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Abstract

In World War Two, about half a million Jews served in the Soviet military—18.3% of the 3,028,538 Jews in the USSR in 1939 and 11 percent of Jews who were Soviet citizens in 1941. More than a third of them were killed in combat. This study examines the motivations for fighting of Soviet Jewish combatants, their knowledge and perceptions of the Holocaust, and the impact of their war experiences on their consciousness as Soviet people and as Jews.

Since Soviet conditions prevented research into these issues, my work relies on post-Soviet publications (memoirs, diaries, studies) and six oral history collections. I found that those Soviet Jews who came from areas Sovietized in 1918-21 were motivated primarily by the same civic patriotism others felt as defenders of what they regarded as their homeland. However, when they discovered what the Nazis and their local collaborators had perpetrated, their Jewish consciousness was activated and a desire for revenge and to “rescue” Jewish honor as fighters and resisters entered the complex of motivations. But, those from territories annexed to the USSR in 1939-40 were more aware of the Holocaust and more impelled to fight by their sense of Jewishness than by their newly-acquired Soviet identity. Both types of Jews frequently mention their desire to refute stereotypes of Jews as shirkers.

All Jewish combatants are proud of their roles and the great majority idealize the war period as one where interethnic relations were good and anti-Semitism condemned. However, in 1943, as the tide of war shifted, they perceived a change in policy whereby Jews were discriminated against in awards and recognition and new draftees were more likely to be anti-Semitic. A survey of three central Soviet newspapers reflects these shifts.

The tragedy of this first and possibly only genuinely “Soviet” generation was that they fought so hard against one form of totalitarianism on behalf of another.