890.

ideology to determine facts do not accurately capture the ChGK's practices at Majdanek.<sup>75</sup> In Poland, investigators combined techniques honed on Soviet territory with heightened anxiety over how findings would fare on the world stage. Although it is easy to understand how such workflows produced inaccurate death tolls at Majdanek and elsewhere, the ChGK's efforts to represent genuine Nazi crime scenes as vividly as possible shine through just as clearly.

Investigators coalesced around an unarticulated policy of embracing the "worst-case scenario." This upward thrust in victim counting functioned as the war crimes corollary of the enormous harvests and massive industrial achievements routinely proclaimed during peacetime. A Red Army doctor liberated from Majdanek estimated that 18,000 people were killed during mass shootings on 3 November 1943, and a Polish inmate who worked in the camp office testified about seeing "secret documents" sent to Berlin that reported 18,000 victims. Meanwhile, a captured German member of the SS recalled that 18,400 prisoners were shot. For the shoes that Lawrence found so compelling, forensic experts counted for one cubic meter and then multiplied this number by the size of the barrack, which produced a total of 820,000 pairs.<sup>76</sup> An "exact calculation" later yielded the somewhat lower figure of 800,000.<sup>77</sup> Yet for shootings and shoes alike, the ChGK's communiqué published the larger sum without betraying any uncertainty.<sup>78</sup>

Soviet methods for establishing the death toll of Majdanek's crematoria followed similar principles by drawing from witness testimonies about potential capacity and then presuming that ovens burning corpses operated continuously with maximum "productivity." As a result, forensic experts reached what became the official figure of 1,500,000 victims at Majdanek already during their first meeting on 19 August 1944, a full month before the communiqué was released. At this expert gathering, Kudriavtsev encouraged investigators to explore further and see for themselves, but the point had been made.<sup>79</sup> "After Maidanek [sic], I no longer entertained doubts of any kind about German atrocities and the complicity in these atrocities of literally many thousands of Germans," Lawrence reflected decades afterward. "I can still remember those piles of shoes."<sup>80</sup>

<sup>75</sup>On the USSR as a "propaganda state," see, for example: Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Aleksandr Livshin and Igor' Orlov, "Sovetskoe 'propagandistskoe gosudarstvo' v gody II mirovoi voyny: resursnye ogranicheniia i kommunikativnye vozmozhnosti," *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 39, no. 2 (2012): 192–218.

<sup>76</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 107, d. 30, ll. 109, 117 ("Protokol № 2 soveshaniia sudebno-sledstvennoi komissii," 19 August 1944).

<sup>77</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 107, d. 30, l. 152 ("Protokol № 3," 22 August 1944).

<sup>78</sup>"Kommuniuke"; "The Maidanek Inferno."

<sup>79</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 107, d. 30, ll. 112, 118–9 ("Protokol № 2," 19 August 1944).

<sup>80</sup>Lawrence, *Six Presidents*, 103.

Lawrence would depart the Soviet Union in February 1945 without ever reporting about the Auschwitz camp system liberated by the Red Army on 27 January.<sup>81</sup> Still, his replacement Cyrus Leo Sulzberger II, nephew of the publisher of the *New York Times*, followed in Lawrence's footsteps by featuring the Soviet claim of 4,000,000 victims at Auschwitz in the title of what amounted to an English-language synopsis of the ChGK communiqué. "For some time various Russians have had a pretty good idea of the abysmal tale of Oswiecim," Sulzberger wrote. "Such a report would seem incredible to American readers, except that now they have been 'conditioned.'"<sup>82</sup> The ChGK's numbers were grounded in a nightmarish reality. Forensic experts recorded 219,429 items of men's clothing in an attic, observing that a "significant quantity" bore six-pointed stars with the word "Jude." A recovered ledger revealed that 116 shipments of clothing departed from the camps over a recent 37-day period, indicating that what these specialists saw was only a small fraction of Auschwitz's true human cost.<sup>83</sup> Because Germans destroyed virtually all other documentation before retreating, inference became data. Experts divided the camp's operation into three "periods" extending from late 1941 through October 1944, hypothesizing that the rates of crematoria use ranged from 50 to 90 percent to yield an overall death toll of 4,000,000.<sup>84</sup> The ChGK helped produce a film and photographs that were later exhibited at Nuremberg.<sup>85</sup> At Auschwitz, it seemed, Stalin's regime had nothing to hide.

### **Postwar and Post-Soviet Trade-Offs**

The ChGK's calculations were on full display during the Trial of the Major War Criminals. Chief legal expert Trainin verified the number of Soviet civilian victims for the indictment, which featured the figures for Auschwitz, Majdanek, Lviv, Klooga, Kyiv, and Krasnodar discussed above, along with several other death tolls.<sup>86</sup> Kudriavtsev joined two different secret commissions to support the Soviet prosecution team at Nuremberg.<sup>87</sup> Back in Poland, the chairman of the Supreme People's Court wrote to thank Kudriavtsev personally for his help in convicting former Auschwitz camp guards.<sup>88</sup> The

<sup>81</sup> Laurel Leff, *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 298–9.

<sup>82</sup> C. L. Sulzberger, "Oswiecim Killings Placed at 4,000,000," *New York Times*, 8 May 1945, 12.

<sup>83</sup> GARF, f. R-7021, op. 108, d. 10, ll. 46, 48 ("Akt," 4 March 1945).

<sup>84</sup> GARF, f. R-7021, op. 108, d. 14, ll. 18–20 ("Rascheti po opredeleniiu kolichestva liudei, unichtozhennykh nemtsami v lagere Os'ventsim," c. 8 March 1945).

<sup>85</sup> RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 329, l. 5 (Shvernik to Malenkov, 30 December 1945); GARF, f. R-7021, op. 149, d. 68, l. 43 (Bogoiavlenskii to Vyshinskii, 11 September 1945).

<sup>86</sup> GARF, f. R-7021, op. 149, d. 68, l. 44 (Trainin to Vyshinskii, c. September–October 1945); IMT, *Trial*, 1:47–50.

<sup>87</sup> GARF, f. R-7021, op. 149, d. 114, l. 42 (Shvernik to Vyshinskii, 29 August 1945); N. S. Lebedeva, ed., *SSSR i Niurnbergskii protsess: neizvestnye i maloizvestnye stranitsy istorii* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond "Demokratia," 2012), 238–9; Francine Hirsch, *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg: A New History of the International Military Tribunal after World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 78–80, 100, 118.

<sup>88</sup> GARF, f. R-7021, op. 108, d. 38, l. 2 (chairman of the Supreme People's Court Eimer to Kudriavtsev, 22 December 1947).

end goal of retribution rationalized all sorts of means. As is well known today, Soviet film footage of Auschwitz relied upon reenactments to compensate for the failure to capture the most dramatic moments in real time, with healthy local Poles standing in for Jewish inmates weeks after the events supposedly pictured.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, Soviet hubris would yield a stubborn clinging to the ChGK's death tolls for Auschwitz and Majdanek until the fall of the Berlin Wall, long after more accurate figures from other countries had shown that these wartime victim counts were much too high.<sup>90</sup> As time would tell, if there was one thing the USSR avoided as long as it lasted, it was acknowledging errors in judgment. The isolation of Soviet statistics became part of a Cold War severing of the "Big Three" alliance that was comprehensive enough to obscure the roles westerners played in circulating these numbers in the first place.

World War II death tolls remain battlegrounds still. Russian historian Pavel Polian has incurred criticism for presenting ChGK victim counts as authoritative without problematizing where these figures came from and how they were generated.<sup>91</sup> By contrast, when reproducing a facsimile of summarized data, Latvian scholar Andrew Ezergailis dismisses the ChGK's calculations as fabrications out of hand. "As the table illustrates, the Soviet political use of the Holocaust began even before the war had ended," Ezergailis declares.<sup>92</sup> Such controversies extend well beyond the ChGK. British researcher Mark Harrison has repeatedly defended the overall 27 million death toll for the wartime USSR from those who seek to inflate it drastically.<sup>93</sup> Developments of recent years have taken even this relatively stable figure in new directions. In 2020, to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, President Vladimir Putin published articles in Russian and English which emphasized that 27 million war dead amounted to one seventh of the entire population of the USSR. Putin reflected that in contrast, the United Kingdom lost only one out of 127 British nationals in the fight against Hitler, and the United States a mere one out of every 320 citizens.<sup>94</sup> Transnational entanglements in making numbers count have yet to die out completely. In an

<sup>89</sup>Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–1946* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 174–85.

<sup>90</sup>Franciszek Piper, *Die Zahl der Opfer von Auschwitz: Aufgrund der Quellen und der Erträge der Forschung 1945 bis 1990* (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum w Oświęcimiu, 1993), esp. 7–19, 167; Robert Jan van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 137–223; Poulsen, "Soviet Extraordinary State Commission," 130–1.

<sup>91</sup>Pavel Polian, *Zhertyy dvukh diktatur. Zhizn', trud, unizhenie i smert' sovetskikh voennoplennykh i ostarbaiterov na chuzhbine i na rodine* (ROSSPEN, 2002), 10–1. For the critique: Marina Sorokina, "People and Procedures: Toward a History of the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the USSR," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 806n27.

<sup>92</sup>Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia*, 8.

<sup>93</sup>Mark Harrison, "Counting Soviet Deaths in the Great Patriotic War: Comment," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 6 (2003): 939–44; Mark Harrison, "Counting the Soviet Union's War Dead: Still 26–27 Million," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 6 (2019): 1036–47.

<sup>94</sup>Vladimir Putin, "75 let Velikoi Pobedy: obshchaia otvetstvennost' pered istoriei i budushchim," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 19 June 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/06/19/75-let-velikoj-pobedy-obshchaia-otvetstvennost-pered-istoriej-i-budushchim.html>; Vladimir Putin, "The Real Lessons of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of World War II," *National Interest*, 18 June 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982>.

interview published in *Rossiiskaia gazeta* shortly after the release of Putin's articles, Peter Kuznick, a professor of history at American University in Washington, D.C., pointedly observed that reaching 27 million fatalities would require the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 to be repeated daily for 24 years.<sup>95</sup>

The stakes of victim statistics are always high, because they fuel claims of moral entitlement – especially fraught territory in parts of Eastern Europe where whether Stalin or Hitler was worse remains an open question. This produces the paradox of needing to establish the human costs of mass violence while never being able to know precisely. For example, across the formerly occupied USSR, Jewish contributions were the single greatest determining factor in the quality of the ChGK's war crimes investigations, but Holocaust survivor testimonies clearly show that individuals on the ground could not grasp the exact magnitude of antisemitic atrocities they witnessed.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, meaningful understanding of the relative scale of murder is vital for refuting “double genocide” theories, which draw false equivalences between Stalinist terror and wartime massacres of Jews, aiming to recast local collaboration in the Holocaust as anti-Soviet resistance or even a form of self-defense.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, the ChGK's death tolls shed light on why memory of the Shoah on the Eastern Front has departed from the trajectories of western countries. On the eve of World War II, roughly half of Europe's Jews lived on purportedly Soviet territory, and as many as half of all Holocaust victims would die there before the Red Army reached Berlin.<sup>98</sup> Still, three million deaths do not constitute Hitler's largest victim group in the USSR, a distinction that belongs to Red Army prisoners of war.<sup>99</sup> In the Nazi-occupied Soviet Union, at times Jews were only a small minority of murder victims,

<sup>95</sup>Igor' Dunaevskii, “Istoriik SShA o stat'e Putina: zabyvchivost' Zapada ukrepliaet pagubnye tendentsii v mire,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 21 June 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/06/21/istorik-ssha-o-state-putina-zabyvchivost-zapada-ukrepliaet-pagubnye-tendencii-v-mire.html>.

<sup>96</sup>Compare, for instance, the wartime and postwar accounts of Motke Zaidel, a Jewish survivor of the prisoner brigade forced to burn corpses in the Ponary forest outside Vilnius: GARF, f. R-7021, op. 94, d. 1, ll. 41ob-2 (“Zaiavlenie,” Zaidel, c. August 1944); USHMM, RG-60.5050, “*Shoah: Zaidel et Doughin*,” accessed 31 August 2024, [https://collections.ushmm.org/film\\_findingaids/RG-60.5050\\_01\\_trs\\_fr.pdf](https://collections.ushmm.org/film_findingaids/RG-60.5050_01_trs_fr.pdf), 3, 17, 23, 31, 35. Ponary was the site of the largest mass shootings in Lithuania, while Lithuania had the highest death rate for Jews out of anywhere in Nazi-occupied Europe. Richard A. Freund, *The Archeology of the Holocaust: Vilna, Rhodes, and Escape Tunnels* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 95, 219; Weiss-Wendt, *On the Margins*, 244.

<sup>97</sup>On “double genocide”: Dovid Katz, “The Extraordinary Recent History of Holocaust Studies in Lithuania,” *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 31, no. 3 (2017): 285–95; Ljiljana Radonić, “From ‘Double Genocide’ to ‘the New Jews’: Holocaust, Genocide and Mass Violence in Post-Communist Memorial Museums,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 20, no. 4 (2018): 510–29; Paula Chan, “Documents Accuse: The Post-Soviet Memory Politics of Genocide,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 1, no. 2 (2021): 39–57.

<sup>98</sup>Mordechai Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry on the Eve of the Holocaust: A Social and Demographic Profile* (Jerusalem: Center for Research of East European Jewry, Hebrew University, 1998), 8; Harvey Asher, “The Soviet Union, the Holocaust, and Auschwitz,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 887–8n1.

<sup>99</sup>Some 3.3 million prisoners of war were killed, as opposed to at least two million Soviet Jews. Christian Streit, *Keine Kamaraden: Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen, 1941–1945*, rev. ed. (Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz, 1997); Geoffrey P. Megargee, Joseph R. White, and Mel Hecker, eds., *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945. Volume IV: Camps and Other Detention Facilities under the German Armed Forces* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022); Michael David-Fox, *Crucibles of Power: Smolensk under Stalinist and Nazi Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2025).

although relatively low numbers represented the entire local Jewish community.<sup>100</sup>

Death tolls were forms of expression in the wartime USSR that targeted multiple audiences and goals, some more callously than others. A proposal from early in the ChGK's activity that was never implemented suggested attaching specific amounts for monetary restitution to each victim, pointing to the 1919 Versailles Treaty as precedent.<sup>101</sup> Just as Soviet counting pursued multiple objectives, leaders in Moscow proceeded on the backs of multiple contributors, including foreign observers and innumerable other ordinary people charged with quantifying mass murders they themselves had barely managed to escape. While even these sincere, highly personal figures have since proven to be inaccurate in many cases (usually too high), the recent history of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as ongoing crises in Ukraine and Gaza remind us that challenges in tracking human losses in real time are far from a uniquely Stalinist problem.<sup>102</sup> Even when numbers fail to capture the realities of historical events, they still have much to reveal about the methods and motivations of the people who produced them. Within the Soviet context, ChGK victim counts illuminate a system that relied on equal parts grassroots information and ideological determinism to manage a society that was traumatized yet proud. By evaluating the ChGK's death tolls on their own terms, not merely in contrast to estimates further west, researchers can continue the project of explaining the Nazi occupation of the Soviet Union decades after not only the ChGK, but the system that created it ceased to exist.

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<sup>100</sup>For example, in Beloglinskii raion in Krasnodar krai an investigator reported that 55 of 3,500 victims were Jewish, but these 55 Jews represented "almost the entire Jewish population of the raion, [and] remaining residents of neighboring raions." GAKK, f. R-897, op. 1, d. 13, l. 170 ("Dokladnaia zapiska," authorized representative of the Krasnodar krai commission Kulikov to chief secretary of the Krasnodar krai commission Pantikov, 12 January 1944).

<sup>101</sup>GARF, f. R-7021, op. 116, d. 324, l. 21 ("Spravka," c. March-May 1943).

<sup>102</sup>David Adam, "COVID's True Death Toll: Much Higher than Official Figures," *Nature* 603, 24 March 2022, 562; Nick Cumming-Bruce, "The U.N. Confirms Civilian Deaths in Ukraine Have Surpassed 7,000, but Says the Real Toll Is Far Higher," *New York Times*, 16 January 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/16/world/europe/un-ukraine-war-civilian-deaths.html>; Matthew Mpoke Bigg, Lauren Leatherby, and Abu Bakr Bashir, "How Many of Gaza's Dead are Women and Children? For 10,000, the Data Is Incomplete," *New York Times*, 15 May 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/14/world/middleeast/un-gaza-death-toll-women-children.html>.

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