The Memorycide of Babin Yar

I grew up behind the iron curtain in the 1980s. In Bulgaria, we learned at school that our freedom should never be taken for granted. Thousands of Russian soldiers died fighting for our right to be free. We were sworn as pioneers at the monuments commemorating their sacrifice. Our lives were organised around celebrations and manifestations attesting our deep gratitude for the Russian heroes. At the start of each school year, we brought flowers to the Monument of Aliosha. Yes, we referred to these heroes, cast in bronze according to the canons of Socialist Realism, by their first names. They were not a token of anonymous and distant memory; their bodies and armour stood guard of our daily lives. We identified with their valour and heroism. Ideology and sculpture went hand in hand. The remembrance of the Second World War was kept alive by constant reminders of the battlefields on which the Russian soldiers lost their lives for our liberation. Books, films, posters, all told countless personal stories of idealistic young men and women who perished in the name of Communism.

What happened at Babin Yar?

Babin Yar (Babi/Babyn Yar in Russian), meaning “the ravine of the old woman,” is one of Europe’s largest mass graves and the scene of the biggest mass killing of the Holocaust. Within 48 hours on 29–30 September 1941, nearly 34,000 of the Holocaust. Within 48 hours on 29–30 September 1941, nearly 34,000 Jews were shot dead in a three-kilometre ravine situated in the city centre. Before the German invasion in September 1941, some 160,000 Jews resided in the city and constituted approximately 20 percent of its population. By the end of the German occupation Kyiv, about 60,000 Jews remained. The majority of those who stayed behind included women, children, and the elderly; most of them were ill, malnourished, and unable to flee. In early September 1941, two large explosions and fires shattered the city and destroyed the German headquarters. Many German soldiers and officials were killed in the ensuing flames. Although the explosions were caused by mines left by retreating Soviet soldiers, the attacks were framed as a pretext to murder the Jews who still remained in Kyiv. All Jews were requested to collect their belongings and head – at gunpoint – towards the outskirts of the city, genuinely believing that they were about to be evacuated. Once at Babin Yar, the victims were forced to take off their clothes and walk into the ravine, where they were subsequently shot by special killing squads. Those Jews were shot dead in a three-kilometre ravine situated in the city centre. Before the German invasion in September 1941, some 160,000 Jews resided in the city and constituted approximately 20 percent of its population. By the end of the German occupation Kyiv, about 60,000 Jews remained. The majority of those who stayed behind included women, children, and the elderly; most of them were ill, malnourished, and unable to flee. In early September 1941, two large explosions and fires shattered the city and destroyed the German headquarters. Many German soldiers and officials were killed in the ensuing flames. Although the explosions were caused by mines left by retreating Soviet soldiers, the attacks were framed as a pretext to murder the Jews who still remained in Kyiv. All Jews were requested to collect their belongings and head – at gunpoint – towards the outskirts of the city, genuinely believing that they were about to be evacuated. Once at Babin Yar, the victims were forced to take off their clothes and walk into the ravine, where they were subsequently shot by special killing squads. Those who survived the gunfire were buried alive. The walls of the ravine were blown up with dynamite. SS men searched and looted the belongings of the murdered Jews in early October 1941. By the end of 1941, another 150,000 victims – including Jews, Ukrainian civilians, Roma, Russian prisoners of war, and physically and mentally disabled people from a nearby psychiatric hospital – were murdered by the Nazis and buried at Babin Yar. Near the end of the Second World War, the German soldiers forced Soviet prisoners to exhume the remains of the dead and to destroy the evidence of the killings. Some bodies were smothered with gasoline and burnt, after which a thin layer of earth was shoveled over them. The site was bulldozed to cover up the war crimes. Even by the 1950s, Babin Yar was not recognized by the Soviet Union as a site of mass murder. Any attempts to erect a monument commemorating the thousands of victims remained futile, shrouded in the local population’s anti-Semitic sentiments following the pogrom against the Jews of Kyiv that broke out in September 1945. The targeted policy of forgetting and destroying the memory of the mass executions at Babin Yar even resulted in the physical obliteration of all material traces and human remains that could be found on the site. In 1952, the local city council decided to fill the edges of the Babin Yar ravine with industrial waste. The geometry of the site and its proximity to the city made it an ideal place for the disposal of brick residues from adjacent factories. The bricks were used for the construction of post-war socialist Kyiv. In the following years, Kyiv would become one of the largest cities of the Soviet Union with a population reaching 2.5 million people by 1989, surpassed only by Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg). On 13 March 1961 a dam collapsed at the industrial waste site built at the Babin Yar ravine. In the subsequent flooding, 145 civilians died in several residential areas of Kyiv. Parts of the city were cut off, and the military had to use boats and army vehicles to rescue the survivors and provide food supplies. All information about the tragedy remained classified under the Soviet authorities.

No monument stands over Babi Yar. A drop sheer as a crude gravestone. I am afraid. Today I am as old in years as all the Jewish people.
films about the Second World War. The television relentlessly broadcasted Russian propaganda. On Fridays, Bulgarian state role in the ideology of the communist between the two nations played a major encouraged to have pen friends from I was growing up in the 1980s, we were and satellite state of the USSR. When I was growing up in the 1980s, we were encouraged to have pen friends from across the Soviet Union. The friendship between the two nations played a major role in the ideology of the communist regime. We started learning Russian as a second language at the age of ten. Our knowledge about the fraternal peoples of the USSR was carefully crafted by communist propagandists. On Fridays, Bulgarian state television relentlessly broadcasted Russian films about the Second World War. The heroic exploits of Russian soldiers, their courageous endurance, and the victory over Nazi Germany were exemplary. In the childhood imagination of my generation, the benevolent bravery of the Russian heroes was beyond a shadow of a doubt. The war monuments commemorating their valor were adornning the envelopes of our Soviet pen friends. We were receiving postcards of their cities with selected war memorials that were potent reminders of the great sacrifices of all Russians in the Second World War. Twenty-seven million people lost their lives. My first pen friend was from Kyiv. As part of my communist upbringing, my grandmother, who was a journalist working for the local newspaper Dunavska Pravda, took me on a trip to Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia in 1985. Such organized tours were closely controlled by the state, and the itinerary was in accordance with party guidelines. Very few people could be “approved for travel” beyond the borders of Bulgaria at the time, and I was in a privileged position. Kyiv was the first stop after our three-day train journey across Romania and Moldova. The city was dazzling with lights; the hustle and bustle of its wide avenues were overwhelming. We stayed only for two days but I vividly remember the glistering golden domes of Kyiv’s orthodox cathedrals and the city’s verdant parks. Yet, the only place that we actually visited was Babin Yar. Unfortunately, my pen friend was staying over with family out of town, so I could not meet her. We were welcomed by her mother, who took us kindly on a trip to Babin Yar. The memorial site mattered to her. The tranquility of the Ukrainian capital now more than ever. The War in Ukraine On 11 March 2022, the site of Babin Yar was struck by Russian missiles and shells as part of the ongoing military invasion of Ukraine. The indiscriminate attack hit the Babin Yar Holocaust Memorial complex and resulted in the deaths of five people. However, the monument and the newly built synagogue, one of Babin Yar’s most iconic memorials, reportedly remained unscathed. The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is of Jewish descent and lost relatives in the Holocaust, defined the attack as being “beyond humanity.” In the words of Zelensky, Russia is trying “to erase our history, our country and all of us.” The murders and war atrocities perpetrated at Babin Yar continue more than 80 years after the initial killings of innocent and vulnerable civilians. The new Russian policy of forgetting is not aimed at double memorycide, the physical destruction of people and their memory. It has gained another inhuman dimension that goes beyond Soviet-conceived narratives of antisemitism. In a reverse memorycide, Putin is invoking the painful – and at the same time heroic – memory of de-Nazification to justify his violent acts of war against a sovereign country. Putin’s distortion of history and his acts of delusion aim to discredit the independent nation of Ukraine and the ongoing struggle for freedom of all Ukrainians. In a highly polarized world that is slowly coming to grips with the long pandemic, the falsification of history, which Russia has been transformed into a barren citiescape of war devastation. Continuous news coverage with five correspondents across Ukraine seems pervasive. Unlike the scarcity of reporting from 1941, and unlike the attempts of Nazi SS units to erase up war crimes, we do not know exactly what is going in Kyiv in 2022. However, the inert logic of world conventions and peace talks has been proven ineffectual in solving the pressing issues of today’s war. In 2007, Evgenii Evtushenko referred to his tribute to Babin Yar as “human rights poetry which defends human conscience as the greatest spiritual value.” It is perhaps high time to re-evaluate our rhetorical activities and to give a prominent voice to our human conscience in support for Ukraine.

Notes
3. Variety, largest film studio, it produced most of the Soviet-era war films.
4. Also spelled Yevegenii Yevtushenko.
5. The title of the Soviet anthem.
6. Op. 113 in B-flat minor is an hour-long work for bass soloist, men’s chorus, and large orchestra that is laid out in five movements with a setting of the Evgenev Evtushenko poem.

Fig. 3 (above left): My visit to Babi Yar in 1985. From left to right: my pen friend’s mother, my grandmother, me, our Jewish fellow traveler, June 1985 (Photo from the author’s personal collection).
Fig. 6 (right): Student demonstration in support of Ukraine, The Dam Square Amsterdam, 3 March 2022 (Photo by the author, 2022).

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