

**Babi Yar**  
**Site of Mass Murder, Ravine of Oblivion**

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Let us look now at mass murder. And at oblivion. And these at Babi Yar.

Babi Yar, or Babyn Yar in Ukrainian, means Old Woman's Ravine. Both the event and its memory claim our attention. I have marshaled sources that, for the most part, were not available until recently, and the evidence shows that Babi Yar stands for many things.

Seven decades ago it was the site of the largest single German shooting of Jews in the Soviet Union. That is why it symbolizes what is now often called the "Holocaust by bullets."<sup>1</sup> Babi Yar also is Ukraine's largest mass grave of victims of the Nazis—for, after the main massacre of September 1941, the SS and German police, as long as they were there, never stopped killing. At Babi Yar, shooting of Jews, Ukrainians, Russians, and others occurred almost daily.

And Babi Yar has been like the Lethe, the river of oblivion in the ancient Greek underworld. After the Nazis left, callous decisions were taken with regard to the site. Almost all of the Soviet Communist officials who returned in November 1943 disrespected the human remains interred at Babi Yar. Moreover, they stubbornly refused to state that the victims of the main massacre perpetrated there had been Jews, killed simply because they were Jews. And these authorities allowed no dissent: they

intimidated and persecuted the people who disagreed and who wished to pay their respects to the dead.

Babi Yar used to be a ravine on the edge of Kiev. Today, the site is within the city, which has been allowed to swallow it. It no longer can be recognized as a ravine and it is largely covered with a park, apartments, and traffic. For many centuries, however, Babi Yar existed as part of a range of beautiful ravines on the northwestern boundaries of Kiev. They served as natural defense positions against invaders. Babi Yar had rather steep slopes and, including nine spurs in the east and west, ranged for 1.5 miles. It was 30 to 160 feet (10 to 50 meters) deep. On the narrow bottom ran a stream. In 1401, a tavern-keeper sold the terrain to the nearby Dominican Monastery, and this became the oldest record mentioning it.<sup>2</sup>

In the nineteenth century, cemeteries for Jews, Karaites, Muslims, and Orthodox Christians were established close to the slopes. That same century, the Russian Imperial army created summer camps with shooting ranges in the nearby area of Syrets. In the early Soviet period, armored units of the Red Army began to be stationed there.<sup>3</sup> Besides military, a few other people were seen in Lukianivka, the city district bordering Babi Yar. These people lived in country houses and barracks, no closer than 650 feet (200 meters) from the ravine edge. The Lukianivka district housed a railway freight station; but overall, the area was hard to reach, even after 1934, when a tram line appeared, and it was ever harder to pass. The main nearby street, Melnikov Street, ended where the ravine began.<sup>4</sup> The people there had no radio, no electricity, and no tap water. Except when one looked at the ravine corner where garbage from the city was dumped,<sup>5</sup> the notion of city life seemed almost entirely alien here. Babi Yar was a place of natural beauty where boys and girls liked to wander, swim, and play.

Babi Yar was not used to bury victims of Soviet policies—the Great Famine of 1933 or the Stalinist terror; contrary to what some Ukrainians believe today. For those corpses, there were secret mass graves at the nearby cemeteries. One witness of the night-time burials there was Aleksei Glagolev, an Orthodox priest, who hoped to find a trace of his father, who had been arrested. Just several years later, under the Germans, Father Aleksei was to save Jews.<sup>6</sup>

Late in 1940, a time when the Soviet Union was, in effect, allied with Nazi Germany, it was decided that henceforth it would not even be necessary to situate armed forces near Babi Yar; the army summer camps would be turned into a terrain for

skiing.<sup>7</sup> The decision had not been implemented when, in June 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union.

At that time, there were in Kiev approximately 850,000 people, including a large number of refugees. It seems reasonable to estimate that about half of these 850,000 were registered as ethnic Ukrainians, and about a quarter were registered as Jews. As the Germans approached, many of the Jews moved east, but others deliberately stayed behind. Some likely did not want to abandon elderly or frail relatives; others may have had an attachment to belongings. But perhaps the most important reason some would have stayed was the hope for a better life under the Germans—a hope shared with many non-Jews. Many Kievan Jews wanted to be rid of Stalin and his Bolsheviks. Few of them believed the suddenly alarmist Soviet media. A Jewish man who had heard German radio broadcasts warned as many Jews as he could to flee, but many called him a panic-monger. Some Kievan Jews who by profession were artisans and traders even anticipated positive developments from what they had heard about Nazi Germany. Soviet policies had made them unemployed and, because the Soviet media were describing Nazism as an extreme form of capitalism, these Jews believed that under the Germans their living standard at least would stay the same and that it might even improve.<sup>8</sup>

On the morning of September 18, 1941, with the German armed forces close to capturing the city, people in Kiev began to loot stores and warehouses.<sup>9</sup> During the morning of Friday, September 19, German troops occupied the city. Curious residents came out to watch but did little else. On some streets the mood was openly upbeat. Other Kievans actually were too busy to receive the Germans—they were looting again. In the Podil district, where most Jews lived, the streets were littered with broken glass and entire crowds carried and moved things. When it became clear that for now the Germans were minding their own business, a night and morning of looting followed, this time of Kiev's main street, the Khreshchatyk.

On Saturday, September 20, a mine exploded in the former arsenal next to the Caves Monastery, killing the Germans who were quartered there. Immediately, German round-ups of Jewish pedestrians began. Germans checked people's identity papers, and now the Soviet entry on "nationality" became a great liability.

On Wednesday, September 24, thousands of people patiently were standing in lines in the Khreshchatyk. They were obeying orders to register at the German Field Command and also to hand in hunting rifles and gas masks at a former toy store.

Around 2:00 p.m., a bomb exploded on the first floor of the toy store, quickly followed by a louder explosion from the third floor. It blasted Germans from their vehicles, threw the top of the building onto the crowd, and ignited a large fire. Both Germans and Kievans died. Fifteen minutes later, another blast destroyed the Grand Hotel, the German headquarters. Moments later, the Arcade blew up, and still more explosions rocked Kiev's best hotel, the Continental. All evening and night, and also the next day, with intervals of just minutes, explosions continued. Before the Germans occupied the city, skillful Red Army engineers and NKVD officers had placed bombs. Now, Soviet agents spread the fire by throwing bottles of fuel. The resulting sea of fire engulfed about one square kilometer, and for more than a week the nights were nearly as illuminated as the days. In all, some 200 Germans lost their lives.

Rumors tended to blame "the Jews." Such talk spread partly because all Kievans feared a terrible German reprisal, and many wanted a scapegoat. All the signs indicated that the Jews indeed would suffer the most. SS men hunting for Jews entered one office and shouted, "All Jews must be shot!" They also began arresting Jews in their homes. Genia Batasheva, then seventeen, has recalled how Germans burst into her home shouting, "Juden, Juden!" and overturned everything. In this case, they left without arresting anyone, after seeing the work tools of her father, who was a joiner.<sup>10</sup> But hundreds of Jews were arrested in this wave, along with NKVD agents, political officers, and partisans. All of the arrestees were shot at various locations in the city, probably including the trenches dug by the Red Army near Babi Yar.<sup>11</sup>

On Friday, September 26, a secret meeting took place in the new office of the city commandant. The German army and the SS agreed that the Jews would not be interned in a ghetto. They would be gathered for immediate annihilation, at Babi Yar. The SS already had shot war prisoners there. For the record, then, the first people shot by the Nazis at Babi Yar were not Jewish civilians, but so-called "commissars." The Nazis were anxious to begin the larger-scale massacre: as early as Saturday 27, the day after the secret meeting, they began shooting Jewish civilians at two locations in Babi Yar.<sup>12</sup> To themselves and their superiors the murderers characterized the upcoming main massacre of the Jews of Kiev as an act of "reprisal." To them, whatever "Bolshevik" activists did were actions instigated or perpetrated by Jews. In their view, Communism was simply one of many vehicles through which Jews attempted to rule the world.

On Sunday, September 28, the newly installed Ukrainian police posted 2,000 copies of a Russian-, Ukrainian-, and German-language order to the Jews of Kiev and the surrounding area. It instructed them to appear the next day before 8:00 a.m. at a specified intersection and to bring along “documents, money, valuables, warm clothing, and underwear.” The order was not signed. No one involved in composing its text knew much about Kiev, for the order claimed that the intersection was “near the cemeteries,” which was incorrect.<sup>13</sup> The announcement added that those Jews who disobeyed would be shot; the Russian text employed the word “Yids.”

Jews and non-Jews alike agreed on one thing—the order had been triggered by the explosions and fire. Now the SS, and probably also the Ukrainian militia, spread another rumor: the Jews would be concentrated in a ghetto and put to work there. Because the designated point of assembly was near the railroad freight station, many Jews were able to convince themselves that they would be sent away.

On the other hand, it was widely known in the city that the Jews who had been arrested earlier had not returned. Moreover, on September 19, the day the occupation began, Germans also had reached an eastern district across the Dnieper River; there many refugees from Kiev and elsewhere had been stranded, along with Red Army soldiers. Any of these civilians and military who merely might be Jewish were shot and dumped into a mass grave, as early as September 20. News of this eastern massacre, at Darnytsia, quickly reached at least some Jews in Kiev.<sup>14</sup>

We probably will never know which sentiment prevailed among most of the Jews, but mortal fear is a good candidate. As for the non-Jews, Ukrainians and Russians alike after the war said that they recalled that few considered the possibility of the terrible truth: mass murder. Many non-Jews believed that the Jews would be “merely” deported. Few expressed regrets about that day, but many seem to have petitioned the authorities to exempt particular Jews.

All of Monday, September 29, Jews—men, women, and small children—along with non-Jewish spouses, other relatives, and friends, walked to the designated street corner in the Lukianivka district.<sup>15</sup> A Ukrainian witness, Fedir Pihido, has recalled seeing the following around 11 a.m.:

Many thousands of people, mainly old ones—but middle-aged people also were not lacking— were moving toward Babi Yar. And the children—my God, there were so many children! All this was moving,

burdened with luggage and children. Here and there old and sick people who lacked the strength to move by themselves were being carried, probably by sons or daughters, on carts without any assistance. Some cry, others console. Most were moving in a self-absorbed way, in silence and with a doomed look. It was a terrible sight.

Other sources have attested that some onlookers watched and sighed, but that others jeered and shouted insults. As for the Jews, Genia Batasheva, whose home had been invaded, has recalled that one thing somewhat reassured her: the sight of Germans in a truck driving in the opposite direction. They were smiling, which to her suggested that nothing horrible could be in the making.

The Jews, and the non-Jews who accompanied them, arrived at the designated corner of Melnikov and Degtiarev Streets and then continued to walk west, down Melnikov Street. There they saw auxiliary policemen and reached, on their right, the gate to the Jewish cemetery. Dina Pronicheva, who was then thirty years old, arrived there comparatively late. She has testified that that spot, that is, just before the entrance to the Jewish cemetery, was the point of no return. Melnikov Street was fenced off with Soviet barbed wire and anti-tank obstacles. "Germans and Ukrainians," as she put it, stood at the entrance and let people in. They could enter freely, "but no one was let out, except for carters."

There were a few SS men, but they just watched. Most of the Germans here were Army Feldgendarmarie wearing helmets, green uniforms, and chains with gorgets. These military police counted off a specific number of people and edged them on, while restraining those behind them for some ten minutes. Thus, the immense crowd was systematically subdivided. Each group turned left into Kahatna Street. Then each group turned right, into Laherna Street (today's Dorohozhytska Street).

That was when the Jews lost any doubt that they were marked for mass murder. Germans demanded their documents and burned them before their very eyes. There could hardly be a more powerful signal of coming death. The air was filled with aggressive shouts and fearful cries. The men, women, and children were forced to undress, but not all went completely naked; here, the Nazis preferred speed to thoroughness. It seems that men and women undressed separately and that they were lined up separately, again in groups. Ruvim Shtein, who was then fifteen, saw how

women and girls were put onto wheeled vehicles and quickly driven farther. They were shot elsewhere in the ravine.

Most of the Jews who arrived that day also were chased through a vicious gauntlet of Germans with rubber clubs, big sticks, and dogs. Covered with blood and extremely afraid, they then came upon an open space close to the edge of the ravine. In this space, German and non-German policemen dispensed more beatings. The Jews reached the crest and entered the ravine through ancient paths or through newly made cuts. At any moment during the massacre, Jews were shot at three different sites in Babi Yar. The murderers and their batches of victims moved along a stretch of about a mile. The Jews were shot either while lying down, or while standing on a narrow ledge. Babies were ripped from parents' arms and simply thrown into the ravine.

Quite a few non-Jews saw the massacre. Ioanna Ievhenieva, a non-Jewish girl then thirteen, secretly looked on from the Red Army canteen that was located just 230 feet (seventy meters) from the ravine. She saw a beautiful girl with curly black hair; the young woman refused to undress, even though she was beaten very hard. The struggling young lady was shot on the spot, not inside the ravine, and with her clothes on.

When it was almost dark, Germans assisted by non-Germans walked across the bodies of the victims; with flashlights they sought out survivors, and finished them off. Two of these men approached Dina Pronicheva, who earlier had jumped into the ravine just before any bullet could hit her. The killers became suspicious and trampled her, to verify that she was dead. She showed no sign of life. The corpses were covered with a thin layer of sand. Shooting had begun at 10:00 a.m. that day. It ended between 5:00 and 6:00 p.m. But not every Jewish arrival had been shot. Those not shot were pressed into garages for the night. After suffering inside there in a way that is impossible to imagine, they were shot the next day. According to the SS, the German forces on hand shot 33,771 Jews on September 29 and September 30.

Early in October, a German military photographer came to the site and took some color pictures. Those that have been preserved show no corpses; they do show heaps of clothing, SS men rummaging through them, and Soviet prisoners of war, who are forced to level the covered mass grave.<sup>16</sup>

The killers belonged to Sonderkommando 4a, a subunit of the Einsatzgruppe C of the Security Police and Security Service. But they did not act alone: they were assisted by Police Battalion 45, by Police Battalion 303 from the city of Bremen, by

interpreters, and by Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking auxiliary policemen. Some of the latter may have been Russian nationalists. In any event, Ukrainian sources name two paramilitary and auxiliary police formations that were in Kiev at the time of the massacre. They were created or at least commanded by activists of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, a militant group dominated by western Ukrainians. The first formation was a company of Ukrainian policemen that arrived on September 23. The second formation was the Bukovinian Battalion, with Ukrainians from Bukovina.<sup>17</sup>

It was a sign of the Germans' supreme confidence that in October 1941 they took thirty foreign correspondents from ten countries in buses from Berlin to Kiev. There a representative of the city administration told them that there used to be 350,000 Jews in the city; but today, there were no more Jews. An Italian newspaper reported this statement, and wondered where the Jews had gone. Other reports of the visit, such as the one in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, omitted this conversation.<sup>18</sup>

Groups of Jewish civilians and prisoners of war continued to be shot at Babi Yar after September 30, up to at least the end of October. Wartime records that have been preserved do not mention figures for these later shootings, but witnesses often mention them.<sup>19</sup>

Non-Jews, too, were killed at Babi Yar. Some died with their Jewish spouses in late September. Others were Roma and non-Jewish prisoners of war. In February 1942, Kiev's mayor and some members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists were killed; if this did not happen at Babi Yar, the Nazis probably still dumped the corpses there.<sup>20</sup>

By the summer of 1943 the ravine held perhaps as many as 100,000 corpses.

For six weeks from the middle of August 1943, hundreds of prisoners had to dig up and burn them, as part of an attempt to erase the traces. At the end, these laborers revolted. Of the five rebels who survived, four estimated later that more than 100,000 bodies were incinerated. Yet even then the SS kept on killing, also with a mobile gas van. Initially only on Tuesdays and Saturdays, then also on other days, the van arrived at the ravine five to nine times per day. The fifty or more people inside were gassed on the way or were killed upon arrival. The age and ethnicity of this group of victims varied.<sup>21</sup>

In November 1943, the Red Army and the Soviet authorities returned to Kiev. They came upon a ravine with a raised bottom, but that still retained its basic shape, as pictures show.<sup>22</sup>

Many scholars of the Holocaust now study the ways in which Germans, Poles, and others have remembered the Holocaust. But the way in which Soviet society dealt with this past is only beginning to be addressed in detail. The findings so far, made by a small number of scholars, have not yet produced a consistent picture. My own research also focuses not only on the massacre at Babi Yar, but only on how people dealt with it afterward and how the site itself was treated. It would be wrong to say that the massacre was fully forgotten; for instance, it came up at various trials in the Soviet Union. But official memory distorted it and often seemed bent on pushing it into oblivion. According to an officially published report, the occupiers killed more than 100,000 “men, women, children, and old people” at Babi Yar. Jews were not mentioned.

The words *Babi Yar* were primarily rhetorical weapons against foreign countries, in particular Israel, the United States, and West Germany. The Communist Party prohibited serious study and commemoration of the mass murder, as it did of the Holocaust in general. The Soviet leadership preferred to emphasize that the Germans also put to death tens of thousands of non-Jews at the ravine and refused to acknowledge that the massacre of September 1941 amounted to an unparalleled war crime, namely, the attempt to kill every single Jew in the city at the time. Ultimately, this refusal to acknowledge the victims as Jews and properly to commemorate them, stemmed from a combination of Communist ideology, which felt that Jews did not belong but had to assimilate; the antisemitic notion that Jews had been, and remained, alien and hostile; and animosity to Israel.

Only on rare occasions did references to the Jewish background of the victims of the main massacre survive the censor. When, in 1946, Dina Pronicheva testified about her ordeal, the press allowed her text to refer once to the Jewishness of the victims. The Soviet media were most open during the post-Stalin “thaw” of the 1960s. For instance, in 1966, Anatolii Kuznetsov’s autobiographical novel *Babi Yar* appeared. Despite heavy censorship, it gave a detailed account of the massacre, through the eyes of Pronicheva. But then the regime concluded that to allow it had been a mistake, and it withdrew the book from libraries. Its author sought political asylum in the United Kingdom.

The political climate of the 1970s, when the Soviet media produced an enormous amount of anti-Israeli propaganda with many antisemitic features, brought

forth some of the worst distortions of Babi Yar. The faithful of Kiev's one synagogue were compelled to sign an open letter accusing the "Zionists" of having forgotten the massacre.<sup>23</sup> *Pravda*, the main Soviet newspaper, published a statement signed by Ukrainian Jews putting some of the blame for the massacre on the Jews themselves: "The tragedy of Babi Yar," it read, "will forever remain the embodiment not only of the cannibalism of the Hitlerites, but also of the indelible disgrace of their accomplices and followers: the Zionists." This oppressive and antisemitic climate created stark fear among the Jews of Kiev, as every foreign Jew visiting as a tourist could notice.<sup>24</sup>

As for the killing ground itself, locals and authorities alike did not simply neglect it. For some years after the Germans were driven out of Kiev, some people seeking gold among the remains were active. Nearby inhabitants also began using Babi Yar as an illegal dumping ground. Recruits from the nearby School of Military Medicine practiced firing their small arms on the slopes. Yet one of them has testified that they had no idea that they were ejecting their empty cartridges atop a mass grave.<sup>25</sup>

Early in April 1945 the Soviet press had announced that a museum and a memorial to the "Kievans" killed at Babi Yar would be placed there. A plan indeed reserved 2.5 million rubles for this. Both were supposed to be unveiled in 1950, but nothing was done with the design. Instead, in 1950, another decision was taken: funds were reserved to create a park over Babi Yar. Above all, the city authorities were preoccupied with something that they felt had to precede such a park—the removal of the ravine as such. Leveling the surface of the area to that of its surroundings would allow the city to grow and traffic to cross. That was why, also in 1950, the local and republic party officials decided, in total secrecy, essentially to obliterate Babi Yar. Nearby brick factories would pump in muddy water. Engineers had proposed the idea of flooding the ravine. The autocratic chairman of the city administration liked the notion and quickly had it rubber-stamped.<sup>26</sup>

The only public protest came from the Kievan writer and Stalingrad veteran Viktor Nekrasov, in an article in a Moscow newspaper in the fall of 1959. Why was there no memorial, he wondered, and how could one possibly decide to flood and level Babi Yar? His article did not mention Jews, but, at his request, it appeared on October 10, Yom Kippur.<sup>27</sup>

By the time of Nekrasov's public protest, specialists were warning that the flooding, up to the very top of the spurs of the ravine, was creating a risky situation. But, in typical Soviet fashion, the authorities ignored them. On March 13, 1961, one

dam restraining the mud fell apart and a huge mudslide occurred: a mass of heavy dirt, built up over years, thirteen feet (four meters) high, streamed out and pushed into the city. According to government figures, the mud killed 145 people and injured 143 others, but some researchers today think ten times as many people died. The disaster became known among Kievans as the Kurenivka Tragedy. An investigation was held.<sup>28</sup> But the obliteration of Babi Yar continued at an increased pace.

In August 1961 the Russian writer Yevgeni Yevtushenko visited Kiev and saw trucks dump garbage into the flooded Babi Yar. He immediately wrote a poem and read it out to a packed October Palace in Kiev. As he recalls it, the applause was like thunder. The poem, called “Babi Yar,” appeared in print one month later. It mentioned the absence of a memorial and dared to sympathize with the Jews: “In their callous rage, all antisemites must hate me now as a Jew,” he wrote.<sup>29</sup> The poem created a furor—but like the mudslide it did not impact the future of the site. Right on top of the now filled ravine, a new arterial road was built, Novo-Okruzhna Street; it was completed in 1969. By the late 1970s, the rest of the terrain was designated a “Park of Culture and Recreation.” Foreign tourists sometimes asked to be taken to Babi Yar. They were always rebuffed by the Soviet tourist agency guides—the place was far away, and uninteresting.<sup>30</sup>

The only positive change on the ground, at Babi Yar, came from pressure from below, in the form of unauthorized commemoration and the Soviet response to this. In 1966, it was twenty-five years since the main massacre. On September 28 of that year, three young Jews asked the leader of Kiev’s synagogue if he would announce that, the next day, there would be a commemoration at Babi Yar. The man said nothing official had been planned, and refused. But on September 29, after 5 p.m., an informal commemoration began. About 600 people, most of them Jews, began gathering at the site. They stood in groups and talked mostly about their desire for a memorial. Some writers came also and gave speeches. One was Viktor Nekrasov. Another was the Ukrainian writer Ivan Dziuba, who called it wrong to be silent about “tragedies” as enormous as Babi Yar when far from everything that might be said about it had been said. Actually, *nothing* had been said about it. Ukrainians, he said, had a special responsibility not to forget Babi Yar, because it had happened on Ukrainian soil. He went on to denounce Stalinist attempts to, as he put it, “play on the mutual prejudices of Ukrainians and Jews.” While Jews should combat those who disrespected Ukrainians, Ukrainians had an obligation to fight the antisemitism that still existed among them.

At 7:30 p.m., policemen and KGB officers began dispersing the crowd. The city party chief thought that “Jewish and Ukrainian nationalists” had organized the event in order to “inflame nationalist tendencies” among the Jews of Kiev.<sup>31</sup> Dziuba was interrogated, but this was nothing compared to the harassment of Nekrasov that now began. And he was a party member. Eventually, he had to emigrate.

However, the Soviet authorities silently agreed that a memorial nevertheless was needed, and they gave tangible proof of this agreement. Two weeks after the unofficial commemoration, a gray, granite stone was placed. It announced the future construction of a memorial to the “Soviet citizens” shot at the site. A competition for this memorial was held. But none of the designs was used and the granite stone remained in place. September 29 officially became a memorial day in Kiev—not for the victims of Babi Yar, but more broadly for the “Victims of the Temporary German-Fascist Occupation” of Kiev. Each year, a tightly guarded stage was placed at Babi Yar; from that podium the Communist leader of the Shevchenko district spoke to a handpicked audience about social and economic achievements. Only elderly people with flowers were allowed to approach. Secret documents state frankly that the commemorations were held to preclude gatherings by “nationalist Jewish citizens.”<sup>32</sup> By this were meant, in particular, commemorative acts by Soviet Jews who were not allowed to emigrate—the so-called *refuseniks*.

In July 1976, almost ten years after the unofficial commemoration of 1966 and the placement of the granite stone, the authorities finally erected a large bronze sculpture at the site. It was not surprising that in commemorating the “citizens of the city of Kiev and the prisoners of war” killed in Babi Yar between 1941 and 1943, the memorial made no mention of Jews.

In August 1991, the month when Ukraine declared its independence, a new stage in the memory of Babi Yar began. *Pravda* mentioned that Jews had been Babi Yar’s first victims. It even erroneously called Babi Yar “the beginning of the genocide of the Jews in our country.”<sup>33</sup> In September 1991, the first ever official national commemoration of the Babi Yar massacre took place. The acting president, Leonid Kravchuk, said that it was appropriate to “ask forgiveness from the Jewish people, against whom were committed so many injustices in our history.” The apology was far from popular, and it was decided not to print it.<sup>34</sup> Texts in Russian and Yiddish were added to the Soviet memorial, and, at another location (far from the shooting site), local Jews placed a bronze menorah. Other new commemorative objects in or near the area

now include a wooden cross, erected by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists; a cross for two Russian Orthodox priests believed to have been shot at the site; and a memorial to the murdered children of Babi Yar.

The post-Soviet period saw no end to the construction in the former killing zone: in 2000, the Dorohozhychy metro station was opened on the spot where some of the killings of September 29 had taken place. Babi Yar—or, more precisely, the former Babi Yar—is now very much part of the city.

The first stone for a Babi Yar Museum was laid in 2001. But the year 2002 witnessed the beginning of an emotional debate in Kiev, primarily between Jews from two competing Babi Yar memorial committees. The issue was the chance that a community center to be built by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, would arise atop human remains. The opponents prevailed. In September 2009, the mayor of Kiev vetoed a city council decision to build a hotel on the site. In 2011, twenty years since Ukraine became independent and seventy years since the Babi Yar massacre, there still was no museum, nor is there today.

It is time to draw some conclusions. Babi Yar was a site where Germans and their auxiliaries shot Jews to death on a scale that is difficult to imagine; in September 1941 in particular, but also during the remainder of German rule. Most of the perhaps 100,000 people buried there probably were Jews. After the war, Babi Yar became a site of oblivion, one that Stalin and his successors tried to oblige others to forget. The Soviet methods included censorship, arrest, and erasure of the site itself, beginning as early as the 1950s. Pressure from ordinary citizens for a memorial began in the 1960s and had some result. But the memorial spoke a half-truth—and the site itself continued to be developed and shaped.

Would the Soviet state have treated the site differently if most of the victims had not been Jews? Would more Ukrainians have cared about it? Perhaps. Would it have made a difference if the Germans had not burned the corpses? Probably not—the Soviet state mistreated not only its living citizens; it also was inherently incapable of respecting the dead and allowing others to do so. It causes one all the more to admire those brave few who dared to remember.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> T. Evstaf'eva, V. Nakhmanovich, "Syrets, Luk'ianovka i Babii iar v pervoi polovine XX v. (do nachala nemetskoï okkupatsii 1941–1943 gg.): Istoriiia zastroiki i problem topografii," in Tat'iana Evstaf'eva and Vitalii Nakhmanovich, eds., *Babii Iar: Chelovek, vlast', istoriia. Kniga 1: Istoricheskaia topografiia. Khronologiia sobytii* (Kiev: Vneshtorgizdat Ukrainy, 2004), pp. 66–67, also available at <http://www.kby.kiev.ua/book1/articles/art22.html>, last accessed February 7, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67–68.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72–79.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79–81; Aleksandr Glagolev, *Kupina neopalimaia*, ed. Pavel Protsenko (Kiev: Dukh i litera, 2002), pp. 240, 265–66.

<sup>7</sup> Evstaf'eva and Nakhmanovich, "Syrets, Luk'ianovka i Babii iar v pervoi polovine XX v.," p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 61–62.

<sup>9</sup> This and the following three paragraphs derive from Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair*, pp. 27–32.

<sup>10</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Archives, RG-50.120\*0008, "Oral history interview with Genya Batashuva [sic, Batasheva], 1992 Apr. 30," Israel Documentation Project, female interviewer not identified by name.

<sup>11</sup> V. Nakhmanovich, "Rasstrely i zakhoroneniia v raione Bab'ego Iara vo vremia nemetskoï okkupatsii g. Kieva 1941–1943 gg.: Problemy khronologii i tipografii," in Evstaf'eva and Nakhmanovich, *Babii Iar*, pp. 94–98, also at <http://www.kby.kiev.ua/book1/articles/mart6.html>, last accessed February 7, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Nakhmanovich, "Rasstrely i zakhoroneniia," p. 98.

<sup>13</sup> Nakhmanovich, “Rasstrely i zakhoroneniia,” p. 89.

<sup>14</sup> Mikhl Tanklevski, “Der kiever khurn,” *Eynikayt* (Kuibyshev/Samara), April 5, 1943, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> The paragraphs describing September 29 are based on Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair*, pp. 65–68; Karel C. Berkhoff, “Dina Pronicheva’s Story of Surviving the Babi Yar Massacre: German, Jewish, Soviet, Russian, and Ukrainian Records,” in Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower, eds., *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2008), pp. 291–317; Nakhmanovich, “Rasstrely i zakhoroneniia,” pp. 102–14; Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht: Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2008), pp. 259–60; USHMM Archives, Batasheva interview; USC (University of Southern California) Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, interview 36727, Ioanna Evgen’eva Evgeneva, speaking to Bronya Borodyanskaya, Kiev, October 21, 1997; USC Shoah Foundation Institute, interview 15235, Evgenii Semenovich Skorokhod, speaking to Maria Temkina, Brooklyn, May 17, 1996; USC Shoah Foundation Institute, interview 23366, Ruvim [sic; Ruvim] Izrailevich Shtein, speaking to Alla Klepikova, Kiev, November 15, 1996.

<sup>16</sup> D. Malakov, “Kiev i Babii Iar na nemetskoj fotoplenke oseni 1941 goda,” in Evstaf’eva and Nakhmanovich, *Babii Iar*, pp. 164–70, also at <http://www.kby.kiev.ua/book1/articles/art33.html>, last accessed February 7, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Berkhoff, “Dina Pronicheva’s Story,” pp. 303, 316–17, n. 55.

<sup>18</sup> Felice Bellotti, “Le mine ‘assassine’ di Kiev,” *La Stampa* (Turin), October 31, 1941, p. 3, quoted in Ievhen Onats’kyi, “Ukraïna ochyma italiis’kykh korespondentiv u druhii svitovii viini,” *Samostiina Ukraïna* 18, no. 2(192) (New York, February 1965), p. 21; Alex Small, “Ruins of 5 Day Blaze – Kiev’s War Reminder,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 23, 1941, p. 1. (I thank Robert Williams for supplying the final article.)

<sup>19</sup> Nakhmanovich, “Rasstrely i zakhoroneniia,” p. 121.

<sup>20</sup> Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair*, pp. 52, 147.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 302–303.

<sup>22</sup> T. Evstaf’eva, V. Nakhmanovich, “Syrets, Luk’ianovka i Babii iar v pervoi polovine XX v. (do nachala nemetskoj okkupatsii 1941–1943 gg.): Istoriia zastroiki i problem topografii,” in Evstaf’eva and Nakhmanovich, *Babii Iar*, pp. 73, 78, also at <http://www.kby.kiev.ua/book1/articles/art22.html>, last accessed February 7, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> “Obrashchenie Kievskoi evreiskoi religioznoi obshchiny ‘v sviazi s provokatsionnymi deistviiami pravitelei Izrailia,’” Kiev, March 5, 1970, published in Mikhail Mitsel’, *Obshchiny iudeiskogo veroispovedaniia v Ukraine (Kiev, L’vov, 1945–1981)* (Kiev: Sfera, 1998), cited from <http://www.judaica.kiev.ua/mizel.htm>, last accessed February 7, 2011. See also Mikhail

Mitsel', "Zapret na uvekovechenie pamiati kak sposob zamalchivaniia Kholokosta: Praktika KPU v otnoshenii Bab'ego Iara," *Holokost i suchasnist'*, no. 1(2) (Kiev, 2007): pp. 9–30.

<sup>24</sup> Berkhoff, "Dina Pronicheva's Story," p. 292. The fear was observed already a decade earlier; see David W. Weiss, "The Plight of the Jews in the Soviet Union," *Dissent* (New York), July–August 1966, pp. 452–53.

<sup>25</sup> Viktor Nekrasov, *Zapiski zevaki* (Moscow: ZAO "Plius-Minus," 2003), p. 83; Isaak Trabskii, "Zhiznennyi podvig," *Slovo\Word*, no. 61 (New York, 2009), cited from <http://magazines.russ.ru/slovo/2009/61/tr20.html>, last accessed February 7, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> "Pamiatnik pogibshim v Bab'em Iaru," *Pravda*, April 4, 1945, p. 3; T. Evstaf'eva, "Babii Iar vo vtoroi polovine XX. v.," in Evstaf'eva and Nakhmanovich, *Babii Iar*, pp. 191, 195–197, also at <http://www.kby.kiev.ua/book1/articles/art37.html>, last accessed February 7, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> L. Lazarev, *Shestoi etakh, ili perebiraia nashi daty* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Knizhnyi sad," 1999), pp. 185–86.

<sup>28</sup> Evstaf'eva, "Babii Iar vo vtoroi polovine XX. v.," pp. 200–201; Oleksandr Anisimov, *Kurenivs'kyi Apokalipsys: Kyivs'ka trahediia 13 bereznia 1961 roku v fotohrafiiakh, dokumentakh, spohadakh...* (Kiev: Fakt, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Jerry Tallmer, "'Babi Yar' — where 33,000 died, one poet stood up," *Downtown Express* (New York), September 22–28, 2006, cited from [http://www.downtownexpress.com/de\\_176/babiyar.html](http://www.downtownexpress.com/de_176/babiyar.html), last accessed February 7, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Evstaf'eva, "Babii Iar vo vtoroi polovine XX. v.," pp. 201–203. Examples of testimonies include Weiss, "The Plight of the Jews in the Soviet Union," p. 457; Joseph B. Schechtman, *Star in Eclipse: Russian Jewry Revisited* (New York and London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961), p. 100.

<sup>31</sup> "Miting v Bab'em Iaru," in Mitsel' *Obshchiny iudeiskogo veroispovedaniia v Ukraine*; Vladimir Khanin, ed., *Documents on Ukrainian Jewish Identity and Emigration, 1944–1990* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 145–47; "Ivan Dzyuba's speech in Babyn Yar on September 29, 1966," in Vyacheslav Chornovil, red., *The Chornovil Papers* (New York, 1968), pp. 222–26.

<sup>32</sup> Nekrasov, *Zapiski zevaki*, pp. 82, 85; Khanin, *Documents*, pp. 176–78, 185, 200–201.

<sup>33</sup> "Massovymi rasstrelami nevinnykh liudei," *Pravda*, August 8, 1991, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Aleksandr Burakovskii, *Evrei, Ukraina: Razmyshleniia "inorodtsa."* *Kniga publitsistiki* (New York: Izdatel'stvo Kluba russkikh pisatelei, 2008), pp. 161–63. For an example of the unpopularity, see the Oles' Honchar, *Shchodennyky u tr'okh tomakh*, ed., Valentyna Honchar, vol. 3, 1984–1995 (Kiev: "Veselka," 2004), pp. 379–80.

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