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*Stalin's Intellectual?*  
*Ilya Ehrenburg, The Jewish Question, and the State of Israel*

In his 1965 memoirs *People, Years, Life*, Ilya Ehrenburg reflects “I love Spain, Italy, and France, but all my years are inseparable from Russian life. I have never concealed my origin. There were times when I did not give it a thought, and others when I said wherever I could: I am a Jew, for to my mind solidarity with the persecuted is the first principle of humanitarianism.”<sup>1</sup> Ehrenburg, a Soviet Jewish intellectual, a correspondent for *Izvestia* during the Spanish Civil war, a member of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, co-author, with Vasily Grossman, of *The Black Book*, a collection of first hand accounts of Soviet Jewish suffering in Nazi occupied Russia, is often cited as a prototypical “assimilated Jew” of the Soviet Union, who lacked “Jewish national consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> He represents a “strange blend of nihilistic and alienated sentiment with regard to Jewish national culture and boundless admiration for the culture of the host nation, was characteristic of assimilated Jews the world over.”<sup>3</sup> Any “national consciousness” that did emerge, for Ehrenburg, was in response to anti-Semitism, reinforced after World War II, which provided the “raison d’etre for the Jews.”<sup>4</sup> But as his memoirs indicate, Ilya Ehrenburg's identity as a Soviet Jewish intellectual is a paradox in and of itself, whose contradictions need to be teased out and read closely in the context of the Soviet State.

This assimilationist argument is made famous by Yuri Slezkine and, as one reviewer put it, his “hermetic academic exercise” *The Jewish Century*, which distinguishes the twentieth century, the modern age, and modernization, as the “Jewish age.”<sup>5</sup> Russian Jews, who remained in Russia after the revolution, did

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<sup>1</sup> I. Ehrenburg, 1965 *Lyudi, Gody, Zhizn*. Novy Mir. No. 2, pp 51-55

<sup>2</sup> See Pinkus, Benjamin *The Soviet Government and the Jews* 1984. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. P.20

<sup>3</sup> Pinkus, 20

<sup>4</sup> Pinkus, 20

<sup>5</sup> Slezkine, Yuri. 2004. *The Jewish Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Pg.1

Not stay home: they moved to Kiev, Kharkov, Leningrad, and Moscow, and they moved up the Soviet social ladder once they got there. Jews by birth and perhaps by upbringing, they were Russian by cultural affiliation and-many of them-Soviet by ideological commitment.<sup>6</sup>

While I find Slezkine's thesis compelling, I also find such categorizations problematic, for they pigeonhole Soviet Jews as static and essentialized, unaffected by the complexities of time, place, gender, and class.<sup>7</sup> The assimilationist argument does not explain the outpouring of solidarity for Israel in 1948 among the supposedly "assimilated" Moscow Jews, but merely notes the connection between Zionism and Soviet Communism as "millenarian rebellions against capitalism, "philistinism," and "chimerical nationality""<sup>8</sup> I aim to complicate this assimilationist thesis by complicating Ilya Ehrenburg, the popular prototype used by Slezkine, Pinkus, and others. I argue that the Soviet public realm was extremely complex, and Ehrenburg was forced to negotiate and articulate his identity, as a Soviet, as a Jew, and as an intelligent, in nuanced and carefully calculated ways, within the confines of the totalitarian state.

In this essay I offer a discussion of Ehrenburg's 1948 "Concerning a Certain Letter," published in *Pravda* 11 days after the demonstrations of Zionist support for the State of Israel at High Holy Day services at the Moscow Synagogue during Golda Meir's tenure as an ambassador to the Soviet Union. I argue that the letter, often cited as evidence of Ehrenburg's compliance with the Soviet State, was actually meant to be a warning to the Jewish people of Stalin's forthcoming anti-Semitic policies. It also serves as a reminder of the many apparent contradictions of the Soviet state, of the way in which it both encourage Jewish culture, and

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<sup>6</sup> Slezkine, 206

<sup>7</sup> Pinkus argues that there are two other branches of identity of Soviet Jews in addition to the "assimilated group," to which Ehrenburg belonged. The "national-communist" group, aspired to "establish a Jewish national life based on Yiddish culture" in the 1920s and 1930s, and many became part of the assimilated category because of changes in Soviet government policy and changes in demographic, social, and economic patterns. The second group, the national-Zionist group, is "best described...by pointing out that it differs essentially from the assimilationists and the Communists in that it no longer believes that the Jewish national problem can find a solution within the Soviet Union" (20-21).

<sup>8</sup> Slezkine, 269

suppressed it (often violently). The letter, perhaps most importantly for this paper, acts as an articulation of Ehrenburg's own complicated identities. I examine select letters to Ehrenburg in response to his piece in *Pravda* from Soviet Jews, as indication that (some) Soviet Jews understood Ehrenburg as a liaison between the Jews and the Soviet State. It is my intention that by complicating one Soviet Jewish intellectual, my reader begins to complicate his/her understanding of Jewish identity in the Soviet Union and begins to question what it meant to be Jewish in the USSR in 1948, at the moment when Palestine became the State of Israel, where Zionism's "messianic promise of imminent collective redemption and a more or less collective transfiguration," a promise it shared with Bolshevism, was supposedly realized.<sup>9</sup>

### *Ehrenburg as a Soviet Jewish Intellectual*

Ehrenburg was born to a secular Jewish family in Kiev in 1891. After becoming an activist for Moscow's Bolshevik underground and imprisoned at the age of seventeen in 1908, he fled Tsarist Russia for Paris, where he met Vladimir Lenin for the first time. His intellectual cohort included Picasso, Chagall, Modigliani, and Rivera. He published *The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurenito and His Disciples* from Paris in 1922. In 1923, Ehrenburg became the *Isvestia* correspondent in Paris.

Ehrenburg began publishing heavy-handed propaganda in *Isvestia*, which not only reflected his own personal politics but also helped maintain his privileged position abroad. His articles began as condemnations of Fascist aggression and "Stalin's ideological opponents as

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<sup>9</sup> Slezkine, 289

well-French surrealists and intellectuals such as Andre Gide, who broke with the Communists even though they shared a common hatred for it.”<sup>10</sup>

He criticized French accommodation to Hitler and the Munich Agreement, serving as “a mouth piece for Russia’s rage,” to borrow from Slezkine.<sup>11</sup> His articles not only criticized Fascism but anti-Semitism as well, particularly in the French government (his host at the time), where reports of pogroms in Germany were repeatedly ignored in the press. He wrote of attacks on Jews in Dijon and Lille, and was almost forced to leave France because of these condemning accounts. Only the Soviet Union, it seemed, appeared ready to oppose Hitler. Ehrenburg wrote in early October: “I am a Soviet citizen. There is no person that wants peace more than mine. They know the meaning of motherland, loyalty, and honor.”<sup>12</sup> His critique of anti-Semitism during the Second World War marks the beginnings of the formation of his position as a Soviet Jewish Intellectual.

During the Second World War, Ehrenburg was appointed to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, an arm of the Soviet Union used to recruit American Jewish dollars for the Soviet war effort.<sup>13</sup> Members of the JAFC included Solomon Mikhoels, the director of the State Moscow Yiddish Theater (the GOSET), who would later be murdered in 1948 by Stalin’s secret police. During his time on the JAFC, Ehrenburg began to collect testimonies of Soviet Jews who survived the Nazi occupation of Soviet territories, testimonies that included eyewitnesses of the mobile Nazi death squad, which would later become *The Black Book*, a collection edited by Ehrenburg and his friend and fellow Soviet Jewish intellectual Vassily Grossman.

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<sup>10</sup> Rubenstein, Joshua. 1996. *Tangled Loyalties: the Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg* New York: BasicBooks.

<sup>11</sup> Slezkine, Yuri. 2004. *The Jewish Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Pg. 226

<sup>12</sup> Rubenstein, 178

<sup>13</sup> For more on the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, see *Arkady Vaksberg Stalin Against the Jews: The Tragedy of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*.

Reporting the horrors of the Holocaust certainly solidified Ehrenburg's contempt of anti-Semitism. In December of 1944, with the German troops about to invade Prussia, Ehrenburg emphasized the "Nazi's greatest crime," the crime against the Jews:

Ask any captured German why his countrymen destroyed six million innocent people and he will answer: "They are Jews. They are black or red-haired. They have different blood..." and all this begin with stupid jokes, with the shouts of street kids, with signposts, and it led to Maidanek, Babi Yar, Treblinka, to ditches filled with children's corpses."<sup>14</sup>

Of course Ehrenburg's vehement anti-fascism and disdain for anti-Semitism is also reflective of the Soviet Union's official position. But can we discount Ehrenburg and his work simply because of these parallel opinions? I argue that this is a very complex, often indiscernible position that deserves our careful attention. When the War ended, and Ehrenburg returned to Moscow, he persisted to write against anti-Semitism, praise high culture, and praise the Soviet State. Ehrenburg continued to be a complicated figure, negotiating his role as an intellectual within the confines of the Soviet State, and complicating this role even further as a Soviet Jewish Intellectual.

#### *Golda Meir, The State of Israel, and "Concerning a Certain Letter"*

Golda Meir's appointment as Ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1948, and her visit to the Moscow Synagogue on the High Holy Days of September and October 1948, would mark a turning point in Soviet Policy in the Middle East, as well as an important moment in understanding Ehrenburg's role as a Soviet Jewish Intellectual. In May of 1948, when the Jews in Palestine declared their independence, the Soviet Union was the third nation, following the United States and Guatemala, to extend diplomatic recognition to Israel. This vote can be understood as an extension of Stalin and Lenin's ideology that all "nations have the right to self-

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<sup>14</sup> *Pravda*, December 17, 1994 p. 3. See also *Pravda*, August 11, 1994, pg. 2, August 12, 1994, p. 3, October 27, 1944, pg. 4

determination,” but more convincingly, it was a move against British colonialism, and the only proposal in front of the General Assembly of the United Nations that “had a chance of commanding the necessary two-thirds majority, and was therefore the only proposal that promised to bring about the ending of British rule in Palestine.”<sup>15</sup> The Soviet Union’s support of the new State of Israel continued, albeit deteriorating, and rapidly, until February 9, 1953, when in the international context of the Cold War, the Soviet legation in Tel Aviv was bombed, and all diplomatic relations were severed.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the first Saturday after presenting her credentials to the Kremlin on September 10, 1948, Meir and her staff headed for the synagogue. As she recounts in her memoirs, Meir wondered “what had remained of their Jewishness after so many years of life under a regime that proclaimed a war...specifically against Judaism.”<sup>17</sup> What she found in the synagogue on September 11<sup>th</sup> were banners, proclaiming in Hebrew “The Jewish People Lives,” and “The State of Israel Was Proclaimed on May 14, 1948.”<sup>18</sup> Mordechai Namir, the first legation’s first secretary, recalled the crowd cheering “*Shalom*,” and that

After with all of our joy that fortune had granted us such a reunion with our brothers, there was also a sinking feeling in our hearts because of the suspicion that the blatant conduct of the congregation had crossed the acceptable limits of the city and that we had participated in a very tragic event.<sup>19</sup>

Meir and her legation were told that many more Jews would be coming for the upcoming High Holy Day services. When she arrived, she was met by 50,000 Jews:

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<sup>15</sup> Lederer, Ivo J., and Wayne S. Vucinich. 1974. *The Soviet Union and the Middle East; the post-World War II Era*. Stanford, Calif: Hoover Institution Press, p. 161

<sup>16</sup> For more on the Soviet Union’s foreign policy with Israel, please see Nadav Safran’s *The Soviet Union and Israel, 1947-1969*, in *The Soviet Union and the Middle East: the post World War II Era*

<sup>17</sup> Meir, Golda *My Life*, Putnam and Sons, New York, p. 247.

<sup>18</sup> Rubenstein, Joshua *Tangled Loyalties*, p. 257

<sup>19</sup> Meir, 258

The street in front of the synagogue had changed. Now it was filled with hundreds of them, packed together like sardines, hundreds...including Red Army officers, soldiers, teenagers and babies carried in their parents arms. Instead of the 2,000 odd Jews...there were 50,000. They had come...these good, brave Jews, to be with us, to demonstrate their sense of kinship and to celebrate the establishment of the State of Israel.<sup>20</sup>

The crowds greeted her “Shalom” and called out to “*Nasha Golda*.”<sup>21</sup> Golda responded in Yiddish “*A dank eich vos ihr seit geblieben Yidden*” (Thank you for having remained Jews).<sup>22</sup>

The demonstrations in the Synagogue would facilitate the shut down of what was left of Stalin’s pro-Yiddish policies (for Yiddish was the language of the Jewish proletariat, Hebrew the language of the sacred). Stalin had promoted his paradoxical conclusion that “a nation has the right to determine its fate freely...it has the right to live as it wishes.”<sup>23</sup> This right to self-determination is a key point in the development of the policy of *Korenizatsiia* and what Yuri Slezkine calls Stalin and Lenin’s “ethnophilia.”<sup>24</sup> The establishment of autonomous republics (The Soviet Socialist Republics), regions, and national territories (called Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics) demonstrated that socialism had “solved” the national issue.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, it explains the government’s support of the Moscow State Jewish Theater (the MosGOSET), of the Yiddish writers Yitzhak Fefer, Vasily Grossman, and their Yiddish language newspapers that circulated in the 1920s and 1930s. This would become a common refrain in the Soviet Union, particularly to combat any accusations from the “West” of anti-Semitism (which was, after all, technically illegal) in the Soviet Union.

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<sup>20</sup> Meir, 250

<sup>21</sup> Meir, 250-251

<sup>22</sup> Meir, 251

<sup>23</sup> Vaksberg, 5. Arkady Vaksberg’s monograph draws on the totalitarian school of Soviet historiography to contend that Stalin executed anti-Semitic policies through terror alone, and that all Jews and Jewish expressions of identity were suppressed by his hegemony (and were by default, uncontested). For more on Stalin’s suppression of Jewish identity, see Arkady Vaksberg *Stalin Against the Jews*, and Arno Lustiger, and the *Stalin and the Jews: The Red Book and the Tragedy of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*.

<sup>24</sup> Slezkine, Yuri. 1994. "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism". *Slavic Review*. 53 (2): 414

<sup>25</sup> Dekel-Chen, 15

However, in November of 1948, two months after the High Holy Day services, the remaining members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested. The Jewish Museums in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast and in Vilna were shut down. The Yiddish Theaters and Yiddish publishing houses in Odessa, Moscow, and Birobidzhan were forced to close. Ehrenburg became the only surviving member of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee.

Thus Namir's premonitions that the "conduct of the congregation had crossed the acceptable limit" had been correct.<sup>26</sup> Ehrenburg published "Concerning a Certain Letter" in the 21<sup>st</sup> of September, 1948 issue of *Pravda*, as a reaction to the enthusiastic responses among the Russian Jewry in the Moscow Synagogue.<sup>27</sup> After Mikhoels' murder in January of 1948, Ehrenburg certainly considered his position with the Stalinist state precarious, and his letter foreshadowed, indeed warned Soviet Jews of what was to come.

"Letter" is a response to a (probably fictitious) German Jewish soldier who had fought for the French Communists, and returned to Munich to find his family killed at the hands of the SS. He still encounters anti-Semitism, coworkers urge him to "get out of here, go to Palestine."<sup>28</sup> Ehrenburg's response reminds "Alexander R." that the "Soviet government was the first to recognize the new state," that he does "believe in the future of Israel," and that

The solution to the "Jewish problem" does not depend on military success in Palestine, but on the triumph of socialism over capitalism, the triumph of lofty internationalist principles of the working class over nationalism, fascism and racism...the October Revolution brought freedom and equality to all citizens of the Soviet land...some [Jews] still regard Russian as their mother tongue, others Ukrainian, still others Yiddish, but they all regard the Soviet Union as their homeland where there is no longer the exploitation of one man by another.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Meir, 258

<sup>27</sup> In his memoirs, Ehrenburg mentions that he was "asked" to publish the letter.

<sup>28</sup> *Pravda*, September 21, 1948 p. 2

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 2

One can read and derive multiple meanings from Ehrenburg's "Letter." It has been cited, by Arkady Vaksberg, Benjamin Pinkus, and other scholars, as evidence of Ehrenburg's complicity in Stalin's ongoing and upcoming assault on Yiddish culture. In fact, even Golda Meir criticized Ehrenburg vehemently in her memoirs.

In the letter, Ehrenburg employs the language of the Stalinist state, the language of pluralism, of "sovereignty" and the right of all nations to "self-determination," and is precisely the same language of Lenin and Stalin used to justify *Korenizatssia* and the promotion of national consciousness and identity. The article establishes that Jews have legitimate moral and political rights to a state of their own, which he describes (appropriately) as "an ark, a raft, holding people overtaken by the bloody flood of racism and Fascism" and even acknowledges the possibility that Aliyah might be necessary for some Jews:

It is possible that, under some circumstances, Alexander R. has no choice but to make his way to Israel. That may well be the solution to his personal dilemma, but it will not be the solution for all Jews, who live in many different lands under the oppression of money, lies, and superstition.<sup>30</sup>

As Namir points out in his memoirs, the contents of the letter are clearly "Pro-Israeli and anti-Zionist."<sup>31</sup>

If one reads the letter and considers the context-- the recent demonstration of Moscow Jews at the Synagogue, Stalin's tightening of policies against Jews--we can also begin to read between the lines. I, like Joshua Rubenstein, the writer of a biography of Ehrenburg, suggest that Ehrenburg shared in Namir's anxiety, that his "fellow Moscow Jews were behaving too enthusiastically for their own good and he was determined to caution them."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Ehrenburg

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<sup>30</sup> *Pravda*, September 21, 1948 p. 3

<sup>31</sup> Rubenstein, 260

<sup>32</sup> Rubenstein, 259

had “witnessed Hitler’s atrocities and was heartened by the establishment of Israel...but he knew that official anti-Semitism was a growing threat and that Soviet Jews needed a warning, a reminder of where they were living.”<sup>33</sup> Ehrenburg understood all too well that all other Jewish press and cultural centers had been shut down, and in order to publish anything in 1948, he would have to write in official language, or to borrow from Stephen Kotkin, to “speak Bolshevik.”

Soviet Jews’ responses to Ehrenburg’s letter indicate that (some) Jews understood not only his message, but also continued to view him as a fellow Soviet Jew who could act in their best interest. A published collection of letters of Soviet Jews to Ehrenburg demonstrates his unique position as a liaison between Jews and the Stalinist state.<sup>34</sup> One such letter comes from Saul Glusker. He writes to Ehrenburg that the *Pravda* article encouraged him to write to Ehrenburg of a topic that he had “long been thinking of.”<sup>35</sup> Glusker describes a day when his seven year old daughter came in from school and announced to him that she “no longer want to be a Jew,” and when he asked why, she answered “because everyone teases her.”<sup>36</sup> This is disconcerting for Glusker, who tells his daughter that it “is impossible to change her blue eyes to brown...as it is to change her *nationality*,” and that the teachers “Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin...were all of different nationalities...she was especially pleased that Lenin and Stalin’s teacher, Marx, was a Jew.”<sup>37</sup> He writes to Ehrenburg:

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<sup>33</sup> Rubenstein, 258

<sup>34</sup> For more on genre of letter writing in the Soviet Union, please see Sheila Fitzpatrick *Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s* in the *Slavic Review*, Vol. 55 No. 1 (Spring, 1996) pp. 78-105

<sup>35</sup> Altshuler, Mordechai, Yitzhak Arad, and Shmuel Krakowski. 1993. *Sovetskie evrei pishut Il'e Erenburgu: 1943-1966*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem., 288

<sup>36</sup> Alshuler et al., 289

<sup>37</sup> Alshuler et al., , 290

As a talented representative of the Jewish nationality, a beloved voice of our country...we need to make more of a war on anti-Semitism, to take out the diseased tree with the root.<sup>38</sup>

Because Glusker appealed to Ehrenburg, we see that he understands him as a Soviet Jewish intellectual, as someone that can serve as their liason with the Soviet state. Even though Ehrenburg's letter in *Pravda* may seem as just an arm of the Soviet state, it becomes clear that Soviet Jews did not see the letter as such, and understood the message between the lines.

There are several other letters in response to Ehrenburg's article, several of which see him not only as Jewish but as someone who can appeal to the state on behalf of the Jewish people. "Boris Brainin," an alias for the famous writer Sepp Osterreicher, wrote to Ehrenburg in 1948 after the letter in *Pravda* informing him that the site of Babi Yar had been desecrated by looters, and that "wouldn't it be possible to construct a park and memorial for Babi Yar?"<sup>39</sup> Or Volberg A., writes to Ehrenburg also in 1948, telling him of an anti-Semitic exchange on a bus between himself (a Jew) and a police officer. The letters opens,

Why do I choose to write to you, rather than someone else? I remember your articles during the Second World War...and I think that you are able to understand not only physical pain but also the humiliation of persecution...<sup>40</sup>

The letter goes on to describe the incident, and to point out that the "point is not this one incident...but multiple incidents, and the inability for anyone to stand up for what is right."<sup>41</sup>The letter indicates the prevalence of official and unofficial anti-Semitism, and while the letter seems to be a bit rhetorical (it is unclear what the author expects to come of the letter), we can still see Ehrenburg's connection to a larger Soviet Jewish community.

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<sup>38</sup> Alshuler et al., ., 291

<sup>39</sup> *Sovetskie Evrei Pishut Ile Erenburgu*, The Hebrew University Press, Tel Aviv: p. 295

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 293, My Translation

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Ilya Ehrenburg's identity as a Soviet Jewish intellectual is a paradox in and of itself, whose contradictions need to be teased out and read closely in the context of the Soviet State. Certainly a critical juncture in the formation of his Jewish identity was the Holocaust and the Second World War, as was the case for many Jews in the Soviet Union. By understanding Ilya Ehrenburg's contradictions, we can begin to problematize the standard assimilationist narrative of Soviet Jews more generally. I must remind my audience that often the most fascinating examples come from those who do not fit the standard narrative, and while I have provided one case study, one example of the complexity of Jewish intellectual life and identity in the Soviet Union, there are several more examples of Soviet intellectuals, particularly in cultural production, that should be looked at in this context more closely.