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The Fate of the Jews in the Soviet Union and on the Eastern Front during World War II - in the Light of Online Edition of the American Newspaper ‘Yevreiski Mir’

Doctoral thesis written under the supervision of dr hab. Waław Wierzbieniec, prof. UR

Summary

The main aim of the thesis was to analyse the articles of online edition of an American weekly, ‘Yevreiski Mir’, concerning the fate of the Jewish population in the territories of the Soviet state and on the Eastern Front during World War II. The periodical was created by Russian-speaking Jewish emigrants in New York and, in its traditional (paper) version, has been published since the 1990s. The launch of the online version of the weekly may be considered a turning point in the history of the editorial office. This took place in the beginning of the 21st century and contributed to the development of the newspaper and cooperation of its editorial team with many journalists, not only from the United States, but also from other countries, such as Israel, Germany, Russia and Ukraine.

The journalists' narrative of the investigated periodical and its online edition — concerning the situation of the Jewish population in the areas of the USSR, as well as in the territories occupied by the Soviets in 1939–1945 — was discussed. Among other things, an attempt was made to answer the questions of who the authors of the analysed publications were, how they constructed their papers, and whether the historical picture of the events of the war period created by them was more similar to the Soviet or Western narrative model. In addition, the thesis also reflects on the way in which Jewish victims, as well as the Jews who served during the war in the ranks of the Red Army or in partisan units are portrayed. The analysis of articles in the investigated weekly periodical also provided answer to the question of whether Russian-speaking Jewish journalists attempted to create or reproduce myths related to the figures or events they quoted. In addition, the thesis also sought to discuss in greater detail the question of how the columnists of the investigated weekly periodical and its online edition portrayed the manifestations of World War II events commemoration.

The study covered publications of the ‘Yevreiski Mir’ weekly online edition, posted in the periodical's website between September 2003 and 20 January 2021. The starting point was determined based on the moment when the online version of the studied periodical was launched. In turn, the end point of the analysis was the day Donald Trump's term as the President of the United States

ended and Joe Biden took office. This was due to the fact that the change in power that took place at that time was received rather reluctantly by many Russian-speaking Jewish journalists, displaying right-wing sympathies, in general. This, in turn, translated into their frequent criticism of, both, Biden and his administration. This tendency was also noticeable in the coverage of the ‘Yevreiski Mir’ weekly and its online version.

The territorial scope of the thesis was determined on the basis of borders before the outbreak of World War II. For this reason, in the discussion, an attempt was made to separate the pre-war areas of the Soviet state from the lands that were occupied by the Soviets after 1939. These included the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, as well as the territories of the Baltic republics annexed by the USSR, i.e. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. In addition to this, the territorial coverage included also areas that were the Red Army's zone of operations in 1944–1945, including the pre-war territories of Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the Third Reich.

In the discussion, it was decided to adopt a chronological and factual arrangement. In total, the thesis consists of six chapters divided into smaller sub-chapters and, subsequently, into sub-sections. Chapter I provides an overview of the history of Jewish emigration from the USSR and the countries which emerged after its collapse in 1991. It also presents the specific character of the Russian-speaking Jewish community in the United States, taking into account its social structure, relations with other Jews and the functioning of the local Russian language mass media. Chapter II is focused on the shape of the investigated weekly periodical, and its thematic profile, online edition, editorial team and conveyed message. Subsequent chapters, in turn, document the discussion in scope. Chapter III discusses publications devoted to the fate of Jews in the USSR in 1939–1941, as well as in the areas that were incorporated into the Soviet state after the outbreak of World War II. Chapters IV and V present the main elements of the message conveyed in the online edition of the ‘Yevreiski Mir’ weekly periodical, related to the way the Jewish community was portrayed in the territory of the USSR in 1941–1945 (and in the areas annexed by the Soviets in 1939). Chapter IV focuses on the coverage of the fate of the civilian population — both, the Jews from the areas that fell under the occupation of the Third Reich and its allies, and of those who were then in the hinterland of the USSR. Chapter V, conversely, discusses the way in which the journalists of the investigated periodical portrayed the service of people of Jewish origin in the Red Army and in partisan units. Chapter VI, to end with, analyses the image of broadly understood acts of remembrance of Jewish victims and veterans of the struggle against the German occupant.

The analysis made it possible for the Author to formulate the conclusion that the main motifs that, between 2003 and 2021, appeared in articles referring to the experiences of the Jewish population in the territories of the USSR and the areas incorporated by the Soviets into their state, were:

the sacrifice made by the Jews during the Holocaust, as well as the heroism, pride and talents that some of them were supposed to have displayed while working for Moscow or while fighting against the aggressors. The publicists of the online edition of the 'Yevreiski Mir' weekly have repeatedly tried to combine elements of the Jewish narrative with the Soviet tradition, including through the narration of Jewish war heroes they created. It should be noted that the members of the editorial team, during the reviewed period, did not formulate a common position on the events of World War II. As a result, the message of the online edition of the 'Yevreiski Mir' weekly was quite often ambiguous and sometimes even contradictory. This, however, may prove that in the sphere of historical memory of Russian-speaking Jews, some changes were still taking place between 2003 and 2021. Hence, it can be considered that today it is still in a 'transitional phase' of its kind.

Keywords: 'Yevreiski Mir', USSR, Soviet Jews, World War II, memory