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Understanding Terrible Crimes: Youth Memory of the Holocaust in the Russian Federation

A world without war is possible only with realistic views on events in our history. Therefore, people, remember! We live in order to preserve memory, to pass on accumulated knowledge and experience from generation to generation. Our future and the future of our children depend on the level of our understanding of the causes of terrible crimes.¹

Russian schoolchild Kseniya Sheveleva came to this realisation following her participation in an annual conference for pupils and teachers, *The Holocaust: Memory and Prevention*, which is held in Moscow each January by the Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Centre (RREHC).² Established in 1992, the RREHC was the first institution in the post-Soviet space to “preserve the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, create documentary exhibitions, include themes of the Holocaust in educational programmes and standards at schools and universities, hold memorial evenings, create memorials, collect documents, testimonies and memoirs”.³ Originally headed by historian Mikhail Gefter, the institution is now co-run by historian and archivist Ilya Altman and writer and journalist Alla Gerber.⁴ The Holocaust is barely present in state education, so the RREHC conference has played an important role in raising awareness of the tragedy within the Russian Federation. Indeed, this assessment is echoed in the centre’s focus on Holocaust memory and prevention of its repetition.⁵

The RREHC website contains a plethora of information about the organisation’s publications and activities. Reviews written by attendees at some events are also available. I examine reviews written by teachers and schoolchildren about the RREHC conference to assess how they believe the conference has inspired them to promulgate or pursue Holocaust education in the future. These reviews reveal how

1 Sheveleva, Kseniya. “Mir bez voyny vozmozhen lish’ pri trezvykh vzglyadakh na sobytiya nashey istorii.” *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 30 January 2016, <http://www.old.holocf.ru/Editor/asets2/otzyv%20konfa%20studentov%20sheveleva.pdf> (14 November 2021).

2 The research for this paper was conducted as part of my PhD, which is funded by the SWWDTP. I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor James Mark and Dr Jenny Mathers, for helpful comments and feedback on earlier versions of this chapter.

3 “Istoriya.” *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, <http://holocf.ru/история/> (6 June 2020).

4 “Istoriya.” *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*.

5 *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, <http://holocf.ru/>. (18 November 2020).

participation at the conference leads children to feel that they are empowered to commemorate the Holocaust and prevent its repetition. According to participants' own reviews, the RREHC conference provides attendees with the information, skills, and supportive and creative atmosphere needed to further their Holocaust education and research activities, conducted under the guidance of their teacher.

The RREHC conference, then, differs starkly from the children's limited experience of Holocaust education in school classrooms. Almost no time in the curriculum is accorded to teaching the history of World War II (Altman 2012, 122).⁶ The state-mandated curriculum allots little time to teaching the Holocaust. Following participation in the RREHC conference, however, students hope to continue their study of the Holocaust, to attend the conference again, and to spread information about the topic among their peers. In this way, children who have attended work as memory activists.⁷ Moreover, attendees' own rhetoric of "never again"⁸ seems to align closely with the framework of cosmopolitan memory promulgated in the European Union. This is, perhaps, a striking fact, given that the Russian state's broader focus on Soviet heroism and victory dominates the classroom and state-funded culture. Even within the Russian Federation, where the state's monolithic narrative dominates historical discourse, Holocaust memory is full of nuance – and, indeed, exists in a dialogic relationship with cosmopolitan memory. Whilst these two memory frameworks are not necessarily incompatible, they are employed for different purposes.

Some academic studies of the RREHC's work have been produced (Altman 2019; Altman 1999). However, the voice of the RREHC conference's audience – teachers and schoolchildren – does not crop up in this literature. Indeed, children's voices are more generally underrepresented in research on Holocaust education and memory in the Russian context. There is currently no academic analysis of how children use or perceive the RREHC's materials, or of how young people engage with the centre's competitions, conferences and seminars. This scholarly vacuum effectively neglects the agency of Russian schoolchildren in memory practices by ignoring their contribution to the nature of Holocaust memory.

I analyse the two main aims of the conference according to children's reviews, specifically looking at the preservation of Holocaust memory and prevention of its repetition, and how these foci sit within broader societal and political understandings of the Holocaust in Russia. By focusing my analysis on children's written reviews of the RREHC's work, I seek to introduce young voices into the subfield. Besides simply

⁶ "Voyna za sem' urokov." *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 25 December 2017, <https://rg.ru/2017/12/17/eksperty-predlozhili-vesti-uroki-istorii-v-shkole-po-modulnomu-principu.html> (10 July 2021).

⁷ For more on the topic of youth mobilisation and activism, see Krawatzek 2018.

⁸ Omarov, Magomed. *Tsentri Fond Kholokost*, n.d., <http://www.old.holocf.ru/Editor/assets/2/konfa%20v%20moskve%20magomedov.pdf> (14 November 2021).

acknowledging their voices, my analysis foregrounds both the unique insights of the children into Holocaust education and the ways in which those children believe that the RREHC is addressing potential gaps in their education.

The sample of available reviews is, however, limited to the opinions of those students who chose to write a review to be published on the RREHC website. Indeed, out of the 28 students who attended the 2020 RREHC conference, only seven reviews were published online.⁹ The provenance of this source material is also limited: the 15 reviews I analyse seem to predominantly reflect the views of older students from Russia's western regions.¹⁰ Given this geographic and age bias, it might be argued that the opinions of these reviewers do not reflect the opinions of Russian youth and society at large. In order to highlight that these reviews do indeed reflect wider ideological trends, I position them within a broader socio-political discourse. By doing so, I will show that some of the principal tenets of socio-political discourse on the Holocaust are being supported in the setting of the conference. In doing so, I ascertain two primary motivations for pupils to educate themselves and others about the Holocaust: to remember the tragedy and to prevent its repetition. These views echo wider Russian societal and political understandings of the Holocaust. The RREHC conference reinforces the Russian state's narrative that it is essential to preserve the memory of the Holocaust as just one part of the memory of World War II, and that doing so will help ensure such events will never happen again. However, the conference also introduces an understanding of the Holocaust which is somewhat more rounded than that promoted by schools, by offering a platform for engagement with new topics and employing new creative formats in which pupils can display their work.

⁹ "Otkrytie konferentsii shkol'nikov." *Tsentri Fond Kholokost*, 19 January 2020, <http://holocf.ru/открытие-конференции-школьников/> (20 January 2021). "Several dozen" students took part in the event in 2015 ("Otkrytie mezhdunarodnoy konferentsii shkol'nikov i studentov." *Tsentri Fond Kholokost*, 23 January 2015, <http://holocf.ru/открытие-международной-конференции/> [3 June 2020]). Seventy participants took part in the event in 2016, which was also held for university students and "young scientists" ("Konferentsiya shkol'nikov i studentov oprovergnut mify o Kholokoste." *Tsentri Fond Kholokost*, 22 January 2016, <http://holocf.ru/конференция-школьников-и-студентов-о/> [2 June 2020]).

¹⁰ Two students were in the eighth grade (14–15 years old), two students were in ninth grade (15–16 years old) and four students were in tenth (16–17 years old) and eleventh grades (17–18 years old). Three pupils did not disclose their age. The pupils came from schools predominantly in the Western regions of Russia (Samara, Bryansk, Vologda, Pskov, Tambovsk, Saratov, Orel). One student came from the northwest region of Arkhangelsk, and one came from the west-central region in the Ural Mountains, Chelyabinsk.

1 RREHC Conference: “An experience that cannot be forgotten”

The annual RREHC conference is one of the key events of the “Week of Memory” (“Nedelya Pamyati”).¹¹ Organised by the Russian Jewish Congress and the RREHC, and supported by the Moscow City Government, a programme of memorial and educational events has been held in the week around 27 January annually since 2015.¹² Those who perform well in the RREHC’s *Road to Tolerance* competition are invited to present their material at the conference.¹³ At the conference itself, schoolchildren present the findings of their research projects and engage in a multitude of other activities, such as attending film screenings.¹⁴

Like many of the RREHC’s activities, the organisation of the conference is collaborative. The 2016 conference was supported by the Moscow City Government, the Russian Jewish Congress, and the Russian State University for the Humanities.¹⁵ These groups likely supported the RREHC Conference because of their own dedication to preserving what they would claim as truthful historical memory,¹⁶ their own efforts to commemorate the Holocaust,¹⁷ and their professional links with employees of the RREHC.¹⁸

11 “Konferentsiya shkol’nikov i studentov oprovergnet mify o Kholokoste.” *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 22 January 2016.

12 “Gorodskoy metodicheskiy tsentr opublikoval spisok meropriyatiy ‘Nedeli pamyati’.” *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 13 January 2019, <http://holocf.ru/городской-методический-центр-опубли/> (28 May 2020).

13 “Otkrytie mezhdunarodnoy konferentsii shkol’nikov i studentov.” *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 23 January 2015.

14 “IX Mezhdunarodnaya konferentsiya shkol’nikov «Kholokost: Pamyat’ i Preduprezhdenie.»” *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 26 January 2015, <https://holocf.ru/ix-международная-конференция-школьник/> (14 November 2021).

15 “Konferentsiya shkol’nikov i studentov oprovergnet mify o Kholokoste.” *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 22 January 2016.

16 This dedication was mentioned at the 2020 Conference in a speech given by the mayor of Moscow (“V stolitse proshel blagotvoritel’nyi memorial’nyy vecher ‘Khranitel’ pamyati’.” *Informatsionnyy Tsentr Pravitel’stva Moskvy*, 28 January 2020, <https://icmos.ru/publications/v-stolitse-proshel-blagotvoritelnyy-memorialnyy-vecher-khranitel-pamyati> [1 December 2020]).

17 For an example, see the “Restore Dignity” (“Vernut’ dostoystvo”) project of the RJC and RREHC, dedicated to bringing “the graves of victims of mass executions in line with Jewish tradition and the laws of the countries where they are located” (“O proekte.” *Vernut’ dostoystvo*, <http://victimsdignity.ru/o-iproekte/> [3 June 2020]).

18 In 2016 an International Educational and Research Centre of the Holocaust and Genocides History was established at the Russian State Humanitarian University, which “conducts research on issues of the First and Second World Wars history, ethnic and religious conflicts, participates in

This support, moreover, highlights the inextricable links between state and non-state institutions in their dedication to Holocaust memory. Mariëlle Wijermars has explained that “differentiation between state and non-state actors [. . .] is notoriously murky” in Russia (2019, 3). This merging between state and non-state in memory politics has become even more “murky” since the 2012 “foreign agent” law against foreign funding of NGOs and the government’s own launch of a “large-scale grant operation” (Lipman and Miller 2019). This coalescence of state and non-state, however, does not seem to affect the way in which the conference is perceived by pupils, nor the types of pupils who participate in the event.

2 “After this conference, I know exactly what we should remember”

The reviews are dominated by the idea of preserving the memory of the Holocaust and by the supposition that schoolchildren have a special role to play in that preservation. This attitude reflects a broader Russian socio-political discourse – encouraged by the state – on the need to preserve the memory of World War II. In a speech at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Centre in 2019, Vladimir Putin argued that “such tragedies, crimes against humanity cannot and should not be forgotten”.¹⁹ In a 2020 speech, however, he went further to elucidate the nature of the memory to be preserved: memory of the war is “a matter of our conscience before the entire generation of victors”.²⁰ This narrative of indebtedness and responsibility to those who fought for the Motherland is a common theme in Russian narratives of the Great Patriotic War.²¹ The Russian state is charged with passing this memory onto “future generations, great-

the preparation of thematic textbooks, and organises scientific events” (“Center for the History of the Holocaust and Genocides.” *Russian State University for the Humanities*, <https://www.rsuh.ru/en/faculties-departments-and-international-centers/center-for-the-history-of-the-holocaust-and-genocides/> [6 November 2020]). Altman is Director of the Centre, which renders the university support for RREHC activities somewhat unsurprising (“Historians Discussed Holocaust-Related Internships.” *Russian State University for the Humanities*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.rsuh.ru/en/news/historians-discussed-holocaust-related-internships/> [18 November 2020]).

¹⁹ “Poseshchenie Evreyskogo muzeya i Tsentra tolerantnosti.” *Sayt Prezidenta Rossii*, 4 June 2019, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60657> (12 January 2021).

²⁰ “Obrashchenie k avstriyskim grazhdanam po sluchayu 75-letiya osvobodzheniya Evropy ot fashizma.” *Sayt Prezidenta Rossii*, 8 May 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63316> (12 January 2021).

²¹ For more information on this theme of indebtedness, see Edwards, this volume.

grandchildren of the victors, instilling in them a grateful memory to those who gave us freedom and at the cost of their lives proved the enduring value of peace and justice”.²² Yet the memory that is preserved at the RREHC conference goes beyond some of the state’s own narratives by offering a warm, inviting atmosphere for discussion of the Holocaust – one which contrasts starkly with the topic’s treatment in schools and elsewhere.

Indeed, the topic of the Holocaust was only introduced to the Russian state education system in 2004 (Zinnatov 2017, 46). In spite of this innovation, Ilya Altman has argued that very few school pupils in Russia have actually learnt about the subject (Carrier, Fuchs and Messinger 2015, 34). Those teachers that do want to teach their students about the Holocaust are constricted by the lack of time afforded to the topic (Altman 2012, 122). Textbooks are just as scarce: the eight history books approved by the Ministry of Education and Science for use in schools between 2013 and 2018 contained only 92 references to the Holocaust (Panchenko, Zinnatov and Kadyrova 2019, 680).²³ Teachers are therefore limited in their use of state-approved pedagogical material for use in classrooms. Some might turn to materials published by the RREHC (76.6 per cent of the 273 respondents to an RREHC survey noted that they use the organisation’s website to access publications by the RREHC²⁴). One of the attendees at the RREHC conference commented on the “superficial” engagement with the Holocaust in state-approved textbooks, which suggested a “reluctance to engrave this terrible crime against humanity that claimed thousands of innocent lives in the minds of students”.²⁵ This exemplifies the scholastic gap addressed by the conference, which is contrastingly praised as an “interesting and unforgettable” event which allows participants to “take a deeper look at the Holocaust, from different points of view that were new to me, and also to meet people who can talk about their research on this topic and talk about something that I did not know”.²⁶

22 “Otkrytie monumenta v chest’ zhitel’ey i zashchitnikov blokadnogo Leningrada ‘Svecha pamyati.’” *Sayt Prezidenta Rossii*, 23 January 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62642> (12 January 2021).

23 The same research does, however, acknowledge that this is an increase from previous periods (29 sentences in textbooks published in 1995–2005, 72 sentences in textbooks published in 2006–2012).

24 “Holocaust. The Newsletter of the Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Center and the Holocaust Foundation.” <https://holocf.ru/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Newsletter-of-the-RHC-Nº-88-4-2020.pdf> (16 November 2020) Eds. Gideon Frydman and Darid Ruzmanova. 88.4 (December 2020).

25 Sheveleva, *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 30 January 2016.

26 “Otzyv o XVI Mezhdunarodnoy konferentsii shkol’nikov «Kholokost: pamyat’ i preduprezhdeniye» uchastnitsy Gilëvoy Aliny, uchenitsy 10 klassa MAOU «SOSH No 6 s uglublennym

Besides the opportunity to present one's work, the RREHC offers a range of other activities, including "discussions, training activities, presentations of documentary films, conversations with filmmakers, visits to the State Duma, to the Museum of Jewish Heritage and the Holocaust on Poklonnaya Hill, viewing the 'Right to Life' performance of the Moscow Pedagogical Theatre for Teenagers, participation in the memorial requiem evening at the Helikon Opera Theatre".²⁷ The conference thus also provides attendees with the opportunity to learn from non-academic individuals and sources connected to or with the Holocaust. For one participant, Ekaterina Pautova, listening to speeches elicited an emotional response: "The words of many [speakers] touched me deeply."²⁸ Individuals from outside the academic realm are not invited to talk to students about the Holocaust in state-endorsed classes, so the RREHC offers novel opportunities for knowledge absorption as well as creation. The range of activities prompted strong reactions among those participants who had written online reviews. Pupil Darya Chebanova argued that attendance offered her "a lot of new and useful information about the Holocaust".²⁹ She attended lectures which allowed her "to replenish [my] knowledge of the Holocaust".³⁰

The breadth of topics discussed across the conference's many activities is far greater than that found in the state curriculum. While, as I have noted, the Holocaust is officially supposed to be taught about in history classes, the state's history curriculum stipulates that it can only be explored in the context of an extremely limited number of topics:

Nazi occupation regime. "Master Plan for the East". Mass crimes of Nazis against Soviet citizens. Death camps. Holocaust. Ethnic cleansing on the occupied territory of the USSR. The Nazi captivity. The murder of Soviet prisoners of war and medical experiments on inmates. The theft of Soviet people to Germany. The looting and destruction of cultural values. The start of mass resistance against the enemy. The uprisings in the Nazi camps. The deployment of the partisan movement.³¹

izucheniyem inostrannykh yazykov», G. Severodvinsk." *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 30 January 2016, <http://www.old.holocf.ru/Editor/assets2/otzyv%20konfa%20gileva.pdf> (16 November 2020).

27 Sheveleva, *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 30 January 2016.

28 *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 28 January 2017, <http://holocf.ru/xvi-международная-конференция-школьник/> (14 November 2021).

29 *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, n.d., <http://www.old.holocf.ru/Editor/assets2/konfa%20v%20moskve%20chebanova%20d.pdf> (16 November 2020).

30 Chebanova, *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, n.d.

31 "Mezhdunarodnyy den' pamyati zhertv Kholokosta. Istoriya i metodika prepodavaniya." *YouTube*, 24 January 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s94lhodLYAg> (13 July 2020); "Istoriko-kul'turnyi standart." *Rossiyskoe istoricheskoe obshchestvo*, 24 August 2015, <https://>

The RREHC conference, by contrast, is usually split into thematic sections. Examples include sections on pupils' own research, the Holocaust in literature, and the Righteous Among Nations.³² Teachers explicitly mentioned a number of topics in their reviews: the Holocaust on the territory of the former USSR and abroad, falsified acts of history, Holocaust denial and the use of Holocaust sources in education. These topics delve into areas of the Holocaust totally untouched by the state's curriculum.³³ One such topic not included in the state standard is Holocaust denial. Pupil Aleksandra Polivko commented on the novelty of several of the topics presented at the conference, noting that "I thought I knew a lot about the Holocaust, but after listening to my colleagues talk about their academic work, I realised that I did not even know a tenth of what was spoken about the Holocaust."³⁴ By touching on topics beyond the state standard's purview, the conferences give pupils the opportunity to conduct and learn about research on topics that might be neglected within the narrow confines of the school curriculum. Here, the scope for non-state agency in the Russian Federation's memory landscape is, perhaps, surprisingly broad.

At the RREHC conference, indeed, children are not only taught new narratives. Attendees are taught skills (including, for example, "analysis of information [and] methods of collecting documents"³⁵) that enable them to research and construct their own narratives. Such work is not entirely absent from the state classroom, where children are supposed to be given practical instruction about how to work with archival documents, as well as methodological recommendations for the search for names and biographies for the "Liberators" ("Osvoboditeli") project on the liberators of Auschwitz-Birkenau.³⁶ The state's curriculum suggests that

historyrussia.org/proekty/kontseptsiya-novogo-uchebno-metodicheskogo-kompleksa-po-otechestvennoj-istorii/istoriko-kulturnyj-standart.html (21 January 2021).

32 Sheveleva, *Tsentri Fond Kholokost*, 30 January 2016.

33 "Kontseptsiya prepodavaniya. Uchebnogo kursa 'Istoriya Rossii' v obrazovatel'nykh organizatsiyakh Rossiyskoy Federatsii." *Ministerstvo prosvesheniya Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, 23 October 2020, <http://docs.edu.gov.ru/document/b12aa655a39f6016af3974a98620bc34/download/3243/> (21 January 2021), 62. Albeit a new draft of the standards in 2020 did refer to the Righteous Among Nations.

34 *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, 28 January 2017, <http://holocf.ru/xvi-международная-конференция-школьник/> (14 November 2021).

35 Omarov, *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, n.d.

36 Filippova, Anetta Aleksandrovna, and Kaitmazova, Yana. *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, n.d., <http://www.old.holocf.ru/Editor/assets2/konfa%20v%20moskve%20kaitmazova.pdf> (12 November 2021).

"Osvoboditeli Aushvitsa." *Osvoboditeli*. <http://osvoboditeli.com/> (28 February 2019). The project searches for "information about the lives and fates of soldiers and officers of the Red Army who liberated Auschwitz, doctors who saved freed prisoners, war correspondents who recorded crimes in the worst of Nazi camps." Schoolchildren are encouraged to participate in

developing research skills is an important part of a student's education. Children should, according to the curriculum, learn to obtain "historical knowledge from other sources, and the teacher should promote the mastery of student research techniques, the development of critical thinking, teaching the analysis of texts, methods of searching and selecting information, comparing different points of view, facts and their interpretations".³⁷ Children are meant in turn to use these skills for "the study of local history, the history of their family, and the collection of oral history".³⁸

Indeed, pupil Ekaterina Puzynya's work at the conference focused on the impact of the Holocaust on her own family.³⁹ The conference thus allows school pupils the opportunity to develop these state-mandated skills. Whilst the school curriculum may give children the opportunity to develop such critical thinking skills, the lack of time afforded to the Holocaust might mean that the Holocaust is seldom the specific topic chosen for this task.

State discourse on the Holocaust is restricted. Yet, where students are fortunate enough to have a particularly motivated or inspiring teacher, they may be encouraged to do their *own* research on the subject. Sometimes this research is presented at the conference – indeed, preserving the memory of the Holocaust through sharing one's own work is critical for the development of a pupil's Holocaust education.⁴⁰ Several conference attendees, such as teacher S. F. Makartsova, praised the school-aged participants' work, specifically their "research skills, the ability to find information in various sources and academic literature, to compile and systematise material, to conduct interviews, and to conduct excursions".⁴¹ Several teachers and academics also commended those pupils who had worked with a variety of sources and praised those who "demonstrated the ability to work with documents, periodicals, to analyse academic texts, to use interviews as a historical source".⁴² For pupil Aleksandra Polivko, to hear and to be heard was the

the project ("Tsentr Kholokost – v chisle pobediteley ocherednogo konkursa grantov prezidenta RF." *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 30 November 2017, <http://holocf.ru/центр-холокост-в-числе-победителей/> [1 June 2020]).

37 "Istoriko-kul'turnyi standart." *Rossiyskoe istoricheskoe obshchestvo*, 24 August 2015, 10.

38 "Istoriko-kul'turnyi standart." *Rossiyskoe istoricheskoe obshchestvo*, 24 August 2015, 12.

39 *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 30 January 2016, <http://www.old.holocf.ru/Editor/assets2/otzyv%20puzynya.pdf> (14 November 2014).

40 Polivko, *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 28 January 2017.

41 *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, n.d., <http://www.old.holocf.ru/Editor/assets2/konfa%20v%20moskve%20makarcova.pdf> (14 November 2021).

42 Khlistunova, Natal'ya, Svetlana Tikhankina, and Tat'yana Pasman. "Shestnadtsataya ezhegodnaya mezhdunAarodnaya konferentsiya shkol'nikov «Kholokost: Pamyat' i Preduprezhdenie.»"

most important aspect of the conference.⁴³ Such discursive openness contrasts with the more restrictive experience of state history teaching.

Some schoolchildren presented their work in creative form, their efforts receiving praise from adult attendees. For example, the teacher Vera Bogdanova noted she was particularly impressed by ninth-grader Pavel Alekseev's orchestral composition, which was performed at the Helikon Opera Theatre.⁴⁴ Teacher Elena Merkulova was impressed by pupil Alexei Epifantsev's film *The Great Tragedy of a Small Town*.⁴⁵ Given the lack of time afforded to studying the Holocaust in state schools, and the fact that teachers tend to stick closely to state-endorsed textbooks (Winkler 2015, 27),⁴⁶ such creative displays of work on the topic are unusual – and, presumably, appealing to potential school-aged participants. Rather, the creative showcasing of work similar to those mentioned is likely to be conducted outside of state-endorsed classes, under the guidance of a passionate, motivated teacher. Examples of creative outputs outside of the conference have included “scripts and stage performances on books about the Holocaust”, conducted by pupils under the guidance of their teachers.⁴⁷ However, this sort of effort is both local and reliant on individual teachers' dedication, as opposed to the national and collaborative nature of the RREHC conference.

3 “The memory and study of the reasons that led to the massacre of civilians is a guarantee that this will never happen again”

School pupils' reviews broadly agreed that attending the RREHC conference was inspirational, especially when it came to further study. Darya Chebanova

Tsentri i Fond Kholokost, 30 January 2016, <https://holocf.ru/шестнадцатая-ежегодная-международна/> (14 November 2021).

⁴³ Polivko, *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, 28 January 2017.

⁴⁴ “Otzyv.” *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, n.d., <http://www.old.holocf.ru/Editor/assets2/konfa%20v%20moskve%20bogdanova.pdf> (14 November 2021).

⁴⁵ *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, n.d., <http://www.old.holocf.ru/Editor/assets2/konfa%20v%20moskve%20merkulova.pdf> (14 November 2021).

⁴⁶ “Minprosveshcheniya Rossii obnovilo federal'nyy perechen' uchebnikov.” *Minprosveshcheniya Rossii*, 29 December 2018, <https://edu.gov.ru/press/970/minprosveshcheniya-rossii-obnovilo-federalnyy-perechen-uchebnikov> (1 September 2020).

⁴⁷ *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, 30 August 2019, <https://holocf.ru/завершилась-летняя-сессия-преподава/> (14 November 2021).

noted that after attending she felt motivated to “continue to develop and study new information about the Holocaust”.⁴⁸ When school lessons offer such a paucity of time and detail on the topic – livened only by the extracurricular efforts of the occasional passionate teacher – this is no surprise. However, the contrast led pupils to reflect more broadly on the state of Holocaust education and commemoration in Russia. Some of the reviews mention the need to commemorate the Holocaust widely. Pupil Kristina Sysoeva noted that “the theme of the Holocaust is a source for humanity’s education. This was not only the tragedy of the Jewish people, but also the tragedy of many peoples subjected to mass genocide. Therefore, it is necessary to preserve the memory of the Holocaust for future generations.”⁴⁹ Sysoeva’s words speak to an all-encompassing understanding of the Holocaust that does not focus on the uniqueness of the tragedy, or of Jewish victimhood, but rather on the applicability of the topic to understanding broader questions of humanity.

This universalisation reflects societal understanding of the Holocaust in contemporary Russia not as the tragedy of the *Jewish* people but as the tragedy of *Soviet* victims, which results in the elevation of broader narratives of Soviet victory in World War II. Even after attending the RREHC conference, pupil Tatyana Nefedova contended that, “the memory of tragedies, troubles, catastrophes, including those such as the Holocaust, unites people, and prevents us forgetting the horrors that people experienced during the years of World War II”.⁵⁰ Nefedova acknowledges the Holocaust as just one of several wartime tragedies, negating claims of the Holocaust’s historical uniqueness or the singularity of the messages that it might teach. This focus on Soviet suffering also serves as a convenient tool for avoiding sensitive questions in the Russian Federation about collaboration with Nazi Germany – as well as Russia’s own history of antisemitism. A universalised, broader Holocaust memory is tied to a broadly promoted and popular Russian memory architecture.

However, the repetition of prevailing narratives did not diminish participants’ certainty that the Holocaust deserves continued attention. One reviewer, Polina Kochetkova, focused specifically on the importance of studying the Holocaust in

48 Chebanova, *Tsentri Fond Kholokost*, n.d.

49 “OTZYV o Mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii shkol’nikov i pedagogov «Kholokost: pamyat’ i preduprezhdeniye» 20–23 yanvarya 2018 goda.” *Tsentri Fond Kholokost*, 2018, <http://www.old.holocf.ru/Editor/assets2/konfa%20v%20moskve%20sysoeva.pdf> (14 November 2021).

50 “OTZYV o Mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii shkol’nikov i pedagogov «Kholokost: pamyat’ i preduprezhdeniye» 20–23 yanvarya 2018 goda Uchenitsy 11 klassa p. Strugi-Krasnyye, «Strugo-Krasnenskoy sredney obshcheobrazovatel’noy shkoly» Nefedovoy Tat’yany.” *Tsentri Fond Kholokost*, n.d., <http://www.old.holocf.ru/Editor/assets2/konfa%20v%20moskve%20nefedova.pdf> (14 November 2021).

the Russian Federation: “the tragedy of the Jewish genocide in our time is not widespread in society. That is why today educational projects for schoolchildren and students are playing a huge role. Books, exhibitions of documents, films, conferences tell the truth, warn, make you think.”⁵¹ Kochetkova seems almost to be cognisant of how the silencing of Holocaust narratives during the Soviet era has impacted the ways in which the Holocaust is understood in today’s Russia.

Scholars have noted the consequences of reductive Soviet-era historical narratives in present-day discourse around the Holocaust. For example, Alexander Loshkin notes that current Russian Holocaust education suffers as a result of “the heritage of Soviet historiography, in which the topic of Jews is missing, as are the topics of pogroms, the Holocaust, and state-sponsored antisemitism”.⁵² Altman believes that “this reactionary and revisionist impact [of Soviet silencing] is stronger than elsewhere in the post-Soviet European space” (2018, 231). Altman elsewhere observes that “while the Holocaust’s place in history has been the subject of widespread public debate in many former Eastern Bloc countries and former Soviet Republics, this has not happened in Russia” (2014). He lists a number of deeper social and political trends that further suppress Holocaust memory in Russia: the fact that the state does not officially commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day; the absence of Russian media interest in the day; a lack of events outside Moscow and other large cities to remember the Holocaust; and lingering antisemitism among the Russian population (Altman 2014).⁵³ As a result of these difficulties and the precarious state of classroom teaching, educational programmes such as the RREHC conference represent one of the few

51 “Otzv o konferentsii «Kholokost: pamyat’ i preduprezhdeniye» Kochetkovoy Poliny uchenitsy 11 klassa Munitsipal’nogo obshcheobrazovatel’nogo uchrezhdeniya «Srednyaya obshcheobrazovatel’naya shkola No 20 imeni geroya Sovetskogo Soyuza Dolgova Vladimira Konstantinovicha» g. Vologdy.” *Tsentr i Fond Kholokost*, 30 January 2016, <http://www.old.holocf.ru/Editor/assets2/otzyv%20polina%20kochetkova.pdf> (14 November 2021).

52 “Nedetskaya istoriya.” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 13 February 2008, https://www.ng.ru/politics/2008-02-%2013/3_history.html (17 June 2020).

53 It is odd that International Holocaust Remembrance Day is not celebrated in Russia given that the state co-sponsored the UN initiative behind the designation of the date (“Privetstvennoe poslanie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S. V. Lavrova uchastnikam memorial’nogo vechera, posvyashchennogo Mezhdunarodnomu dnyu pamyati zhtv Kholokosta.” *Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, 29 January 2017, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/382962 [27 November 2020]). This implies that the Russian co-sponsorship of this initiative may not have been entirely noble. Altman specifically notes the adverse popular reaction to an erroneous news story in 2012 about a 72-hour long course at school on the Holocaust as an example of widespread antisemitism.

chances for children to engage with the Holocaust and thereby preserve the memory of the tragedy.

In spite of the interest in and weight of the past, some RREHC reviewers were strikingly forward-thinking, acknowledging the need to remember the past in order to protect the future. Kseniya Sheveleva explicitly made this connection, claiming that “indeed, without the past there is no future, no present”.⁵⁴ Attending the conference and engaging in the “study of the reasons that led to the massacre of civilians is a guarantee that this will never happen again”.⁵⁵ Pupil Magomed Omarov, meanwhile, wondered, “Can I do something so that this horror never returns? I think that I can. First of all, to know and remember, and to tell others about it.”⁵⁶ Building on this sort of reflection, Alina Gileva succeeded in linking the present, past, and future:

The reasons why six million Jews were dying remain relevant in our time. Human life and reason are extremely fragile matters; they are so easily destroyed, crushed, turned to dust. And sometimes ideas that seem sound and right to us, in fact, can turn out to be monstrous and inhumane. And when these monstrous ideas are combined with the fragility of life, the most terrible crime is born. Unfortunately, now this tendency is emerging again, and I would very much like to prevent the possibility of a recurrence of the Holocaust through my creativity and actions.⁵⁷

School-aged reviewers also commented on the need to unite schoolchildren in order to prevent such a repetition. Valeriya Akulina, for instance, drew a link between collective action and specific developments happening in the Russian Federation: “We must unite to counter the growing manifestations of antisemitism and nationalism in our society.”⁵⁸ Akulina’s peer Tatyana Nefedova hoped that “every year more and more children come to the conference who are interested in this, who are not indifferent to the memory of the past and the fate of the future of our country”.⁵⁹

54 Sheveleva, *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, 30 January 2016.

55 Kochetkova, *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, 30 January 2016.

56 Omarov, *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, n.d.

57 Gilëva, *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, 30 January 2016; Kseniya Sheveleva makes a similar contention, linking contemporary actions and humanity with one’s understanding of history. She argues that: “Our level of humanity and morality, which is reflected in our actions, directly depends on the awareness of the role of history in the modern world. It is possible and necessary to correct humanity, but for this it is necessary to remember history. To remember in order to prevent the mistakes of the past!” (Sheveleva, *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, 30 January 2016).

58 “Otzyv o Mezhdunarodnoy konferentsii shkol’nikov i studentov “Kholokost: pamyat’ i preduzhdeniye.” *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, 28 January 2017, <http://holocf.ru/xvi-международная-конференция-школьник/> (14 November 2021).

59 Nefedova, *Tsentri i Fond Kholokost*, n.d.

This focus on memory activism is, however, not unique. In fact, it echoes parts of the state's discourse on the Holocaust. For example, at a speech during a visit to Moscow's Jewish Museum and Tolerance Centre, President Putin said that memory of the Holocaust serves as a "guarantee that the horror of the Holocaust, the cold-blooded, deliberate destruction of entire nations will never happen again".⁶⁰ These words came amid an increasing political concern about growing antisemitism, xenophobia, and nationalism in former Soviet countries such as Ukraine and in Russia itself.⁶¹ I suggest that Putin's line of thinking is that by uniting against a common foe, the Russian Federation can prevent repetition of a crime like the Holocaust.⁶² Nevertheless, these apparently local and national interests are, ironically, closely aligned with cosmopolitan memory's mantra of "Never Again."

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the RREHC's annual Holocaust conference is an important opportunity for Russian schoolchildren to supplement their otherwise limited Holocaust education. The reviews published on the RREHC's website are broadly aligned with societal and political narratives surrounding the Holocaust in the

60 "Poseshchenie Evreyskogo muzeya i Tsentra tolerantnosti." *Sayt Prezidenta Rossii*, 4 June 2019.

61 A report written by the Russian Jewish Congress in 2018 noted that there was an increase in antisemitic vandalism, whereas the level of antisemitism expressed in mass media remained constant ("Report on Anti-Semitism in Russia 2018." *Russian Jewish Congress*, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/Submissions/WJC-Annex2.pdf> [16 November 2020]). A Pew survey in the same year indicated that only 40 per cent of Russians would be willing to accept Jews as members of their family, in comparison to 57 per cent of Poles and Hungarians ("Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues." *Pew Research Center*, 29 October 2018, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/> [18 November 2020]). In 2020, whilst Head of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia Aleksandr Boroda argued that a US State Department report on religious freedom across the world indicated that Jews are not the main enemy in Russia, he did note that latent antisemitism is high in the country ("Prezident FEOR zayavil o vysokom ur ovne skrytogo antisemitizma v Rossii." *Interfax*, 15 June 2020, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/713200> [18 November 2020]).

62 Indeed, Putin himself argued that "our memory is a warning against any attempts to ride the idea of world domination, to declare, build, and assert our greatness on the basis of racial, national, or any other superiority, which Russia categorically rejects" ("Meropriyatie, posvyashchennoe dnyu pamyati zhertv Kholokosta i godovshchine snyatiya blokady Leningrada." *Sayt Prezidenta Rossii*, 29 January 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56740> [12 January 2021]).

Russian Federation, and especially with the need to preserve memory and therefore prevent repetition. However, conference attendees were motivated to continue their own Holocaust research activities and to share information about the tragedy with their friends. This moral obligation to share information with their peers ties into the role that pupils can play in preventing repetition of the tragedy in the twenty-first century. In this way, the reviews seem to reiterate the key tenet of cosmopolitan memory, “Never Again”. However, the understanding of the Holocaust as presented at the conference is slightly different to that presented in official discourse: the conference provides the pupils who wrote these reviews with information about new topics, including those that are not currently included in the state curriculum, and new skills, methodologies, and sources to support their own independent research activities about the Holocaust.

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