Ghostwriting: Erenburg and Grossman’s Black Book on the Holocaust in the Soviet Union

On Tuesday, September 17, Dr. Anja Tippner, Professor of Slavic Literature and Culture at Hamburg University, presented her new research in a lecture titled “Ghostwriting: Erenburg and Grossman’s Black Book on the Holocaust in the Soviet Union,” the first of the 2013-2014 academic year’s Noontime Scholars Lecture series. Dr. Tippner has written the monographs *Alterity, Translation and Culture: Chekhov’s Prose Between Russia and Germany* (Frankfurt/New York, 1997) and *The Permanent Avant-Garde? Surrealism in Prague* (Cologne/Weimar, 2009), as well as numerous articles on Jewish narratives in Eastern Europe and socialist children’s literature.

Dr. Tippner’s lecture examined the remembrance of trauma in the Soviet Union after World War II, specifically Holocaust memory narratives. After 1945, the Soviet victory over the Nazis became a part of the official myth. Remembering wartime experiences was difficult, unless it fit the ideology of heroism and the triumph of communism over fascism. Within that historical context, Dr. Tippner distinguished between two types of memory, individual and collective/institutional. In the Soviet Union, individual memory had to conform to the collective/institutional memory. Those individuals who had suffered during the war (e.g. soldiers, partisans, Holocaust survivors, prisoners of war) could not tell their personal stories and were left out of memorials. “Their private pain went underground,” Dr. Tippner said because the Soviet culture did not acknowledge wartime trauma.

Since the Holocaust and its victims did not conform to that model of heroism and victory, their memories were unmentionable. However, beginning in the late 1940s, a time of growing anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, there was resistance against such a romanticized, fictionalized story of the war. To counteract the silencing of Jewish survivors’ voices, the Russian Jewish writers Ilya Erenburg and Vasilii Grossman compiled a *Black Book* on the Holocaust. It was a collection of survivors’ accounts, letters, and other documentary material that recorded Nazi atrocities against the Jews. The book covered all areas of the Soviet Union, especially Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. Complementing local accounts from those areas were reports from the concentration camps in Poland. Erenburg and Grossman intended to publish the text in Russian, English, Hebrew, and German.

The final editing stages of the *Black Book* occurred amid more overt Soviet anti-Semitism. By 1948, publication of the *Black Book* became impossible. It was destroyed, and the drafts existed only in the archives. It finally appeared in print in 1991, when it was published in Kiev from a version located in Jerusalem.

While much scholarship on the *Black Book* has either viewed it as a historical document or studied its publication history, not its actual content, Dr. Tippner’s research is the first to look at the book as a literary text. She pointed out that well-known writers such as Viktor Shklovsky, Margarita Aliger, and Vera Inber all edited the documents that comprised the book. The *Black Book* is unique in highlighting the process of aesthetic transformation to record testimonies. The text deftly interweaves primary and secondary witnesses. Dr. Tippner identified the *Black Book*’s editors as ghostwriters, both
the survivors were good Soviet citizens. Although the editors proved the accounts' authenticity through providing the names, dates, residences, and photos of the survivors, they still subsumed the original accounts. Inber's contribution emphasized Soviet solidarity, where Russians and Ukrainians helped their Jewish neighbors. Other writers followed her practice. In the *Black Book*, Holocaust survivors expressed their desire to reconstruct Soviet society. Thus, the multiplicity of voices depicted in the text did not result in a multiplicity of perspectives.

Throughout the lecture, Dr. Tippner underscored how remembering and commemorating trauma were difficult within the Soviet experience. Along with grief and loss, trauma was an utterly inappropriate emotion in a victorious socialist state. Collective discussion of the war's less favorable aspects were muted since the official story omitted wartime trauma. Jewish survivors could not tell their stories independently or have them become part of the Soviet literary canon.

Dr. Tippner concluded with connecting the *Black Book* to today's Russia. Although the *Black Book* discusses events that happened seventy years ago, it is still relevant to Russia, where memories of the Holocaust largely remain silenced. Consequently, Russian literature still lacks published memoirs and autobiographies of Holocaust survivors.

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