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## War, gender, and lasting emotion: letters and photographs of Masha Bruskina and Olga Bancic, 1941–44

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### ABSTRACT

On 21 October 1941, seventeen-year-old Masha Bruskina was hanged in Minsk, a fate thinly veiled in a note smuggled out of prison to her mother in the ghetto. Bessarabian Jew Olga Bancic addressed her last letter to her daughter, Dolores, the day before she was decapitated in Stuttgart in May 1944. Caught at a fleeting juncture between life and death, these letters became *memento mori* and now appear on websites that do neither mention their origins and trajectories nor the role played by intermediaries, motivated by humanism, political allegiance, and economic gain. Also disregarded is the fact that Bruskina's letter shared the fate of her mother, who was murdered two weeks after her daughter. While the decontextualised use of the letters, often accompanied by photographs, elicits an emotional response, this article will show that it also extends the violence inflicted on these women. By tracing the journeys of these letters and photographs my investigation will reveal affective and micro-economic relationships that individualise these Holocaust victims. Even if their executions illustrate Foucault's 'economies of punishment', the material culture that speaks for them merges affect with activism, foregrounding a means to resist that has been ignored or misappropriated.

### KEYWORDS

Epistolary tradition; atrocity photographs; family album; holocaust; partisans; punishment; gender; Olga Bancic; Masha Bruskina; Manouchian Group

Seventeen-year-old Maria Borisovna Bruskina, one of the first twelve civilians publicly hanged in occupied Minsk, smuggled a note to her mother from the prison in which she was held prior to her execution. Nearly three years later, on 9 May 1944, Bessarabian Jew Olga Bancic used the French Red Cross to send a moving missive to her daughter a few hours before she was beheaded in Stuttgart.<sup>1</sup> Caught at a fleeting juncture between life and death, these letters have become precious *memento mori*, speaking for the departed and channelling mourning and affect. Now available on webpages, the letters were cherished not only by their intended recipients but also by myriad intermediaries, some of whom will forever remain anonymous. This article will challenge the skewed memorialisation of these two women within and beyond the Iron Curtain by articulating

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**Content note:** The article deals with the following themes: antisemitism, Holocaust, public executions, atrocity photographs, and refers to traumatic events that some readers may find sensitive or triggering. It also displays graphic images of the executions of individuals in addition to family photographs and final letters written by individuals prior to their death.

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the trajectories of the letters with the legacy of the extant photographs of Bruskina's execution and Bancic's personal life. The contextualisation of these letters and photographs as material culture, I will propose, not only illuminates the uniqueness of the lives and deeds of two remarkable women but is also part and parcel of the political, social, cultural and emotional history of the Second World War. The investigation, therefore, showcases the economies of punishment to which the two women were subjected, in Michel Foucault's definition of the concept while integrating gender and ethnicity with affect and activism.<sup>2</sup>

Banic's and Bruskina's letters have traversed geographical and linguistic boundaries, inspiring admiration, sadness, and anger through their projection of familial and political commitment. Their decontextualised use, however, raises doubts about conscious and unconscious distortions from their Belarussian and French originals. In fact, although quoted verbatim in sites such as Wikipedia, Bruskina's letter did not survive the war and was only passed on as an item of oral history three decades after her death. Bancic's letter, by contrast, reached its recipients and has survived in Romania's National Archive, although it was never thrown from the train that took her from France to Germany, as suggested in the same website.<sup>3</sup> This is because Bancic's manuscript plea prefacing the letter was written on printed paper from Stuttgart's Prison, as will be seen below.<sup>4</sup> Disregarding these facts, this article will propose, not only minimises these women's agency but also obliterates the historical role played by familial and affective relationships in war and conflict.

The production and dissemination of letters such as those investigated here afford important insights into private lives and personal relationships, allowing us to trace individual experiences and agency. While letters first arose as legal documents, they started to assume a prominent role in familial relations during the early modern period and became established as means of domestic communication from the eighteenth century. By then, letters offered opportunities of self-expression to secluded middle- and upper-class women.<sup>5</sup> Contrastingly, the letters that Bruskina and Bancic wrote attest to the literacy of lower-class women, normally the last segment of the population to gain access to education. In Bruskina's case, literacy was partly a consequence of women's rights in post-revolutionary Belarus, while Bancic's self-didacticism ensued from her cultural background and political militancy. The two women benefited from the emphasis placed on portable commodities such as education by European Jews accustomed to exile and displacement.

Despite their uniqueness, letters are not often the main sources of twentieth-century historical inquiry, though they are used as accessories to related media, such as photographs, memoirs, diaries, and testimonies. Even the pervasive presence of war correspondence in war museums or edited collections is not normally accompanied by analyses of the letters' trajectories. As with the two items analysed here, letters written during the two world wars frequently travelled long and torturous journeys to reach their destinations. In addition, they were delivered by special postal units to the remotest corners of battlefields, where they were anxiously awaited. Their pride of place in the pockets of deceased combatants alongside a cherished photograph of one's beloved attests to their comforting qualities. Receiving these letters was considered so important for morale that, during the Great Patriotic War (1941-45), the USSR provided templates for 'unknown girls' to write

to 'unknown soldiers', encouraging them to 'defend the Motherland' and to return home victorious.<sup>6</sup>

Within the epistolary tradition, the letters of people about to be executed are closely linked with those written by soldiers in trenches. The impending departure of the writer makes these letters occupy a transitional space between absence and presence. This liminality, David Barton and Nigel Hall suggest, is shared with 'photographs of deceased people', such as those scrutinised below:

The letter thus occupies the liminal space of photographs of deceased people in an unresolved tension between absence and presence, as well as embodiment and disembodiment. Writing and reading thus acquire features of living and dying, with the letter acting as a fluid boundary between the materiality and immateriality of life and death. As a genre, letters have specific forms of deixis, that is ways of referring to the writer and the intended reader and to space and time.<sup>7</sup>

The 'specific form of deixis' to which Barton and Hall refer is heightened in the letters studied here by the fact that neither Bancic nor Bruskina left any other written material.

The letters written by people cognisant of their impending execution belong within the epistolary tradition of consolation, of which an early exponent was Thomas More's epistle to his daughter, Margaret Roper, written in coal the day prior to his beheading, on 5 July 1535.<sup>8</sup> As with More's comforting words, Bancic's and Bruskina's letters aimed to offer solace to their addressees, while projecting the unique bond between mothers and daughters. Nonetheless, although the content of the letters effectively merges the domestic and public realms, their memorialisation, as that of the women who wrote them, has been clouded by oblivion, censorship, and misrepresentation. These parameters are nowhere better demonstrated than by the fact that Bancic became a familiar point of reference in post-war Romania, although she had been born in today's Moldovan capital, Chişinău (Kishinev), then part of the Russian empire, was subsequently arrested in France and killed in Germany. As a former 'communist hero', Bancic has been largely forgotten in post-Iron Curtain Romania. She is still recognised in France, where she is remembered as a foreign resister defending a country that had embraced her presence, or an internationalist fighting fascism, the latter perspective championed by the Parti Communiste Français (PCF). By contrast, Bruskina was an anonymous but pervasive presence in the USSR, where she was cast as 'the unknown girl' alongside two Heroes of the Soviet Union in a memorial slab and in photographs that were widely reproduced in schoolbooks, films, and museums.<sup>9</sup> Bruskina's long-standing namelessness persisted despite her fame and several attempts to identify and vindicate her. These were first undertaken timidly by her father, Barys Davidovich Bruskin, and her uncle, the renowned Belarussian sculptor Zair Isaakovich Azgur, soon after the war. From the 1960s to the 1980s, several Soviet and US journalists sought to establish her identity, starting with Vladimir Freidin in Minsk, and Jewish Muscovites Lev Arkadyev and Ada Dikhtyar. After Arkadyev and Dikhtyar completed their decade-long research, Bruskina's case was taken up in the US first by Bill Keller from the *New York Times* and, subsequently, by Judith Miller, culminating with Holocaust scholars Nechama Tec and Daniel Weiss, who settled the debate in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Their efforts were finally acknowledged in 2008, when Bruskina's identity was officially

acknowledged in Belarus, a belated recognition that led to the inclusion of her name and patronymic in archival records and books, with the inscription on her monument edited the following year.

Bruskina, a Young Pioneer and member of the Komsomol, was one of twelve ‘partisans’ executed in four separate locations with two men and one woman in each of them.<sup>11</sup> Like the other three women, Bruskina, bore an informative board that reached down to her thighs, in which a caption in Russian and German read: ‘We are partisans who shot German soldiers’ (Figure 1). Using the first-person plural, the women were chosen to ‘confess’ their crimes as ‘partisans’, a euphemism used for real or imagined resisters, civil servants, local intelligentsia, and Jews.

Beginning with Poland, the Nazi classification of Slavs and Jews as *Untermensch* was translated into a brutal display of power that included public executions, and the ever-present spectacle of dangling corpses. These widespread rituals effectively enacted the ‘economies of punishment’ that, as Foucault argues, had been common until the late eighteenth century, when they started to be removed from public view.<sup>12</sup> The powers of horror can be seen in the eight photographs of Bruskina’s execution. However, in a reversal of their original intentions, for contemporary viewers, these images project the humanity and quiet dignity of the victims, dominated by Bruskina’s presence and calm demeanour. Indeed, the eloquence of the photographs made them useful evidence during the Nuremberg Trials, and they were also a staple of Soviet school books, exhibitions, or documentaries, such as Mikhail Romm’s *Ordinary Fascism* (1965).<sup>13</sup> The photographs evoke pride and sorrow in equal measure mostly, but not only, because of the ages and deportment of the condemned, led by the upright Bruskina, who, in the most famous photograph, looks straight at viewers through the camera’s lens. Bruskina reciprocates the spectators’ gaze, placing viewers in the position of the photographer and,



Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1972-026-43 / Fotograf(in): o.Ang.

**Figure 1.** Masha Bruskin (centre), Kirill Truss (left) and Volodya Shcherbatsevich (right) are paraded through Minsk prior to their execution. Bundesarchiv. Bild 146-1972-026-43.

consequently, of perpetrators. As will be seen below, Bruskina's letter completes this perspective.

Bruskina and her two companions were hung at 'the gate of the yeast factory on Voroshilov Street', in Komarovka, in central Minsk.<sup>14</sup> On the site stands a small, unremarkable monument on a granite plinth with three roughly engraved heads aligned as a frieze (Figure 2). The life-size head of Kirill Truss is slightly angled towards his left where young Volodya Shcherbatsevich, in full profile, looks at Bruskina, placed in the centre and facing the road very much as she did in her first photograph. They are separated from each other by their raised, clenched fists, showing their allegiance to the communist ethos and their defiance of the 'fascists' who, the inscription reminds us, murdered them. In style, if not in size, the monument follows the tenets of socialist realism, exemplified by the materials used and the expressionless victims. As the monument is placed sideways on the footpath, it is hardly noticed by pedestrians.<sup>15</sup> Hardly perceptible also is the alteration in the inscription, where, in lieu of the last line, where Bruskina was referred to as 'the unknown girl', her initials and surname, М. Б. Брускина (M. B. Bruskina), were carved in 2009.



**Figure 2.** Monument in front the Yeast Factory, OAO Дрожжевой Комбинат, where Bruskina and her colleagues were executed. Minsk 220030, Belarus. Photograph of the author, 2019.

These inaugural executions of Minsk civilians were staged in front of locals who were required to line the streets to witness the march to the scaffold and the execution itself. The corpses were left in the place of execution, a spectacle designed to serve as a lesson, in consonance with the Nazi dictum that Soviet citizens should be more afraid of them than of their rulers. However, any lessons learnt were not those that the Nazis contemplated as, throughout the USSR, this terror was neither an effective deterrent to potential resisters nor to supporting them. This was due as much to the zeal to 'defend the motherland' as to their brutal treatment by the occupiers.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, as Foucault reminds us, the spectacle of punishment always had the potential 'to make the executioner resemble a criminal ... to reverse roles at the last moment, to make the tortured criminal an object of pity or admiration'.<sup>17</sup> These grisly executions, in other words, exalted ordinary people, transforming them into martyrs and heroes to be pitied or admired and were soon apprehended as sacrifice and martyrdom in accordance with Christian tradition. The executed were likened to living embodiments of Christ's passion and crucifixion, as exemplified in, for example, Larisa Shepitko's *The Ascent* (1977).<sup>18</sup>

Like her two companions, Bruskina was no passive bystander, although she shot neither German occupiers nor Belarusian collaborators. She had been arrested for her participation in an underground cell that disseminated news about the war and helped prisoners reach partisan detachments, *otriads*. These *otriads* were organised soon after the occupation in Minsk's adjacent forests, especially Slutsk, Koidanovo (Dzyarzhynsk), and Naliboki, which was the location of the most famous Jewish unit, led by Anatoly (Tuvia) Bielski and his brothers.<sup>19</sup> She took part in an underground cell comprising twenty-one people, which was led by Olga Fyodorovna Shcherbatsevich, also executed on the same day. Shcherbatsevich oversaw the distribution of prisoners to safe houses, one of which was that of her sister, Nadezhda Fyodorovna Yenushkevich (Nadya), also hung with the group. Shcherbatsevich also liaised with a dressmaker who facilitated garments to disguise the prisoners, Lena Ostrovskaya, who paid with her life too. Reconnaissance and guidance from the town to the forest was undertaken by young scouts, one of whom, Shcherbatsevich's sixteen-year-old son, Volodya, was executed alongside Truss and Bruskina. A tall teenager, Volodya Shcherbatsevich's child-like and tearful appearance was captured at the moment that the executioner tied the noose around his neck (Figure 3).<sup>20</sup> The last person from this executed trio was Kirill Ivanovich Truss, who distributed news from the official Soviet news agency, Sovinformburo (Soviet Information Bureau), and arranged the provision of forged documents for the escapees. These three 'partisans' were hung in sequence, starting with Bruskina, and following with Volodya, perhaps hoping for signs of weakness on their part to undermine their companions' steadfastness.

The twelve members of Shcherbatsevich's cell were identified by one of their number, Boris Rudzyanko, who was summarily executed at the war's end. They were hung by the 707 Infantry Division of the Wehrmacht with assistance given by the Second *Schutzmannschaft* Battalion of Lithuanian auxiliaries, led by Antanas Impulevičius-Impulėnas.<sup>21</sup> In fact, it was one of these Lithuanians who photographed the proceedings, subsequently developed by Alexsei Sergeyevich Kozlovsky in the studio of Volksdeutsche Boris Werner.<sup>22</sup> On liberation, Kozlovsky produced 287 'atrocities' photographs, some of which, like Bruskina's, were used by the KGB to identify collaborators.



**Figure 3.** Volodya Shcherbatsevich's last moments, as the executioner ties the noose around his neck. Bundaarchiv. Bild 183-F1006-0201-002.

The four groups of 'partisans' were photographed, although the extant images of the remaining three groups were taken after their execution, suggesting that they could have been done by the same person. Enlarged copies are displayed in a column on the right-hand side of an alcove dedicated to these first executions at the Belarusian State Museum of the Great Patriotic War (Figure 4). This display mirrors the proceedings by using four ropes where three prints are placed vertically. The standout photograph of the first column is that of its leader, Olga Shcherbatsevich, not just because of her determined expression but because there are no pictures of her companions, whose names are placed underneath prints of head silhouettes. In the second rope, Bruskina's school photograph is flanked by a shot of Truss at the top and one of a childish-looking Volodya Shcherbatsevich, wearing his Pioneer scarf, at the bottom. There are no photographs in the third rope, which ends in a noose and is placed immediately to the right of the bronze bust of Volodya Shcherbatsevich's torso, in which he dons the peasant cap with which he was executed. To its left, the last column shows three photographs of the fourth group, while the last column shows the four executions. The display, in other words, foregrounds the youngest male among those executed, fitting closely with the Soviet post-war simplification of the country's heroism as embodied by young Russian soldiers or partisans, disregarding the roles of civilian, as well as the nearly one million young women who volunteered to fight.<sup>23</sup>

Rehearsing this episode, the exhibit evokes the horror felt by those viewing the executions or hearing about them. In fact, the grief of relatives was compounded by the fact that they were not allowed to claim corpses for burial, as they were left exposed for days before they were taken away to be dumped in a ditch. Since photographs of executions were widely used by Soviet authorities to instil anger towards the occupiers, they would be etched in the minds of those close to them. Nazi murders and desecrations were thus completed by the reproduction of these photographs in books, documentaries,





**Figure 4.** Alcove dedicated to the first execution of civilians in Minsk in October 1941. Belarusian State Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War (BSMHGPW). Photograph of the author, 2019.

and museums, which compounded the Nazi contempt for the lives of those classed as subhuman through the exploitation of people's grief. Whereas the act of shooting the photographs violated the privacy of the condemned, depriving the victims of the last vestiges of dignity in death, displaying them perpetuated this violation, appropriating sorrow and mourning for the state's ends. However, if the Soviet aim was to stress resistance and heroism, for those close to them, these 'partisans' were, first and foremost, innocent victims, as Bruskina's uncle emphasised.

For contemporary viewers, Susan Sontag's words about the images of Cambodians about to be executed are particularly resonant in relation to Bruskina's, as they appear 'forever looking at death, forever about to be murdered, forever wronged. And the viewer is in the same position as the lackey behind the camera; the experience is sickening ... even many years after the picture was taken ... one can gaze at these faces for a long time and not come to the end of the mystery, and the indecency, of such co-spectatorship'.<sup>24</sup> As with the Cambodian men, the Minsk victims were subjected to the gaze of the executioners which, preserved by the camera, is our perspective. As spectators, we inhabit the photographer's space and intrude into the last moments of those contemplating their death. That Bruskina turned her back repeatedly when the noose was placed

around her neck corroborates the degree to which the photographs completed the violence of the hangings (Figure 5). According to a witness, Pyotr Pavlovich Borisenko:

When they put her on the stool, the girl turned her face toward the fence ... The executioners wanted her to stand with her face to the crowd, but she turned away and that was that. No matter how much they pushed her and tried to turn her, she remained standing with her back to the crowd. Only then did they kick away the stool from under her.<sup>25</sup>

As Borisenko observed, Bruskina's last act of defiance was the only one available to her: refusing to face a photographer who she had previously challenged by staring at him during the parade. Her attitude thus foregrounds that the decontextualization of these images means, to perpetuate the perpetrators' gaze. As Susan Crane observes, 'With atrocity images, we have tended toward preservation as if by moral imperative, but if that choice means retention of, indeed conservation of, the Nazi gaze, we should reconsider the alternatives'.<sup>26</sup> Marianne Hirsch, however, counters that view, suggesting that 'compulsive and traumatic repetition connects the second generation to the first, producing rather than screening the effect of trauma that was lived so much more directly as compulsive repetition by survivors and contemporary witnesses'.<sup>27</sup>

Bruskina's last action sought to prevent her last moments from becoming a public spectacle, reclaiming for a moment the privacy that the violence of the execution, perpetuated by the photographs, sought to destroy. Paradoxically, however, our empathy is only made possible because these photographs allow us to witness her predicament and her attitude.<sup>28</sup> We face the same contradiction when reading or disseminating her letter, which conjures up its writer's determination and poised acceptance of her destiny.

Bruskina was fully aware that the letter that she wrote to her mother could be read by others, including censors, jailers, and acquaintances, as acknowledged by the family



**Figure 5.** Masha Bruskina turns her back to the photographer and spectators. Courtesy of the Belarusian State Archive of Films, Photographs and Sound Recordings.

friend who attested to the letter's existence and rehearsed its content, Sofia Andreyevna Davidovich. In her interview with Arkadyev and Dikhtyar, Davidovich remembered the 'policeman', probably a Belarussian Auxiliary, who Bruskina's mother had bribed to take a parcel to her imprisoned daughter. On returning, he brought a note: 'on a scrap of paper, scratched out hurriedly in pencil'. Although the letter has not survived, Davidovich recalled it very precisely because she and Bruskina's mother 'read it many times':

The tone was apologetic. Lusya and I read it many times afterward. That is why I remember it. Maybe not word for word, but the content was this: 'Dearest Mama! Above all, I am tormented by the thought that I have caused you tremendous (or great—but something like that) worry. Don't worry. Nothing bad has happened to me. I swear to you that you will have no further unpleasantness because of me. If you can, please send me my dress, my green blouse and white socks. I want to be dressed decently when I leave here'.<sup>29</sup>

To comply with her daughter's wishes, Lusya Bugakova packed the clothes that Bruskina wore 'decently' when she 'left', paying with her wristwatch for the delivery. According to Davidovich, following her daughter's execution, a distraught Bugakova sank into melancholia.<sup>30</sup> There was neither time nor opportunity for Bugakova to work through her grief, as she remained in Minsk's ghetto only two more weeks. On 7 November, the anniversary of the October Revolution, 12,000 Minsk Jews were shot and dumped in ditches the 11th Reserve Police Battalion and Lithuanian Auxiliaries.<sup>31</sup> According to Raul Hilberg, the Minsk Jews were murdered to make room for 25,000 Jews from the Reich (Germany, Austria and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia).<sup>32</sup> Their massacre, recorded in Operational Situation Report USSR 133 of Einsatzgruppe B of 8 November, was one of the 'liquidations' of 'Jews and communists' in the Generalbezirk Weißruthenien, totalling 45,467 people.<sup>33</sup> One of them was Lusya Bugakova, Masha Bruskina's mother.<sup>34</sup>

Bugakova was the primary recipient of words that encapsulate a moment of transition not only between life and death, but also between the intimacy of the mother-daughter relationship and the notoriety of Bruskina's public execution. Bugakova's position as addressee is the position occupied by readers, dwelling on the affect shared by the two women. This, however, is not 'scratched out in pencil' but on countless websites, including Wikipedia. These locations derive their content from Tec and Weiss, who credit Arkadyev and Dikhtyar's transcription of Davidovich's words.<sup>35</sup> Absent from these sites is the fact that the letter is lost and, as Davidovich pointedly reminded her interviewers, her recollection might not be 'word by word'. As Davidovich's interview took place more than three decades after the events, Bruskina's 'letter' is, then, an item of oral history that incorporates censorship, memory, mediation, translation, and dispersion. These omissions extend to the Soviet deletion of the Holocaust from the dominant narrative of the post-war era and a misogyny that castigated women's contributions to the war effort.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the use of this letter needs to take into consideration a twisted journey from its production and reception, as well as silences and the frameworks of collective memory described by Maurice Halbwachs.<sup>37</sup>

Alongside her photographs, Bruskina's letter stood for her persona, occupying the liminal space between her life and her memorialisation. As Esther Milne remarks in relation to absent lovers' letters '[stand] as a metonym for the writer, often gone prior to the letter reaching their destination. Due to its physical proximity or contact with

its author the letter can work metonymically; a function most obvious in amorous epistolary discourse where the letter is kissed, held, cried over or adored in the place of the lover's body'.<sup>38</sup> In Bruskina's case, the lost letter acquires an ethereal quality that makes it a fitting metonymy for Bruskina's short life. However, her letter constructs a persona that can only be accessed through our intrusion into her family life. More questionable is our viewing of photographs taken against the will of their subjects and which exhibit 'the pain of others', to borrow Susan Sontag's words. The emotional ecology that results from our vicarious position of empathy or familiarity also ought to be qualified by Hilberg's dictum that we 'were not there'.<sup>39</sup>

Those reservations never affected Soviet authorities. Indeed, despite the widespread use of her striking photographs, Bruskina was simply listed as 'unknown' in school books and in the aforementioned memorial, which read: 'Here, on 26 October 1941, the Fascists executed the Soviet patriots K. I. Truss, V. I. Sherbateyich and "The Unknown Girl"'. Puzzled about the anonymity of a person whose image was widely reproduced, Soviet journalists Arkadyev and Dikhtyar dedicated the best part of a decade to investigating her possible identity. Undertaking this chore, as Crane remarks, provides a 'sense of the uniqueness of each victim's experience', challenging the decontextualization of the reproduction of her photographs: 'Individuals in historical photographs, if not the explicit subject of the historical narrative, disappear into anonymity through their very presence. By definition, photographs are images taken out of context'.<sup>40</sup>

Their initial efforts coincided with those of the *Evening Minsk* journalist Vladimir Freidin, who wrote about Bruskina on 19, 23 and 24 April 1968. On the last date, Arkadyev also published an article about her, 'Bessmyarotnasts' ('Unmistakable'), in the newspaper *Trud*, which inaugurated his long enquiry. Armed with good will, endless patience, and a tape recorder, Arkadyev and Dikhtyar travelled to Leningrad, Minsk, Kaunas and beyond, interviewing witnesses and relatives of Bruskina and those executed with her. Even though they were aware that their journey would be emotional, they were surprised to find that Bruskina's father, Barys Bruskin, was alive and had tried to trace the whereabouts of his daughter, although he was haunted by memories of the war and suffering mentally from its devastating effects. His fragile state led him to long stays in mental institutions, in one of which he died soon after meeting the journalists. Nevertheless, he gave them letters that he received after the war about his daughter's execution that identified her.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to Bruskina's execution, Arkadyev and Dikhtyar's suspenseful narrative reveals information about the repressive environment in which their investigation took place. Inferences can be made from what is said, as well as from unexpected silences. One example is the repeated disclaimers about the reasons to single out one individual in a fight in which 'all Soviet' citizens lost so much, with many missing decades after the war. Despite their continuous rehearsal about the losses and sacrifices of all Soviets, the fact that both journalists were Jewish is likely to have influenced their tenacious efforts. Other constraints of the time are made explicit in their meetings with Bruskina's uncle, Zair Azgur, who explained to them his decision to withdraw from her identification. A decorated Belarusian sculptor, Hero of Socialist Labour and 'People's Artist', Azgur was adamant that the young woman in the photographs was his niece, and he had written about her in the *Evening Minsk* soon after the war. However, Azgur refrained

from following up on this, which frustrated Bill Keller, the Moscow correspondent of the *New York Times* in the 1980s:

To those who hope to see Masha Bruskina recognized, one of the most disappointing features of the case is the silence of Zahir Azgur. As one of the most prominent Jews in Byelorussia, a sculptor whose work adorns the public monuments of Minsk – including a bust of Feliks Dzerzhinsky, founder of the secret police, in the park across from the local K.G.B. headquarters – and as a delegate to the Byelorussian legislature and a member of several official committees, he was well-placed to take up the matter with party officials. He has not done so.<sup>42</sup>

When probed about his reasons, Azgur indicated that for him to vindicate Bruskina could have been interpreted as self-aggrandising.<sup>43</sup> For Azgur, moreover, she was not so much a hero as a ‘victim. Like my own mother’.<sup>44</sup>

The most revealing segment about the forced silences of the era is when Arkadyev and Dikhtyar write that they will not name the photographer of the execution. They located the ‘person whose last name we will not divulge’ from receipts of Bruskina’s prints bought by the Belarusian State Museum of the Great Patriotic War. The two journalists, accompanied by a Lithuanian assistant, Antanas Ragaišis, correspondent of the *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, interviewed the photographer in his house in Kaunas. There, he was surrounded by ‘thousands of terrible stills made in the fascist camps and prisons’, which they suspected to have been taken by him. Prior to their departure, Ragaišis praised the quality of the images, observing that should people know his identity, ‘the photographer would find instant renown’. Ragaišis’ question, ‘Who could the photographer be?’, was answered by the photographer’s admission, which silenced the visitors: ‘we fell silent, amazed. Our host also fell silent. Vanity had pushed him to the admission, and he himself was not pleased by this confession’. After listening to the photographer’s excuses, the journalists left without shaking hands and walked in Kaunas in silence, wondering whether he had been ‘trying to find the best angle’ when photographing the executions.<sup>45</sup> Their attitude, therefore, corroborates the interchangeable relationship between executioners and photographer, clearly demonstrated through Bruskina’s position when staring into the lense (Figure 1) and when turning her back at the time of her death (Figure 5).

Despite its incisive and convincing evidence, Arkadyev and Dikhtyar’s vindication of Bruskina was dismissed in the USSR. Also dismissed were subsequent efforts from US journalists Miller and Heller and from scholars Tec and Weiss during the following decades. The director of the Museum rejected the evidence as inconclusive, arguing that a possible mistake would offend other people whose relatives remained missing and had identified Bruskina as their relation. In conversation with Miller, Dikhtyar added to these reasons the ‘[s]tupidity and meanness of the local Byelorussian bureaucrats who don’t like people from Moscow letting them know what to do’. For Miller, the Museum’s disclaimers simply corroborated that the KGB must have recognised Bruskina and those who had arrested and executed the group, given that they knew the ‘traitor who had given them away, Boris Rudzyanko’.<sup>46</sup> In turn, Tec and Weiss concluded that Bruskina’s anonymity, and the rejection of these investigations, summed up the USSR’s peculiar combination of antisemitism and misogyny, both challenged by Bruskina’s courage and composed attitude. The dignity of a Jewish young woman, they

observed, did not endear her to the prevalent sexism of a Soviet Union that underwent periodic bursts of antisemitic repression, the most prominent of which was the charges against 'rootless cosmopolitans', a euphemism for professional Jews, starting in 1948 and culminating in the infamous 'Doctor's plot'.<sup>47</sup> By contrast, Bruskina's uncle, Azgur, already in his eighties when Miller interviewed him, was adamant that antisemitism had anything to do with his niece's anonymity: 'I deny that ... It is not possible in this country. I am not saying that we do not have anti-Semites. There are some. Like everywhere. But they do not command our lives here'.<sup>48</sup>

In 2008, nearly two decades after the dissolution of the USSR, these efforts were rewarded when Bruskina's identity was accepted officially in Belarus. Her name now appears in archival references and photographs, as well as her monument, which was updated in 2009. Not surprisingly, her ethnicity is nowhere acknowledged in Belarus, which preserves the USSR's narrative of disregarding the suffering of 'nationalities', claiming genocide for Belarusians and other Slavic peoples. By contrast, her Jewishness is the salient feature of her memorialisation in Israel, where a monument and a street honour her. This differs significantly from the second woman studied here, Olga Bancic, whose remembrance was, and to a large extent remains, largely contingent on her internationalist anti-fascism in her native and adopted countries, Moldova, Romania, and France.

Golda Bancic, known as Olga, shares with Bruskina the legacy of having her life cut by a gruesome execution at the hands of 'fascists'. She also wrote a loving letter which, like Bruskina's, is reproduced on numerous internet sites in its French original, as well as in translation. On 8 May 1912, Bancic was born in today's Moldovan capital, Chişinău or Kishinev, which was part of the Russian Empire's Pale of Settlement and had a sizeable population of Jews.<sup>49</sup> She was arrested for participating in a strike aged sixteen, the same year that she married another communist Jew, the writer Salomon Jacob, known in Romania as Alexandru Jar, who was one year older than her. In 1936, she was again imprisoned for communist activities, as documented in the police files and prison documents held at the National Archives of Romania. These documents include information



**Figure 6.** Photograph of Olga Bancic. Courtesy of Romanian National Archives, Arhivele Naţionale Istorice Centrale – Bucureşti (ANIC-B). Fond 95, Nr. Dossar 18781/53573.

about her membership of the Communist Party of Romania, illegal at the time, as well as photographs and fingerprints (Figures 6 and 7).<sup>50</sup> Archive holdings also attest to her husband's visits and the parcels of 'food and laundry' that he took frequently.<sup>51</sup>

Neither her early life of struggle nor the birth of her daughter prevented Bancic from taking an active part in the French resistance during the Nazi occupation. She moved to France after her release from prison in 1938. From there, she helped to ferry weapons in support of the Republic during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), while Jacob Solomon joined the International Brigades.<sup>52</sup> The couple's commitment to the communist cause was shown by naming their daughter after the leader of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), Dolores Ibárruri, known as *La Pasionaria*. A newly born Dolores is held tenderly by Bancic in one of the three extant photographs of mother and daughter, taken in what appears to be the front yard of a private dwelling in early 1939 (Figure 8). Two more images of Dolores exist, both taken in a studio. In the first, Olga holds one-year old Dolores in her arms (Figure 9), while in the second, the girl, surrounded by her parents, stands on a bench holding a teddy bear (Figures 10 and 11). All images show a caring family, and this touching affect emerges from Bancic's final letter.<sup>53</sup> Unlike Bruskin's photographs, these shots, as Martha Langford has shown with relation to family albums 'are often unlabeled because the images are presumed to be so familiar that the label is unnecessary, and because the album presumably was meant to be shared with family and friends in conversations about the pictures'.<sup>54</sup>

Banic became active in the French resistance after the invasion of the USSR in 1941 and was executed for activities that she undertook on French soil. She was the only woman of the Manouchian Group, a communist cell of the FTP-MOI (Francs-tireurs et partisans – main-d'œuvre immigrée), known by the name of their leader, Armenian poet Missak Manouchian.<sup>55</sup> A security breach resulted in their sequential arrest and Bancic, whose nom-de-guerre was Pierrette, was caught when meeting Marcel Rayman



**Figure 7.** Photograph of Olga Bancic from the Siguranță's File. Courtesy of Romanian National Archives, Institutul de Studii Istorice și Social-Politice - Fototeca - Portrete (ISISP). Dosar nr. 3229. B87/26.



**Figure 8.** Olga Bancic holds Dolores in her arms. Courtesy of the Romanian National Archives, Institutul de Studii Istorice și Social-Politice - Fototeca - Portrete (ISISP) Inventar nr. 3229. B87/33.

on 16 November 1943. As Bancic was carrying a false identity card in the name of Marie Lebon, she was not immediately recognised. She maintained that she had only met Rayman that day and was a single mother acting as courier, unaware that she was carrying weapons or their provenance.<sup>56</sup>

The twenty-three militants became notorious when their trial was accompanied by the distribution of posters known as *L’Affiche Rouge*, which described them as ‘the army of crime’. All but one of the men were executed by firing squad at Mount Valerien in February 1944, while Bancic was retried in March of the same year, when the concierge of a building in which she rented a room denounced her. When the police found weapons and munition in the room, she was sentenced to be decapitated in Germany. It was there, in Stuttgart’s Prison, that Bancic wrote her last letter to Dolores in French,





**Figure 9.** Olga Bancic holds one-year old Dolores. Romanian National Archives. ISISP. Inventar Nr. 3229. B87/34.

using blue ink (Figure 12). Bancic professed her love and urged Dolores to be proud of her mother and to be happy with her father in a kinder, future world.<sup>57</sup> Bancic was beheaded at dawn on 10 May 1944, the day that she turned thirty-three.

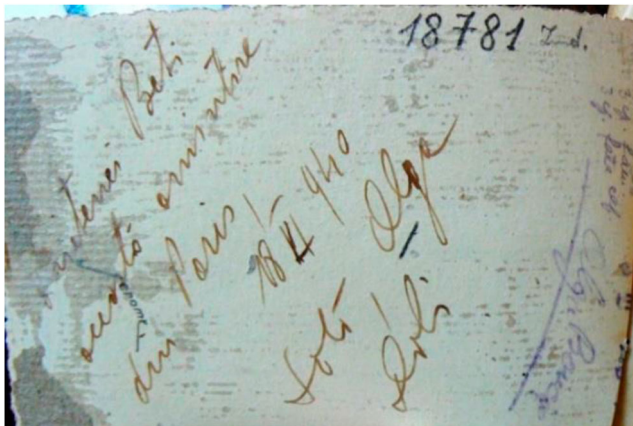
Two theories about Bancic's letter can be found on the internet. Wikipedia, citing the Marxists Internet Archive, claims that Bancic threw the letter from the train in which she was transported, with an anonymous recipient forwarding it to its destination.<sup>58</sup> This is unlikely to have been the case, as the letter's cover page contains printed instructions from Stuttgart's prison (Figure 13). A prefatory request, with her name, 'Bancic Golda', on the top right, is handwritten on this form: 'Dear "Madamme" (sic), I beg you to forward this letter to my little daughter Dolores Jacob after the war. This is the last wish of a mother who will only live twelve more hours. Thank you'.<sup>59</sup> This anonymous 'Madamme', to whom Bancic asked to forward the 'last wish of a mother' to her 'little daughter', was probably a member of the French Red Cross, as noted in the communist broadsheet, *L'Humanité*.<sup>60</sup> With the war nearing its end, Bancic would be aware 'that the French Red Cross was in charge to forward correspondence to people separated by the war, and especially between the prisoners of war and their families'.<sup>61</sup> However, it is also possible, though unlikely, that a prison warden was the 'Madamme'



**Figure 10.** Olga Bancic and her family. Romanian National Archives. ANIC-B, Fond 95. Dosar nr. 18781

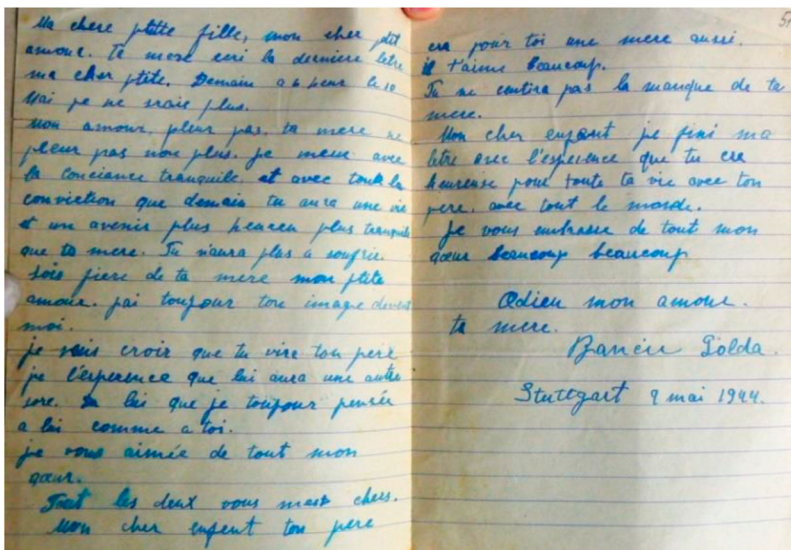
who passed the letter onto the Red Cross, as this was the case with another French woman who was beheaded in Germany. Prior to her execution in Hamburg in 1943, France Bloch-Serazin wrote one letter to her husband, Fredo Serazin, also executed during the war, and a second letter to her parents. The two letters were copied by Friede Sommer, a warden at the prison, who passed them on to a mission 'de rapatriement' from the Vatican in 1945. As with the two last letters investigated here, the convoluted way in which Bloch-Serazin's letter reached its destination demonstrates its documental value as material culture of remembrance. In Bancic's case, this value is corroborated by the fact that it was deposited in Romania's National Archive sixteen years after her death, in 1960 (Figure 14).

Banic was honoured as a communist resister during the Cold War years of Nicolae Ceauşescu's rule in Romania. Not surprisingly, her name was effaced from public memory after the 1989 Revolution, when Eastern European countries embarked in the erasure of their previous communist fervour. As with other countries that endured the



18781  
à la mémoire  
des Parisiens  
1844  
Bancic

**Figure 11.** Verso of Figure 10. Paris, 18 June 1940. Romanian National Archives. ANIC-B, Fond 95. Dosar nr.18781.



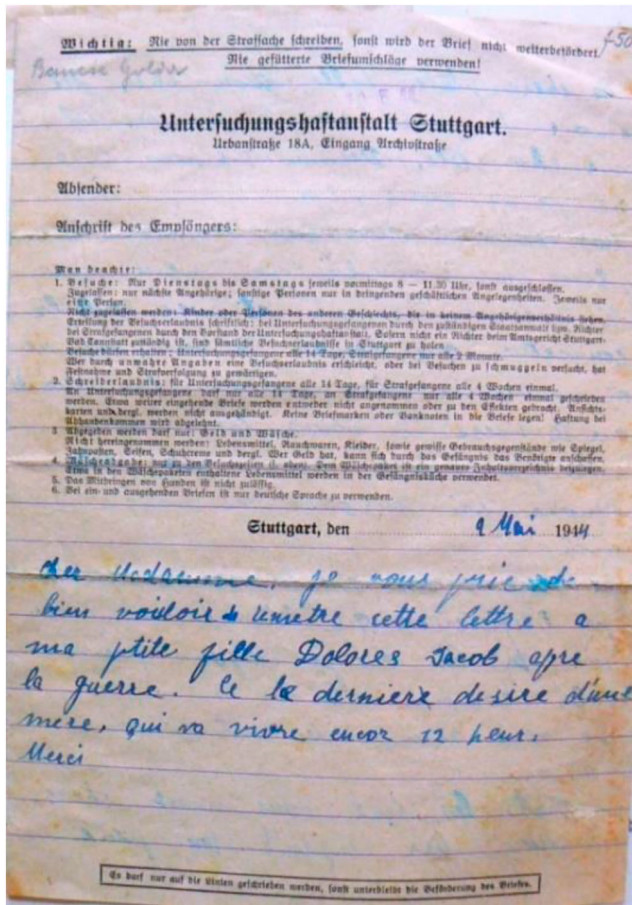
Ma chère petite fille, mon cher petit amour. Te moral c'est la dernière lettre que j'ai écrite. Demain à 6 heures à 10 heures je ne serai plus.  
mon amour plus pas, ta mère ne pleure pas non plus. je m'occupe avec ta conscience tranquille et avec tout la conviction que demain tu aura une vie et un avenir plus heureux plus tranquille que ta mère. Tu n'aura plus à souffrir.  
sois fière de ta mère mon petit amour. j'ai toujours ton image devant moi.  
je suis sûr que tu vira ton père je l'espère que tu aura une autre vie. tu lui que je toujours penser à lui comme à toi.  
je vous aime de tout mon cœur.  
Fait les deux vous mes chers.  
mon cher enfant ton père

en pour toi une mère aussi. et t'aime beaucoup.  
Tu ne contrain pas la souffrance de ta mère.  
Mon cher enfant je fais ma lettre avec l'expérience que tu es heureuse pour toute ta vie avec ton père, avec tout le monde.  
je vous embrasse de tout mon cœur beaucoup beaucoup  
Adieu mon amour.  
ta mère.  
Bancic Solda.  
Stuttgart 9 mai 1944.

**Figure 12.** Bancic's letter to Dolores, Stuttgart, 9 May 1944. Romanian National Archives. ANIC-B, Fond 95. Dosar nr. 18781.

Soviet yoke, Romania's independence brought in its train the unwelcome vindication of its nationalist, antisemitic past, including the controversial exoneration of the Romanian Iron Guard, a fascist group that collaborated actively with Nazi Germany in gruesome massacres of local Jews. In 1994, Bancic's memory became a casualty of this nationalist revival when the street named after her was renamed and a plaque in her memory was unceremoniously removed.<sup>62</sup>

More consistent is Bancic's remembrance in France, where she is listed alongside her comrades from the Manouchian Group in a memorial plaque in Mount Valerien, the site of her colleagues' execution. In her adopted country, Bancic is alternatively co-opted as a

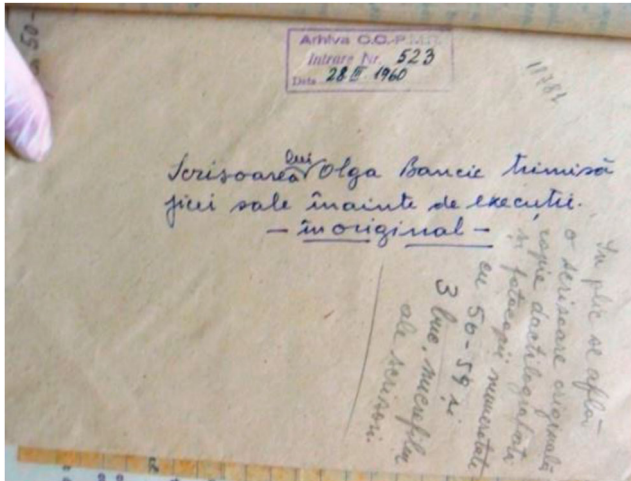


**Figure 13.** Cover page of Olga Bancic's letter, with her plea in her own handwriting in the lower half. Romanian National Archives. ANIC-B, Fond 95. Dosar nr. 18781.

French resistance fighter, that is to say, a foreign activist granted asylum by the republican France of 'liberté, égalité et fraternité', or, for communists or their heirs, an internationalist anti-fascist. As rehearsed in the newspaper of the French Communist Party, *L'Humanité*:

Olga Bancic has become symbol of foreign women and girls engaged in the Resistance in France. In 1995, the City of Paris paid tribute to her by placing a plaque in her memory ... just behind the graves of her comrades, Missak Manouchian and Marcel Rayman. On October 26, 1999, her memory was once again honored by the Conseil supérieur de la mémoire, along with four other famous personalities: Jean Moulin, Félix Éboué, Pierre Brossette and Jacques Trolley de Prévaux.<sup>63</sup>

Banic's legacy is, therefore, a fragmentary one, exemplifying the plight of many European Jews whose memories, like their lives, can be classed as diasporic. What is left and reclaimed highlights or minimises gender, communism, ethnicity, (inter)nationalism or activism. Correspondingly, her letter is normally used to create empathy with the anti-fascist cause through its sentimental value. In other words, Bancic's memorialisation is



**Figure 14.** Envelope containing Olga Bancic's original letter showing the date of receipt ('intrare'). Romanian National Archives. ANIC-B, Fond 95. Dosar nr. 18781.

as polyvalent as that of Bruskina, who is remembered as a Belarussian woman murdered by 'fascists', a communist hero or a Holocaust victim. As Tec and Weiss put it, 'The first is the actual person, the young Masha described and remembered by family and friends. Second, there is the historical Masha who contributed to the early resistance movement. Third, there is the symbolic Masha, elevated to the status of heroine after her death'.<sup>64</sup> The memorialisation, or lack of memorialisation of Bancic and Bruskina, like the reproduction of the letters that they wrote or the photographs in which they appear, thus showcases the difficulties nation states have in coming to terms with past contributions to genocidal violence undertaken on behalf of ethnic purity and identification with the dominant group.

The deaths of Bancic and Bruskina illustrate how the Nazi ideology rendered those classed as subhuman *homo sacer*, or 'bare life', in Giorgio Agamben's formulation.<sup>65</sup> Once deemed enemies of the state, their deaths were designed to eliminate elements of the sacred or sacrifice. They were thus staged or performed as ritualistic displays of power designed to be displayed and viewed by those sharing the Nazi world view, thus casting others in subordinate roles designed to illustrate the fraternity and sense of community of the *Volk* or those germane to them. Bruskina's execution was thus made into a spectacle of public retribution in which guilt and shame became undistinguishable for those spectators who were alien to the communal fraternity undertaking the murder. For them, as for contemporary viewers, the spectacle is different, as Foucault remarks: 'in punishment-as-spectacle a confused horror spread from the scaffold; it enveloped both executioner and condemned; and, although it was always ready to invert the shame inflicted on the victim into pity or glory, it often turned the legal violence of the executioner into shame'.<sup>66</sup> As seen above, the photographs of her execution home in on that narrative. By way of contrast, the method to kill Bancic behind closed doors, decapitation, exemplifies, in Foucault's formulation, an 'economy of suspended

rights' designed to extricate the condemned from her executioners, depriving the executed of a last attempt to communicate with the living from the scaffold.

Bancic's and Bruskina's letters, however, restore these women's individuality and right to life through the mother-daughter relationship that they foreground. At the threshold of the public and the intimate, these letters speak of the dead, freezing forever a moment that encapsulates life, beliefs, and affect. The letters reached a mother and a daughter through myriad intermediaries, including a member of the *Schutzmannschaft*, neighbours, relatives, and an anonymous Red Cross volunteer. They subsequently became known, or their writers identified, through an assemblage of academics and journalists from France, Romania, the USA and the USSR. Ultimately, these letters are metonymies for their writers, standing in their stead like the photographs produced by a Lithuanian fascist, the Romanian police, or a French studio. Their affective and documental value, that is, arises from the women, as well as the microcosmic alliance of unlikely subjects.

This article has shown how the convoluted trajectories of Bancic's and Bruskina's letters were accomplished through asymmetrical exchanges across geographical, chronological, and socio-political distance. These started at the time and place of their production, when two Jewish women reached out to their most cherished family member and appealed to intermediaries to bridge the distance between life, love, and death. Bancic's and Bruskina's letters then became precious relics of material culture and oral history that, as with Bancic's family pictures, effectively articulate the dialectic between social struggle and maternal affect. By contrast, the transmission of the photographs of Bruskina's execution showcases the paradoxes inherent in remembering atrocities through the sources created by the perpetrators. However, I have proposed that efforts to give Bruskina a name and an identity complement her resistance to be photographed in death and, therefore, counter the perpetrators' obliterating narrative by making her life and death those of a unique individual. The intentions and feelings of these women, I have argued in this article, cannot be separated from the conditions in which their letters were conceived, produced, and eventually transmitted and researched by the myriad people who include the present writer. These named and anonymous intermediaries have transformed these relics into material culture that stands for two women annihilated by war and minimised in a post-war environment that utilised their deaths for self-serving political ends. The contextualisation of Bancic's and Bruskina's letters and photographs, I have proposed, challenges thus the use and abuse of the powers of horror, as well as the subjugation of gender, and affect in the history of the Second World War.

## Notes

1. The Association of Relatives and Friends of Members of the French Resistance Executed and Massacred (Association Nationale des Familles de Fusillés et Massacrees de la Résistance Francaise et ses Amis) lists a total of fifty people, most of them communists, killed by guillotine. A total of nine women were executed in Germany, as they could not be shot in France. Of the men, nineteen were killed in France and twenty-two in Germany (<http://familles-de-fusilles.com/les-resistants-guillotines>). As this introduction suggests, this article engages with a traumatic topic, and it displays explicit images of the executions in Minsk, in addition to family photographs of Bancic and last letters.

2. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 9.
3. This is found in Wikipedia's entry for Bancic ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olga\\_Bancic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olga_Bancic)).
4. I am indebted to Dr Mihai Burcea for information about this original, as well as helping with archival material held in Bucharest. I am also grateful to the Director of the National Archives of Romania, Dr Cristian Anita, for kindly answering queries about these sources and permission to reproduce Bancic's photographs. I also wish to acknowledge the Bundsarchiv and the staff at the Belarusian State Archive of Film, Photography and Sound for welcoming me in 2019 and allowing me to consult and reproduce material on Bruskina, including one of the photographs used in this article.
5. An early example of domestic correspondence in England is the fifteenth century Paston Letters. During the eighteenth century, the epistolary tradition was consolidated as a literary genre in novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, first published in 1748.
6. See the testimony of Second Lieutenant, Postal Worker Maria Alexeevna Remneva in Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Penguin, 2017), 167-68. The famous Russian song, Vasya Vasilyok presents the banter of soldiers towards one of them who appears sad and 'depressed' because he is not receiving letters from his sweetheart for five weeks. Routinely sung by the Red Army Alexandrov Ensemble, it was composed by songwriter, Anatoly Novikov in 1941.
7. Introduction to *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, Studies in Written Language and Literacy, ed. Barton and Hall (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1999), 96.
8. See More, *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Cleveland: Duke University Press, 2014).
9. Prior to 2009, the caption on her monument read 'девушку Фамили не установлена', literally, 'girl family name not established'.
10. Arkadyev and Dikhtyar, 'The Unknown Girl', *Yiddish Writers* 1 (1987): 161-204; Bill Keller, 'Echo of '41 in Minsk: Was the Heroine a Jew?', *New York Times*, 15 September 1987 (<https://www.nytimes.com/1987/09/15/world/echo-of-41-in-minsk-was-the-heroine-a-jew.html>). Miller, *One by One by One* (New York: Touchstone, 1990); Tec and Weiss, 'A Historical Injustice: The Case of Masha Bruskina', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 11, no. 3 (1997), 366-377; reprinted as 'The Heroine of Minsk: Eight Photographs of an Execution', *History of Photography* 23, no. 4 (1999), 322-30.
11. A 'prison matron' informed Bruskina's prison companion, Stefanida Yemolaryevna Kaminskaya, who was the first person interviewed by Arkadyev and Dikhtyar, that they had executed: 'Three at the Kommunarika factory. Three more at Freedom Square. And the last three at the Government Building'. See 'The Unknown Girl', 165.
12. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 7.
13. This film, *Обыкновенный фашизм*, is known as *Echo of the Jackboot* in the United Kingdom and *Triumph over Violence* in the USA.
14. Arkadyev and Dikhtyar, 'The Unknown Girl', 165.
15. The monument is neither mentioned in tourist brochures nor in the section dedicated to these executions in the BSMHGPPW. However, the factory, Oao 'Drozhzhevoy Kombinat' (ОАО 'Дрожжевой Комбинат'), which was inaugurated in 1893, is only a short walk from Dynamo Minsk Stadium, near the popular Komarovka Market.
16. This applied to the USSR, Yugoslavia or Poland, resulting in ordinary people not always begrudging resistance actions performed in their midst, which contrasts with places such as France or the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, especially in the early years of the war. For information on France, see Robert Gildea, 'Resistance, Reprisals and Community in Occupied France', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 13 (2003), 163-85. For the lack of resistance in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, including after the widespread reprisals for the murder of Reinhard Heidrich, codenamed Operation Anthropoid, see Mark Mazower *Hilter's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Penguin, 2008), 485.
17. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 9.

18. See 'Citizen Ivanov Versus Comrade Tito: Partisans in Soviet and Yugoslav Cinema of the Second World War (1960–1985)', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 36.1 (2019), 1-25.
19. On the Bielskis, see Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The True Story of the Bielski Partisans* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2008.
20. Arkadyev and Dikhtyar, 'The Unknown Girl', 166.
21. This battalion participated 'extensively' in the Holocaust, according to historian and archivist Arūnas Bubnys, Director of the Research Department at the Lithuanian Center for Genocide and Resistance Research. See 'The Holocaust in Lithuania: An Outline of the Major Stages and their Results', *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, ed. Alvydas Nikžentaitis, Stefan Schreiner and Darius Staliūnas (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2004), 205-22.
22. David Marples identifies Kozlovski as the photographer in 'Our Glorious Past': *Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War* (Hannover: Ibidem-Verlag, 2014), 94. According to Arkadyev and Dikhtyar, however, Kozlovski did not take the photographs but kept copies of the prints. See 'The Unknown Girl', 187-88.
23. Around 800,000 women served in the Red Army in World War II, including the famous pilots known as 'The Night Witches'. On this topic, see Roger D. Markwick and Euridice Charon Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War* (Hampshire, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
24. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004), 54-55, 53-54.
25. Arkadyev and Dikhtyar, 'The Unknown Girl', 187.
26. Crane, 'Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography'. *History and Theory*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2008), 309–330 (p. 322). Barbie Zelizer proposes that the repeated use of these images 'undoes the ability to respond'. See *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 220.
27. Hirsch, 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 214-246; quote at 218).
28. The paradoxes of displaying these photographs has been scrutinised by Hanno Lewy, "'... without masks": Jews through the Lens of "German Photography" 1933-1945', in *German Photography 1870-1970: The Power of a Medium*, ed. Klaus Honnert, Rolf Sachsse, and Karin Thomas (Cologne: Dumont, 1997), 100-114. On this topic, see also Bernd Boll, 'Zloczow, July 1941: The Wehrmacht and the Beginning of the Holocaust in Galicia, From a Criticism of Photographs to a Revision of the Past', in *Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Omer Bartov, Atina Grossman, and Mary Nolan (New York: New Press, 2002), 61–99 and Judith Levin and Daniel Uziel, 'Ordinary Men, Extraordinary Photos', *Yad Vashem Studies* 26 (1998), 265-93.
29. See Arkadyev and Dikhtyar, 'The Unknown Girl', 178.
30. Bugakova's attitude complies with Sigmund Freud's definition of the condition as 'a profoundly painful rejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that ... culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment'. See 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *Collected Papers*, vol. 4, ed. James Strachey, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth, 1953), 152-70; quote at 153.
31. The overall toll in these operations was 19,000 'partisans and criminals, that is, in the majority Jews'. See Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 310.
32. See Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, 364. Saul Friedlander observes that: 'In Minsk 13,000 local Jews were exterminated on November 7, and a further group of 7,000 on November 20. Clearly the mass slaughters of October and November 1941 were intended to make space for the new arrivals from the Reich'. *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939–1945* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), 267.
33. Einsatzgruppe B operated in the Nazi Reichskommissariat Ostland, then including most of the Baltics and today's Western Belarus.



34. 'The Einsatzgruppen: Operational Situation Report USSR No. 133'. Jewish Virtual Library (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/operational-situation-report-ussr-no-133>).
35. Tec and Weiss refer readers to Arkadyev and Dikhtyar, introducing the letter as follows: 'Offering encouragement to her mother in a note smuggled from the prison, Masha wrote ...' See 'A Historical Injustice', 372.
36. This absence has effectively been countered by Svetlana Alexievich from the 1980s, when she published her collection of testimonies in *The Unwomanly Face of War*. See note 3.
37. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
38. Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Email: Technologies of Presence* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 53.
39. 'I was not there' is the title of Hilberg's article, republished as Chapter 9 of *The Anatomy of the Holocaust: Selected Works from a Life of Scholarship*, ed. Walter H. Pehle and René Schlott (New York and Oxford: Bergham, 2019), 147-58.
40. Crane, 'Choosing Not to Look', 325.
41. Dikhtyar donated their recording and photographs to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
42. Keller, 'Echo of '41'.
43. Arkadyev and Dikhtyar introduce him with the full array of Soviet honours as 'the famous Byelorussian sculptor and People's Artist, an Acting Member of the Academy of the Arts of the USSR, and State Prize Winner'. See 'The Unknown Girl', 197.
44. Miller, *One by One by One*, 182-83.
45. Arkadyev and Dikhtyar, 'The Unknown Girl', 189, 190.
46. Miller bases this on the testimony of Lev Ovsishcher, Belarusian Jew who migrated to Israel. See Miller, *One by One by One*, 175-76.
47. The 'doctor's plot', with its intricate waves of terror and incriminations under torture, eventually included hundreds of doctors accused of killing or plotting to kill Soviet leaders, including Stalin. Stalin is thought to have held antisemitic views, as shown during the 1930s terror, when he charged against his (perceived or real) enemies, including prominent Jews, such as Leon Trotsky, murdered in Mexico on Stalin's orders. In fact, the persecution and random executions of Soviet Jews only receded after Stalin's death in 1953, and *refuseniks* were only allowed to migrate to Israel from 1971.
48. Miller, *One by One by One*, 182-83.
49. Hilberg estimates 80,000 ethnic Jews, which made up 60.2 percent of the population in 1939. See *Destruction of European Jews*, 296.
50. Other than the photographs, Bancic's holdings are filed in the inventory of 'Anti-fascist Resisters', *Dosare personale ale luptatorilor antifascisti intocmite de Ministerul de Interne in perioada 1917-1944*. Inv. 2828.
51. Receipts kept in the Archive are dated one week apart; for example, 5, 12, 19 and 26 March or 7, 14, 21 and 28 May. See, for example, ANIC-B, Fond 95, Dosar nr. 1738/934 for his visit of 26 March 1935 or ANIC-B, Fond 95, Dosar nr. 1738/934 for permission 'for Salomon Jacob to talk to Olga Bancic in the presence of a prison witness and to take laundry and food' on 5 May 1935.
52. Bancic's smuggled weapons were used by a group made up of French and Belgian volunteers that was part of the 35th Division of the Brigades. It was led by the famous Romanian Jew, Ana Pauker.
53. The originals are held at the Romanian National Archives, which also holds a typescript of a speech delivered by Bessarabian Jew, Boris Holban (pseudonym of Baruch Bruhman), on the tenth anniversary of Bancic's execution, in 1954. Holban's script summarizes Bancic's life and contains copies of Bancic's photographs, as well as a Romanian translation of her letter and the plea for its delivery.
54. On this topic, see Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 3-21 *passim*

55. The FTP-MOI was led by Romanian Boris Holban, who moved to France in 1938 when he was deprived of his Romanian citizenship on account of the country's antisemitic laws. Half of the twenty-three members of the group were Eastern European Jews who had fought with the International Brigades.
56. The police records contain an earlier reference about Bancic, dated 15 December 1941, as an accomplice in Jacob's escape from Tenon Hospital on 23 November of the same year. However, she is assumed to be Jacob's 'lover' ('amant').
57. Mitch Abidor's English translation of Bancic's letter for the Marxists Internet Archive reads as follows:
- 'My dear little daughter, my darling little love  
Your mother is writing the last letter, my dear little daughter; tomorrow at 6:00, on May 10, I will be no more.  
Don't cry, my love; your mother doesn't cry any more either. I die with a peaceful conscience and with the firm conviction that tomorrow you will have a happier life and future than your mother's. You will no longer have to suffer. Be proud of your mother, my little love. I always have your image before me.  
I'm going to believe that you will see your father, and I have hope that he'll meet a fate different from mine. Tell him that I always thought of him, as I always thought of you. I love you both with all my heart. Both of you are dear to me. My darling child, your father is, for you, also a mother. He loves you a lot. You won't feel the loss of your mother. My darling child, I finish this letter with the hope that you will be happy all your life, with your father, with everyone.  
I kiss you with all my heart, a lot a lot.  
Farewell my love.  
Your mother'.
- See 'Last letters of The Manouchian Group. May, 1944: Olga Bancic'. <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/resistance/manouchian/letters/bancic.htm>
58. The archive cites Philippe Ganier Raymond as the source for the information. See *L'Affiche Rouge* (Paris: Fayard, 1975), n. 44.
59. The original reads as follows: 'Cher Madame [Chère Madame]. Je vous prie de bien vouloir remettre cette lettre à ma petite fille Dolorès Jacob. Ce la dernière desire [le dernier désir] d'une mère, qui va vivre encore 12 heures. Merci' (French corrections in brackets).
60. 'Olga Bancic: Malgré des tortures ignobles, elle ne céda jamais', *L'Humanité*, 16 July 2010. <https://www.humanite.fr/olga-bancic-malgre-des-tortures-ignobles-elle-ne-ceda-jamais>
61. Daniel Palmieri, Archive of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Personal Communication, 8 July 2019.
62. In his study of Romanian contribution to French resistance, Gavin Bowd notes that: 'Already in 1994, the small street in central Bucharest named after Olga Bancic was de-baptized. No one knows where the commemorative plaque has gone'. See 'Romanians of the French Resistance', *French History* 28, no. 4 (2014): 559.
63. See note 50.
64. Tec and Weiss, 'The Heroine of Minsk', 327.
65. In Roman law, *homo sacer*, 'sacred' or 'accursed' man, could be killed but not sacrificed. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* Stanford (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998).
66. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 9. For information about Bancic's execution with an axe, see Bowd, 'Romanians of the French Resistance', 545. The Association of Association of Relatives and Friends of Members of the French Resistance Executed and Massacred, however, notes that it was a guillotine and not an axe that was used to behead all those executed by this means both in France and Germany (<http://familles-de-fusilles.com/les-resistants-guillotines>)

## Notes on Contributor

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## Disclosure statement

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