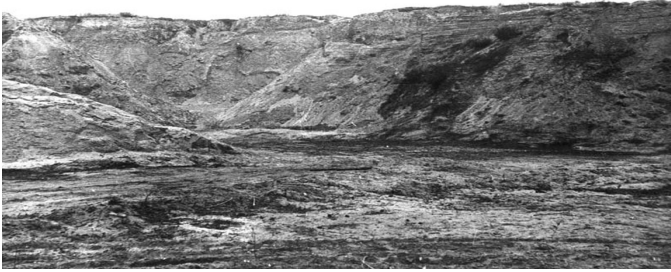


# The Memorialization of Babin Yar



## ---- Introduction ----

On September 19th, 1941 the German army entered Kyiv, the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and the largest Soviet city to fall under the Nazi occupation during World War II. Just ten days later, on September 29th and 30th, the Nazis began executing Jews at the Babin Yar ravine - which continued for the next two years. Today Babin Yar is understood to be one of the most important sites of mass executions in the Soviet Union from The Second World War. The below paper will outline the history of Babin Yar and how it came to be so significant in Soviet memorial history.

## ---- 1941-1945 ----

The German army's arrival in Kyiv on September 19th was greeted with a grand reception from the Ukrainian and Jewish populations. This reception was interrupted by explosions at the bell tower and Monastery of the Caves which killed forty Germans. On September 24<sup>th</sup>, another set of bombs went off blowing up the Nazi headquarters and blowing out the windows of the buildings on Kreshchatik and parallel streets (Kuznetsov, 84). These bombs had been placed by retreating Soviet troops in an attempt to kill German officials once they took the city. These explosions drastically escalated tensions in Kyiv. The Germans believed that communism was led by Jewish people ("the Jewish disease") and blamed the Jews in Kyiv for the actions of the Soviets. After the first explosion Jews were assigned to detect and clear land mines to ensure no further Germans were killed by the bombs and after the second set of bombs went off the military command ordered that the security office shoot all remaining Jews in Kyiv (Kuznetsov, 91).

On September 28th, the newly installed Ukrainian police posted two thousand copies of an unsigned order around Kyiv. The order was in Russian, Ukrainian and German and was addressed to the Jews of the city. This order stipulated that all Kyivian Jews were to appear the next day before eight a.m. at an intersection near the Jewish cemetery. They were to bring with them their documents, money, valuables, and warm clothing. Any "Yids [sic]" who disobeyed would be shot (Kuznetsov, 91). Thousands of Jews from Kiev arrived the next morning at the intersection of Melnyk and Dehtiarivska street expecting to be deported via the nearby train station. Instead, Jews papers were checked and discarded before they were stripped, beaten and led to the edge of the Babin Yar ravine where they were shot. In total, between September 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> 34 000 Jews were shot and buried in a mass grave at Babin Yar. This was one of the first and the largest massacre of Jews in the Holocaust.

In the following months, the killing of Jews and other minorities would continue until the end of November 1941 by which time 42 000 people had been killed, 40 000 of which were Jewish people (Aristov, 437).

Fast Forward to 1943 when the final phase of Babin Yar began. In order to destroy the evidence of what took place at Babin Yar, the Germans ordered the multi ethnic POW prisoners at the neighbouring Babin Yar concentration camp to excavate the bodies of those buried there, check them for valuables and then burn them. The ashes were then crushed and spread around vegetable gardens near the ravine (Kuznetsov, 376). The Germans were in a hurry to get this done as the Soviet army was approaching. They would arrive in Kyiv on November 3rd of that same year, reclaiming the city on November 13th.

## ----- Acknowledgements -----

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## ---- Attempts at Memorialization ----

Memorialization is defined as the process of preserving memories of people or events through writing, monuments, music, etc. After twenty years of inaction and no discussion, the question of memorialization at Babin Yar was reignited by two key publications: Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem *Babin Yar* and Anatoli Kuznetsov's memoir *Babin Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel*.

In September 1961, Yevtushenko, a famous Russian poet published a poem memorializing Babin Yar in the Russian journal *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Burakovskiy, 375). His poem caused an uproar within the intelligentsia, making Babin Yar a central incident in Holocaust discussions regarding the Soviet territory. Public discussion surrounding Babin Yar clearly showed that a significant segment of the Russian population supported the Soviet universalistic approach to the victims of the Second World War which made it incorrect to differentiate between those who had perished based on ethnicity.

The year 1961 became a landmark year for the world's recognition of the massacre after the publication of the poem. The poem became the first monument to the Jews of Babin Yar. In Ukraine however, the poem was met with official silence and for twenty three years it was forbidden in Kyiv.

Perhaps even more important in bringing the tragedy of Babin Yar to the attention of the world was the serial publication of Anatoli Kuznetsov's memoir in the Soviet journal *Yunist*, in 1966 (Naimark, 182). Kuznetsov was an ethnic Ukrainian who lived in Kyiv throughout World War Two. Although large sections of the book were redacted, the construction of the book included long passages from several survivor testimonies. This created a powerful impression of the horror of the Babin Yar tragedy along with an effective history of its purposeful forgetting by the Soviet Union. On a trip to London in 1969, Kuznetsov would seek political asylum and publish the book in full.

It was these two publications that provided the impetus for the gathering of 29 September 1966 at Babin Yar, commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre (Patrovsky-Shtern, 2). This was a spontaneous meeting of mainly young Jews, including some writers and filmmakers. Many uncensored speeches were made by notable attendees - some of which were recorded by the filmmakers for later distribution. It was the second commemoration to take place that month. The Ukrainian secret police who attempted to disperse the crowd, documented 500 participants, although other attendees claim more were present.

## ---- Soviet Memorialization ----

As public interest in Babin Yar increased, the Soviet state was forced to recognize the narrative asserted by Yevtushenko and Kuznetsov in order to control it. The Ukrainian government erected a granite stone with an inscription calling for the establishment of a memorial at Babin Yar dedicated to the memory of the "victims of fascism" (Cherepinsky, 163). This granite stone would remain in its place for ten years until it was replaced by a monument in 1976. This acknowledgement stemmed from pressure generated by the international community following these publications detailing the massacre.

After three closed design competition winners were rejected by the local government, a statue was finally commissioned in 1972 by Party officials. The statue was unveiled on July 2, 1976 with little publicity (Zeliser, 174). The statue was identified as a monument to the Soviet people, honouring citizens, soldiers and prisoners of war shot by the Germans at Babin Yar, but not specifically Jews. In 1991, additional plaques were added to the monument with inscriptions in Russian, Ukrainian and Yiddish. This was the only monument ever erected at Babin Yar by a government to commemorate those who died there.

The Soviet monument erected at Babin Yar has often been criticized for the inaccuracy of its design. It depicts at the bottom layer a ring of Red Army soldiers, few of whom were actually killed at Babin Yar. Behind the soldiers are depicted civilians attempting to escape, some of whom are shown falling off the back of the monument into the ravine. Those civilians falling into the ravine is the only accurate element of this monument as that is how the majority of those killed ended up in the ravine.



## ---- Post Soviet Memorialization & Conclusion ----

Since 1976 over seventy other monuments have been added to the park that now surrounds Babin Yar. These monuments have been the result of fundraising by local and international communities, none of which have been government funded. Some of these monuments memorialize specific ethnicities such as a wagon commemorating the Roma killed, or the Star of David commemorating those Jews who died. Others represent political, rather than ethnic groups killed at Babin Yar, such as the cross recognizing murdered members of the Ukrainian resistance. The diversity of the monuments corresponds to Ukraine's conception of itself as a multi-ethnic nation, an idea that emerged with the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. These monuments have each been placed in a specific manner so that they interact with each other and the large Soviet monument due to their angles and placement. This interaction is significant because the placement reflects the importance and stature of each political or ethnic group depending on its size, and proximity to the large Soviet monument.

The debate over Babin Yar remains a contentious one to this day. There are various projects that have been proposed for the park that surrounds the ravine and even the ravine itself, including a hotel and a synagogue. These projects are all highly controversial as each group that suffered at Babin Yar has a different relationship with the ravine and would like to see it memorialized differently.



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