

BABIJJAR: A MOAT FULL OF DENIALS

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ABSTRACT

On September 29 and 30, 1941 thousands of Jewish victims were murdered at the Babyn Yar ravine by the Nazis, throughout the Nazi occupation of Kyiv. The estimated number of victims murdered at Babyn Yar is around 100,000: this is Europe's largest mass grave. The article delves into the reasons for oblivion.

Keywords: anti-semitism, anti-judaism, massacre, memory.

1. Babij Jar, a covered track

Babij Jar is the name of a place where, at the time of the Second World War, a deep moat stood out. It became the grave of thousands of Jews and then of other Ukrainian citizens disliked by the Nazis. Years later, the poet Yevgeny Aleksandrovič Evtušenko (1932-2017), who dedicated this poem to it, drew attention to the extermination:

*No monument stands over Babi Yar.
A steep cliff only, like the rudest headstone.
I am afraid.
Today, I am as old
As the entire Jewish race itself.*

*I see myself an ancient Israelite.
I wander o'er the roads of ancient Egypt
And here, upon the cross, I perish, tortured
And even now, I bear the marks of nails.*

*It seems to me that Dreyfus is myself.
The Philistines betrayed me – and now judge.
I'm in a cage. Surrounded and trapped,*

*I'm persecuted, spat on, slandered, and
The dainty dollies in their Brussels frills
Squeal, as they stab umbrellas at my face.*

*I see myself a boy in Belostok
Blood spills, and runs upon the floors,
The chiefs of bar and pub rage unimpeded
And reek of vodka and of onion, half and half.*

*I'm thrown back by a boot, I have no strength left,
In vain I beg the rabble of pogrom,
To jeers of "Kill the Jews, and save our Russia!"
My mother's being beaten by a clerk.*

*O, Russia of my heart, I know that you
Are international, by inner nature.
But often those whose hands are steeped in filth
Abused your purest name, in name of hatred.*

*I know the kindness of my native land.
How vile, that without the slightest quiver
The antisemites have proclaimed themselves
The "Union of the Russian People!"*

*It seems to me that I am Anna Frank,
Transparent, as the thinnest branch in April,
And I'm in love, and have no need of phrases,
But only that we gaze into each other's eyes.
How little one can see, or even sense!
Leaves are forbidden, so is sky,
But much is still allowed – very gently
In darkened rooms each other to embrace.*

- "They come!"

*- "No, fear not – those are sounds
Of spring itself. She's coming soon.
Quickly, your lips!"*

- "They break the door!"

- "No, river ice is breaking..."

*Wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar,
The trees look sternly, as if passing judgement.
Here, silently, all screams, and, hat in hand,
I feel my hair changing shade to gray.*

*And I myself, like one long soundless scream
Above the thousands of thousands interred,
I'm every old man executed here,
As I am every child murdered here.*

*No fiber of my body will forget this.
May "Internationale" thunder and ring
When, for all time, is buried and forgotten
The last of antisemites on this earth.*

*There is no Jewish blood that's blood of mine,
But, hated with a passion that's corrosive
Am I by antisemites like a Jew.
And that is why I call myself a Russian!*

On September 28, 1941, a poster was posted on the streets of the town, inviting the Jews to prepare for their scheduled departure the following day, otherwise they would have been shot. Some sensed or learned that they were going to meet death, so they committed suicide. The others, at the first light of dawn, on 29 September 1941, the day of the solemnity of Kippur, began to flow like the silent and prudent water of a human stream. They carried with them as much as they could, from valuables to supplies. There was no shortage of children and the infirm even on stretchers. The goal of the journey was outside the city, it was the slope corresponding to the Babij jar moat. Witnesses report that the documents were torn and thrown to the ground, forming a paper layer, the uncovered and vilified layer of life that was going away. At the time of registration, everyone had to deliver the precious objects that were confiscated. Subsequently all were forced to undress and wait for the blow that would deliver them to death and slide their bodies into the ditch.

Today there is a park there, on the outskirts of Kiev, where over thirty thousand Jews ended up in that pit in one day alone. By whom were they killed? (From)* By the Nazis, of course, with the

collaboration of the Ukrainian police. In a second moment by the silence imposed by communism. Finally, there was no lack of general indifference to perpetrate this assassination. The bodies were discovered and counted in December 1943, when the Red Army liberated the capital. The memory, however, was not restored to them. The Soviet government, in fact, made the massacre known*, attributing it to the Nazis, but was silent about how many fellow citizens went to the site of the massacre to appropriate the goods of the dead. Vassily Grosmann, a member of the Jewish anti-fascist committee, was prevented from publishing the black book on the massacre. Anatolij Kuznetsov, writer of Kief, and a Soviet Ukraine tried to erase the traces of Judaism and to forget, until the poems of 1961 were set to music in the symphony n. 13 by Dmitry Shostakovich. *The authorities then decided to post three plates on the spot, two in Russian, one in Ukrainian, languages not belonging to most Jews or even less to their history. Only with the end of communism, in 1989, was a plaque in Yiddish posted. In 1992 the Ukrainian government placed a cross on the site of the massacre to remember the Ukrainians who fell in the war, adding strangeness to the paradox of forgetfulness. Today there is also a menorah, devastated by current signs of anti-Semitism. On September 30, 2001, a plaque was placed on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the massacre of Jews in Babij Jar.

2. The anti-Semitic complexity. A look at the literature of the time

Literature represents an important mirror to understand how deeply rooted anti-Semitism was and how widespread negative prejudices against Jews were. The most authoritative example comes from Nikolay Gogol and his novel *TarasBulba*, written in 1834 and published in 1835, at a time when the great writer even set out to compose a history of Ukraine.

In *TarasBulba* the author makes religions enter in insults, in the construction of the enemy, he animates them as the background of a passionate and rude story at the same time. The Jew in the contempt of the Cossacks is second only to the Catholics, obedient to the logic of Christian money, property, and contempt. In the fiction, a persecution of Jews is reconstructed within a frame of guilt on their part, contemptuous of Christians and their churches, dominant because they are rich. And they begin to be thrown into the river, when they, in an attempt to defend themselves, distance themselves from the Catholics and claim *to be with the Zaporozhians as if they were brothers*. The Zaporozhian Cossacks (are)*outraged by the unwanted brotherhood take action. A subtle sarcasm outlines the personality of the Jew Iankel, who even when he is threatened with death manages to set up a cart and a stall to sell what is possible following the persecutors. In this the Jews are noted for their shrewd nature, for the rest they appear as strangers to history, like monks and women, far removed from others, both Catholics and Orthodox, albeit experts in mysterious knowledge, such as the power of herbs, more astute than the others, perhaps because they are more used to running away and rebuilding a life. The pig,

the dog, the devil in exclamations are often linked to the Hebrew(s)* in the language of the novel. Taras in his rudeness does not fail to accuse Iankel of the killing of Christ. Overall, Iankel's weight and description is such as to seem, more than an enemy, the intelligent ally, the diplomat capable of reaching anywhere, while the verbal expressions and intimate considerations of Taras and the other Cossacks let the otherness that the dominant culture outlined on the Jews shine through.*

Also in *Doctor Zhivago*, signed by Boris Leonidovič Pasternak (1890-1960), there is no lack of references to Jews against the background of the period described, marked by the civil war between the White Russians and the Red Army following the October Revolution. The character of Misha Gordon, the protagonist's friend with a Hebrew surname, but sympathetic towards Christianity, during a long reflection states something like that: *And we also spoke of mediocre politicians, who have nothing to say to life and to the world, forces of second order, interested in ensuring that there is always talk of some people, preferably small and persecuted ... The classic victim, par excellence, of these forces are the Jews. The national idea has imposed on them the lethal function of remaining a people and only a people ..., when the very force once released from its ranks freed the whole world from this humiliating fate. ... this joyful liberation from the damned obligation of mediocrity, the soaring above the narrow-mindedness of everyday life, all this was born on their land, was expressed in their language and belonged to their race. And they, who have seen and heard all this, have let it slip. ... who benefits from this voluntary martyrdom, what good is it that for centuries so many innocent people have been mocked and shed their blood ... so sensitive and capable of good and sharing of affection? it was expressed in their language and belonged to their race. And they, who have seen and heard all this, have let it slip. ... who benefits from this voluntary martyrdom, what good is it that for centuries so many innocent people have been mocked and shed their blood ... so sensitive and capable of good and sharing of affection?*

Greater compassion animates the protagonist, JurijAndrèevič Zhivago, when he says: *You can't even imagine what this wretched Jewish population is going through in this war. The fighting happens to be in the Residential Area and, as if punitive taxation, the destruction of their property and all their other suffering weren't enough, they are now undergoing pogroms, insults and charges of lack of patriotism.*

From both voices emerges a critical condition for the Jews, victims of persecution and pretext of violence, emblem of a misery in tragic contrast to the destiny of election and the biblical story of

liberation. As had already happened in Gogol, albeit with different characteristics, also in Pasternak the theme reflects a certain complexity, which obviously gives rise, evidently also in the mentality of the time, to different readings of the Jew, to which the different characters or phases of history give voice.

Another interesting writer for the period under review is the Ukrainian Jew Ilya Ehrenburg (1891-1967), nicknamed *Stalin's Jewish dog* by Hitler. He fought in the Second World War, called the Great Patriotic War by the Russians, also instigating through writing. A day spent without killing a German was lost to him. In his first book, published in 1922, entitled *The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurenito and his disciples*, he foresaw some tragedies, including the extermination of Jews in Kiev and many other places.

Ukrainian Ilya Ilf (1897-1937), also a Jew, in his novel *The Twelve Chairs*, written with* Yevgeny Petrov, mocked the stereotype of the money-hungry Jew, describing the adventures of Ippolit Vorob'janinov in vain search for the chair in which his late mother-in-law had sewn a fortune in diamonds and cash. Although hindered in his search by a priest, Father Fëdor, Ippolit traces in a grotesque way the Jewish parable badly intertwined with money, which in any case is not enough to redeem it from an epilogue of misery and even of fiction and ridicule.

3. A stereotype subservient to power

Fascism and Nazism channeled the anti-Semitic stereotype, which crept into the background of European cultures, into their own government policy and simply made the enemy match up with it. As a counterpoint to Semitic inferiority Hitler erected the monument of superiority to the Aryan race.

Tsarist Russia was not free from policies of this kind. In 1905, in fact, the terrorist organization called *Black Hundreds or Black-hundredists* was born, of conservative, traditionalist inspiration, close to the Orthodox Church, proud to include Tsar Nicholas II as an honorary member. Among other things, they were responsible for the anti-Semites pogroms. In this context, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* appeared.

Because the Nazis had designated Babij Jar for mass Jewish elimination.* One answer may lie in the fact that (in)* this city (it)* housed many cemeteries, Jewish, Orthodox, Karaite, Muslim, that of some brotherhoods, the Lukyanivske cemetery. The conformation of this peripheral area of Kiev physically lent itself to accommodate many bodies. The keeper's daughter of Lukyanivske cemetery was heard as a witness and reported of the flood of people brought naked to Babij Jar and never returning, while she had been watching, waiting to see them return.

On June 22, 1941, the Germans invaded the Soviet Union and began the systematic elimination of millions of citizens, especially Communists and Jews. A slower course was expected for the elimination of the Slavs, the first to be designated for elimination were the Jews. Their elimination in the Soviet Union thus took place in a particularly short time, especially in Kiev. The ways of extermination were diversified, the Germans could break into homes and arrest the inhabitants. Many Kiev Jews were beaten in the middle of the street to death. The bodies of many, adults and children, slipped or were thrown into the Dnieper. The shooting took place leaving the condemned man standing, or against bodies piled up according to the system defined as a can of sardines. The capillarity and the direct approach to extermination in these territories were due to the *Einsatzgruppen*, the death squads, special bodies of the SS and the police, which had the task of purging the areas where the German army was advancing from Jews, Roma, political opponents, counting on the collaboration of local populations and the Ukrainian police. They did not spare even the physically or mentally disabled. They resorted to shooting, mass killings, vans set up as gas chambers. Their methods were faster than the deportations to death camps carried out elsewhere. The *Einsatzgruppen* went to them to the places to be cleaned and eliminated the enemies almost instantly.

Many Ukrainian Jews, 33,771 according to estimates, met (the)* death at the *old woman's moat* (literal translation of Babi jar) in a frightening nightmare in all its phases. The strategy developed was to spread false news, to induce Jews to set out for some destination. In a short time the unfortunate people, loaded with heavy clothes and goods, passed from their home to the grave, where they would end up dead bodies. Shocking speed and farce beat any possibility of organized resistance against time.

4. Memory clearing

Babij Jar has long been buried under a blanket of silence. It was difficult to access the Soviet archives, on the one hand, on the other the Soviet Union experienced a very problematic relationship with its anti-Semitism and never gave due emphasis to the massacres committed against Jews, simply passing them off as crimes of war, in which the Jews would be involved as Soviets.

In 1946 a Soviet television crew took up the testimony given by Dina Pronicheva, actress of the Kiev theater, who survived the moat with her little girl. On January 24 of that year, the woman attended a court hearing. She was asked the following questions:

1. Could you tell us what you know about Babij Jar?
2. Were people aware that they were being led to their own execution?

3. Were there many women, children, old people?

The woman responded to several people who questioned her over the years and who reported her testimony in different ways. An important phase in the reconstruction of the event is represented by the trial which began in the German city of Darmstadt in 1967 and ended with the conviction of the eleven defendants. The following year Dina was also heard, along with one hundred and sixty-four other witnesses. She spoke about tens of thousands of Jews who walked along the road leading to the gate of the Jewish cemetery, near which there was a checkpoint bordered by barbed wire and antitank. There were German soldiers, but also local police. The Germans, however, had to stock up on Jewish property, including clothing. Among other things, Dina testified that a German proposed to her to earn her salvation in exchange for sexual favors.

The crowded people, when (they) crossing* the empty and forbidden space without permission, entered the last phase of their life, stripped by the auxiliary police and placed on the edge of the precipice, into which they would have fallen and been*shot. Many became prey to nervous breakdowns at the sight of those gorges of sand. Younger children were snatched from their mothers' arms and thrown directly into the moat. Many, before stopping along the line of death, had been beaten to blood, for pure sadism of the Germans or for "punishment", in case they tried to cover their nakedness with their hands. Others turned gray instantly.

Proof among others is the plaque affixed in 1976 by the city of Kiev near the tragic moat, whose inscription is in memory of the Soviet citizens of the city of Kiev and prisoners of war, soldiers and officers of the Soviet Army, killed by the German Nazis in Babij Jar Not a word appears about the Jews.

In 1970, in a tense political climate between the Soviet Union and Israel, the Pravda newspaper published a declaration signed by 51 Ukrainian Jews, which stated, among other things, that the *tragedy of Baby Jar* would remain as a *personification not only of Hitler's cannibalism, but also the indelible disgrace of their accomplices and followers, the Zionists.*

References

1. Translated into English by Benjamin Okopnik, in [Babi Yar By Yevgeni Yevtushenko | The Holocaust History - A People's and Survivor History - Remember.org](#) (last accessed 2021/02/04).
2. AnatolijKuznetsov, *Baby Jar: A document in the form of a novel*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1990.

3. You can hear it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvMXpTCQYII> (last accessed 2021/02/04).
4. The author himself underlines that in *TarasBulba*, chapter VI.
5. Cf. Nikolay Gogol, *TarasBulba*, Bookclassic, 2015, IV chap.
6. The Zaporozhians were Cossacks, therefore military, who inhabited the region called *Zaporoz'e*, located in southern Ukraine, and who fought for independence in succession against Poland, the Ottoman Empire and Russia.
7. In (the)* chapter X of the book, a Jewish woman, expert in natural medicine, treats Taras.
8. Cf. Nikolay Gogol, *TarasBulba*, liberliber.it, chapter VII, p. 116.
9. Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, Dead Authors Society 2018.better without are*, Hebrews as group,* word order-let something shine through*note 7(the)*
10. *Pogrom* literally means *devastation*. After the partition of Poland in the eighteenth century in Russia, the *Pale of settlement* was created. Here pogroms took place from 1821 to 1921. Ernst Nolte in *La CrisideiRegimiLiberali e iMovimentiFascisti* (Il Mulino, Bologna, 1970, p. 268) wrote: "Pogroms of the Hundred Blacks, after the revolution of 1905, were tolerated, indeed supported, by the government, and anti-liberal, anti-capitalist and anti-Semitic, at the same time, organizations, such as the *Union of Russian Peoples* or the *Union of the Russian People*, had a ruling class largely coming from humble people and managed to be supported by peasants and proletarians".
11. Cf. <http://babynyar.gov.ua/en/historical-information> (last accessed 2021/02/04).
12. Cf. Vasilij Grossman-Ilya Erenburg, *Il libro nero. Il genocidio nazista nei territori sovietici 1941-1945*, Mondadori, Milan 2001, pp. 23-34.
13. Cf. *The shoah in Ukraine: history, testimony, memorialization*, ed. by Ray Brandon-Wendy Lower, p. 303.
14. Cf. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/it/article/einsatzgruppen> (last accessed 2021/02/04).
15. The place was so called because it was owned by an elderly innkeeper, who sold it in 1401 to a Dominican convent, cf. <http://babynyar.gov.ua/en/historical-information> (last accessed 2021/02/04).

16. The stages of the reconstruction of the story starting from the story of Pronicheva is reconstructed in *The Shoah in Ukraine*, work cited, pp. 294ss.
17. Cf. Antonella Salomoni, *L'eccidio di Babij Jar simbolo della memoria censurata*, in "Osservatore Romano", 11 January 2008.
18. Cf. *The Shoah in Ukraine*, work cited, p. 292.