The Representation of Babi Yar in Soviet Russian and Yiddish Literature

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Abstract

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This dissertation is dedicated to the literary representation of the memory of Babi Yar, the ravine on the outskirts of Kiev where over 100,000 people, primarily Jews, were murdered during World War II. During the Cold War there was a tendency among scholars in the West to underline the role of Babi Yar as a battleground between the Soviet state that wished to erase the site from the face of the earth, and individual Soviet dissidents, who protested these suppressive measures. By focusing on Soviet literature, the major arena where the memory of Babi Yar crystalized, I qualify this tendency and offer a new approach to this commemorative process.

By including the analysis of works in both Russian and Yiddish, I delineate the commemoration of Babi Yar as a process that entailed a constant negotiation between Moscow and its writers. My investigation of the works written on Babi Yar in these two languages positions the site, not only as an ideological middle ground between the state and its writers, but also between the master narrative of the Great Patriotic War (cultivated by Moscow in the post-Stalin years as the regime's new legitimating myth) and that of the Holocaust of European Jewry (which the Soviet regime, by contrast, tended to gloss over).

Recognizing the common denominators that underlie the representation of Babi Yar in Soviet literature, I also dwell on the crucial differences between the two spheres. In Part I, dedicated to the works of the Russian writers Viktor Nekrasov, Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Anatoly Kuznetsov as well as the composer Dmitry Shostakovich, I illustrate Babi Yar's role as a trope of "permitted dissent," i.e. as a theme the Soviet intelligentsia espoused in order to broaden the boundaries of the permissible in Soviet culture. In Part II, by contrast, exploring works dedicated to Babi Yar in Yiddish written by Itsik Kipnis, Shike Driz, Motl Talalayevsky, Dore Khaykine and Shloyme Cherniavsky, I illustrate the minor role that Babi Yar played in this sphere, a theme that remained largely suppressed.

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Acknowledgments

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In a way, my decision to devote several years of my life to the study of Babi Yar was a natural outcome of my work in the field of Soviet Jewish history and culture with my advisors. But on a more profound level, these are the fruits of seeds that were sown when I was little, surrounded by loving grandparents, who all, in one way or another, were touched by the grand Soviet experiment. I would like to dedicate this dissertation to them. To the memory of three of them: Sara and Anshel Pilnik z”l, and Mikhael Hazanovsky z”l, as well as to my beloved grandmother Fruma Hazanovsky, on the occasion of her 89th birthday. From my conversations with all of them in different stages of my life I was given an insight into the world of East European Jews that no scholarly book could ever provide. They live in me wherever I am.

Bronye has been lying in this mass grave for almost two decades; she shared the bitter fate of the other 16,000 innocent people, who were murdered on October 10, 1941, in the "trenches" [*okopes*]. Every city, in which the German fascists were present, had its own "Babi Yar." In Vilna – this was Ponary, in Kharkov – Kholodnaya Gora, and in my hometown of Azovsk we [simply] call them "trenches."

- Tevye Gen, 1961.[1]

Introduction

Two Tales of One Ravine

In the introduction to his systematic study of Holocaust memorials, which traces the process whereby monuments have shaped the collective memory of the Holocaust and have been shaped by them, James Young dwells on their paradoxical nature. These inanimate objects, Young reminds his readers, are meant to encapsulate a memory, a narrative of a specific historical event. While stating the obvious, Young also draws his reader's attention to one crucial yet often neglected fact:

> "The more memory comes to rest in its exteriorized forms, the less it is experienced internally. … For once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory burden.[2]"

[1] Tevye Gen, "In der heymshtot: togbukh," *Sovetish heymland* 1 (1961): 27.
[2] James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

When a monument turns, over time, into an indispensable part of its surroundings and "grows as natural to the eye as the landscape in which it stands,"[3] Young contends that its effectiveness as a bearer of a memory of a past event may be seriously diminished.

As true as Young's postulate may be with respect to existing monuments, it is that much truer when the opposite occurs – when there is a memory-space which demands its own monument, yet none exists. This, then, is our story, the story of Babi Yar, a ravine on the northwestern outskirts of Kiev that for several decades was marked by the absence of any exteriorized forms of memory. From a state of total neglect in the immediate years of World War II, through the attempts to flood it in the early 1960s, the first small obelisk laid there in 1966 to herald great things to come, and up until the erection of the first lasting monument at the site in 1976 – a gigantic granite slab that contained no reference to the Jewish ethnic identity of most of its victims – Babi Yar was throughout much of the Cold War a "memory black-hole."[4] It was a site that prompted, even forced, the individuals surrounding it to remember the wartime atrocities that had taken place there in the absence of the physical monument that the Soviet government refused to erect.

Over the years, instead of engraving the memories of Babi Yar in stone, they were recollected through different artistic media of which belles-lettres was the most dominant. The following study offers a close investigation of the genesis and evolution of a single memory-site that since the end of the Second World War and up until the collapse of the Soviet Union became known throughout the world due to the absence of a memorial in it. "There are no memorials

[3] Ibid., 2.

[4] Zvi Gitelman, "Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," in *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1997), 20.

over Babi Yar," the first line in Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem dedicated to the ravine, is perhaps the most quoted reference to the condition of Babi Yar as a "memory black-hole" written by a Russian, non-Jewish poet who played a key role, yet was by no means a single voice in the representation of Babi Yar in Soviet literature. This long process, taking place primarily in two different spheres: that of Russian literature and of Yiddish literature – is the focus of this dissertation.

Over the years, and in a large part due to the reception of Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" by readers worldwide, Babi Yar was remembered as a site standing for two contrasting vectors: the duty never to forget and the vector of neglect and chronic amnesia. To be sure, all such "memory black-holes" are epitomized by similar tensions. They may all be defined as a battlefield where two irreconcilable narratives clash. One narrative, often held by the powerless, identifies a particular locus as connected to a meaningful historic event of a traumatic or heroic nature. The other narrative, held often by the powerful, namely, by the state apparatus, contains the denial of the former and strives to forcefully – and at times even violently – blur, reject, or even totally efface any possible thread on the ground that it could potentially link the site to the awesome historical event associated with it.

While "memory black-holes" are, at least in theory, marked by such a polarized struggle between remembering and forgetting, between the powerful and powerless, the story of Babi Yar, the site in which during the course of World War II over 100,000 people were brutally murdered, among them both Jews and non-Jews, does not correspond to this black-and-white paradigm. The dualist view of Babi Yar – and by extension, of the whole treatment by the Soviet regime of the Holocaust of European Jewry – was firmly in place and was hardly ever called into question throughout much of the Cold War. When carefully examined and broadly explored,

however, as the present study purports to do, the memory of Babi Yar emerges as a kaleidoscopic entity, consisting not of two contrasting colors, but rather of multiple shades of gray, each relating to the memory of the site in its own way. While some components of Babi Yar's memory were shaped and owned by Soviet official bodies, others were formed by individuals who in one way or another were touched by its symbolic resonance. The present study will illustrate how, all-in-all and despite the ideological gaps between these two groups apparent in many cases, the attempt to set a clear demarcation line between them is an almost impossible task.

During the Cold War, whenever Babi Yar was brought up in the context of the treatment of Soviet Jews by the Soviet government, the topic evoked, particularly among Jewish scholars, politicians, writers and artists in the West, a strong reaction of identification with the former, and fury about the heartless attitude of the latter. William Korey, the director of the B'nai B'rith International council, Lucy Dawidowicz the Jewish history scholar and author of the seminal book *The War against the Jews*, and the celebrated Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel are only a few representative Westerners to view Babi Yar as the focal point of a grand "battle of histories" waged, between Soviet Jews, joined by some bold dissidents, and Moscow – the Soviet regime's officials.[5] And in fact, such confrontations did occur and gained momentum from the mid-1960s onward, ever since the anniversary of the main massacre that had taken place in Babi Yar on

[5] William Korey is the author who has written about the suppression of Babi Yar's memory most extensively. See: William Korey, "Babi Yar Remembered," *Midstream* 15, no. 3 (1969): 24-32; Idem, "In History's 'Memory Hole:' the Soviet Treatment of the Holocaust," in: Randolph Braham, ed., *Contemporary Views on the Holocaust* (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1983), 154; Idem, "Forty Years Ago at Babi Yar: Reliving the Crime" *Present Tense* 9, no. 1 (1981): 27-31; Idem, "A Monument Over Babi Yar?", in: Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey Gurock,, eds. *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941-1945* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 61-74. As for the contribution by the scholar Dawidowicz and the novelist Wiesel see: Lucy Dawidowicz, "Babi Yar's Legacy," *The New York Times Magazine*, 27 September, 1981, accessed December 12, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/27/magazine/babi-yar-s-legacy.html ; Elie Wiesel, *The Jews of Silence: a Personal Report on Soviet Jewry* (New York, Schocken Books, 1987), 25-32; Idem, "Bezokhrenu et Babi Yar: ka'avor arba'im shanah," *Masua*, no. 10 (1982): 28-31.

September 29 became the occasion of grassroots ceremonies at the site, often followed by clashes between Soviet Jews and the local police. [6]

This dualist view of Babi Yar still reverberates in scholarly writing on the topic. Two recent articles, by the American scholars, Edith Clowes and Jeff Mankoff, view Babi Yar as a focal point of contention. For Clowes, the underlying drama of the Babi Yar memorial was a generational struggle waged between the establishment ideologues of the Communist Party and the younger generation of Soviet intellectuals, coming of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s. For Mankoff, Babi Yar's memory is anchored in another polarized paradigm: he views its construction in Foucauldian terms as the outcome of a grand conflict between the memory of Soviet officialdom and the counter-memory of Jewish dissidents.[7] While it might hold true with regard to the grassroots protests that took place at the site, this clear-cut divide between Jews as well as the Soviet dissidents with the Soviet authorities never really played itself out in the Soviet literary arena. And this latter fact is something of immense significance for my study. Without dismissing the commemoration of Babi Yar by other means, it was in the arena of literature, one so central to pre-revolutionary Russian culture and to the Soviet culture that succeeded it, that the collective memory of Babi Yar took form. As we look back two decades

[6] Richard Sheldon, "The Transformation of Babi Yar," in *Soviet Society and Culture: Essays in Honor of Vera S. Dunham*, ed. Terry Thompson and Richard Sheldon (Boulder, CO and London: Westview Press, 1988), 145. This unofficial anniversary ceremony would continue to take place annually during the ensuing years. According to Ludmilla Alexeyeva, in 1968 only 50 to 70 people attended the annual ceremony at the site. These figures kept increasing together with the growth of the Soviet Jewish immigration dissident movement. In 1971, for instance, the year when the Soviet gates opened up for the first wave of mass emigration of Jews, about a thousand participants came to lay wreaths at the ravine. See: Ludmilla Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent: Contemporary Movements for National, Religious, and Human Rights* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 175.

[7] Edith Clowes, "Constructing the Memory of the Holocaust: The Ambiguous Treatment of Babi Yar in Soviet Literature," *Partial Answers* 3, no. 2 (2005): 156; Jeff Mankoff, "Babi Yar and the Struggle for Memory, 1944-2004," *Ab Imperio* 2 (2004):393-94, 398-400.

after the conclusion of the Cold War, we can offer a new perspective on Babi Yar's commemoration process.

In what way does Babi Yar defy and qualify the standard paradigm of a "memory black-hole?" The absence of a clear barrier between the Soviet state and the writers who decided to dedicate themselves to the memory of Babi Yar, while affected by many factors, was primarily the result of the unique way in which World War II unfolded in the USSR. In both popular memory and historiography this site lies at the intersection of two master narratives, the relation between which is far from easy to unravel: the Holocaust of European Jewry and the theater of war waged between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union known in Soviet history as the Great Patriotic War or the Great Fatherland War (*velikaya otechestvennaya voina*). Uniquely, Babi Yar is among the only sites within the interwar boundaries of the USSR that plays a pivotal role in these very different two grand historical narratives. The former was throughout much of the Cold War era downplayed by the Soviet authorities. The latter, in sharp contrast, emerged in the postwar decades as the legitimating myth of the Soviet state. By signifying both of them, what was seen by Moscow as peripheral as well as what they regarded as central, the memory of Babi Yar as it crystallized in the Soviet Union was a complex aggregate of different memories, defying the schemes often used to explain it during the Cold War.

On the one hand, Babi Yar has been regarded, both within and beyond the Soviet Union as a symbol of the Holocaust as it took shape on Soviet soil, something captured by the epigraph to this introduction. As the scholar Mordechai Altshuler notes, the anniversary of the largest mass execution of Kiev Jews that took place in Babi Yar held on September 29 had become, already in the early 1950s an unofficial Holocaust Memorial Day for Soviet Jewry, marked in

many cities throughout the USSR and standing for the uniqueness of the Holocaust as it evolved on Soviet soil.[8]

Characteristically, as opposed to their brethren in countries west of the USSR, where Jews were typically murdered by gas in the Nazi death camps far away from their homes, Soviet Jews were led, as soon as Operation Barbarossa was set in motion on June 22, 1941, to forests, ravines or anti-tank ditches located near their hometowns. Once there, they were ordered to strip off their clothes, line up and wait their turn to be machine-gunned – men and women, young and old - by the Nazis and their collaborators.[9] The particular fate of Babi Yar's Jewish victims was no different. Those among them who obeyed the order that had been posted on September 28 throughout the city, calling all the Jews who remained there to show up the following morning at the corner of Mel'nikovskaya and Doktorskaya Street, were marched to an enormous ravine outside the city named Babi Yar (The Women's Ravine). Believing the rumors that they would be transported elsewhere and not knowing that they were about to be shot, the victims--mainly women, children and the elderly (most able-bodied men had already been mobilized into the Red Army by then)--were first ordered to part with their food and belongings. As Lucy Dawidowicz vividly describes what happened afterwards,

> The Germans began shoving the Jews in to new narrower lines. They moved very slowly. After a long walk, they came to a passageway formed by German soldiers with truncheons and police dogs [these were the members of Sonderkommando 4A, an advance unit of Einsatzgruppe C, one of the "special-duty troops", who were entrusted with the task of murdering by bullets the Jews of the Soviet Union, among other "undesirable elements" as they were advancing on the heels of the Wehrmacht]. The Jews

[8] Mordechai Altshuler, *Yahadut bamakhbesh haSovieti:bein dat lezehut yehudit biVrit haMo'atsot, 1941-1964* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2008), 136.

[9] Zvi Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present*, 2nd edition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 123

> were whipped through. The dogs went at those who fell…. Bruised and bloodied, numbed by the incomprehensibility of their fate, the Jews emerged on a grassy clearing.... Ukrainian militiamen, supervised by Germans, ordered the Jews to undress. Those who balked, who resisted, were assaulted, their clothes ripped off…. The Germans led small groups away from the clearing toward a narrow ledge along the ravine…. When the ledge contained as many Jews as it could hold, the Germans gunned them down. The bodies toppled into the ravine, piling up layer upon layer. Where once a clear stream flowed, now blood ran.[10]

Although Babi Yar was not the largest Holocaust era mass-murder site on Soviet soil (this was Maly Trostenets, the extermination camp located a few miles away from Minsk, in which over 200,000 people were killed, among them Soviet prisoners-of-war and 65,000 Jews from different countries), it surpassed in importance all the other mass graves scattered throughout the western frontier of the USSR for two main reasons. First, the city of Kiev, the capital of the Soviet Ukrainian Republic with an interwar Jewish population of 160,000, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century hub for Jewish culture, was the first European capital to become *Juderein* during the Holocaust.[11] The massacres in Babi Yar that began in late September 1941 commenced soon after the Nazis shifted their anti-Jewish policies from social exclusion and ghettoization to genocide.[12] With the massacre in Babi Yar, like parallel operations of mass shooting perpetrated across the western frontier of the USSR around the same time, the Nazi grand murderous plan prescribing the annihilation of European Jewry was launched.

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[10] Lucy Dawidowicz, "Babi Yar's Legacy."

[11] Semion Viguchin, "Babi yar – uroki tragedii," in: *Pamyat' bab'evo yara*, ed. Ilya Levitas (Kiev: Evreiskii sovet ukraini, 2001), 237.

[12] According to the Holocaust history scholar Yehuda Bauer, the order to embark upon the systematic annihilation of European Jewry was transmitted to Heinrich Himmler by Adolf Hitler in March of 1941, as a part of Nazi Germany's preparation for the imminent invasion of the Soviet Union. See: Yehuda Bauer, *Teguvot be'et haShoah: nisyonot amida, hitnagdut, hatsala* (Tel Aviv: Israel Ministry of Defense Press, 1983), 78.

Second, what made Babi Yar tower above all other Holocaust sites scattered throughout the western frontier of the Soviet Union was the unprecedented pace at which the killing took place. As is well known, the Nazis later came to the realization that perpetrating a "Holocaust by bullets," to borrow the title of the book by Father Patrick Desbois,[13] was not the most effective method of mass murder. But as Lucy Dawidowicz notes, the killing of 33,771 Jews in Babi Yar within 36 hours on September 29-30, 1941, set a record that made even the high efficiency of Auschwitz pale, with its cremation capacity of 6,000 persons a day at its peak. Another reason for the site's distinctness is this: while not the largest World War II killing field in the Soviet Union, the approximate number of 100,000 dead in Babi Yar, the overwhelming majority of whom were Jewish, helped establish Babi Yar's position as the centerpiece of the Holocaust in the USSR.[14]

The anti-Jewish genocide that took place mainly but not only on September 29-30, 1941 was not the only mass murder carried out in the Kiev area, in which Nazi brutality found expression on a scale not yet witnessed in European history. It was, in fact, to a large degree eclipsed by other atrocities related, not to the Holocaust, at least not directly, but rather to the Great Patriotic War. As is well-known, the unprecedented massacre of the Jews was carried out in the midst of one of the greatest catastrophes in military history. By heeding Stalin's command to defend the Ukrainian capital at all costs, rather than pursue a strategic withdrawal from the city, the commanders of the Red Army troops deployed to Kiev led to a military disaster – the encirclement of the Soviet troops – that cost the Red Army a total of over half a million

[13] Father 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).

[14] The total number of Jewish dead in Babi Yar has not been established with certainty. It is accepted among most scholars that about 90,000 of the dead in Babi Yar were Jewish. See Dawidowicz, "Babi Yar's Legacy."

prisoners-of-war and casualties.[15] The Soviet defeat was accompanied by gruesome cycles of mass execution carried out by the Nazis, targeting both civilians and prisoners of war. From the figures gathered by the Extraordinary Commission, the Soviet body set up in the Ukraine upon its liberation and in other localities in order to investigate the crimes against the local population perpetrated by the Nazis, an approximate total of 195,000 victims of World War II were believed to be buried in the vicinity of Greater Kiev, a figure that includes both Babi Yar's 100,000 dead and victims buried elsewhere.[16]

While estimates of the exact ratio of the Jews and non-Jews murdered in Babi Yar vary, it is agreed by most accounts that a significant minority, a minimum of 10,000 non-Jews, among them Russians, Ukrainians and Roma were buried at the site.[17] Together with the Jewish dead, these were regarded by the Soviet regime as victims of the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet generic term referring to the USSR's war against Hitler's armies. These non-Jewish victims buried in Babi Yar died for a variety of reasons. The majority of them were fighters: prisoners-of-war, members of the underground and partisans. Others were members of the Communist party or other Soviet functionaries. Still others were factory workers and ordinary civilians.[18] In addition to the presence of victims from a variety of backgrounds, murdered for a variety of

[15] Richard Overy, *Russia's War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 91-92; and also: A. I. Balashov and G. P. Rudakov, *Istoriya velikoy otechestvennoi voiny* (Moscow: Peter, 2005), 98.

[16] Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln, NE and Jerusalem: the University of Nebraska Press and Yad Vashem, 2009), 541. In addition to the ravine in which the Jews of Kiev found their death on September 29-30, 1941, the second largest war crime site in the vicinity of Babi Yar was the Syrets concentration camp, set up in 1942 and located on the northern outskirts of Kiev. In this camp "undesirable elements" including Jews, POWs, communists and captured partisans were interned, tortured and shot. According to the official Soviet records, over 25,000 people were victims of Syrets. Vitalii Nakhmanovich notes that these were buried both in Babi Yar and other ditches surrounding the city of Kiev. See: Vitali Nakhmanovich, "Rasstrely i zahoroneniya v rayone bab'evo yara vo vremya nemetskoi okkupatsii g. Kieva 1941-1943 gg.: problem hronologii i topografii," in: Vitali Nakhmanovich and Tetyana Evstaf'eva, eds., *Babii yar: chelovek, vlast', istoriya* (Kiev: Vneshtorgizdat ukraini, 2004), 163. On the Sieretskii camp see: Tetyana Evstaf'eva, "Syretskii kontsentratsionnyi lager'," in: *Babii yar: chelovek, vlast', istoriya*, 171-186; Bogdan Martinenko, "Babi yar vehashmadat ha'am hayehudi beUkraina 'al yedei haNatsim," *Mikhael* 13 (1993): 85.

[17] Shmuel Spector, "Babi Yar," in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*.

[18] F. Levitas and M. Shimanovskii, *Babii yar: stranitsy tragedii* (Kiev: Slid, 1991), 22.

reasons, complicating matters further was the fact that among the Ukrainian victims buried in Babi Yar, some were members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), a paramilitary group that in the early stages of the war sided with the Nazis, and prior to its own targeting by the Nazis had taken active part, *inter alia*, in the annihilation of Soviet Jews.[19] In short, Babi Yar was a memory-space relating to a variety of communities, who would not find it easy to agree about what the site stood for.

Babi Yar's position, if we imagine it geometrically, was in the overlapping area between the two circles of the Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust master narratives. Yet most of the players responsible for shaping its memory during the Cold War were to a large extent oblivious to this crucial, central fact. The first party to display this ignorance was the Soviet regime itself. The treatment of the Holocaust by the Soviet regime is a subject that has been amply explored by key Soviet Jewish history scholars. Suffice it to say that the attempts to silence the story of Babi Yar (as we shall see) were a part of a Soviet official policy that was never written or clearly formulated. As Zvi Gitelman notes, no work could be found in the Soviet Union that would treat the Holocaust *sui generis* or make use of the term "Holocaust," a coinage that appeared in the West during the 1950s and is laden with theological implications that would have not easily been received in the USSR, the first atheist state in history. Surrogate terms referring to the annihilation of Soviet Jews did exist, among them *katastropha* (catastrophe), or *unichtozhenie* (annihilation).[20] Yet, beyond anything else, the Soviet dismissive attitude toward the Holocaust, which perhaps found its most conspicuous expression in the suppression of Babi Yar, was not the outcome of any lexical shortage but of deeper underlying reasons.

[19] Jeff Mankoff notes that in recent years Babi Yar became a magnet to Ukrainian nationalists who rally at the site every September 29 to commemorate the death of the OUN members. On Babi Yar as a trigger for conflicts between Ukrainians and Jews in the post-Soviet period see: Mankoff, 412-413.

[20] Zvi Gitelman, "Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust," 18-19.

Critics of Moscow's approach to Babi Yar, and by extension – to all Holocaust-related atrocities – did not have a hard time discerning the anti-Semitic underpinnings that stood at the crux of this indifference; biases that emerged before the conclusion of the war and persisted with many vicissitudes up until the era of *glasnost'*. From Moscow's standpoint, the Holocaust was viewed as a legal 'gray' zone in a way that would allow a limited number of publications on the Holocaust to appear, and a few monuments commemorating the Jewish dead to be erected in the Soviet Union.[21] As a general rule, the Soviet regime tended to downplay the large proportion of Jews among the Soviet victims of Nazism. [22] It viewed all the Soviet dead in the war as victims of the Great Patriotic War and this collective death highlighted one of the chief Soviet doctrines of the so-called *Druzhaba narodov* (The Brotherhood of all Soviet peoples). Coupled to this was the Soviet refusal to openly discuss the genocidal, anti-Jewish nature of Nazi atrocities on Soviet soil, to link these atrocities to the destruction of European Jewry elsewhere, or to allude to the frequent collaboration of some segments of the Soviet local population with the Nazis.

If the Soviet regime's refusal to acknowledge the linkage between Babi Yar and the occurrence of genocide targeting its Jewish civilians in the midst of the war was buttressed by a great amount of cynicism, prejudice and insensitivity, the refusal of Western observers to acknowledge the converse linkage – between Babi Yar and the Great Patriotic War, seemed far more innocent. If the refusal of Moscow, though, to view Babi Yar as a Holocaust site is a well-

[21] For the erection, for example, of memorial stones for the Jewish victims of Nazi atrocities in Minsk, Ponary and Tarnopol see: Mordechai Altshuler, *Yahadut bamakhbesh haSovieti*, 345-347.

[22] According to Zvi Gitelman, a careful estimate of Jewish casualties during the war indicates that 2,711,000 Jews who were citizens of the Soviet Union in 1941 died in the course of the war (this number includes Jewish Red Army soldiers who died while in combat as well as Jewish POWs). Since over twenty six million Soviet citizens died during the war, one may infer from this estimate that more than ten percent of the Soviet victims of Nazism were Jewish, whereas Jews constituted only 2.5 percent of the Soviet population prior to WWII. See: Zvi Gitelman, "Internationalism, Patriotism, and Disillusion: Soviet Jewish Veterans Remember World War II and the Holocaust," in *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Symposium Presentations* (USHMM: Washington, DC, 2005), accessed 12 December 2012, http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/2005-10/paper.pdf, 99.

known fact, the converse refusal has hardly ever been given sufficient attention. Perhaps this was an error committed subconsciously as a reaction to the negative attitude of the Soviet regime to the Holocaust. Or maybe this was a result of what Alan Mintz views as the 'exceptionalist' response to the Holocaust, the view of it as a "radical rapture in human history that goes well beyond notions of uniqueness."[23]

Either way, when such Western observers as Korey, Dawidowicz and Wiesel visited the theme of Babi Yar, their gaze was always fixed on what was known as The Babi Yar Massacre, namely, the murder of 33,771 Jews at Babi Yar perpetrated on September 29-30, 1941. To cite only one example of many, we may recall Wiesel's official visit to Babi Yar, conducted in 1979 in his capacity as the Chairman of the President's Commission on the Holocaust appointed by Jimmy Carter. Confronted by the new face of Babi Yar, by the memorial to the Soviet prisoners of war erected there three years earlier, Wiesel spoke of a deep feeling of frustration, shame and rage that the Soviet government chose to perpetuate the memory of Babi Yar's victims without being willing to even slightly recognize the fact that "the men and women buried in this ravine, were murdered for being Jewish! … While still alive, the Jews of Babi Yar were abandoned, and now their memory is being betrayed."[24] No doubt, Wiesel did not mean to claim that no Soviet prisoners of war were killed in Babi Yar, or that the ravine was the burial ground of Jews only. But for him and for Dawidowicz and Korey as well,[25] the war crimes committed against prisoners, partisans or underground members were not a part of the *essence* of Babi Yar's symbolic meaning.

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[23] Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 39.

[24] Eli Vizel, "Bezokhrenu et Babi Yar," 30-31.

[25] Korey went even further than the other Western observers by claiming that the majority of the prisoners of war who were killed in Babi Yar were singled out, taken to Babi Yar and shot there for being Jewish. See Chapter Six for a broader discussion.

While in the post-Cold War era one may call into question the legitimacy of this rather narrow view of Babi Yar from an ethical perspective, a recent, unprecedentedly broad and meticulous study of the site of Babi Yar's history and topography, conducted by the Ukrainian scholar Vitalii Nakhmanovich, seriously challenges its historical grounds as well. As this study compares the multiple testimonies describing the sequence of events taking place at the ravine, it exposes the many contradictions among the plethora of official reports, personal testimonies, and historiographical works written on Babi Yar before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the main conclusions he draws is that mass shootings at Babi Yar, as a part of which both Jews and non-Jews were targeted, while never coming close to the tempo reached during September 29-30, began about a week earlier, soon after the Nazis entered Kiev, and lasted until mid-November of that year[26]. Parallel to this, Nakhmanovich challenges another commonly held view: that only following the massacre of September 29-30, after the main liquidation of Kiev Jews came to a conclusion did Babi Yar turn into a site that, *inter alia*, was chosen for the execution of non-Jews. By arguing that the first massacres at the site were those of prisoners-of-war, shot on the day following the German's arrival, Nakhmanovich places the incident of mass shooting known as The Babi Yar Massacre in the context of a sequence of mass executions. He thus, furthers complicates the Cold War era tendency to magnify and isolate the 36 bitter hours during which the majority of the civilian Jewish population remaining in Kiev was murdered. [27]

[26] Vitali Nakhmanovich, "Rasstrely I zahoroneniya v rayone bab'evo yara," 120, 162.
[27] Ibid., 88, 94-95.

On the Evolution of Memory

The study of Babi Yar offered here, while focusing entirely on the death of Jews at Babi Yar (none of the literary pieces brought under investigation in the following chapters is dedicated to the killing of the POWs, the Roma, the Soviet partisans or Communist Party members) – will do in the realm of literature what Nakhmanovich and Evstrf'eva achieved on the ground. In other words, we will see how the reality transpiring in the physical space of Babi Yar, of multiple massacres, more seamlessly connected than previously imagined, found a parallel manifestation in literary works dedicated to Babi Yar that were written and published in the Soviet Union.

Since Babi Yar will interest us as a memory-site only insofar as it was a "memory black-hole," the chronological framework of our discussion will not go beyond 1976, the year when the first permanent monument was erected. When considering the representation of Babi Yar from the conclusion of the war until 1976, it is apparent that two main factors greatly complicated the memory of Babi Yar in Soviet literature. The first is purely historical: the occurrence of atrocities related to the Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust concurrently in the vicinity of Babi Yar gave rise to two overlapping and necessarily contradictory narratives, as we have seen. Second, in addition to the competition between the two master narratives at the same site, each master narrative, if examined individually, emerges as a complex phenomenon.

In his newly published study of the evolution of Holocaust literature, David Roskies illustrates the extent to which the current, "authorized" memory of the Holocaust, as it was embedded in belletristic works in a number of countries, was the product of a long, reciprocal process, in which a variety of participants took part -- members of political parties, communal organizations, individual writers and artists. Together, these players in the shaping of Holocaust

memory all gave the current, authoritative Holocaust memory its final shape, through a process that underwent a number of phases and happened "at the intersection of the private and public spheres."[28]

Roskies's view of the literary representation of the Holocaust as a multi-phase process has its parallel in the evolution of the Great Patriotic War memory. As both Nina Tumarkin and Catherine Merrrdale trace the gradual evolution of the Great Patriotic War master narrative, while war patriotism was sustained in the Soviet media during the heat of battle, the preoccupation with the war gave way in the immediate postwar years to silence.[29] During the last years of Stalinism virtually all mention of the war was suppressed, as Stalin was well aware of the subversive potential of a memory of a colossal trauma, as well as of the threats embodied in the greater freedoms and sense of self-assertion that many Soviet citizens had experienced during the war.[30] As Tumarkin notes, in 1946, on May Day, Stalin signaled that the war was over and that there was no need to talk about it too much, but rather focus on the new, Cold War. From the years of silence the master narrative of the Great Patriotic War started to gradually emerge during the era in Soviet history known as the Thaw (1953-1966),[31] and reached its zenith in the Brezhnev era as a full-blown cult of World War II.[32] For the new generation of Soviet citizens

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[28] David Roskeis and Naomi Diamant, *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2013), 1-3.

[29] Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Bokks, 1994), 103.

[30] Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth Century Russia* (New York: Basic books, 2002), 213.

[31] The Term "Thaw" (*ottepel'*) was coined after a novel by Ilya Ehrenburg. Published in 1954, a year after the death of Stalin, this novel was the first literary work to contain allusions to Stalin's despotic character. By and large, this term refers to the period of reforms and relaxation of censorship that was ushered in only in 1956, in the wake of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in his Secret Speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party. This new trend of relative openness, however, was apparent as early as the immediate months, following Stalin's death and hence my inclusion of the time-period 1953-1956 within the chronological framework of the era known as "The Thaw." See: Edward Brown, *Russian Literature since the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Collier Books, 1982), 238-257; and also Dina Spechler, *Permitted Dissent: "Novy Mir" and the Soviet Regime* (New York: Praeger 1982), 4.

[32] Tumarkin, 110, 132.

who were too young to remember or witness the October Revolution, the Great Patriotic War was meant to function as a new and compelling legitimating myth.[33] It could be utilized by Moscow as a raison d'être for a political system that, albeit lagging behind the West technologically, economically and in many other respects, did have the defeat over fascism on its record.

Interestingly, the revision of the history of Holocaust literature and memory offered by Roskies is paralleled by a scholarly development related to the Great Patriotic War. Not unlike Roskies, who emphasizes the inability to clearly distinguish between the contribution to Holocaust memory by individuals and by official bodies, the scholar Lisa Kirschenbaum recently challenged Tumarkin's and Merridale's perception of the Great Patriotic War.[34] In a study focusing on the Siege of Leningrad, Kirschenbaum disputes their highly polarized paradigm and argues for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between official and individual memory. Kirschenbaum illustrates through a study of the Leningrad siege how the public and the individual memories of the war overlapped.[35] If individual writers such as Ilya Ehrenburg or O'lga Berggol'ts, among many others, helped forge the official memory of the war, so Kirschenbaum's argument goes, individual Soviet citizens managed to make sense of their personal, and often traumatic war experiences drawing upon 'ready-made' slogans and clichés

[33] Zvi Gitelman, "Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust," 28.

[34] Nina Tumarkin presents her view of the Great Patriotic War as a predominantly manipulative, cynical cult, blind to the real suffering of the Soviet people in her book *The Living and the Dead*. For Catherine Merridale's conception of the term in the same vein see: Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone*, 235-240; Idem, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945* (New York: Picador, 2006), 374-75.

35 Lisa Kirschenbaum, "Nothing Is Forgotten: Individual Memory and the Myth of the Great Patriotic War," in: Frank Bieses and Robert G. Moeller, eds., *History of the Aftermath: The Legacies of the Second World War in Europe* (New York and Oxford: Berghagn Books, 2010), 68-70.

transmitted to them by the Soviet media.[36] Thus, for Kirschenbaum, attempting to draw the line between passive individuals and the active state as bearers of memory is a very difficult, perhaps impossible task.

If we interweave all the threads presented thus far, the fog clouding Babi Yar starts to clear and it becomes easier to recognize the site's literary representation as a part of a multi-phase process in which two spectrums intersected: the Great Patriotic War versus the Holocaust one, and the Soviet state versus individual Soviet writers. Throughout our exploration of the literary works in which Babi Yar was represented we will see how each of these works may be placed, almost like in a coordinate system, as a product of a negotiation process: between the attention that writers needed to give to the Holocaust versus the Great Patriotic War, and between the desires and values of Soviet writers and the Soviet state, the controller of all artistic means of production in the country. While the commemoration of Babi Yar took place in a variety of art forms and was not solely confined to the spheres of Yiddish and Russian literature, we will limit ourselves, with only few exceptions, to these two spheres, as they stand at the very center of this decades-long process.

In Part I, I will look at the representation of Babi Yar in the Russian literary sphere. While this was a process that spanned decades, I will focus on a critical epoch in Soviet history that was given form, among other factors, by the memory of Babi Yar – the Thaw era, spanning the years 1953-1966. In this part I will concentrate on the work of three key players in the commemoration of Babi Yar, three Russian writers who were joined at some point by another artist – a composer.

[36] Ibid.," 69, 72.

Chapter One will trace the evolution of Babi Yar from the end of the war through the work of the Russian-Jewish writer Ilya Ehrenburg. It will conclude when the site became a concern on an international scale, both as a physical site and a literary phenomenon once the Russian writer Viktor Nekrasov fired the first shot, and opened for public discussion the appalling neglect at the site. The works of the two will be described against the backdrop of the transition from the last years of Stalinism to the Thaw era. Special attention will be given in the chapter to purely political matters. As we describe the suppression of Babi Yar on the ground, it will become clear that one of the key players in determining the fate of Babi Yar, both as a physical space and a literary phenomenon, was Nikita Khrushchev, the man who succeeded Stalin as the ruler of the Soviet state.

After assessing the impact of the Soviet premier on the attempts to consign Babi Yar to oblivion, Chapter Two will shift attention to the last years of the Thaw, analyze the worldwide response to the poem "Babi Yar" by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and will, finally, assess the impact that the poem had once it was set to music, as part of the Thirteenth Symphony by Dmitry Shostakovich subtitled "Babi Yar."

Chapter Three will explore the novel by the Russian writer Anatoly Kuznetsov, who toward the very end of the Thaw rendered his own account of the atrocities at the site in two different versions, a censored and an expanded one, the latter appearing in the West following Kuznetsov's defection to England.

In Part II, we will turn to the younger and more fragile sister of Soviet Russian literature, to works published in Babi Yar in the Soviet Union in the Yiddish language. In marked contrast to the case of Russian works dedicated to Babi Yar, the Yiddish ones were hardly ever given

attention either by scholars or by literary critics. Beyond the need to rescue some of them from oblivion and give others the consideration that they deserve, the juxtaposition of Yiddish and Russian works on Babi Yar will elucidate the different role that Babi Yar as a trope played in each sphere. If in the Russian one, it acted as a symbol constantly defining and redefining the shifting bounds of the permissible, marking, in other words, Soviet culture's general level of openness, in the Yiddish sphere, Babi Yar's role was reversed. Alluded to in many cases only obliquely, sometimes without even mentioning the name Babi Yar itself, the site emerges in the Yiddish sphere as the marker of what is regarded as taboo. When looking at this corpus as a whole, it seems as though it is governed by the following rule: "this is where the freedom of a Soviet writer, for whom the language of expression is Yiddish, comes to an end."

Chapter Four will be dedicated to a broad historical overview of Babi Yar's representation in Yiddish literature from the conclusion of the war and up until 1976. It will present the Kiev circle of Yiddish writers, the group that more than any other in the Yiddish sphere was bore the impact of the Babi Yar massacre. As a prelude to the Brezhnev years, the period during which the representation of Babi Yar reached its peak, the chapter will also briefly analyze two works, the poem "The Mother Rachel" by Aron Kushnirov and *War* by Perets Markish.

Chapter Five will explore the two most important works on Babi Yar written in Yiddish: the essay-story by Itzik Kipnis and poem by Shike Driz, both carrying the title "Babi Yar." Through our close reading of both texts we will gain an appreciation of how these two writers, each in his own way, turned Babi Yar into a Jewish space, aligned his vision of Babi Yar with the master narrative of the Holocaust, while doing so only obliquely, in order to pass the hurdle of censorship.

Chapter Six is dedicated to Yiddish poetry dealing with Babi Yar written both during the Thaw era and the decade that succeeded it. Through an analysis of works on Babi Yar by the Kiev circle poets Motl Talalayevsky, Dore Khaykine and Shloyme Chernyavsky, we will be able to characterize the narrow boundaries of the permissible in the Soviet Yiddish sphere, and come to perhaps the most striking realization of this study – that it was Soviet Jewish writers, for whom the language of expression was a Jewish tongue, who tended to view Babi Yar as a Great Patriotic War site. Whether they did so out of choice or coercion we may be able to surmise once we explore these poems against the background of the modest Yiddish literary apparatus that existed in the USSR beginning in 1961, headed by the poet and the editor of the sole Yiddish literary periodical to appear in the country at that time, Aron Vergelis.

In conceiving of it as a bilingual project, I owe a great debt to the Soviet literature scholar Harriet Murav, who in her recent *Music from a Speeding Train* conjoined these two arenas that, for the most part, have been studied separately.[37] Murav's contribution to the study of the Soviet Jewish experience cannot be exaggerated: it corrects the hitherto erroneous tendency of scholars to study writers like Isaac Babel and Dovid Bergelson as if they "lived on different planets."[38] These interpersonal and inter-textual relations notwithstanding, the study offered here on Babi Yar will differ from Murav's on two critical points. First, it will maintain a clear boundary between the representation of Babi Yar in Soviet Russian literature, explored in Part I, and its parallel representation in Soviet Yiddish literature in Part II. This need to draw a dividing line between works in Russian and Yiddish stems from the very different political, cultural and historic conditions that underlay each literary sphere.

[37] Harriet Murav, *Music from a Speeding Train: Jewish Literature in Post-Revolution Russia* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011).
[38] Ibid., 2.

Second, our study will diverge from Murav's methodologically. As a research project that explores the study of Jewish history through the lens of literature, and vice versa, the study of literary works by carefully analyzing the historical conditions in which they came to fruition, our primary concern will be the analysis of literary works dedicated to Babi Yar as a part of a historical progression. At the very center of Murav's work, by contrast, lies the issue of Soviet Jewish identity, as she joins a significant number of recent scholars who are trying to revise the tendency to view Soviet Jewish identity and culture in negative terms, as a product of suppression, or what Zvi Gitelman calls "a thin culture." To this end, Murav focuses on works by Soviet Jewish writers and seams together works written in different eras. Her exploration of Jewish identity, unfortunately, does not set clear chronological boundaries between one era in Soviet history and another, and also conflates works by Soviet Jewish writers appearing in the Soviet Union with ones that appeared in Communist Poland under dramatically different circumstances, together with works that were too "free-thinking" to be published altogether.

In my study I will pay careful attention not only to the literary artifacts themselves, but also to their specific time and place; to specific, idiosyncratic conditions that when set as a background to each particular literary work, help unlock the many meanings embedded in it. Our reading will also help realize the delicate play between the two different master narratives, and between the individual writer and the state. This methodological difference will perforce affect the image of Soviet Jewish identity that emerges from our exploration of Babi Yar, the ravine that although being only one World War II site in the Soviet Union among many, encapsulates in many ways the story of Soviet Russian culture and Soviet Yiddish culture in the postwar era. As we shall see, the story of Babi Yar is neither of cultural freedom nor of suppression; neither of a "thin, empty" Jewish identity nor of unlimited opportunities to develop a viable Soviet Jewish

culture. Babi Yar, in the broader framework of Soviet culture in general, and Soviet Jewish culture in particular, emerges as a boundary marker, demonstrating that what was previously assumed as a theme placed under taboo, found -- in the Russian sphere –fairly ample expression; and conversely, what was seen as a proof of limited freedom – the existence of a state-funded Yiddish literary sphere in the USSR - seems upon a closer examination to be the product of a long process of cultural suppression.

Part I

Бабий Яр

Chapter One

The Representation of Babi Yar in Russian Literature

Early Responses

This woman I had never met.

My dearest child! My rosy blushes!

My countless relatives, my own!

From every gorge your summons rushes:

You plead with me, beseech and moan.

We'll gather all our strength and rise,

Our bones will clatter as we wend – we'll haunt the towns still left alive,

Where bread and perfumes waft their scent.

Your candles sputter. Flags rip out their seams.

We've come to you. Not we – but the ravine. [39]

[39] Ilya Ehrenburg, "Babi Yar," trans. Alyssa Dinega Gillespie, in: Maxim Shrayer, ed., *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature: Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry*, vol. 1: 1801-1953 (Armonk, NY and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 531.

An urge of the living speaker to become one with the dead, a harrowing, haunting mood of a city that has been invaded by the mass graves surrounding it, a veiled reference to the murdered Jews by conjuring up the memory of its civilian victims –the staple features of the many Soviet memorial poems dedicated to Babi Yar to be written in the decades to come – were already present in "Babi Yar" by Ilya Ehrenburg (1891-1967). Published in the Soviet periodical *Novy Mir* in January 1945, this poem, the first Russian work to address the theme of Babi Yar, was written by a Russian-Jewish author who played a major role in conveying the latest events of World War II to the Soviet public. Together with another great Soviet Jewish writer -- Vasily Grossman--Ehrenburg compiled the *Black Book*, a collection of reports on Nazi anti-Jewish atrocities the publication of which was ultimately banned.[40] As a native of Kiev, known as a leading Russian intellectual, as the mouthpiece of Soviet Jews and a leading wartime journalist who reported on the Nazi genocidal operations on the Soviet western frontier, Ehrenburg, appropriately, was the first Soviet Russian writer to erect a literary memorial to Babi Yar. In the next two decades, this poem would spawn a few other artistic monuments of great artistic merit that stand at the heart of this study.

Ehrenburg's "Babi Yar" is an excellent point of departure for the memorial activity that spanned the late Stalin years, the Khrushchev and a part of the Brezhnev era from the time of the massacres of Babi Yar through the erection of the first permanent monument at the site. Here is a

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[40] Printed in 1946, *The Black Book* never saw the light of day in the USSR after the Communist Party's Propaganda department decided that it contained "grave political errors." In 1948, following this decision, all existing copies of the work found in the USSR were destroyed including the type prepared for it. Only because several manuscript copies of the work were sent abroad, a Hebrew, English, Romanian and Russian versions of it appeared in the West. See: Gitelman, "Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust," 19; Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet government and the Jews 1948-1967: A Documented Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 422-423. For the English version of *The Black Book* see: Vassily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Black Book* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1981).

work written by the beloved son of Jewish Kiev, a man who in the wake of the Holocaust was sent a chilling reminder about his Jewish identity and felt, as the poem attests, that his is the fate of a ghost, belonging neither to the world of the postwar Ukrainian capital that is now bereft of its Jewish population, nor to the domain of the charred bones of his dead relatives and friends who now reside outside Kiev, threatening to encroach upon and hover over the city of the living.

To portray an accurate trajectory of Babi Yar's representation in Soviet literature, however, one should begin with "Avraam," a poem published by the Ukrainian-Jewish writer Savva Holovanivsky prior to the Soviet takeover of Kiev, and fully two years before Ehrenburg's poem. Holovanivsky's differs on one crucial respect from Ehrenburg's far more celebrated work. Whereas Ehrenburg refers to the victims of Babi Yar as Jews only implicitly, by alluding to friends and relatives, to children and mothers, Holovanivsky does it more explicitly, featuring the character of an old man, whose name and sense of isolation from his environment as he marches to Babi Yar while his non-Jewish neighbors watch him passively, brings to mind the Biblical prototype of another lonely man of faith.

When juxtaposed to each other as the first two Soviet literary responses to Babi Yar, one is struck by the fact that what for Holovanivsky is a painful truth that must be openly discussed, is for Ehrenburg a no less tormenting truth that must be carefully concealed. Indeed, the comparison reveals a literary transition that is both a reflection and a product of a historical reality. For it was in the winter of 1944, between the publication of these two poems, that the excision of the Jews from the official memory of Babi Yar began.

Babi Yar, we recall, was situated in the center of two overlapping circles, one signifying the Holocaust and the other, the Great Patriotic War. While in theory, the two gradually

emerging master narratives could live in a state of "peaceful co-existence," each shedding a different light on Babi Yar yet not claiming full, exclusive possession of the site, the first postwar decades proved to what extent collective memory, in its Soviet multinational context, evolved as coercive memory instead.

Ehrenburg's "Babi Yar" could perhaps be taken as a sign that as of 1945, the tragedy that had befallen Soviet Jewry, and by extension, all of European Jewry, could not be spoken of openly in the Soviet literary sphere. In the immediate aftermath of the massacres, however, the competing narratives of Babi Yar stood a much better chance of being reconciled. In the first Soviet official communique sent to other foreign governments in January of 1942 dealing with the atrocities taking place in Babi Yar, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov, reported the murder of 52,000 people in Kiev.[41] Hoping to garner the support of the foreign governments in the Soviet war effort, the communiqué admitted that this was a Nazi attack overwhelmingly targeting Soviet Jewish citizens.

Parallel to the Soviet government's candid report of the Nazi operation in Babi Yar, the single official body representing Soviet Jews during the war, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC), also began to place the emerging narrative of the Nazi genocide within the framework of Russia's 'Holy War' against the invading fascists. In October 1942, the Committee published

[41] Sheldon, 126. Most significantly, the note indicated that the Nazis' chief target were "defenseless Jewish working people." The note also appeared in *Pravda*, 7 January 1942. From Molotov's reaction it was clear that the Soviet government did not recognize any potential harm at first, when openly acknowledging the fact that an unprecedented event in European history, the turning of the first European city into a *Judenrein* zone, had happened in the now Nazi-occupied Ukrainian capital. Sheldon suggests that Molotov felt prompted to inform the international community about the massacre, as his wife, Polina Zhemchuzhina was of Jewish origin. See: Idem, 154. Perhaps a less personal explanation for his move was the Soviet need at that time to harness the international community in its war effort against the Nazis by informing the Western public about the beasty crimes perpetrated by the Nazis in Europe's backyard, i.e. in the recently occupied Soviet territories.

its first report on Babi Yar in its Yiddish organ *Eynikeyt*.[42] The author of this reportage was none other than Ilya Ehrenburg. His report, translated from Russian, like the note by Molotov, explicitly mentioned the fact that the majority of the victims shot at the ravine were Jewish. If Molotov intended to enlist foreign support, then Ehrenburg intended to do so at home, by helping to mobilize Soviet Jews into the ranks of the Red Army, join the desperate efforts to drive the Nazis out of the country and take vengeance on them. Nothing better epitomizes the porous boundaries in the early stages of the war between what began to crystalize as the narrative of the Holocaust and that of the Great Patriotic War than the title of Ehrenburg's call: *Gebentshte erd* ("Sanctified land" or "Blessed earth"). If Ehrenburg's "Babi Yar" written two years later would portray Babi Yar as so daunting a place that it would even eclipse the city itself, his reportage of October '42 ended with the meaning of sacred earth shifting from Babi Yar to the battlefield. The early response, then, of both the Soviet regime and its official body representing its Jewish citizens was similar: they both realized that the Nazis were carrying out a monstrous scheme devised to annihilate Jews, one which they constructed within the framework of the general war effort.

This window of opportunity when both master narratives could co-exist in relation to Babi Yar was open for only a very short while. As early as March 1944, about four months after the Soviet takeover of Kiev, a Soviet Extraordinary State Commission was set up to investigate Nazi atrocities perpetrated during the Nazi occupation. The commission collecting data in Kiev, chaired by Nikita Khrushchev, the boss of the Ukrainian SSR at that time, began to refer to the "thousands of peaceful Soviet citizens" who were shot in Kiev.[43] What prompted this turn

[42] Ilya Erenburg, "Gebentshte erd," *Eynikayt*, October 1942, 2.
[43] Sheldon, 130. See also Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, 539.

toward euphemism was the wave of pogroms then engulfing the Ukraine, the chief target of which were Ukrainian Jews who had survived the Holocaust and were now returning to their previous homes. It was in this climate that Khrushchev warned the returning Red Army not to alienate the local Ukrainian population by underlining either the anti-Jewish genocidal character of Nazi atrocities or Ukrainian complicity in those crimes. The commission was also instructed "to suppress the extent of Ukrainian collaboration with the Germans and particularly with the SS in the mass shooting of Jews."[44] Khrushchev, who succeeded Joseph Stalin and would later play a central role in the suppression of Babi Yar, left no ambiguities in this early postwar report about the reason for this tectonic shift in the Soviet regime's attitude to Babi Yar. He declared that "here is the Ukraine and it is not in our interest that the Ukrainians should associate the return of Soviet power with the return of the Jews."[45]

The report compiled by the Ukrainian Extraordinary Commission is a convenient point of reference to mark the watershed between the Soviet acknowledgment of Babi Yar as a site of a tragedy with a distinctly Jewish nature, apparent during the years 1942-1944, and the suppression of this historical fact that marked much of the postwar era up until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet if a clear demarcation line may be drawn between these two eras with regard to the Soviet state's official statements, an exploration of Soviet culture would show that for a regime that controlled all channels of publication and enjoyed a monopoly in the realms of literature and the arts, the Soviet cultural sphere often reflected a lack of ideological clarity in the attitude of the Soviet regime to Babi Yar. If the immediate years following the massacre witnessed the publication of "Avraam" by Holovanivsky and "Babi Yar" by Ehrenburg, this

[44] Gitelman, "Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust," 21.

[45] Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 212. On the takeover of Jewish property by the non-Jewish population of the Ukraine after the war see: Altshuler, "Anti-Semitism in Ukraine toward the End of World War II," in: *Bitter Legacy*, 80-82.

trend was not cut short in the wake of the Extraordinary Commission's investigation, but, rather, gained momentum with the appearance of several more works.

In spite of an increasingly anti-Semitic environment and the suppression of Jewish writers and artists characteristic of the late Stalin era, the works on Babi Yar that followed those of Holovanivskii and Ehrenburg proved capable of passing the scrutiny of the Soviet censorship. These works included the poem "Babi Yar" by the Russian-Jewish poet Lev Ozerov, appearing in the journal *Oktiabr*' in 1948,[46] the first as well as second novel by Ilya Ehrenburg dedicated to the Great Patriotic War, *The Storm* (1948) and *The Ninth Wave* (1952), the symphony "Babi Yar," composed after the war by the Ukrainian-Jewish composer Dmitry Klebanov,[47] and the film *Nepokorennye* (The Undefeated) by the Odessa-born Jewish director Mark Donskoi, (1945), based on a novel bearing the same title by Boris Gorbatov.[48]

No doubt, these works constituted the exception to the rule of silence about the Holocaust and Babi Yar. They came into being at a time when the Soviet regime's relative tolerance toward artists that marked the war years (intended by the Soviet regime to rally the various nationalities populating the Soviet Union to join the battle against the Nazi invaders) came to an end and a new wave of artistic suppression and terror was about to begin. It was then that a new tide of

[46] The poem first appeared in a small collection of poems by Ozerov entitled *Liven'* (Downpour) in 1947. It is cited and translated into English in Clowes, 162. Ozerov tried to publish a sequel to the poem later in 1948 "Anew in Babi Yar," but failed to do so and had to resort to propagating it illegally through the Soviet underground publication method known as *samizdat* (self-publication).

[47] Klebanov's symphony came under attack and was described at a meeting of Kiev composers as a cosmopolitan work slandering the Russian and Ukrainian people. A report about the meeting was published in *Pravda Ukrainy*, 19 March, 1949. See Pinkus, 151, 174-175.

[48] Produced in 1945 and based on a novel of the same title from 1943 by Boris Gorbatov, the film contained a graphic scene of Kiev Jews on their march to the ravine. The film's director, Donskoi, was a staunch communist whose career reached its zenith during the Stalin years and met its demise right afterward as he was reluctant to change his political outlook in accordance with the new cinematic values of the Thaw period. It is noteworthy that during the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign of the late 1940s, Donskoi openly denounced some of his Jewish colleagues. See: Peter Rollberg, *Historical Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Cinema* (Lahman, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 183.

persecutions was set in motion, launched through the wide publication of the August 1946 speech by Stalin's ideological spokesman, Andrei Zhdanov; this new campaign aimed at further narrowing Soviet intellectual discourse and severing Soviet society from all foreign influences and ties. Its chief targets were some of the more free-thinking and less party-line oriented among Soviet cultural figures.[49] Known as the *Zhdanovshchina*, this campaign turned in 1948, after the death of Zhdanov and the establishment of the state of Israel, into a virulent, violent attack against "rootless cosmopolitans." Carrying a distinctively anti- Semitic character, the campaign at that point included official denunciations in the party organ *Pravda* as well as arrests. It reached its nadir with the execution of some of the most prominent Yiddish writers and cultural activists in the Soviet Union.[50]

The *Zhdanovshchina* and the ensuing campaign against "rootless cosmopolitans" made it dangerous for Soviet Jewish writers to mention the Holocaust in general and Babi Yar in particular. As Benjamin Pinkus notes, these writers became increasingly aware of the Zhdanovite new policies and forced upon themselves a complete silence with respect to any Jewish themes.[51] While a universal taboo on the Holocaust was never in effect in the Soviet Union, the years 1949-1953 were a time when a policy of silence was put in place; all mention of Jewishness was erased from existing Great Patriotic War memorials.[52] It was during this period, also known in Soviet Jewish historiography as the "Black Years," that the silencing of the Babi Yar massacre in all spheres of Soviet life, even though never formulated as a specific ordinance, became a comprehensively enforced practice.

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[49] Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End*, 2nd Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 177.

[50] Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present*, 2nd edition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: 2001), 147-156.

[51] Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews*, 390.

[52] Ibid., 423.

Even in this reality, least auspicious for the publication of works dealing with Babi Yar, a Soviet writer of prominent stature, Ilya Ehrenburg, dared to briefly touch upon the theme in two of his novels: *The Storm* (1947) and its sequel *The Ninth Wave* (1952), which appeared in the two major literary journals *Novy Mir* and *Znamya*, respectively. The latter novel, significantly, came out only a year before the first announcement of the "Doctors' Plot," the alleged scheme of Jewish physicians to poison Stalin, a libel orchestrated by the increasingly paranoid tyrant in January 1953. While in both novels Ehrenburg had to pay lip service to anti-Western and anti-Zionist propaganda which were rampant at that time, he did allow mention of some aspects of the Babi Yar massacre deemed by the Soviet regime to be strictly taboo. In the novels, Ehrenburg explicitly refers to the Jewish identity of his hero Osip and his loved ones, who were killed at Babi Yar, an allusion to the ethnic identity of Babi Yar's victims that he avoided in his earlier poem. Furthermore, when his novels' protagonist Osip revisits the postwar city of Kiev to see for himself the streets in which his wife and daughters marched to their death in Babi Yar, Ehrenburg describes the anti-Semitic reactions that Osip encounters from the Kiev locals.

Ehrenburg's engagement in the theme of Babi Yar indicates that this topic – insofar as the Stalin years are concerned – ought not to be presented as a trajectory of constant decline up to a complete silence. A mood of extreme antagonism toward Jews and the Holocaust did prevail following the *Zhdanovshchina* and the anti-cosmopolitan campaigns, yet it did not result in an effectively imposed silence with regard to the Babi Yar massacre. Observing, outside of literature, the way that the Babi Yar massacre was commemorated by Soviet Jews in other realms, we arrive at a similar picture of a suppressed yet persisting engagement with the memory of the tragedy. As the Soviet Jewish history scholar Mordechai Altshuler notes in his work dedicated to the role played by the synagogue, the last vestige of officially sanctioned Soviet-

Jewish institutions, during the late Stalin era the Kiev synagogue became, around the High Holidays, a magnet for the Kiev Jewish crowds, who attended services not out of a feeling of religious duty, but rather as a manifestation of their sense of belonging to the Jewish people and its fate. Indeed, the 1951 Yom Kippur services were endowed with special significance, as they coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Babi Yar massacre.[53]

The new historical data gleaned recently from the Former Soviet Union archives by Altshuler describing Jewish life in the Kiev of the Black Years, combined with Ehrenburg's depiction of the Babi Yar massacre as an event with a distinct connection to Soviet Jews, calls into question the frequent tendency of scholars to divide the commemoration of Babi Yar into two opposing periods: the Stalin years of harsh suppression versus the ensuing period known as The Thaw, in which the memory of Babi Yar resurfaced. Edith Clowes, for example, summarizes the responses to Babi Yar of the late Stalin years as lacking a strong statement of Jewish identity, or as works bearing a passive memory of the tragedy that might ultimately "help to bury and to consign it to oblivion" rather than manifest resistance to Soviet repression.[54] This dichotomy between the Stalin and the Thaw eras is underscored by parallel ethnic and generational divides. According to this scheme, such Soviet Jewish writers as Holovanivsky, Ozerov and Ehrenburg responded immediately to the Babi Yar massacre in a voice that was, for the most part, hesitant and unripe, while the theme of Babi Yar was subject to the audacious, probing attention of a new generation of Soviet artists only later, and under the new and far more propitious circumstances that were created in the country following the death of Stalin. [55]

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[53] Altshuler, *Yahadut bamakhbesh haSovieti,* 136.

[54] Clowes, 164-165.

[55] For Clowes, this generational divide between the youth of the 1960s and their parents runs parallel to similar tensions engulfing West-German society in the postwar era. For another testimony to the tendency of scholars to distinguish between the commemoration of Babi Yar during the Stalin and the Thaw eras see Mankoff, 402. As Jeff

The issue at stake here concerns more than an evaluation of who was bolder: the generation of Soviet Jewish writers who dared to assert their Jewishness and agony over the Babi Yar massacre while under the yoke of Stalin or the new group of artists who embraced the cause of Babi Yar in their battle against Stalin's successor. The debate here is also over the question of whether the story of Babi Yar's commemoration in Soviet literature and art can be accurately presented by drawing a strict dividing line between the silence of the Stalin years vis-à-vis the outspoken battle to commemorate it during the Thaw period. A closer look at the representation of Babi Yar in the Russian cultural arena during the Thaw period reveals that it cannot. On the contrary, as we shall see, the beginning of the epoch of relaxation and increasing tolerance that Soviet society underwent soon after the death of Stalin marked the nadir of the silence enforced in the Soviet Union with regard to the memory of the Babi Yar massacre.

Babi Yar and the Thaw Period (1953-1966)

The Thaw period and the many vicissitudes by which this era in the history of the Soviet Union was characterized left an indelible imprint on the evolution of Babi Yar's memory as both locus and symbol. When the Thaw period began, Babi Yar was a neglected mass grave where the incinerated bones of the murdered lay scattered amidst heaps of garbage; a focal point for dubious characters who would often hang out in its vicinity, digging for any valuable item they could unearth.[56] By the time this thirteen year period ended, Babi Yar had been transformed into one of the most celebrated symbols of the nascent Soviet dissident movement, attracting to it

Mankoff notes, while the death of Stalin hardly led to any change in the Soviet official reaction to Babi Yar, it did lead to the appearance of new voices which increasingly challenged the Soviet official line on this issue.

[56] Nissan Rosenthal, *Hahayim haYehudiyim biVrit-hamo'atsot 1935-1958* (Tel Aviv: Hakibuts hameuhad, 1993), 19; and also: Viktor Nekrasov, "Zapiski zevaki," in: *Kak ya stal sheval'e: rasskazy, portrety, ocherki, povesti* (Yekaterinburg: U-factoria, 2005), 388.

thousands of dissidents, Jews and non-Jews alike, who would come to the ravine to attend the annual memorial ceremonies there and protest Soviet anti-Semitism and ethnic discrimination.[57] Scholars who point to the impact of the events taking place in the Soviet cultural arena during the Thaw invariably refer to four cultural figures who shaped the discourse about Babi Yar during this new era: Viktor Nekrasov, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Dmitry Shostakovich and Anatoly Kuznetsov. These artists, all of them non-Jewish Russians, turned the memory of the massacre from the concern of a small group of local Kiev residents into an issue that preoccupied the wider Soviet Jewish community, the Soviet intelligentsia, and, later, the international community as well.

Given the fact that the Thaw period began after the death of Stalin in March 1953, it must be noted that the reactions offered by these artists to the Soviet suppression of Babi Yar's memory came quite late. They happened only when the process of liberalization that so typified the Thaw period was already in full swing, in the late fifties and early sixties. Students of Soviet cultural history and literature who emphasize the interconnectedness between the commemoration of Babi Yar and the atmosphere of the Thaw tend to concentrate on these works, and thereby – also focus on the later years of this period. This tendency, though, leaves one under the impression that, contrary to the Stalinist suppression of Babi Yar, the years of his successor Khrushchev were radically different. If we examine the *long durée* of the Thaw era, however, we discover that at no other time was the policy of suppression and neglect of Babi Yar as effectively enforced as during the years of the early Thaw, the exact same time when the "Ice Age" afflicting so many other spheres of Soviet life (over decades of Stalinist totalitarian rule) came to an end. It is perhaps one of the many ironies of Soviet history that in its early years the

[57] Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent*, 175.

Thaw period, with its promise of recovery from decades of oppression and terror and of greater tolerance and openness for the expression of opinions that might have deviated from the party line, brought little change in the Soviet government's attitude to Jewish culture, and brought no discernible change in Soviet official policy vis-à-vis the commemoration of the Babi Yar massacre.

In reality, it took more than six years from the death of Stalin for the silence over Babi Yar to be broken. In September 1959, Viktor Nekrasov was the first prominent Soviet writer to do so. Remarkably, Nekrasov's was not an attempt to undo the silencing of Babi Yar imposed by Stalin, but rather was aimed at Nikita Khrushchev, the man who came to prominence as the leader of the Soviet Union in the wake of the death of Stalin and who would become the most influential figure in Russian politics and culture up until his forced retirement in October 1964. Admittedly, Khrushchev's role was instrumental in bringing the witch-hunt of Jewish intellectuals and physicians to a halt, in the arrest of Stalin's butcher Lavrentii Beria, and in the release from prison of thousands of Gulag inmates, among them many Jews.[58] But his coming to power and political career as first secretary of the CPSU were also characterized by equivocation and political zigzagging as he found a need to constantly test the boundaries of the permissible in the sphere of Soviet culture. To better understand how the theme of Babi Yar came to play a crucial role in this process when Soviet public and cultural discourse was constantly tested, let us briefly survey the historical background of the Thaw period and assess the way it transformed Soviet culture.

[58] Kenez, 188-189.

The Thaw and the Memory of Babi Yar

During the first thirteen years after Stalin's death, Soviet society underwent a process of liberalization and cultural revitalization that it had not experienced since the early years of communism and would not recover until the *glasnost'* of the latter half of the 1980s. Beginning with the news of the death of the tyrant on March 5, 1953 and reaching its conclusion during the Brezhnev era with the trial of the two writers Anderi Siniavskii and Yulii Daniel in February 1966, this remarkable era in Soviet history was named *Ottepel'* (The Thaw) after a novella by Ilya Ehrenburg, published in early 1954.[59] Featuring as its central protagonist an autocratic, Stalin-like character, the work offered a remarkably unflattering portrayal of Stalinism. Ehrenburg's negative attitude to the Soviet past was already apparent in the novella's title. The term "thaw" meant that contrary to the Soviet propaganda of the late Stalin era, which claimed that era to be a "hot" time of dynamism and rapid progress, the death of the tyrant left Soviet society in the midst of a long and freezing winter that could, now that Stalin was dead, possibly thaw.[60]

In this work, Ehrenburg gave voice to the demand, supported by a growing number of Soviet intellectuals who survived the Stalinist purges, to introduce radical changes in both the social and the literary spheres of Soviet life. He called ordinary citizens to transform the entire fabric of Soviet society, to cast aside the web of fears, suspicions and rigidity that had become entrenched after decades of terror, and, instead, warm up toward each other and foster a new

[59] Joshua Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties: the Life and Time of Ilya Ehrenburg* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 280; For more details about the Thaw see Edward Brown, *Russian Literature since the Revolution* (London: Collier Books, 1969), 247-254.

[60] Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: the Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2009), 52.

climate of mutual empathy. [61] No less importantly, *The Thaw* was also a cultural manifesto, a call to the new Soviet leadership to do away with the Stalinist dogmatic interference with the work of writers and artists. This interference was first and foremost evident in the strict enforcement of Socialist Realism, the artistic theory endorsed by Stalin himself that had functioned since it proclamation at the First Congress of the Soviet Writers Union as the only legitimate prescription for the composition of artistic works in the USSR. According to the tenets of Socialist Realism, artists and writers were obliged to compose pieces that would comply with the communist party line, render a present-day, optimistic portrayal of Soviet society and the working class, and capture them in their "revolutionary development."

Ehrenburg, in fact, was not the first to criticize the Soviet leadership or raise an objection to Socialist Realism and, thereby, spawn this new trend of de-Stalinization in Soviet culture. The first manifestations of a mild, incipient dissent came, in fact, in the immediate aftermath of Stalin's death in the form of production novels. This was a series of novels that appeared in *Novyi Mir*, soon to become the Soviet Union's primary platform for the expression of dissonance; novels where voice was given for the first time to criticism of irrational Soviet economic planning, chaotic bureaucracy, incompetent management and the corruption that is usually endemic to the first three.[62] While still retaining the facade of *bona fide* socialist realist works due to their focus on industrial and agricultural themes, these novels were followed by other publications that contained even sharper criticisms of the Soviet system.

These new essays and stories, appearing in *Novy Mir* beginning in December 1953, did not limit their criticism to flaws in the Soviet bureaucracy and economy – criticism that was

[61] Edward Brown, 247, 253.
[62] Dina Spechler, *Permitted Dissent: "Novy Mir" and the Soviet Regime* (New York: Praeger, 1982), 3-20.

overall well-received by the new leadership – but rather, chose as their target some of the premises upon which the Soviet ideological edifice rested. The first prominent work of this new wave of dissent was the essay by Vladimir Pomerantsev "On Sincerity in Literature." Voicing concerns invoked later by Ehrenburg in *The Thaw*, the essay alluded to the dire straits of Russian literature in the Soviet era. In the article, Pomerantsev regarded Socialist Realism as the chief cause for the turning of Soviet literature, the inheritor of the canon of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian literature, from its glorious stature into a monotonous entity, almost completely irrelevant to the lives of its readers.[63] Pomerantsev asserted that writers must write with honesty and let only their sincerity and conscience guide them, rather than any theoretical dogma imposed upon them from above. In his gloomy review of the havoc wrought by Socialist Realism on the Russian literary tradition, Pomerantsev contended that for a literature to be worthwhile and not perceived as a hodgepodge of hackneyed socialist clichés, its writers must be gifted and present Soviet life with candor, as it really is.

The call for a new literature that aimed to engage its readers and portray the harsh reality that Soviet citizens faced at that time continued to run like a thread in the Soviet literature of the ensuing years. A growing number of works followed in the footsteps of Ehrenburg and Pomerantsev, calling into question, not only the credibility of Socialist Realism, but of many other aspects of the Soviet system, the legacy of decades of Stalinism. Given the engagement by the Soviet intelligentsia in such global themes as sincerity, the memory of Babi Yar seemed for the time being to have completely faded from the horizon of Russian literature and art. Hardly any reference to Babi Yar can be found in works published between the years 1953-1959. Even the mere mention of Babi Yar by Ehrenburg in his aforementioned works from the late Stalin era

[63] Ibid., 21-22; Zubok, 54-55.

were now, in the more relaxed environment of the Thaw, completely absent from the Russian literary scene.

If in the first three years of the Thaw no prominent Soviet artists touched upon the theme of Babi Yar, the most pivotal event of the era, the decision made by Nikita Khrushchev to openly denounce Stalin and the Cult of Personality at the Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956 brought no change with respect to the treatment of Babi Yar in Soviet literature either. One would imagine that together with other key features of the Stalin era, the suppression of the Babi Yar massacre, one facet among many of Stalinist anti-Semitism, would have been openly addressed by the more liberal wing of the Soviet intelligentsia. The opposite, however, was true: it is evident from the silence about Babi Yar in Soviet literature of the early Thaw, and no less importantly, from the actions taken by the local Ukrainian authorities at the same time to eradicate the ravine, that no room for a process of "thawing" was considered by the new regime with respect to the memory of Babi Yar.

A glimpse into the condition of the site of Babi Yar and the attitude of the Kiev City council toward it (an attitude endorsed by the Ukrainian government) illustrates how the Soviet literary sphere and the posture of the Soviet authorities vis-à-vis Babi Yar went hand in glove at that time. As much as the last years of World War II saw the gradual withdrawal of the theme of Babi Yar from the Russian literary scene, a parallel process took place on the ground. At first, as early as 1945, the Kiev City council approved of a memorial project to commemorate the Babi Yar massacre, appointing Kiev's chief architect A. Vlasov and the artist B. Ovchinnikov in charge of the monument's design for "the victims of the fascist terror at Babi Yar," as a part of a

Five Year Plan for the construction of a number of monuments in the city.[64] By 1949, once the anti-cosmopolitan campaign began, it was clear that no room for a commemorative project of this sort would be allowed. The plan for the memorial was thus shelved and in its stead the Kiev City Council decided to transform the topography of the site altogether by flooding the ravine with pulp and mud, so as to level it with the surrounding area. While the decision to flood the area was made in 1950, it is striking that the ravine's eradication started to be carried out only four years later, during the early Thaw.[65]

Officially, the Ukrainian government, backed by Moscow, argued that the flooding of Babi Yar was a necessity as the leveling of the area was part of a larger plan to reconstruct the postwar Ukrainian capital and connect its center to the suburbs. But these arguments could hardly stand critical examination; after all, the Ukrainian authorities could have found other ways to help turn Kiev into a modern metropolitan center without manifesting utter disrespect toward the burial place of tens of thousands of its citizens. It was also striking that while insisting on the eradication of Babi Yar, the Soviet regime encouraged the construction of monuments at other sites throughout the Soviet Union where Nazi atrocities had taken place.[66] If one expected the plan to eradicate Babi Yar as a vestige of Stalinism to be overturned in the wake of Khrushchev's secret speech, the attitude to the site of the new head of the Ukrainian Central Committee, Nikolai Podgorny, a loyalist of Khrushchev, dispelled such hopes. After a renewed discussion of the possibility of erecting a monument at the site, the committee under Podgorny decided, in 1957, to take the last steps in Babi Yar's eradication process. It rejected the proposal

[64] Evstaf'eva and Nakhmanovich, *Babi yar*, 191; Mankoff, 402.
[65] Evstaf'eva and Nakhmanovich, 190, 196.

[66] Sheldon, 133.

for a monument and, at the same time, approved of a plan to lay out a stadium and a park on top of the mass grave.[67]

The shelving of the plan to construct a monument at the site for the second time, coupled with the implementation of the resolution to flood the ravine, indicated that the "freeze" decreed on the commemoration of Babi Yar in the immediate aftermath of World War II remained intact, as if the Thaw period and the process in which Stalinist practices were openly renounced and overturned never happened. While a general overview of the attitude of the new regime toward Jewish culture will be provided in the second part of our study, it is worth noting that during the early years of the Thaw, the new leadership of the Soviet Union did take some courageous steps in bringing the virulent Stalinist persecution of Jews to a halt. Whereas implicit anti-Semitism pervaded many segments of the Soviet bureaucracy during the Thaw years as much as it did during the Stalin era, the acquittal and release of the imprisoned Jewish physicians by the new leadership in April 1953 and the later release and the posthumous rehabilitation of the victims of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign were courageous moves, indicating that the new regime deemed anti-Semitism, to a certain extent, to be a sinister, ingrained aspect of Stalinist totalitarianism.[68] That Khrushchev was willing to take this route was indicative that, at least to some degree, he wished to dissociate himself from the rabidly anti-Semitic rule of his predecessor. However, while the Soviet dictator was dead, the admittance and reversal of such anti-Semitic, Stalinist crimes had the potential of implicating some of Stalin's immediate subordinates who were, by now, members of the newly formed presidium, the governing body of the CPSU. Thus, these moves were not easy to make.

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[67] Ibid. See also Mankoff, 402.

[68] Joshua Rubenstein notes that the Yiddish writers who were arrested during the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign were among the first to be released from Soviet prison camps, as early as November 1955. See: Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties*, 313.

One may question, given the comprehensive nature of the process of de-Stalinization, which engaged for several years both the Soviet leadership and the intelligentsia, why the memory of Babi Yar was so sternly suppressed? Why could no one among the Soviet literati of the early Thaw period – and even a towering cultural figure such as Ilya Ehrenburg, who had addressed the memory of the Babi Yar massacre in his earlier works – publically express any objection to the flooding of the ravine? Indeed, the root causes of this silence over the memory of Babi Yar observed by both intellectuals and politicians are identical. Two of them merit a close examination.

The first cause of the general neglect of Babi Yar during the early Thaw is quite simple. In view of the plethora of challenges that both the Soviet government and the intelligentsia faced during this time of postwar recovery, the concern over the question of how Babi Yar needed to be commemorated must have seemed rather marginal. At a time when the residents of Moscow were experiencing severe shortages of the most basic food supplies, when the country was still run by a war economy and its economic raison d'être depended on the slave labor of an army of 2.5 million prisoners,[69] it is hardly surprising that the memory of Babi Yar and the moral implications of the plans to flood the site did not capture the minds of any influential figures. The memory of Babi Yar, similar to other topics that called for a serious historical revision of Stalinism, must have seemed at that time to have little immediate and practical repercussions and, hence, was cast aside and postponed for the more distant future. The Khrushchev-Malenkov duumvirate, not unlike the Soviet intellectuals of that era, was eager, first, to halt, and, later, as early as the Twentieth Party Congress, to begin to revisit, the crimes perpetrated by the Soviet regime itself. A discussion of how the crimes of Nazi Germany needed to take shape in official

[69] R.G. Pichoia, *Sovetskii soyuz: istoriya vlasti* (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii hronograf, 2000), 90, 96.

Soviet memory was, in this respect, quite understandably, an issue relegated to a much lower priority.

That such rational considerations guided the Soviet elite of the post-Stalin era, the intelligentsia as well as the bureaucracy, in the marginalization of Babi Yar during the very early years of the Thaw was true. But this was only half the truth. For the neglect of Babi Yar was not merely a by-product of a wish to put off the debate about how the site was supposed to be commemorated and wait for a more propitious time. On the contrary, it was a direct result of active attempts to completely erase the precincts of the ravine from the face of the earth. Why was the post-Stalin era Soviet regime so loyal to the plan to destroy Babi Yar, and why did none of the Soviet intellectuals who so critically appraised the legacy of Stalinism make any serious attempt to hinder it? In order to penetrate the second and more profound reason underlying the neglect of Babi Yar during the early Thaw, we must dwell on the unique role that Nikita Khrushchev played, first from Kiev and later from the Kremlin, in consigning Babi Yar to oblivion. Due to the immense influence that Khrushchev had on shaping the Russian culture of the Thaw period, a discussion of his stance toward Babi Yar should not be overlooked.

Nikita Khrushchev and Babi Yar

The Soviet historian of the Thaw period, Rudolph Pihoya, notes that despite the popular view of Khrushchev as a courageous reformer, the chief ideologue of de-Stalinization and the man who, in the days immediately following the death of Stalin, gave the process of liberalization and relaxation from terror its first thrust, the reality in which the Thaw came into being was a great deal more complex. Indeed, despite his later tendency to portray himself as its initiator,

Khrushchev approached the nascent process of de-Stalinization with ambivalence, since he was no less complicit in the Stalinist crimes than his colleagues in the post-Stalin Presidium: Beria, Malenkov, Kaganovich and Molotov.[70] As Khrushchev started to gain power and eclipse his colleagues (at the outset of the Thaw period he ranked only fifth in the Presidium and was the least likely among its members to become the next Soviet leader)[71] he realized the potential of de-Stalinization as a means of securing and strengthening his position. While the death of Stalin was at first met by the majority of the Soviet population with despair and anxiety, Khrushchev, with his down-to-earth political savvy and tactical maneuvering, realized how de-Stalinization was gaining currency, and how identifying himself with this trend might greatly work to his advantage.

Viewed from this perspective, de-Stalinization was not simply the comprehensive unraveling of any policy associated with the crimes of Stalin. Rather, it was a selective process, and by February 1955, when Nikita Khrushchev became the leader of the Soviet Union, it was he who was in the position to coordinate this selective process.[72] While no one can deny the moral underpinnings that prompted Khrushchev to launch his campaign of de-Stalinization, he also had ulterior motives. By first laying the blame for Stalin's tyranny on Beria, later exposing the complicity of Malenkov in the Doctors' Plot and the Leningrad Affair, and, in 1957, by confronting Malenkov, Molotov and Kaganovich, the plotters of the so called "anti-party coup," portraying them as neo-Stalinist, the enemies of progress, Khrushchev carefully followed the

[70] Ironically, as Pihoya contends, it was Beria, the man who later came to be seen, more than anyone else, as Stalin's hangman, who, with courage and a sense of urgency, took the first essential steps to turn the Soviet state from a totalitarian mode into a more benign form of dictatorship. See Ibid, 94, 96-97.

[71] Kenez, 188.
[72] Ibid., 190.

path of de-Stalinization to eliminate anyone who stood in his way of becoming and remaining the head of the Soviet state.[73]

Khrushchev could overturn Stalinist policies with relative ease and openly condemn those crimes from the Stalin era in areas that were far removed from his discretion. But this was certainly not the case concerning Babi Yar and its memory. Here Khrushchev, who spent much of his career in the Ukraine, could not escape his own close involvement in the attempts to eradicate the ravine. As the man appointed by Stalin to act as the First Secretary of the Ukrainian CPSU during the late 1930s and the immediate postwar years,[74] Khrushchev was the one to reject, in 1949, the Vlasov-Ovchinikov proposal for a monument at the site.[75] As in the Katyn massacre of 22,000 Polish officers in 1940, another symbol of Stalinist repression with which Khrushchev was closely involved,[76] the best course of action for Khrushchev to take -- in view of the fact that here there was no one to associate Stalinism with but himself – was to continue the Stalinist policy of silence.

This was exactly the path taken by Khrushchev when he emerged as the leader of the entire Soviet Union. When the question of whether Babi Yar deserved public commemoration was brought up for discussion in 1957, it was Khrushchev's associate Nikolai Podgorny who, as

[73] For how this process played itself out with the attempt to portray Beria as the sole Presidium member responsible for Stalinist repression see: Pihoya, 99-102; No sooner had Khrushchev eliminated Beria as a potential contender to become Stalin's inheritor, he moved on, espousing the language of de-Stalinization, to overcome the powerful Malenkov, who together with him had ruled the Soviet Union in a duumvirate between 1953-1955. See Idem, 122. Later on, Khrushchev's confrontation with Malenkov, who was now supported by Molotov and Kaganovich, reached its climax in the so-called "anti-party coup," when the three failed to oust the Soviet leader during the Presidium of June 1957. Four years later, at the Twenty Second Party Congress, Khrushchev would openly denounce Stalin for the second time, doing so, again, by way of blackening the reputation of the Politburo members who had conspired against him earlier, and presenting them as "old guard" Stalin loyalists. See Zubok, 196.

[74] Yaroslav Bilinsky, *The Second Soviet Republic: The Ukraine after World War II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 234-36.

[75] Mankoff, 402.

[76] Zubok, 60.

noted earlier, after a review of another proposal for a memorial, decided that this plan, like the previous one, would be shelved.[77] In March 1960, already from his office in Moscow, Khrushchev vetoed a decision made earlier in December 1959, according to which a park and an obelisk would be erected to commemorate the victims of Babi Yar who had died there in 1941.[78] Even though this was essentially a proposal to erect a memorial stone for the overwhelming majority of those murdered at Babi Yar in the course of 1941 who were Jews, the inscription for the bottom of the obelisk was to speak of the "Soviet citizens tormented by the Hitlerites in 1941." This vague formulation, however, did not keep Khrushchev from actively interfering with the affairs of the Ukrainian authorities and, from Moscow, thwarting the construction of a monument.

Khrushchev must have realized that any revision of the Stalin-era attitude to Babi Yar could bring only harm. All things considered, it was in Khrushchev's best interest to maintain the silencing of Babi Yar as the site not only reminded passersby of the dark days of Stalinism but also alluded to the anti-Semitic prejudice of the person who came to succeed him. Thus, when seen within the context of Khrushchev's highly selective politics of de-Stalinization, it is easier to understand why it took Soviet intellectuals so long to criticize the attempts to destroy Babi Yar, an eradication process that reached its peak in 1960, when a new dam to facilitate the waters flooding into the ravine was constructed near the site.[79] The reticence of the Soviet intelligentsia was indicative of the fact that they understood that areas where Khrushchev could not be easily divorced from the crimes of the Stalinist past - especially when those crimes persisted in the present - had to be exempted from critical examination.

[77] Mankoff, 402.
[78] Ibid., 403; Sheldon, 135.
[79] Mankoff, 404.

Dina Spechler, in her study of the most central intellectual platform of the Thaw period, the periodical publication *Novy Mir*, where literary works containing criticism of the Soviet system under Stalin appeared, contends that the practice of what she calls "permitted dissent" was the fruit of the mutual support that the members of the Soviet intellectual elite and Khrushchev gave each other as both parties acknowledged Soviet society's basic need to shift from the path of totalitarianism to a more tolerable, party-centered, mode of dictatorship.[80] As this process was gradual, convoluted and fragile and affected by developments not only within the USSR, an irritable subject such as Babi Yar, with its potential of casting a shadow on the image of Nikita Khrushchev, had to be postponed to a distant future. This moment came in October 1959, toward the Thaw's zenith, when the first attack on the Soviet stance vis-à-vis Babi Yar was finally launched. It took shape in the form of a short, polemical essay, published in the literary organ of the Soviet Writers Union *Literaturnaya gazeta* that bluntly criticized the Ukrainian authorities' attempts to level the site of Babi Yar and bring about its complete effacement.

As we shall see, while this critical work may neatly fall into the category of "permitted dissent," as it meant to engage rather than confront the Soviet authorities, one could recognize in it the buds of a new development. The writer of the essay, the Russian author Viktor Nekrasov, signaled in it that he wished to broaden the boundaries of the permissible and explore a new theme that could potentially shed a negative light on Khrushchev and the post-Stalinist Soviet regime. This was, in other words, still a piece of constructive criticism, but now a harsher, intransigent one. As it turned out, Nekrasov would become one of the most prominent cultural

[80] Spechler, xv-xxiii. In his work on dissent in the Soviet Union, Rudolph Tőkés identifies the same phenomenon as "within-system opposition." See: Rudolph Tőkés, "Introduction," in *Dissent in the USSR: Politics, Ideology, and People*, edited by Rudolph Tőkés (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1975), 22.

figures of the late Thaw period to uphold the banner of Babi Yar's memory. His essay would act as a harbinger for the work of other non-Jewish Russian artists who would give the debate over Babi Yar in the Russian cultural sphere its ultimate shape.

A Monument for "Peace-Loving Soviet citizens": Nekrasov's Essay

In the wake of the Hungarian Revolution in October 1956, Soviet officialdom resorted to methods of repression in its handling of writers and artists. That this popular uprising taking place in a Soviet satellite was endorsed and encouraged by a group of communist intellectuals served only to alarm the Soviet leadership about the perils of intellectual freedom when harnessed against the Soviet regime itself. Khrushchev, in a bid to ensure that these developments would not spill into his own country, during a conversation with writers at the beginning of 1957, warned his guests that in the eventuality of a similar situation in the USSR, he "would know what to do with them, and his hand would not tremble."[81] Two years later, however, during the Third Congress of Soviet Writers in 1959, Khrushchev's curtailment of literary freedom seemed to be toning down. The abortion of the anti-Party coup that had been plotted against him and the launching of the first Sputnik in 1957 managed to restore his confidence in the policy of de-Stalinization, which he seemed to have lost in the aftermath of the Hungarian crisis. The conquering of space signaled, once again, that a great future awaited the empire under Khrushchev's rule.[82]

[81] Edward Brown, *Russian Literature since the Revolution*, 266.
[82] Ibid., 267; Zubok, 121.

During the second half of the 1950s the Soviet political and literary scene was in a state of limbo: on the one hand, Khrushchev, who, toward the end of the decade saw his country's economy and industry slowly recovering from the devastation wrought by the war, was no longer feeling in dire need of the support of either the scientific or the artistic intelligentsia. The mass popularity that he had enjoyed in the wake of his secret speech no longer seemed as crucial to his political survival as before. The Hungarian crisis only reinforced his conviction that the previous campaign of relaxation and benign liberalism must be halted. On the other hand, it was clear to Khrushchev and his *apparatchiks* in charge of ideology and the arts – as much as it was for the Soviet intellectual elite – that the days of Stalinist harassment, imprisonment and assassination of artists were already behind and that the process of de-Stalinization was by now unstoppable.[83]

Against the background of this fluctuation between liberalization and repression, there appeared, on October 10, 1959, a short essay by the Russian writer Viktor Nekrasov entitled "Why has It not been done?" protesting the Kiev City Council attempts to flood Babi Yar, fill it with mud and later lay out on its territory a park and a stadium.[84] Written by a Russian writer who had established himself already as one of the leading members of the post-Stalin era Soviet intelligentsia, the essay by Nekrasov constituted the first overt act of protest against the Soviet attempts to suppress the memory of Babi Yar.[85] Up until its appearance, the various references to the massacre at the ravine, as we recall, were meant only to sustain Babi Yar's memory in the

[83] Edward Brown, 267.

[84] Viktor Nekrasov, "pachemu eto ne sdeleno?" *Literaturnaya gazeta,* 10 October 1959, 4. An English translation of the essay was printed in Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews*, 436-37.

[85] The first major Soviet writer to protest the Soviet handling of Babi Yar was Ilya Ehrenburg, who appealed right after the liberation of Kiev, while the war was still wearing on, to the First Secretary of the CPU, Nikita Khrushchev, and protested a plan to build a market over Babi Yar. Khrushchev retorted to Ehrenburg's protest that "I advise you not to intervene in matters not your own. Better write good novels instead." As Ehrenburg communicated his protest to Khrushchev in a personal letter, the essay by Nekrasov was the first time when such claims were publically made. See Rubenstein, 211. It is worth noting that Ehrenburg was among those who favorably responded to Nekrasov's demands in his "Why Has It not been done?" See: Rubenstein, 440.

public consciousness rather than directly raise any objection to the measures taken at that time by the Soviet regime. In his essay, Nekrasov was the first to seek the latter course of action and protest the Soviet attempts to destroy Babi Yar that were then only gathering momentum.

The essay was well received: Two months later, in response to it, a group of residents of the Babi Yar vicinity sent a letter to *Literaturnaya gazeta* endorsing Nekrasov's demand for a monument dedicated to the victims of fascism, with a single reservation: that no objection to the construction of a park over the site be warranted, as Babi Yar could not simply be left intact and the incorporation of it into the postwar greater Kiev area was inevitable.[86]" Thereafter, the Vice Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Kiev State Council of Workers' Deputies, Skidra, announced a decision made in December 1959 to erect an obelisk at Babi Yar with a plaque noting that the site functioned in 1941 as a Nazi mass murder site. Although this plan was vetoed later on by Khrushchev, the pressure that Kuznetsov and the other Russian intellectuals who followed in his footsteps exerted on the Soviet government led to the ultimate laying of an obelisk over Babi Yar in 1966. While this obelisk included an inscription that was in line with the Soviet official position that Babi Yar was a Great Patriotic War, not a Holocaust site, as it turned out, its erection helped turn Babi Yar into a focal point for memorial assemblies and rallies attended by those who came to protest the Soviet stance toward Babi Yar and commemorate it as a distinct tragedy of Soviet Jews. Not coincidentally, one of the first to organize and take part in these events was none other than Viktor Nekrasov."[87]

In its format, while squarely criticizing the Kiev City Council plan to turn the site into a recreational center, Nekrasov's essay still resembled previous works dedicated to Babi Yar that,

[86] For the essay's translation into English, see Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews*, 437-38.
[87] Nekrasov,"Zapiski zevaki," 388.

in one way or another, were all manifestations of "permitted dissent." It came out, after all, through official Soviet publication channels and must have been endorsed to a certain extent by the Soviet censor. But as its essence proved, the essay approached the neglect of Babi Yar in a bolder fashion than ever before. Evidently, the three years that had passed since the Hungarian crisis and the recent pronouncements by Khrushchev hinting that a new wave of liberalization was imminent, gave both Nekrasov and the editors of *Literaturnaya gazeta* the confidence they needed to openly address a topic that was till then completely covered up. If these signals of an approaching relaxation enabled the publication of the essay, what gave it a sense of urgency was the ongoing flooding of the ravine that would determine the fate of Babi Yar's memory forever.

Nekrasov's essay was more than an expression of disagreement over a specific wrongdoing by a certain municipality in the vast Soviet empire. The essay was a direct attack on the moral repercussions of Soviet postwar urban reconstruction efforts. This process, according to Nekrasov, was morally flawed as it involved erasing any traces that alluded to the horrific toll that the Nazi occupation had taken on the country. Nekrasov was the first to point to the character of postwar Kiev as a city having a "memory black-hole" in its midst, as a city attempting to recover from the trauma of Nazi ruin by completely turning its back on its past. Appalled by this attitude, the Russian writer argued that ethical, far-sighted considerations must guide the Kiev City Council, rather than the immediate, practical need for new roads to connect Babi Yar to the greater Kiev area. In the last two paragraphs of his essay, Nekrasov points out that in Kiev, the city's natural expansion drive must not come at the expense of the basic human need to remember and honor the dead:

> Is that possible? Who could think of that? To fill a ravine 30m deep, and to make merry and play football where the greatest tragedy took place.

> No, it's impermissible!
>
> When a man dies, he is buried, and a monument is placed on his grave. Can it be that such a token of respect is not deserved by the 195,000 people of Kiev brutally shot in Babi Yar, Syrets, Darnitsa, the Kirillov Hospital, the Monastery, the Lukyanoka Cemetery?![88]

Those who read Nekrasov's essay in *Literaturnaya gazeta* must have been astounded by its boldness. Even though Nekrasov zeroed in only on a single issue of contention and did not make any statement that could undermine the legitimacy of the Soviet system, those who could read between the lines realized the condemnation implicitly embedded in it. The juxtaposition of the brutal Nazi handling of the Soviet civilian population and the Soviet disrespect for their memory was no simple argument to make in the Soviet Union at that time. The essay was, of course, only lightly tinged with this contrast between the Soviet and Nazi systems, a comparison so perilous that when Vasily Grossman, one of the foremost World War II writers, would draw it a year later in his epic novel *Zhizn' i sudba* ("Life and Fate"), the manuscript of his work would be promptly confiscated by KGB agents.[89] To be published in *Literaturnaya gazeta*, Nekrasov could only draw such parallels in the most oblique fashion.

In 1974, while writing from Paris as an émigré, Nekrasov, in an autobiographical piece initially rejected for publication by *Novy Mir* entitled "Notes of a Bystander," returned to the theme of Babi Yar, now being a bit more overt in his comparison between the two totalitarian systems:

> And then the Nazis left. They were trying to conceal the traces of their own crimes. But how can you conceal… They forced the prisoners of war to incinerate

[88] Pinkus, 437.
[89] Weiner, 193-194. Zubok, 247.

> the bodies**;** to gather them into piles and burn [them]. But you cannot burn all of them.
>
> Then [they] flooded the ravine.[90]

According to Nekrasov, it was exactly the short episode in these autobiographical sketches dealing with Babi Yar, including the above quotation that led to the rejection of the story by *Novy Mir*. He further reports that his attempt to submit it to another journal, the less liberal *Moskva*, was followed not only by the story's rejection, but also by Nekrasov's exclusion from the Communist Party, another step in the deterioration of his standing vis-à-vis the Soviet regime that would later lead to his forced emigration to France.[91]

All that happened later, when the atmosphere of relative liberalism ran its course and gave way to the coming to power of Brezhnev and Kosygin, who together with other conservative, neo-Stalinist elements in the government and party apparatus, brought the Thaw period to an abrupt end. While Nekrasov's "Notes of a Bystander" is a work that exceeds the chronological timeframe of the Thaw, it may help us better understand the underlying motives that drove the Russian author to protest the flooding of Babi Yar in his "Why Has It not been done?" It is valuable as an autobiographical story written in exile, at a time when Nekrasov was already free of any censorship restriction. By comparing the essay and the story, it becomes clear, that both implicitly protested the Soviet regime's efforts to make all evidence of the death of tens of thousands of its own people wholly evaporate, a practice begun by the Nazis and resumed by the Soviets.

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[90] Nekrasov, "Zapiski zevaki," 386 (author's translation).

[91] Ibid., 345; Michael Falchikov, "Introduction," in Viktor Nekrasov, *Postscripts* (London: Quartet Books, 1991), xiv.

Nekrasov was the first to dwell on the moral implications that underlay the actions of the local Kiev authorities. “Why Has It not been done?” was also unprecedented in other respects. It was the first time that precise details about the September 29-30 events were given to the Soviet public after fifteen years of silence. If mentioning the silenced massacre was not enough, Nekrasov told his audience that the Soviet regime, while communicating to the entire world the news about the atrocities at the site only a few months after they had taken place, overturned in the wake of the war its own proposal to construct a monument at the site. By mentioning, the rejected sketches by Vlasov and Ovchinnikov, Nekrasov suggested that it was not a passive process of forgetting that led to the neglect of Babi Yar, but rather, an active one. Nekrasov hinted that it was orchestrated by none other than the First Secretary of the CPSU, Nikita Khrushchev himself.

Although Nekrasov did not mention Khrushchev by name, it did not require much effort to identify the culprit of the crime committed against Babi Yar. The appearance of the essay in a Moscow journal, rather than a local, Ukrainian one, also alluded to the fact that Nekrasov’s concern for Babi Yar’s neglect was nothing short of an attack leveled at the very top of the Soviet hierarchy. It suggested that this matter had to be resolved, not by the Kiev City Council, but far higher. As the man who headed the CPU during the conclusion of World War II was now the head of the entire USSR, Nekrasov, by sending his essay to *Literaturnaya gazeta*, showed awareness of the fact that when it came to Babi Yar, Moscow and Kiev politics were completely intertwined. As we shall see, this step made by Nekrasov would later be emulated by other Russian artists. Like Nekrasov, they would also pursue the turning of Babi Yar from a minor, local matter into an issue that had to resonate beyond the realms of the Ukrainian republic’s capital, and ultimately attract the attention of the international community.

How can one account for this sudden appearance of the first work of dissent related to Babi Yar containing an attack against the Soviet treatment of this issue, an attack which, despite its obliqueness, was extraordinary and unprecedented at the time of its publication? While some signs that changes for the better in Khrushchev's relationship with the intelligentsia were noticeable toward the turn of the new decade, it was, in fact, not simply a matter of timing that facilitated the publication of Nekrasov's "Why Has It not been done?" Rather, it was the omission of one significant piece of information that accounted for this. Readers of the essay, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, could not pass over the fact that nowhere in it did Nekrasov make any reference to the information that it was, overwhelmingly, Jews who were murdered at Babi Yar on September 29-20, 1941 as well as in the subsequent killing operations that took place at the site. Strikingly, instead of speaking about Jews, Nekrasov only asserted that "on September 29 1941, the Hitlerites drove here some tens of thousands of peaceful people who were guilty of no crime and shot them mercilessly."[92]

This omission, of course, was not a coincidence. In all likelihood, it played a pivotal role in helping the editor-in-chief of *Literaturnaya gazeta* accept the essay for publication in the first place. While, as we noted earlier, the late 1950s could be seen, in hindsight, as a fitting time for the appearance of "permitted dissent" publications like Nekrasov's essay, the same period also witnessed the deterioration of the Soviet state's relationship with its Jewish citizens. This trend, taking place as part of a general anti-religious campaign that was launched between the years 1957-1964 stood in the background of Nekrasov's essay. Although the campaign targeted Soviet religious institutions across the board, it took a marked toll on Jewish synagogues and

[92] Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews*, 436.

cemeteries.[93] Together with the closure of synagogues, which remained during those years the last vestige of Jewish communal life, the campaign was accompanied by virulent attacks against Jews both in the media and on the street. Only six days before Nekrasov's letter appeared, a synagogue and the home of the Jewish cemetery warden were burnt in the town of Malakhovka, not far from Moscow. This attack, leading to the death of the warden's wife, was the culmination of a malicious campaign launched by a local gang naming itself "Beat the Jews and Save Russia" after the slogan of the notorious anti-Semitic group of the tsarist era, The Black Hundreds.[94] The anti-religious campaign, thus, coupled with the grassroots outbreak of anti-Semitism in Malakhovka may help explain Nekrasov's decision to eschew any mention of the term "Jews" in his essay. As calculated as this choice of his was, though, it later led readers of the essay to evaluate and contextualize it in retrospect in two contrasting ways.

There were some who, in response to the carefully chosen wording by Nekrasov, contended that by referring to the September 29-30 massacre without mentioning the Jews, the Russian writer helped reinforce the Soviet reluctance to admit that Babi Yar was a site of a distinctly Jewish tragedy. Jeff Mankoff, for instance, has argued that the essay was "one of the first attempts to both acknowledge the importance of Babi Yar and reject the centrality of its Jewish narrative."[95] Instead of countering the Soviet official posture, so the argument goes,

[93] Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence*, 161-167.

[94] Pinkus, 96. The Soviet authorities responded to the affair, first in complete denial, and only three weeks later relented and made several arrests, sentencing the culprits to no longer than ten to twelve years in prison. Western lawyers who inquired about the affair could not obtain from Soviet officials full details of the events in Malakhovka; they seemed to be attempting to hush up the entire affair. See Bilinksy, 406. Bilinisky, in his discussion of Ukrainian-Jewish relations cites this case by way of showing that anti-Semitic bias was not something endemic only to Ukrainian society. He implies, by bringing up the Malakhovka affair which took place on Russian soil, that the attempts to eradicate Babi Yar, while endorsed by the CPU (a body that saw during that time a rise in membership among native Ukrainians), were orchestrated "from above" by the Soviet central government, an argument that may be supported by Nerkasov's decision to send his essay for publication to a journal printed in Moscow, as noted above. On the Malakhovka affair see also: Ben Zion Goldberg, T*he Jewish Problem in the Soviet Union: Analysis and Solution* (Westwood, Con.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 282-286.

[95] Mankoff, 403.

Nekrasov only gave it approbation, now from a leading member of the intelligentsia. He did so most conspicuously by drawing upon the data that had first appeared in the March 1, 1944 *Pravda* report about Nazi atrocities in the Kiev area, compiled by the officially appointed Extraordinary Commission, and even more so, by using its terminology, that is, its reference to "peace-loving Soviet citizens," rather than Jews.

Nekrasov's essay was in agreement with this earlier report not only in this respect. By relying on the statistical figures of the dead gleaned by the commission, the essay placed the Babi Yar massacre in the context of other Nazi war crimes, thereby downplaying its distinct character. In the excerpt from the essay cited earlier, Nekrasov plainly referred to the number of dead whose memory deserved the attention of Soviet officials – 195,000 victims. A glimpse into the details provided by Nekrasov as he cites the findings of the Extraordinary Commission shows that these figures amounted to the total number of victims of Nazism in the city: the 100,000 who died in Babi Yar, added to the 68,000 POWs and citizens who were shot in the Darnitsa labor camp the 25,000 POWs and citizens who were shot near the Syretsky camp and, finally, a smaller number of victims from other Nazi massacres.[96] The fact that the victims buried in Babi Yar amounted to only half of those whose murder Nekrasov called never to forget, and that among them were not only Jews but Russians and Ukrainians as well, may indicate that the memory of the Jews was not Nekrasov's single concern in his essay. There were, therefore, some who assumed that Nekrasov's mention of Jews and non-Jews, soldiers and civilians, in one breath, reflected a desire to call for the commemoration of all of those who fell victim to fascism during the Nazi occupation of Kiev, irrespective of their ethnic affiliation.

[96] Pinkus, 436.

Another source that bears testimony to Nekrasov's desire to commemorate Babi Yar in the context of the Great Patriotic War rather than the Holocaust is the aforementioned autobiographical story "Notes of a Bystander." Dwelling in this piece on the difference between the Darnitsa prison camp for POWs, the Warsaw Ghetto, and Babi Yar, Nekrasov concludes that the future monument for the victims of Babi Yar must underscore the site's distinctiveness. He presents a view of the Babi Yar massacre as an exclusive case, but not because of its underlying genocidal nature:

> The moment at the Warsaw Ghetto – is a monument for an uprising, for the struggle against death; the [proposed] monument at Darnitsa – for the soldiers, fighters, people who fell captive and had been murdered in a beastly manner… for people, who were for the most part strong, young. But Babi Yar –this is a *tragedy* of the helpless, the old.[97]

Whereas in "Why has It not been done?" Nekrasov lists the Babi Yar massacre among the other mass murders that took place in Kiev, here he clearly underlines its uniqueness. But his comparison of the ravine with the other two World War II sites is very telling. Rather than linking Babi Yar to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and the fate of European Jewry, he categorizes the two as distinct. Nekrasov deems the Babi Yar massacre a universal symbol, exceeding the context of the Jewish people's tragedy. In his eyes, it is a symbol of the degradation of humankind, reaching its nadir when the well-armed soldiers of Europe's mightiest army targeted an innocent civilian population on a scale hitherto unimaginable.

In another statement, concluding his discussion of Babi Yar in these autobiographical sketches, he asserts:

> Stop and bow your head.

[97] Nekrasov, "Zapiski zevaki," 391.

People were shot here.

One hundred thousand.

By the fascists.

The first salvo was fired on September 29, 1941.[98]

Perhaps this quotation is the most illustrative of Nekrasov's conception of Babi Yar and its memory. Here Nekrasov, free of the need to refer to the death of the Jews in a circumlocutory manner, decides to characterize them as "people." It follows from this assertion that Nekrasov viewed the victims of the Babi Yar massacre as civilian casualties of one of the most horrific events of the Great Patriotic War. A comparison of the essay and the autobiographical sketches reveals that it was not the concern for the commemoration of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union that preoccupied him but rather, the Soviet cult of the Great Patriotic War: a cult that took shape following the death of Stalin and revolved around Soviet war heroism and left in the shadows the war's victims, the helpless civilians together with the POWs.[99]

An examination of Nekrasov's earlier career sheds further light on the writing of "Why Has It not been done? The novel *In the Trenches of Stalingrad*, in which Nekrasov made his debut in 1946 and which won him the Stalin prize the following year, already took issue with the Soviet myth of Stalingrad that, in Nekrasov's eyes, was far removed from the hardships experienced during the famous battle by rank-and-file soldiers. The novel offered a rare, candid account of combat during World War II based on Nekrasov's own experience as a commander of

[98] Nekrasov, *Zapiski Zevaki*, 392.
[99] Merridale, *Night of Stone*, 212-213, 235.

a battalion positioned in the beleaguered city. [100] In addition to *In the Trenches of Stalingrad*, another work by Nekrasov entitled "Hometown" (1954) also elaborated on the ordeals facing Red Army soldiers now discharged from their duty and returning home, emotionally and physically scarred, unable to find an honorable place in a society that sought only war heroes and labeled the invalid veterans, or those bearing the emotional scars of war, deviants or cowards.[101] These works also show that Nekrasov, the veteran writer of World War II, was first and foremost concerned in his essay with a Great Patriotic War cult that had no room whatsoever for the memory of nearly 200,000 Kiev residents, who lost their lives in its course. That a leading Soviet writer would criticize the Soviet government for its disrespect for the victims of fascism was certainly something it was not enthusiastic about. But was such criticism tantamount to accusing the Soviet regime of being anti-Semitic, of denying for decades that the large scale mass murder that had taken place on the outskirts of Kiev was an anti-Jewish genocide? It was certainly not.

There were other scholars, however, who took the opposite approach, arguing that "Why has It not been done?" was a courageous, unprecedented effort to confront the Soviet regime for its suppression of Babi Yar as an indispensably Jewish site. Richard Sheldon and Benjamin Pinkus, for instance, while noticing Nekrasov's omission of the Jews from his article, could not but credit the Russian writer for bringing up an issue that at a time when Soviet anti-Semitism

[100] A.I. Pavlovskii, *Russkie pisateli xx vek: biliograficheskii slovar' v dvukh chasyah*, 94; Nekrasov's portrayal of the battlefield was devoid of redundant embellishments, had hardly any mention of Stalin and virtually no reference to the role played by the Communist Party in the battle, omissions that distinguished Nekrasov from almost any other author of the time dealing with the memories of the Great Patriotic War. See: Pavlovskii, 94; and also: "Vot esli by da kaby…" Consider the fact that the time of the novel's publication was a period when Stalin, concerned with the surge of nationalist sentiments among some of the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union, ascribed the triumph over Nazism to the Communist party, rather than to the armed forces. See Bilinsky, *The Second Soviet Republic*, 12.

[101] Viktor Nekrasov, "V rodnom gorode," *Novy mir*, 10 (1954): 3-65, 11(1954): 97-178. For a description of this piece see Spechler, 40; for the treatment of handicapped veterans of the Great Patriotic War see Merridale, 240.

was on the rise was very unlikely to receive any attention.[102] These scholars viewed the essay as primarily concerned with the anti-Semitic bias that underlay the Soviet silence over Babi Yar, even though it had to resort to the use of the Aesopian language of "peaceful Soviet citizens" in order to allude to the Jewish victims. To support this argument, Edith Clowes, for instance, refers to the fact that the essay opens with a statement that Babi Yar is adjacent to the ancient Jewish cemetery of Kiev by way of hinting obliquely at Babi Yar as a site of a Jewish tragedy.[103] Clowes, like other proponents of this view, believes that Nekrasov, being unable to do otherwise, used the terminology of the Extraordinary Commission, not in order to agree with its anti-Jewish bias, but, rather, in order to counter it.

This account of Nekrasov's essay as one concerned with Babi Yar as a Jewish site may also be supported by the Russian author's testimony offered in his later autobiographical work. In "Notes of a Bystander" Nekrasov goes to great lengths to underscore the fact that the innocent people who had been killed in Babi Yar were Jewish. On a personal note, he relates that his mother, who had many Jewish friends, warned them not to heed the Nazi command to show up at the assembly point on the morning of September 29, to run away, and she even offered them refuge in her own home.[104] Moreover, while even at this late date Nekrasov still seems ambivalent about how Babi Yar ought to be commemorated, he leaves no doubt that an anti-Semitic bias is the true reason behind the Soviet neglect of the site over decades.[105]

But is there really an inner contradiction between the view of Babi Yar as a Holocaust site and the one that prefers to correlate it with the Great Patriotic War narrative? The truth of the

[102] Richard Sheldon noted that Nekrasov's essay was a "bold and passionate appeal to commemorate the [Jewish] victims [of Babi Yar]". See Sheldon, 134; and also Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews*, 97.
[103] Clowes, 166.
[104] Nekrasov, "Zapiski zevaki, 385.
[105] Ibid., 390.

matter is that Nekrasov's original essay, its ambiguous language notwithstanding, seems to criticize the Soviet regime on multiple issues and sets for itself goals that are not necessarily contradictory. From the standpoint of Nekrasov, the implicitly anti-Semitic suppression of the Holocaust and the overly patriotic Great Patriotic War cult were two policies employed to achieve the same goal – the glorification of the Soviet people and Red Army during the war as the legitimating myth of the Soviet system. This myth, no matter how useful it was, was anathema to Nekrasov as it came at the expense of the truthful process of reckoning with the harsh realities of World War II – of enormous civilian casualties, of major military blows, and the perpetration of genocide on Soviet territories.

The view of Nekrasov's work as containing two conflicting messages fails to take into account the historical and cultural context in which the debate about Babi Yar's memory took place. As we have seen, this debate was an indispensable part of the evolution of "permitted dissent;" the process through which new voices began to emanate from post-Stalinist Russia and went as far as mildly criticizing specific Soviet policies, while manifesting overall support for the communist enterprise. In this sense, Nekrasov delineated the contours of the public debate about Babi Yar as it took shape during the Thaw period. As we shall further see, the Russian artists who later joined Nekrasov would also criticize the Soviet policy vis-à-vis Babi Yar in a moderate fashion, leaving some leeway for ambiguity as they would not recognize any dichotomy between the memory of Babi Yar as a Holocaust site and a Great Patriotic War one. Curiously, they would all approach Babi Yar as outsiders, as they were, like Nekrasov, of non-Jewish background.

From this point onward, the clamor over Babi Yar's neglect would make headway and gradually intensify. In the next stage, a new work, no doubt the most famous to have been

written about Babi Yar, would appear in the Russian literature of the Thaw–the poem “Babi Yar” by Yevgeny Yevtushenko. Its author, while approaching the ravine’s memory with no less ambiguity than Nekrasov, would now deviate from his fellow Russian writer on a critical issue. Casting aside the “peace-loving Soviet citizens” referred to by Nekrasov, Yevtushenko would proclaim in the very first stanza of his poem that Babi Yar was a site of unique significance in the history of the Jewish people.

Chapter Two

"Therefore I am a True Russian" – Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar"

The Second Thaw

Without underestimating the role that the article written by Viktor Nekrasov played in bringing Babi Yar to the forefront of Soviet public and intellectual discourse, the Soviet cultural scene had to await political changes before a more candid and open discussion of the true reasons behind the site's neglect could take place. It was only later, at the beginning of the new decade that a substantial change in the regime's attitude toward the arts as well as toward intellectual freedom became evident. This shift of policy brought about two years of relaxation of harsh censorship and the suppression of writers, a time period commonly referred to as The Second Thaw.[106] Two major factors – unrelated to each other – underlay this shift in the Soviet cultural atmosphere: Khrushchev's change of heart toward the expression of dissent, and the coming to the fore of a young, dynamic and vocal group of intellectuals, a new generation, with whose demands for artistic freedom Khrushchev and his old-guard conservative associates soon needed to reckon.

[106] Zubok, 196. According to Zubok , the Second Thaw was ushered in only in October 1961, in the wake of the Twenty Second Party Congress . Khrushchev's attack on abstract art upon his visit to the State Exhibition Hall in the Manege (the former tsarist stables near the Kremlin) on December 1, 1962, was the first sign that this period of liberalization was about to end. The scholar Katerina Clark offers a different division of the Thaw era into three sub-periods, with the first thaw occurring in 1954 (after the September 1953 Central Committee plenum), the second in 1956, following Khrushchev's secret speech and the third after the Twenty Second Party Congress. See: Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 211. Edward Brown proposes a similar division into three thaws in his book on Soviet literature; See Edward Brown, 238-293. In my discussion of the Second Thaw, I adhere to Peter Rudy's categorization of this period, dating its beginning point to early and mid-1961 (prior to the Party Congress) when a number of works signaling a change of current in the Russian literary climate were published, among them the story "Kira Georgevna" by Viktor Nekrasov, the short story "By the Light of the Day" by E. Kazakevich, the novel *A Ticket to the Stars* by Vasilii Aksyonov and the poem "Babi Yar" by Yevgenii Yevtushenko. See: Peter Rudy, "The Soviet Russian Literary Scene in 1961: A Mild Permafrost Thaw," *The Modern Language Journal* 46, no. 6 (1962): 245-249.

Once he established himself in power as the unassailable leader of the Soviet Union and was able to keep in check the political unrest within the Soviet satellite states, Khrushchev decided to seize the opportunity, on the occasion of the convening of the Twenty-second Party Congress, held in October, 1961, to return, this time in full vigor, to the course of de-Stalinization which he seemed to have abandoned in the wake of the Hungarian Revolution. Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in his speech addressing the congress delegates was part of a broader move on his part: for the first time after his secret speech, he seemed to be back again on the side of the liberal, left-leaning wing of the Soviet intelligentsia, signaling that his regime would welcome greater involvement of this group in politics and allow them to have their works published.[107]

Khrushchev soon allowed the publication of works that offered a far more profound exploration of the Stalinist past. For the first time, the detachment of Khrushchev himself from the crimes of the Stalinist past, a sentiment that he had attempted to instill in Soviet public consciousness ever since he came to power, was called into question. Most representative of these works were Alexander Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" (in which the Soviet public was given, for the first time, a glimpse into the degradation of innocent Soviet citizens in the Stalinist prison-camp system), Ilya Ehrenburg's memoirs (where Ehrenburg shared his recollections of the Great Terror, implying that if he himself had known that innocent people, loyal communists, were being arrested and executed at that time, Khrushchev must have

[107] Zubok, 194, 204.

also fully been aware of this), [108] and, as we shall explore in great detail below, the poem "Babi Yar" by Yevgeny Yevtushenko.

How is one to make sense of this move back to the course of de-Stalinization on the part of Khrushchev after several years in which artistic and intellectual freedom were strictly curtailed? While one may point out a number of motives that could have prompted the Soviet leader to continue to play the card of de-Stalinization to serve both his domestic and foreign policies, the reason for his change of attitude most relevant to our discussion may be found, not in any immediate political considerations, but, rather, in Khrushchev's character and temper. As the scholar Peter Kenez remarks, Khrushchev was the last Soviet leader to be loyal to the Marxist- Leninist ideology and revolutionary spirit. He espoused policies that he believed would turn the Soviet Union into the mightiest, most prosperous, and technologically as well as culturally advanced civilization on earth even at the price of current crises and instability.[109]

When it came to the cultural arena, this proclivity on the part of Khrushchev for change, experimentation and risk-taking was best reflected in the Communist Party's new program that he adopted in June 1961, only three months after Yuri Gagarin became the first man to orbit the earth, signaling to the whole world that the Soviet way of life was synonymous with modernity and progress.[110] The program, declaring what seemed at that time like a promise to bring about a quasi-utopian advent of "socialism" within a matter of twenty years, envisioned a future Soviet

[108] Ehrenburg's memoirs began to be serialized in *Novy Mir* as early as 1960, embodying the aspirations of its new editor Alexander Tvardovsky, who in June 1958, after he had been dismissed from this position four years earlier, was reappointed the periodical's editor. It was, however, only in 1961 that Ehrenburg's memoirs started to include anti-Stalinist materials of a more radical character where vivid descriptions of the Great Terror and anti-Stalinist campaigns were rendered to the Soviet reader. See: Spechler, 144, Joshua Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties*, 344; Patricia Blake, "Introduction," in: *Half-way to the Moon: New Writing from Russia*, eds., Patricia Blake and Max Hayward (London: Encounter, 1964), 14.

[109] Kenez, 210-212.

[110] Peter Vail' and Alexander Genis, *Shestidesyatie: mir sovetskovo cheloveka* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989), 3.

society that would be sustained by a great literature and culture, predicated on the Thaw period's motto – the demand from artists of absolute sincerity in their portrayal of Soviet life.[111] While in accordance with the new program, artists, as in the past, needed to conform to the party line, such fidelity was now defined in the broadest terms. Artists were now allowed greater freedom to demonstrate "individual creative initiative, a high degree of craftsmanship, and a variety of creative forms, styles, and genres."[112] The program focused on the far-sighted revolutionary future instead of only factoring in Khrushchev's minor, tactical considerations. It reflected a genuine desire on his part to reenergize Soviet society and culture even at the price of compromising political stability in the short term, an approach that no other Soviet leader to succeed him would be willing to take.

If the elderly Soviet leader was young only in spirit, the other force that drove this change was also young in flesh: the group of newly-arrived Soviet intellectuals, who came to artistic maturity during the years 1956-1961 -- the Soviet generation of the sixties, or the *shestidesiatniki*.[113] This was essentially a group of young people who were now in their late twenties and early thirties. They came of age during World War II and could vividly remember only the last years of Stalinism. Not experiencing the full cycle of the Stalinist terror, this new cohort of intellectuals was more adamant in their demand for freedom of expression when compared with their predecessors. In a young society, where only ten percent of the population was over sixty years of age,[114] it was the members of this generation who took Khrushchev up on

[111] Ibid., 7.
[112] Rudy, 247.
[113] As Vladislav Zubok notes, the term *shestidesiatniki,* translated as "[the generation] of the sixties," was coined as early as 1960. It referred to a young group of people who conceived of themselves as people who could think more independently and be able to better reflect on life's complexities than the generation of their parents who had spent their formative years in the Stalinist, terrorist state. See Zubook, 162.
[114] Ibid., 121.

his willingness to loosen the screws of censorship and who gave Soviet culture of the early sixties its new shape.

While not radical and libertarian compared to their American peers, the *shestidesiatniki*, in their dress code, language, literary taste and civil courage were perceived by the older generation in a manner similar to parallel developments in Western countries, as a new, uneasy-to-digest force, exhibiting overt reluctance to play by the rules of their predecessors. The rebelliousness of the *shestidesiatniki* found expression, not only in the new literary style of their representative writers, but also in the way these writers were now venerated by their audiences. If in countries beyond the Iron Curtain the icons of the new mass culture of rebellious youth were rock-and-roll bands, a similar role was played in the Soviet Union by poets and bards, whose poetry recitation concerts drew thousands of keen poetry enthusiasts throughout the country. By way of renewing the Russian literary tradition of the Golden and Silver Ages, these rising young stars were now looked up to by their peers as the prophets of an entire generation. And while poets like Andrei Voznesenski and Bella Akhmadulina, or the bard Bulat Okudzhava, to name only a few, emerged as leading cultural figures of this new Soviet generation, no one came to epitomize and represent the *shestidesiatniki* more than Yevgeny Yevtushenko.[115]

Yevtushenko, who was born in Siberia in 1932 in the small town of Zima, located off the Trans-Siberian railway, spent his childhood in Moscow and was evacuated to his hometown when the war broke out. After the war ended, he moved back to the Soviet capital to attend a school for poets there, and later, between the years 1951-1954, the renowned Gorky Literary

[115]M. F. P'yanyh, "Yevtushenko, Yevgenii Alexandrovich," in: *Ruskie Pisateli: dvadtsati vek* (Moscow: Prosveshenie, 1987)

Institute.[116] Not unlike other members of his generation, he came to the forefront of the Russian literary scene right after Khrushchev's Secret Speech,[117] but it was only in the early sixties, and more particularly with the publication of "Babi Yar" on September 19, 1961 in *Literaturnaya gazeta*, that his fame reached its zenith within and outside the Soviet Union. In fact, his fame at that time was unparalleled by any other Soviet cultural figure.[118]

Beyond any other reason, what made the poem "Babi Yar" so transformative, not only in the career of Yevtushenko but in Soviet literature in general, was the fact that for the first time since the death of Stalin a writer dared to touch upon an extremely sensitive subject hitherto deemed nearly complete taboo. The poem's first readers found in it not only (as in the case of Nekrasov's article) a protest against the Soviet neglect of Babi Yar, but, also an accusation – implicit yet fairly clear even to the lay reader – that the absence of a monument at the site and the ongoing attempts to flood it were fraught with strong anti-Semitic underpinnings.[119] From the very first stanza of the poem it was clear that for Yevtushenko, Babi Yar is a memory space standing for the tragedy of the Jewish people:

No Monument Stands over Babi Yar

A drop sheer as a crude gravestone

I am afraid.

Today I am as old in years

---

[116] Ibid. E. Sidorov, *Yevgenii Yevtushenko: lichnost' I tvorchestvo* (Moskva: Hudozesvennaya literatura, 1987), 22.

[117] Ibd., 31.

[118] B. Rubin, commenting on Yevtushenko's success less than two years after the publication of his "Babi Yar," goes even further to argue that the commercial success of Yevtushenko as a young poet who managed in a short period of time to sell more than 100,000 copies of his books was unparalleled in the history of poetry. See: B. Rubin, "Uroki odnoi poeticheskoi biografii: zametki o lirike Evgeniya Evtushenko," *Voprosi literatury* 2 (1963): 17.

[119] While never touching upon the theme of anti-Semitism as blatantly as he did in "Babi Yar," Yevtushenko was among the first Soviet writers to engage this theme, as early as 1954. See Albert Todd, *Yevgeny Yevtushenko: The Collected Poems, 1952-1990* (New York: Henry Holt, 1991), xxi.

As all the Jewish people.

Now I seem to be

A Jew.

Here I plod through ancient Egypt.

Here I perish crucified, on the cross,

And to this day I bear the scars of nails.[120]

As it transpired from the poem, it was anti-Semitism and nothing else that was the real cause of Babi Yar's neglect. Anti-Semitism was portrayed as a time-honored malice infecting many levels of Soviet society, a staple of the Stalinist past that Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign had either not succeeded in eradicating or had not attempted to abolish.

In his autobiography, published almost two years later in France without the permission of the Soviet censor, Yevtushenko went to great lengths to describe the vicissitudes that preceded the publication of his poem. He reports that soon after he came back to Moscow from his visit to Kiev he felt an urge to read the poem in front of a crowd of 1200 students at the Moscow Polytechnic Institute. As he finished the recitation, Yevtushenko recalls that the crowd turned from a deadly silence to frantic applause, a reaction that prompted the twenty-eight-year-old poet to rush to the *Literaturnaya gazeta* office and submit his poem for publication.[121] While approving of the sincerity and quest for justice reflected in the poem, the newspaper's editor-in-

[120] Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *Early Poems* (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1989), 145.

[121] Yevgenii Yevtushenko, *A Precocious Autobiography*, Trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Dutton, 1963), 116.

chief, Valery Kosolapov warned the poet outright that he was crossing a line that had not been crossed before.

It soon became clear that Kosolapov was right. The poem was perceived by its first readers, as both Shimon Markish and Edith Clowes put it, as a literary bombshell. [122] After its appearance in *Literaturnaya gazeta***,** it would not be reprinted in the Soviet Union in the many collections of his poetry published by Yevtushenko throughout his career up until 1983.[123] Its publication cost the editor-in-chief his position and, correspondingly, triggered a barrage of attacks by conservative critics that would reach a peak twice, in December 1962 and March 1963, when the poem would be condemned by Khrushchev himself at two meetings with writers and artists.[124] Beyond the narrow realms of Soviet literature, the poem stirred a worldwide uproar. In historical perspective, no literary work was as pivotal as Yevtushenko's poem in turning Babi Yar into a focal point for the general Soviet as well as the particular Soviet-Jewish nationalist dissident movements. In hindsight, there is no doubt that Yevtushenko's poem must receive full recognition for its role in leading to the construction of the official monument for Babi Yar's victims that was unveiled in 1976.[125]

What prompted Yevtushenko to travel to Kiev and visit Babi Yar in the first place was another tragedy that took place at the site that could only indirectly be linked to the Babi Yar massacre. Yevtushenko, who was accompanied on his visit to Babi Yar by his fellow writer

[122] Shimon Markish, "The Role of Officially Published Russian Literature in the Reawakening of Jewish National Consciousness (1953-1970)," in: Yaacov Ro'i and Avi Beker, eds. *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 224; Clowes, 168.

[123] Albert Todd, xix. Todd notes that is was only in 1983, when a three volume edition of Yevtuhsenko's poetry came out, that the ban on the reprinting of the poem was lifted. Even then, though, the poem was elucidated by a footnote, explaining to the reader that not only Jews were among Babi Yar's victims. Todd further adds that Yevtushenko was not allowed to take part in any poetry recitation event in the Soviet Republic of the Ukraine until *perestroika*.

[124] William Korey, "In History's 'Memory Hole', 154.

[125] Sidorov, 70; Clowes, 166.

Anatoly Kuznetsov, a native of Kiev, came to the ravine in the wake of a tragedy that took place in Kurenyovka, a district adjacent to Babi Yar. There, in March, 1961, over 145 residents were killed by a massive stream of mud that poured into the neighborhood after the dam constructed nearby a year earlier had collapsed.[126] In a way, the Kurenyovka tragedy could be seen as a result of the Soviet authorities' bid to flood the ravine. But regardless of whether Yevtushenko recognized such a link between the Kurenyovka Tragedy and the Babi Yar massacre, the former is not mentioned in his poem at all. His "Babi Yar," as becomes apparent from every verse of his poem, is a site associated only with the Jewish tragedy that took place there during World War II.

It has already been noted that the most radical argument made by Yevtushenko in his poem was the accusation that the Soviet regime and large segments of Soviet society were deeply afflicted by anti-Semitic bias, something that found expression most conspicuously in the neglect of Babi Yar. As in the case of Nekrasov's essay, what made the poem particularly explosive was the more latent charge embedded in it that in this neglect, a vestige of the Stalinist past, the present leader of the Soviet Union and the former head of the Ukrainian party apparatus, Nikita Khrushchev, was deeply involved.

The issue of anti-Semitism was not the only contentious argument made in "Babi Yar." Another, deviating from Marxist-Leninist doctrine, was the poem's characterization of the Jewish people. The poem begins with a statement that, "no monument stands over Babi Yar," exclaimed as the poet's first reaction to the bleak vision he encountered at Babi Yar. He then goes on to manifest absolute identification with the fate of the Jewish people and sets off on a

[126] Evstaf'eva and Nakhmanovich, 201. The unofficial figure of casualties of the Kurenyovka tragedy was a great deal higher, reaching 1,500 casualties.

historical journey through the milestones of Jewish martyrdom. Yevtushenko encompasses over two thousand years of Jewish history, from the enslavement of the Hebrews in Egypt through the crucifixion of a Jewish man,[127] the Dreyfus affair, the pogroms of the Tsarist era, and up to the persecution of Jews by the Nazis during World War II, epitomized by the figure of Anne Frank. From the point of view of a regime that insisted that Judaism was only a religion, a vestige of the old order that would sooner or later die out, and refused to acknowledge its ethnic, extra-territorial nature, this exposition of Jewish history as a thread running through different eras and lands was, in itself, irksome from the official Soviet standpoint. Thus, at a time when the Communist party was soon to so proudly announce in its Communist Party Program that "the greatest achievement of socialism is the resolution of the national question," or that "the economic and cultural inequality inherited from the old regime has been liquidated,"[128] Yevtushenko's acknowledgement of a historical and currently existing Jewish people, suffering then and now from anti-Semitism, dealt a blow to official attempts at representing the Jews as well treated by the Soviet regime and equal to all other Soviet nationalities.

Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" was thus a multi-faceted attack leveled at both the Soviet doctrine and government, offering an explicit link between the ravine's memory and anti-Semitism and thereby constituting a break in the way this theme had been handled by Soviet

[127] In all likelihood, the crucified Jew featured in the poem is a reference to Jesus. It makes one wonder how relevant and tasteful the mentioning of the murder of Christ is - a crime for which Jews have been persecuted throughout the generations - in a poem dedicated to Jewish martyrdom. Richard Sheldon considers this one of the poem's most apparent flaws, as he argues that its "extravagant, presumptuous list of parallels [of the Hebrews in Egypt, Christ, the boy in Belostok and Anne Frank] imparts to the poem a bombastic, egocentric quality that does not accord well with the subject matter." See Sheldon, 138. In Yevtushenko's defense, it may be argued that growing up in the first atheist state in history he might have simply been unaware of the crucifixion of Jesus seen from the historical perspective of the Jewish people. Wishing to conjure up an image of Jewish martyrdom drawn from ancient times, Yevtushenko found it in Christ, a symbol far more familiar to him. Interestingly, Sheldon's criticism of Yevtushenko for being egocentric and often overly pompous in his tone was echoed in the reaction of Soviet conservative critics, who from the time Yevtushenko had made his debut, leveled at him similar accusations, for being loud, immodest, bombastic and frivolous. See: Rubin, 21.

[128] Richard Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union, 1917-1991* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 329-30.

writers up until then. Concomitantly, the poem was a turning point in the career of Yevtushenko himself. Even though in his earliest poems one could already recognize the voice of a rebellious, life-thirsty and clamorous young man, "Babi Yar" was his first piece to seriously arouse the ire of the Soviet authorities and lead to a worldwide literary sensation. It was only after the appearance of "Babi Yar" that he became an icon of Soviet dissent in the West, a complete novelty for the Western public. It is not surprising that only in the aftermath of this poem's publication did his portrait appear on the cover of *Time* magazine in April 1962. Only after "Babi Yar" did he have two hundred and fifty poetry reading performances a year that at times attracted an audience of 14,000 enthusiastic young people. Indeed, copies of his books were sold on an unprecedentedly large scale for a young contemporary poet. [129] Together with the upswing in his popularity as a poet, the appearance of "Babi Yar" also made Yevtushenko tower above any other intellectual of his generation as a political figure: as a poet-dissident, boldly ready to confront the Soviet regime by giving publicity to a wrongdoing it had been striving to silence for decades.

Broadening the Boundaries of "Permitted dissent"

Without diminishing the role played by Yevtushenko in the struggle to commemorate the massacre of Kiev Jews, it must be noted that his "Babi Yar," if analyzed carefully, emerges as a poem endowed with a greater deal of ambiguity than almost any of its critics have acknowledged, both liberal supporters and conservative detractors. As much as the poem

[129] Vail' and Genis, 25; As George Reavey notes, the years 1959-1962 saw the swift rise of Yevtushenko's editions from 20,000 to 100,000 copies. See: George Reavey, "Yevgeny Yevtushenko: Man and Poet," in: Yevtushenko, *Early Poems*, trans. George Reavey (London and New York: Marion Boyar, 1989), xxii.

threatened to split the right and the left wings of the Soviet political spectrum when it first appeared, more than a few elements can be found in it that attest to the cautious manner in which the themes elaborated in the poem were selected by Yevtushenko. Of course, virtually all of the critics who have dealt with "Babi Yar" over the years have not been oblivious to the fact that the poem appeared in a major Soviet publication, the organ of the Soviet Writers Union. This fact by itself is, of course, a conspicuous sign that the Soviet censorship was not intransigently opposed to the poem's content. While being aware of the fact that the poem was not circulated via the underground press, but publically and lawfully, readers of the poem in the half century that has elapsed since it first appeared – both Soviet Jewish history and Soviet culture scholars – have too often tended to present "Babi Yar" as a full-blown poem of dissent, attesting to the rift between an oppressive regime and a freedom-fighting intelligentsia. Such appraisals of "Babi Yar" were often made from a narrow angle that could neatly suit their authors' general argument, either regarding the struggle to commemorate Babi Yar, or the general struggle to sustain Jewish life under Soviet pressure. They were often made at the expense of a meticulous reading of the idiosyncratic way in which Yevtushenko chose to commemorate the Babi Yar massacre.

Solomon Schwarz, for one, in his broader discussion of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, contends that Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" transformed the attitude of millions of Soviet readers toward Soviet Jews, "instilling within them an uncompromising attitude toward anti-Semitism."[130] As for Soviet Jews, he argues, the publication of "Babi Yar" was the most significant historic event since the Doctors' Plot was unmasked as an anti-Semitic sham in the weeks that followed the death of Stalin.[131] He thus views "Babi Yar" as an utter condemnation of

[130] Solomon Shvarts, *Evrei v sovetskom soyuze: s nachala vtoroi mirovoi voini 1939-1965* (New York, Amerikanskovo evreisokovo rabochevo komiteta, 1966), 371.
[131] Ibid.

official and popular Soviet anti-Semitism. Similarly, Jeff Mankoff understands the poem as an emblem of the Jewish "counter-memory" of the World War II period, an alternative account of the tragedy that befell not only Kiev Jews but Soviet Jews in other locations, who were all, not merely victims of the Great Patriotic War like other Soviet nationals (the "peace-loving Soviet citizens" we have mentioned earlier), but rather, victims of a well-planned and systematically implemented genocide.[132] Joining those who deem "Babi Yar" a milestone in the materialization of the Soviet-Jewish nationalist movement, William Korey offers another positive appraisal of "Babi Yar," arguing that the poem, together with the article by Nekrasov, was "brooding over the double tragedy of Babi Yar –first the Holocaust there and then suppression of any reference to it."[133]

This positive appraisal of "Babi Yar," while having some textual evidence to support it, is by and large a product of the Cold War, although it continues to resonate in Western scholarship even beyond the Soviet era. Ingrained throughout the Cold War years, this stance toward "Babi Yar," amounts to a "wishful reading "of the poem, reflecting the hope that the voice of Yevtushenko was just a trickle of a larger current of dissent emanating from the Soviet Union; a current which could be utilized by Western readers as proof that the Soviet regime did not have the popular support it claimed to enjoy and that the anti-Semitic policies it espoused were about to cause a rift between the people and the regime.

Quite ironically, this positive perspective on Yevtushenko's poem, rather than relying entirely on the poem itself, was to a great degree influenced by the immediate reaction to "Babi

[132] Mankoff, 404. Mankoff offers an exploration of Soviet literary pieces dedicated to Babi Yar from the Stalin era up until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The underlying argument of his discussion is that these works helped gradually galvanize the Soviet Jewish "counter-memory" of the events that took place in Babi Yar. He notes that "Babi Yar" by Yevtushenko was pivotal in turning the ravine from the concern of a few families and Kiev residents into an international issue.

[133] William Korey, *The Soviet Cage: Anti-Semitism in Russia* (The Viking Press, New York, 1973), 106.

Yar" by two of its most zealous detractors, Alexei Markov and Dmitry Starikov. Harshly attacking "Babi Yar," the former with a mock-poem and the latter with an article, their pieces came out a few months after the publication of Yevtushenko's poem, appearing in the conservative journal *Literatura i zhizn*.[134] In what seemed like an orchestrated attack against Yevtushenko from above,[135] Markov and Starikov accused the poet of a variety of transgressions: that he distorted the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War ignoring the death of millions of non-Jewish Soviet citizens, that he displayed disloyalty to the Soviet state and the Russian nation, and that he jeopardized the so-called *druzhba narodov* (friendship of peoples) by spreading enmity among Jews and non-Jews by arguing that Babi Yar was a site of an exclusively Jewish tragedy.

For both those who reacted to the poem with outrage as well as those who did so with enthusiasm, "Babi Yar" was a poem of unparalleled radicalism, carrying unequivocal messages. In reality, however, Yevtushenko's poem had far more modest objectives. While Yevtushenko was attacked by Starikov for falsely arguing that the Babi Yar massacre was a part of anti-Jewish genocide (Starikov further denied that such genocide had indeed happened), nowhere in the poem is found any conspicuous conception of the September 29-30 murder of Kiev Jews in those terms. While Yevtushenko loosely connects the fate of Anne Frank with that of Kiev Jews, nowhere in the poem does he explicitly present Babi Yar as a symbol for the occurrence of the Holocaust on Soviet soil.

If recognition that the poem presents Babi Yar as a Holocaust site *per se* was one conclusion that critics hastened to make, another one is the view that the poem constituted a

[134] A. Markov, "Moi otvet," *Literatura i zhizn'*, 24 September, 1961; D. Starikov, "Ob odnom sithotvorenii," *Literatura i zhizn',* 27 September, 1961.
[135] Shvarts, 363-364.

demand made on the Soviet authorities to construct a monument at the ravine. In fact, such a demand is not really featured in "Babi Yar." Consider the poem's opening verse, asserting that "no monument stands over Babi Yar." It can be read as a statement about the gloomy reality that the poet encountered upon his visit to the ravine rather than as an attempt to interfere with the affairs of the local Ukrainian authorities by demanding that they undo this reality. True, Yevtushenko's bewilderment and fury over the absence of a monument permeates every line in the poem. There is also little doubt that the poem played a pivotal role in bringing the Soviet government to concede and ultimately allow the construction of the first monument at Babi Yar fifteen years later. Yet as politically charged as it is, this reading of "Babi Yar" in the narrowest sense, as a demand for a memorial for the Jewish victims of Babi Yar, is often done through hindsight, projecting the monument laid at the site in the mid-sixties and mid-seventies onto the past.

The absence of a clear reference to the Holocaust or of a demand to lay a memorial at the site is not the only testimony to the poem's moderate tone. One may also examine the portrayal of anti-Semitism in the poem. Among those who have studied the commemoration of Babi Yar in its Soviet context, it is only Richard Sheldon who pointed out the implicit guidelines to which Yevtushenko had to adhere in order to touch upon the sensitive issue of Soviet anti-Semitism without having his "Babi Yar" banned from publication. According to Sheldon, Yevtushenko was apparently more at ease with bringing up occasions of anti-Jewish persecution from either distant times or distant lands than with pointing to anti-Semitism in its Soviet context.[136] He did so only to imply that Soviet society and government were tainted with an anti-Semitic bias, rather than more bluntly castigating the two. After all, mentioning the enslavement of the

[136] Sheldon argues that, "like Ehrenburg, Yevtushenko has an almost uncanny ability to sense the limits to which he can go in challenging official positions, and this poem demonstrates this quality." See: Sheldon, 138.

Hebrews in Egypt, the harassment of Jews by the Nazis in Holland, the perpetrators of the Bialystok pogrom during the late tsarist era, or the chauvinistic, Black-Hundreds organization of the pre-revolutionary era "The Union of the Russian People" was one thing (most conspicuously, in the case of the latter two examples, not the Bolsheviks themselves, but, rather, their enemies were the anti-Semites). And blaming the Soviet regime for the more recent destruction of prominent Jewish cultural figures during the campaign against "Rootless Cosmopolitans," for continuing the shut-down of all Jewish cultural activities in the country and for turning a blind eye on more recent cases of popular anti-Semitic outbursts (concerns that were completely absent from Yevtushenko's poem) – was, evidently, another.[137]

The ambiguous way in which the issue of anti-Semitism is handled in the poem does not close with the imaginary historical journey of Yevtushenko. It culminates when Yevtushenko exclaims:

> "in their callous rage, all anti-Semites
> must hate me now as a Jew
> for that reason
> I am a true Russian!"[138]

These lines bring the poem to a conclusion on a quite puzzling note: on the one hand, its chief subject is Babi Yar, a site epitomizing the anti-Semitic nature of the Soviet regime, of which the latter had been so categorically in denial. On the other hand, it portrays Soviet anti-

[137] Ibid. Edith Clowes notes that Yevtushenko's mentioning of the slogan "beat the Jews and save Russia" echoed the name of the grassroots organization that stood behind the attack on the Malakhovka synagogue two years earlier. While pointing it out to demonstrate the relevancy of the poem to current events, this comment by itself is a good indication of Yevtushenko's skillful, somewhat acrobatic, capability of alluding to facts inconvenient for the Soviet regime without really spelling them out.

[138] Yevtushenko, *Early Poems*, 149.

Semitism as an elusive entity, ubiquitous and admitted by the poet while, at the same time, never to be found in a "true Russian."[139] Hence one may infer from a statement like this that anti-Semitism is something essentially alien to the Soviet system, rather than being a prejudice that has infected virtually all strata of Russian and Soviet society for generations.

All-in-all, a set of conclusions may be inferred from "Babi Yar": the persistence of Soviet anti-Semitism in the Thaw period, the Soviet suppression of the Holocaust, and a demand to construct a memorial for Babi Yar's Jewish victims. None of them, however, is plainly stated in the poem, a fact that, for the most part, has been ignored by scholars who have dealt with Yevtushenko's poem in the context of the half a century battle to commemorate Babi Yar as a Holocaust site. It is noteworthy that in stark contrast to this group of scholars, the ambiguous nature of "Babi Yar" was noticed by some Russian intellectuals who wanted to call into question the credibility of Yevtushenko's image as a bold dissident, a person whose views and activities the Soviet regime saw as detrimental. For this group of critics, Yevtushenko's ambivalent treatment of Soviet anti-Semitism demonstrated his willingness to accommodate Moscow, or, to go even further, they interpreted his ambiguous "Babi Yar" as the epitome of what they considered Yevtushenko's opportunism. This negative characterization of Yevtushenko as a court poet fraudulently fancying himself a dissident recurred throughout Yevtushenko's career far beyond the specific context of "Babi Yar." In 1987, for instance, upon Yevtushenko's induction as an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the poet Joseph Brodsky told a *New York Times* correspondent that Yevtushenko had never had any real confrontation with the Soviet regime and added that Yevtushenko chose to criticize the

[139] Sheldon, 138

Stalinist terror and anti-Semitism only when it was safe to do so.[140] Two other Soviet literature critics also viewed Yevtushenko's oeuvre and activities in the same light. While praising the poet for his compelling and extremely sincere style, the scholar Deming Brown noted that "Yevtushenko surrounds his politically provocative poetry with reams of verse that is 'safe.' When he goes globe-trotting, he often writes friendly, appreciative verse about many features of the countries he visits, but pays for his passport with politically orthodox commentary on other features."[141] The scholar David Lowe, for another, in his discussion of Moscow's new voices of the 1950s and 1960s, referred to Yevtushenko as "a court poet.… a vivid example of the danger of imagining that one can meet the Soviet government only half way."[142]

Not unlike Jewish history scholars in the West for whom "Babi Yar" was a milestone in the development of Soviet Jewish national consciousness, those calling into question Yevtushenko's characterization as a dissident also viewed "Babi Yar" from a narrow and highly politicized standpoint. Driven by a need to draw the distinction between only two types of Soviet writers, "court poets" versus *bona fide* dissidents, they suggested that Yevtushenko's portrayal of anti-Semitism in his "Babi Yar" could only benefit the regime that enabled the publication of such a piece. Here is how Ludmila Shtern in her book dedicated to her friend, fellow dissident and Noble Prize winner Joseph Brodsky, characterizes Yevtushenko in the narrow context of "Babi Yar":

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[140] Edwin Mcdowell, "Brodsky Quits Arts Group over Yevtushenko Induction," *The New York Times*, 20 June, 1987.

[141] Deming Brown, *Soviet Russian literature since Stalin* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 114.

[142] See David Lowe, *Russian Writing Since 1953: A Critical Survey* (New York: Ungar 1987), 135. For another critical account of Yevtushenko presented from a similar angle, from a post-Soviet Russian critic, see: Viktor Erofeyev, *Muzhshchini* (Moscow: Zebra E, 2004), 102.

> Yevtushenko was not simply a prosperous Soviet poet who had no problem publishing in the Soviet press. He was one of "the cultural ambassadors," one of those artists sent abroad to testify that there was indeed freedom of speech and artistic freedom in the Soviet Union. And Yevtushenko would so testify. I remember visiting Edinburgh, Scotland [in 1962], during the theatre festival there and reading an interview with Yevtushenko who had published a poem about Babi Yar, the place near Kiev where the Nazis killed all Kiev Jews and where the Soviet government did not want to put a sign acknowledging the tragedy. "And you see," said Yevtushenko in the interview, "I was not punished." Words that were certain to make Brodsky's blood boil![143]

While Shtern does not offer a close reading of the poem and is oblivious to the sense of complete shock that the poem left on its first readers, her argument does rely on some substantiated evidence. Surprisingly, her claim that Yevtushenko used "Babi Yar" on his trips abroad to demonstrate the virtues of Soviet society rather than its flaws is corroborated by Yevtushenko himself. As Yevtushenko notes in his autobiography, some Western correspondents and critics misjudged the acerbic reactions that "Babi Yar" received in the Soviet press, viewing it wrongly as proof of the ubiquity of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. To these suggestions Yevtushenko retorted that, "some of these papers [the Western press] dishonestly distorted the meaning of my poem to suit their ends."[144] He went on to argue that, on the contrary, the overwhelmingly warm reaction of the Soviet audience to his poem illustrated how unpopular anti-Semitic sentiments were in his own country.[145] More than alluding to Yevtushenko's role as a critic of his own society – the way that he has often been perceived – this comment suggests that Yevtushenko was careful to dissociate himself from any of his Western admirers who might

[143] Ludmila Shtern, *Brodsky: A Personal Memoir* (Fort Worth, TX: Baskerville Publishers, 2004), 286-287.
[144] Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *A Precocious Autobiography*, 124.
[145] Ibid., 124-125.

have been unambiguously hostile to the Soviet mainstream. Shtern is therefore correct in her assertion that once Yevtushenko realized that his criticism could be used, not in order to improve the image of the Soviet regime, but, rather, to unmask its flaws, his enthusiasm and self-assured criticism was somewhat toned down.

Shtern's critical account of Yevtushenko's work receives another affirmation when we explore "Babi Yar" in the context of the general development of the poet's career. When viewed from this perspective, it turns out that rather than singling him out as a dangerous rebel, the poem actually helped bolster Yevtushenko's career in a country where poets – being, like all other workers, state employees -- were often granted higher salaries and rare benefits, reserved only for the Soviet *nomenklatura* and scientific as well as cultural elite.[146] Shtern alludes to one piece of evidence that the Soviet regime found Yevtushenko useful: had it not been for the permission it gave Yevtushenko to travel abroad, she argues, he would not have been able to attend foreign poetry reading festivals in the first place. The permission he received, for instance, to visit Cuba and England soon after he wrote his "Babi Yar," [147] also shows that while often wishing to restrain defiant intellectuals of Yevtushenko's type in the domestic arena, Moscow recognized the benefit it could gain by sending a young, open-minded intellectual like Yevtushenko abroad to act as a cultural ambassador.

An artist like Yevtushenko, the Soviet authorities believed, could demonstrate to the Western public the new, far more liberal character of Soviet society and cultural life. Doing so at a time when the Soviet Union was promoting its international policy of "peaceful-coexistence" with the West could help the Soviet Union win public support in the West, perhaps even more

[146] John and Carol Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Union* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 114-136.

[147] Reavey, xxvii . On the proximity of "Babi Yar's publication to Yevtushenko's trip to Cuba see also: Evgenii Evtushenko, *Shestidesantik: memuarnaya proza* (Moscow: Zebra E, 2006), 218-220.

than cohorts of experienced, highly eloquent Soviet diplomats.[148] If this were not enough of a sign of the ambivalent manner in which the Soviet regime approached Yevtushenko, the appearance of another of his poems, "The Heirs of Stalin," in no less than the Communist Party organ *Pravda*, was also significant. Published in October 1962, soon before the campaign of de-Stalinization came to an end, this poem also helped consolidate the image of the poet who had written "Babi Yar" as one who could be ideologically agile enough to be a dissident and the regime's darling at the same time.

We have thus far observed the view of Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" by a variety of groups: Soviet Jewish history and Soviet culture scholars in the West who appraised it positively, and Soviet conservative critics as well as a representative Russian dissident who, for different reasons, reacted to the poem disapprovingly. When juxtaposed, their perspectives may lead the reader to a Socratic state of *aporia* as the convincing arguments of each group ultimately leave one with a sense of puzzlement, wondering what Yevtushenko's real intent was when he wrote his "Babi Yar. Was it meant to, by way of touching upon the Jewish question in the USSR, condemn the Soviet regime and its leader Khrushchev, constituting a break with the relatively moderate tone that had characterized the literature of the Thaw period that preceded it? Or, rather, was it, in line with the campaign of de-Stalinization, a manifestation of support on the part of Yevtushenko for the Soviet way of life, one that had always resisted the anti-Semitic, reactionary elements within it?

Perhaps the best way to unravel this contradictory nature of "Babi Yar" is to see it as a product of the literature of "permitted dissent," and more accurately, of "permitted dissent" stretched to the maximum – a poem harshly criticizing a dictatorial regime at a time when the

[148] Zubok, 73, 197.

latter was encouraging the appearance of such critical works. As noted earlier, this was a time when Soviet society was making preparations to launch its transformation from a "dictatorship of the proletariat" into a society reaching the utopian state of communism, a future that would take place twenty years later, when class conflicts, state and society conflicts, the banning of freedom of speech, and the limiting of artistic freedom would all finally be overcome. It was this paradoxical historical background, this transitional stage between the repressive dictatorship and the future existence of artistic freedom that may account for the interplay in "Babi Yar" between resistance to the Soviet regime and the concurrent enthusiastic support of it.

The Poem as Intimate Testimony

While the poem's vagueness from the political standpoint may be judged as either one of its greatest virtues or shortcomings, any appraisal of "Babi Yar" would be fragmentary if it did not factor in another major aspect of "Babi Yar" – the poem as a personal account, the testimony of a traveler who had witnessed, standing on the brink of the ravine, an arresting vision of horror and felt compelled to share it with his readers. Yevtushenko himself confessed, in another autobiography published decades after "Babi Yar," that innermost motivations compelled him to write his "Babi Yar," not merely desire to render a cold, rational analysis of the issue of anti-Semitism and its link to Babi Yar. According to the poet, during the time of the Doctors' Plot, before he even turned twenty, he composed an anti-Semitic poem condemning the Jewish physicians that he, fortunately, eventually decided not to publish.[149] His "Babi Yar" was, for this reason, a poem of atonement. The exploration of anti-Semitism in it, while at times criticized for

[149] Evgenii Evtushenko, "styd kak soaftor," in: *Shestidesantik,* 412-415; See also Alice Nakhimovsky, "Yevgenii Yevtushenko," in: *Holocaust Literature: an Encyclopedia of Writers and their Work*.

being superficial, was not merely a political statement but was based on Yevtushenko's own experience as someone who knew how easily one may fall prey to this kind of virulent spread of ethnic hatred.

Indeed, a desire to write personal poems exposing the life and thoughts of the writer in the most intimate fashion was a major feature of Yevtushenko's poetics. As Peter Vail' and Alexander Genis point out in their work on Soviet culture of the 1960s, Yevtushenko and the bard Bulat Okudzhava were the first Soviet poets to elaborate lyrical and intimate poetry after decades of complete absence of this genre from the horizon of Soviet literature.[150] Their contribution may be seen as another phase in a trajectory that began with Pomerantsev and Ehrenburg, who, as we have noted, called in the immediate aftermath of Stalin's death for sincerity in literature and for doing away with the mechanized language and clichés of Socialist Realism that left no room for the voice of the individual.[151] Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar," as a part of the general theme of his oeuvre, was a personal poem no less than it was a political statement. More accurately – its most profound political message lay in the personal, intimate perspective embedded in it, in the sincere voice of the individual poet, atoning for his sins and calling to remove the obstacle of anti-Semitism, a Stalinist vestige blocking the Soviet state's path to a brighter future.

As it turns out, however, the personal aspect of the poem is no less intricate and fraught with ambiguity than the other themes we have examined. As Vail' and Genis contend, Yevtushenko's lyricism and sense of intimacy were always balanced by a contrasting tendency –

[150] Vail' and Genis, 22.

[151] Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 94-95; James Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*: *an Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 567.

his rare ability, apparent since the dawn of his poetic career (in early 1949, when he had his debut with a set of anti-American poems in *Sovetskii sport*), to render the Kremlin's ever-changing and often hard-to-understand political programs into a language accessible to his peers.[152] In a fashion reminiscent of his primary influence, the Russian futurist poet of thepre-revolutionary avant-garde, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Yevtushenko's poetry is an interplay between the collective and individual voice, where the boundaries demarcating lyricism and propaganda are often highly blurred.[153] The desire to harmonize these two contrasting tendencies, to be both a political agitator and a lyricist, becomes evident when we consider the medium via which Yevtushenko commonly addressed his readers, that of poetry declamation events taking place at squares, in university auditoriums, concert halls, and even stadiums, where a single speaker exposes his inner world to a mass audience.

According to Patricia Blake, who visited the Soviet Union during the early sixties, "Babi Yar" rapidly became Yevtushenko's most popular piece in these poetry recitation concerts. At times it seemed as though Yevtushenko could not satiate his crowd's demand to hear it recited more and more, perhaps the best testimony to the poem's suitability for the medium of declamation.[154] Both the structure and themes of his "Babi Yar" betray its designation as a performance piece. The poem's loosely organized iambic structure,[155] the excessive employment in it of a number of literary devices: the anaphora (the recurrence of "*nad babim yaram*," "*ya kazdhii"*), alliteration ("*damochki s bryussel'skimi oborkami"*), oxymoron ("here all things scream silently"), and the elaboration of unusual, surprising rhymes, are all meant to endow the

[152] Vail' and Genis, 21.
[153] See Edward Brown, *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 24.
[154] Blake, 25.
[155] Patricia Polock Brodsky, "Babi Yar": Poem by Yevgenii Yevtushenko, 1961," in: *Reference Guide to Holocaust Literature*.

poem with a forceful dramatic effect that fully comes to light when one listens to a recording of Yevtushenko himself reading the poem.[156]

As we bear in mind that the poem was designed for public recitation, more and more of its intricacies start to surface. On the one hand, it is a complex poem, full of historical allusions that were meant to engage the educated Russian reader initiated into the time-honored history of the Jewish people as well as Russian anti-Semitism. On the other hand, its theme is highly accessible, and its often bombastic and extravagant style – features for which Yevtushenko has often been criticized – shows that its message was meant to reach mass readers and listeners, as it successfully did. One may perhaps go even further and suggest that the declamatory nature of Yevtushenko's poetic style amounted to one of the reasons for why he found the theme of Babi Yar so appealing in the first place. Quite an odd choice for someone, who was doubly foreign to Babi Yar, not being Jewish and not being a resident of Kiev, the poem's theme was perfectly suitable for public recitation. For in this particular genre, the more astounding, controversial and unpredictable a poem's subject matter was – the better it engaged the young enthusiasts that swarmed to hear it recited by the poet. "Babi Yar," in this respect, joined many other poems in Yevtushenko's repertoire (such as his "A Meeting in Copenhagen," reporting on the rendezvous he had in Copenhagen with Ernest Hemingway or "A Beatnik Girl," telling of a meeting he had with young beatniks in New York, to mention only a few examples),[157] that included the impressions of his many trips that he, the dissident-traveler, wished to share with his audience.

While "Babi Yar" begins with a detailed (and as we have already noted, ambiguous, and, some would say, superficial) survey of Jewish martyrdom and persecution, it is here, when

[156] The application of these literary devices by Yevtushenko so as to conjure up a poetic style suitable for public declamation is discussed in Deming Brown, 115.
[157] Yevtushenko, *Early Poems*, 112-115, 120-123.

Yevtushenko reflects on the daunting experience of visiting a World War II mass murder site, that the poem reaches its apogee. Now, standing on the brink of the ravine, he realizes the extreme contrast between the serene landscape covered with rustling grasses and surrounded by trees and the memory of the atrocities that the same place had witnessed a few decades earlier. This is also the point when Yevtushenko reaches complete identification with the Jewish victims of Babi Yar, as he, the victims, and the site itself become one:

> The wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar.
> The trees look ominous,
> like judges.
> Here all things scream silently,
> and, bearing my head,
> slowly I feel myself
> turning gray.
> And I myself
> am one massive, soundless scream
> above the thousand thousand buried here.
> I am
> each old man
> here shot dead
> I am
> each child
> here shot dead.
> Nothing in me
> shall ever forget![158]

[158] Ibid., 149.

While defying translation into English, it is here, where Yevtushenko's poem reaches, not only its dramatic but, also, its artistic peak, both thematically and musically. Employing both perfect and slanted rhymes, he blends the following elements into one: the serene landscape, the memory of the victims, the dismembered and incinerated bones lying underneath, and, finally, the poet himself who turns into one scream. When one follows the rhyming scheme in this part of the poem, the amalgamation of all these elements becomes apparent: *shelest dikih* trav *... i shapku sniav* (the grasses rustle … and taking off my hat), *derevya smotrayat po-sudeiski ... ya chustvuyu kak medleno sedeyu* (the trees look like judges … I feel myself turning gray), *i sam ya, kak sploshnoi bezzvuchnii krik ... ya kazhdii zdes' rasstrelyannyi starik* (I myself am one massive soundless scream … I am each old man here shot dead), *tisyach pogrebyonniyh ... rasstrelyannyi rebyonok* (the thousand buried here… shot-dead child). While some of these rhymes are more apparent than others in the printed version of the poem, it is far easier to grasp them and appreciate their musicality when listening to the poem's declamation. It is here, where Yevtushenko's awareness of the need to suit the poem's message to its medium is most conspicuous. From these lines it becomes clear that while the political drama of the absent monument at Babi Yar appears at the poem's start, it is here, with the personal experience of identification with the victims, where the heart of Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" lies.

If we thus bear in mind both the poem's medium and message it is easier to view "Babi Yar" as a work fraught with contradictions. The poem is based on a personal, intimate experience yet it means to share this with as many readers as possible. The poem contained ideas representing Yevtushenko's views only, but, at the same time, it had a propagandistic goal, as it helped communicate to its audience the message that Soviet life and literature were in the

process of a constant shift away from Stalinism. It was a poem of protest against a specific, unwritten Soviet policy, yet the language used to address this policy was couched with vagueness so as not to exceedingly arouse the ire of those in power. Its attractiveness to young and defiant audiences alluded to its radical nature, but its recitation at various large public venues spoke volumes of official Soviet approval..

While these contradictions account for what made "Babi Yar" extraordinarily popular as a poem, they were also a staple feature of the literature of the Second Thaw, a time when Russian writers exhibited two contrasting tendencies, both to support a regime that had manifested its commitment to de-Stalinization and a return to the Leninist path and to protest against what seemed to them to be an incomplete and slow movement away from the Stalin era. Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" was among the finest works of the Soviet 1960s generation whose socialist, optimistic and utopian works were poignantly coined by Vladislav Zubok "socialist romanticism," to underline the break this generation of artists made with the Stalinist and Zhdanovite dogmas of Socialist Realism. The ethos of this group was best emblematized in the words of the poetess Bella Akhmadulina, Yevgenii Yevtushenko's first wife, who in one of her poems related that "the revolution is sick" and therefore must be cured. If viewed through the lens of this motto, Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" was a call to cure the revolution from one, specific illness – the malice of anti-Semitism, of anti-Jewish prejudice and violence that had infected Russian society for centuries and had not yet been overcome in the era of socialism.

"Babi Yar" Set to Music

As noted earlier, while often regarded during the Cold War as a staple feature of Soviet dissent during the Thaw era, "Babi Yar" by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, was a nuanced, multi-faceted work, never really constituting an all-out attack against Moscow's official, unwritten policy vis-à-vis Babi Yar. After the first wave of attacks aimed at Yevtushenko in late 1961 started to ebb, the young poet's predominance on the Soviet literary scene remained for a time unassailed.[159] Nothing attested better to the benign level of tolerance toward Yevtushenko than his partaking in public recitations of "Babi Yar," both within and beyond the Iron Curtain, as a part of the so-called cultural diplomacy visits to foreign countries.

While our study has so far limited itself to an examination of literary works dedicated to Babi Yar, arguing that the main channel through which the site was commemorated was literary works, we must briefly exceed the bounds of belles-lettres and delve into the arena of music. This shift is necessary, as a big part of what became in collective memory, both in the USSR and the West, the 'Babi Yar' affair, the equal excitement and fury that "Babi Yar" provoked was connected with the decision of Dmitry Shostakovich, the towering Soviet composer, to set the score to Yevtushenko's poem. Without allotting adequate consideration to what became known as Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony, subtitled "Babi Yar," it would be impossible to fully understand the role that Yevtushenko's poem played in Soviet culture of the Thaw period, and come to a final assessment of both its provocative and moderate elements, coalescing into the aforementioned practice of "permitted dissent."

[159] Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews*, 98; Shvarts, 366-368.

It all began with an unexpected phone call that Yevtushenko received at the end of March, 1962. To the amazement of both his wife Galina who picked up the phone and Yevtushenko himself, the person at the other end of the line was none other than the foremost Soviet composer Dmitry Shostakovich. The anxious young poet was told by the older composer that he was deeply moved by his "Babi Yar" and wanted to set it to music. According to Yevtushenko, who recounted the story about this phone conversation in his memoir, after recovering from the momentary shock and realizing he was not the victim of a prank, he responded to the offer in the affirmative enthusiastically, only to learn that Shostakovich had already completed a rough draft of it and was ready to perform it for Yevtushenko.[160]

This cooperative effort, bridging two generations of the liberal Soviet intelligentsia, led to Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony, subtitled "Babi Yar." Together, the two selected for this five movement symphony four other poems taken from Yevtushenko's oeuvre to be set to music in addition to "Babi Yar." At first sight, the poems were in a way only loosely connected, all falling into the category of exposures of the moral flaws of Soviet society. But upon a closer look, perhaps nothing can elucidate the point we made earlier – that Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" should not be singled out as a piece of Holocaust literature, but should rather be construed as a product of the Thaw era – more than the weaving together of these works. From anti-Semitism ("Babi Yar"), through the absence of humor in Soviet life ("Humor"), the exploitation of Soviet womenfolk in the government-owned grocery store ("In the Shop"), the fear of informants ("Fears") and up to the heroic triumph of humanity over conformism ("A career"), the Thirteenth Symphony emerged as a musical rendition of Yevtushenko's both poetical and ideological stance.

[160] Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *Shestidesantnik*, 417-419.

What led the aging composer Shostakovich, the man who had already tasted the bitter fruits of testing the boundaries of artistic freedom during the days of Stalin, to put himself again under the spotlight of Moscow's chiefs supervising the ideological 'purity' of Soviet art? A glimpse into the biography and earlier repertoire of Shostakovich only confirms his sincere reaction to the matter that lay at the crux of "Babi Yar" the poem – the attack against anti-Semitism and the clear statement made in the poem about the incongruence of anti-Semitism and socialism. By early 1962, Shostakovich had already established his reputation as a non-Jewish Russian artist and primary member of the Soviet intelligentsia, who shared a strong affinity with Jewish culture, music and folklore. As Francis Maes argues, in his work surveying the history of Russian and Soviet music, Shostakovich manifested his fondness for the Jews and their musical heritage through works written far earlier in his career, among them: the Second Piano Trio, op. 67[161] (a piece written in 1944 and dedicated to the victims of Majdanek, the Jewish motifs of which are also echoed in the String Quartet No. 8), the First Violin Concerto and his cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry*[162]

The view of Shostakovich as a Judeophile composer, a predilection of his that could be traced back to the Stalin era, gained currency among Western scholars who tended to emphasize Shostakovich's record as a fighter for artistic freedom of expression. Shostakovich's record in this respect was self-evident: by April 1962, the preeminent Soviet composer had already found himself, twice in his career (first in 1936 with the debut of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, and again in 1948 for his allegedly formalist style) under attack by Moscow's

[161] This trio was composed in 1944 and was dedicated to the victims of Majdanek, Jews and non-Jews alike. The 'Majdanek' theme from it was also quoted in a later work by the composer, the celebrated String Quartet No. 8. Composed in 1960). See Robert Stradling, "Shostakovich and the Soviet System, 1925-1975," in: *Shostakovich: the Man and his Music*, ed. Christopher Norris (Boston and London: Marion Boyars, 1982), 211.

[162] Francis Maes, *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans and Erica Pomerans (Berkeley: California University Press, 2006), 365.

highest officials, including Stalin himself.[163] Viewed as a bold and innovative composer, Shostakovich came to be known posthumously in the West as a dissident, one who dared to challenge Socialist Realism as the official Soviet musical style. Yet, as Maes cogently argues, our characterization of Yevtushenko as an artist willing to walk the fine line demarcating the boundaries between the permissible and the taboo in Soviet discourse would very well suit Dmitry Shostakovich as well.

While the elaboration on Jewish themes for a non-Jewish Soviet composer was something undeniably laden with a great deal of non-conformism in a country where popular anti-Semitism had time-honored roots, Maes suggests that Shostakovich's affinity with Jewish culture should be taken with a grain of salt. To label this artistic predilection on the part of Shostakovich an expression of dissent, Maes contends, would be untrue because of the virtual nonexistence of the concept in Soviet art past Stalin's Cultural Revolution of 1928-1929, and especially ever since the "meat grinder" of the Great Terror had been propelled.[164] Accordingly, Maes poignantly argues that Shostakovich's elaboration on Jewish folk themes was something harmonious with the current trends in Soviet music toward the building of a proletarian music, predicated on the foundations of folk music. This explains why after his works incorporating Jewish folk-music themes were premiered they were hailed as "a proof that music based on folk themes could triumph over the bad influence of modernism."[165]

While contextualizing Shostakovich's affinity with Jewish music in order to dispel the notion broadly accepted during the Cold War of Shostakovich as a full-blown dissident (insofar as the term denotes complete deviation from the ideological posture of the regime) does not

[163] On the attack launched against *Lady Macbeth* see Roy Blokker and Robert Dearling, *The Music of Dmitri Shostakovich: The Symphonies* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1979), 24-27. See also Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87-105.

[164] Maes, 353.

[165] Ibid., 365.

necessarily clear the fog surrounding his attitude toward the Soviet regime, other moves he took during the Thaw era in this direction were more transparent. The early 1960s were a time of increasing fluctuation between cooperation and dissent. During the years 1960-1961, to the puzzlement of many of his admirers, Shostakovich was admitted into the Communist Party, first on a provisional basis, and later on, as a full member.[166] As the scholar Laurel Fay notes, Shostakovich's induction into the party reaffirmed his status as a loyal son of the Soviet regime.[167]

Despite the clear age gap, both composer and poet shared the conception of the artist's role to be one of engaging in criticism "from within," and their joint battle against anti-Semitism was predicated on similar ideological grounds, which may be labeled restorative, .i.e. aspiring to restore communism to its pristine ideals of the Lenin era. However, their shared views did not mean that Shostakovich's joining in the campaign to turn Babi Yar from a "memory black-hole" to a memory-space was hardly meaningful. On the contrary, there was a great deal of synergy in this joint project, insofar as it constituted a real turning point in the careers of Shostakovich and Yevtushenko. If before the symphony's premier, which took place on December 18, 1962, Yevtushenko read his poem at a large number of poetry recitation concerts, evoking excessively enthusiastic reactions on the part of his audiences, it was exactly on the eve of the premier that the poem came under the harshest attack from the Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev himself and from Leonid Ilichev, the Party secretary presiding over ideology.

The attack against Yevtushenko, implicating the Soviet composer as well, came from the very top of the Soviet hierarchy and was part of a broader ideological shift in Moscow's attitude toward artistic freedom. About two weeks before, Nikita Khrushchev, surrounded by his

[166] Fay, 218-219.
[167] Ibid.

entourage, showed up at the State Exhibition Hall in the Manege, to view an exhibition of innovative abstract art there. Khrushchev's reaction to the works displayed to him was brutal and appallingly vulgar: calling the artists "faggots" and their art "dog-shit," the premier threatened to send the artists to Siberia or expel them from the Soviet Union.[168] As Valdislav Zubok portrays the atmosphere following Khrushchev's visit to the Manege Exhibition Hall, there was a feeling in the air that a new campaign of terror against artists was about to be set in motion. Indeed, Khrushchev did order a "purge" of the media, art institutes, the guild of graphic artists and book illustrators and mandated much closer scrutiny of all universities and colleges.[169] Ultimately, arrests did not follow these threats, but the latter were meaningful enough: they sent the Soviet liberal intelligentsia a clear signal that the path of art for art's sake did not belong in the Soviet state; that rather, the role of art was to mobilize the masses to support the Soviet regime and the Party by wholly subscribing to the tenets of Socialist Realism.

Following the Manege incident, on December 17, 1962, only one day before the premier of the Thirteenth Symphony, Khrushchev, followed by other Party leaders, convened what seemed like an informal meeting of about 400 artists and writers in the reception hall at Lenin Hills to discuss the state of Soviet art. According to Solomon Schwartz, the proximity between the meeting and the premier of the Thirteenth Symphony was probably a matter of chance.[170] But remarkably, during the meeting both Yevtushenko and Shostakovich were singled out and came under attack by Ilichev and Khrushchev. According to Vladislav Zubok's account, Khruhschev made Yevtushenko a scapegoat almost by chance. When the Soviet premier wanted to sting the Soviet sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, remarking that "if a person is born ugly, only the grave will

[168] Zubok, 193.
[169] Ibid., 211.
[170] Shvarts, 368.

correct him," it was Yevtushenko who had the audacity to retort that "we live in a time when mistakes are corrected not by graves, but by live, honest, and truthful Bolshevik words."[171] The account of the exchange of words between the poet and the Soviet leader as recounted by Zubok concerns the legitimacy of artistic freedom and the opposition to a relapse to the days of Stalinist terror and taming of artists. While according to Zubok's version Yevtushenko was acting as a representative of his generation writ large, other accounts link the exchange of words directly to "Babi Yar."

According to William Korey's version, what lay at the core of Khrushchev's animus toward Yevtushenko was not the latter's defense of abstract art or artistic freedom in general, but that through his "Babi Yar he had let the genie of anti-Semitism out the Soviet bottle." Apparently, as long as Yevtushenko acted alone, the Soviet leadership treated him with a great deal of ambiguity. But now, only one day before the premier of the Thirteenth Symphony something in the mood of the Soviet premier changed. At their meeting on December 17, according to Korey,

> "The poem became a key issue. When Yevtushenko recited the last two lines of his poem to the audience, Khrushchev interjected: Comrade Yevtushenko, this poem has no place here." At this point the poet commented that he had selected Babi Yar because 'the problem of anti-Semitism' continues to have 'a negative consequence' which has not yet been resolved.' Khrushchev forcefully rejected the argument. Anti-Semitism is not a problem,' he declared. The young writer would not be silenced. He responded: 'It is a problem, Nikita Sergeievich. It cannot be denied and it cannot be suppressed. It is necessary to come to grips with it time and again."[172]

[171] Zubok, 212.

[172] Korey, "Babi Yar remembered, "33. Korey's account is confirmed by Solomon Shvarts who also linked the December 17 meeting between Khrushchev and the artists to the provocation that Yevtushenko's Babi Yar caused. Shvarts, 368.

Another conference of writers and artists held at the Kremlin on March 7-8, 1963 consolidated the impression that at the very heart of this new campaign against the liberal intelligentsia stood the poem and now, the symphony "Babi Yar." At this meeting Khrushchev once more directly attacked the thematic triangle of Jews-Babi Yar-and-anti-Semitism that lay at the heart of Yevtushenko's work. The premier bitterly fulminated against Yevtushenko for bringing up a made-up issue, for what he saw as "ignorance of the historical facts."[173] From Khrushchev's point of view, the October Revolution brought equality for Russia's Jewish citizens and consigned anti-Semitism to the dustbin of history. In other words, mentioning anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union would hurt the reputation of the Soviet regime badly, baselessly.

Crucially, the two meetings between Khrushchev and the Soviet artists, the one held in December 1962 and the one in March of the following year, followed very closely the evolution of Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony. The first meeting, as we recall, was a prelude to the symphony's premier, a performance that was applauded by the audience, yet was attended by no Party official and was followed by no official review by the Soviet press. The second meeting was followed by the decision "from above" to call off all performances of the symphony in the Soviet Union. Henceforth, although an official prohibition of the work in the USSR was never announced, the performing of it in the country resumed only in September 20, 1965, following the ouster of Khrushchev and the changing of the guard at the Kremlin.[174]

What happened, one may conclude from all of the above, is that the setting of the poem to music by Shostakovich is what made the premier lose his temper. More than the text of "Babi Yar" *per se*, it was the reinforcement the young Yevtushenko received from a well-established,

[173] Korey, "Babi Yar Remembered," 34.
[174] Fay, 237; Shvarts, 370.

internationally acclaimed composer the likes of Shostakovich that constituted for Khrushchev and other Party officials a serious crossing of a line. Evidently, in the age of "permitted dissent," what could be written about the massacres that had taken place in Babi Yar, even in such a leading literary magazine as *Literaturnaya gazeta*, and what could be recited by a young, 'rebellious' poet at a mass gathering of Soviet youth, was not the same as including the text in a work by the most notable living Soviet composer. Furthermore, in view of the centrality of the symphony as a genre in Shostakovich's repertoire, joining a long series of other works dedicated, *inter alia* to May Day, the Revolution of 1905, the October Revolution and the Siege of Leningrad, there was something almost sacrilegious in placing Babi Yar as the latest link in this musical chain. [175]

The examination of "Babi Yar" the symphony in conjunction with "Babi Yar" the poem, thus underscores that it was not the poem itself that pitted Yevtushenko against those standing at the very top of the Soviet political and ideological pyramid. Yet, as befitted the practitioners of "permitted dissent," the joint effort of the poet and the composer to commemorate Babi Yar did not only make them more combative, but also forced them to display a great deal of prudence and, it would be fair to say, compliance as well. That this was done under pressure is indisputable, though who was the one to take the initiative here still remains unclear. According to one account, Yevtushenko insisted that these textual modifications were made at his own initiative. This account relies on an interview he gave in Paris in which the poet insisted that "he is not a man to take orders." Rather than capitulate to any political pressure, Yevtushenko

[175]Even further highlighting the boldness that Shostakovich displayed by writing a symphony dedicated to Babi Yar is the suggestion that Shostakovich's Babi Yar" is seamlessly linked to his symphonic cycle. According to Hugh Ottaway, it is very telling that the opus numbers of the Twelfth Symphony, which dealt with the October Revolution and concludes with a final movement entitled "The Dawn of Humanity", is consecutive with the opus of the Thirteenth Symphony. Ottaway wonders aloud, whether Shostakovich consciously chose to turn from what was seen in Soviet eyes as the pinnacle in the history of mankind to the first movement in his next symphony, focusing on one of its most barbarous moments. See Blokker and Dearling, 134.

insisted that these additions were his genuine reaction to a letter he had received from one of his readers, describing a Russian woman's rescue of a Jewish child, who was about to be murdered by the SS.[176] A contrasting account has it that Shostakovich was the one who pressured the initially reluctant Yevtushenko to introduce substantial changes to the original work. Shostakovich had in mind a clear goal: to facilitate the performance of his symphonies in concert halls across the Soviet Union.[177] One thing, though, is clear: if the two artists wished to see their collaborative creation performed more than twice in the Soviet Union, Yevtushenko and Shostakovich would have to follow instructions to introduce several crucial textual changes to enable the continued performance of the symphony within the borders of the USSR.

In the next performance of the Thirteenth Symphony, prior to the complete banning of the piece, the two revised what was seen in the eyes of Moscow officials as the two most provocative stanzas. In place of the stanza beginning with the poet's alter-ego identifying himself as a Jew and reading Jewish suffering all the way back to the enslavement of the Hebrews and then moving to antiquity, to the death of a Jewish man on the cross, came a new stanza that, at first blush, seems completely at odds with the long durée of Jewish suffering:

> Here I stand as if at the fountainhead
>
> That gives me faith in our brotherhood
>
> Here Russians lie, and Ukrainians
>
> Lie together with Jews in the same ground[178]

[176] See Korey, *The Soviet Cage*, 114; Sheldon, 141.
[177] Sheldon, 140.
[178] Blokker and Dearling, 174.

Toward the end of the poem another stanza, the one in which the poet's alter-ego once again identifies with the Jewish victims of Babi Yar (with an old man and a child – a clear reference to the civilians who were killed in Babi Yar, the overwhelming majority of whom were Jewish), supplements the Soviet patriotism of the poem's conclusion with Russian nationalist sentiments:

> I think of Russia's heroic deed
>
> In blocking the way to fascism.
>
> To the infinitesimal dewdrop she is close
>
> To me with her very being and her fate
>
> Nothing in me will ever forget this.[179]

The extent to which the substance of the imperative "never to forget" has changed from the first version to the second speaks for itself. There is no doubt that without outside pressure neither of these two Judeophile Soviet artists would have supplanted the memory of the Jews murdered in Babi Yar with the great exploits of the Red Army in its battle against fascism. Yet, when viewed as a part of a trajectory, as one of the phases in the evolution of "Babi Yar," the setting of the poem to score affected the text in two contradictory ways. On the one hand, it pitted Yevtushenko against none other than Khrushchev himself, something that in future years would greatly enhance the reputation of Yevtushenko as one of the few Russian intellectuals who dared to protest Moscow's official stance toward Babi Yar. On the other hand, the inclusion of

[179] Ibid.

the two stanzas, while never incorporated into the piece's manuscript,[180] turned "Babi Yar" in its alternative version into a piece dedicated not to the Holocaust but rather to the Great Patriotic War.

Thus, while Viktor Nekrasov had left Babi Yar dangling between the two master narratives of the twentieth century, Yevtushenko and Shostakovich established an unequivocal linkage between the two. No personal harm would have befallen Yevtushenko and Shostakovich had they insisted on leaving the poem as is. Their joint project would just never have seen the light of day. Their decision to align Babi Yar with the Great Patriotic War rather than the Holocaust does not signal the betrayal of the ideals that brought them together in the first place. By substituting two of the most controversial stanzas, they reveal something crucial about Babi Yar itself: as a battle ground of two different historical narratives, Babi Yar is extremely difficult to disentangle. The case of Anatoly Kuznetsov that we shall consider next is no less layered and fraught with multiple meanings.

[180] Maes, 368.

Chapter Three

Documentary in Content, Fictional in Form: Anatoly Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar*

No less than Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar", Anatoly Kuznetsov's documentary novel (*roman-dokument*) *Babi Yar* is a product of the Thaw. The novel *Babi Yar* has often been discussed in connection with Yevtushenko's poem due to their obvious thematic similarity. The close relationship between the two works also rests upon a fascinating biographical base: it was none other than Anatoly Kuznetsov, a native son of Kiev, who told his classmate at the Gorky Institute of Literature in Moscow, the young poet Yevtushenko, about the Babi Yar massacre and brought him there for the first time.[181] The two works should be read in tandem for another, no less important reason. As a fellow *shestidesiatnik*, Kuznetsov, like Yevtushenko, was a young Russian writer who made his debut in the late 1950s with works that, despite some slight deviation, had followed the dictates of Socialist Realism. If Yevtushenko's rite-of-passage as a Soviet dissident was the poem "Babi Yar," Kuznetsov's inaugural novel as a Soviet Thaw era dissident, i.e., as a practitioner of "permitted dissent," was, with no doubt, *Babi Yar*. Whether it was because of his premature death at the age of fifty, the artistic muteness to which his life in his London exile had consigned him, or some other reason, *Babi Yar* has become Anatoly Kuznetsov's greatest work.

[181] *Russkie pisateli 20 veka: biograficheskii slovar'* , ed. P.A. Nikolaev (Moscow: Randevu-AM, 2000), s.v. "Kuznetsov, Anatolii Vasil'evich ." Among Kuznetsov's classmates who attended the institute from 1955-1960, were also the poetess Bella Akhmadulina and the writer Anatoly Gladilin. See conversation no. 10 in the recently published transcription of Kuznetsov's Radio Liberty conversation in Anatolii Kuznetsov, Babii yar: *roman-dokument* (Moskva: Astrel', 2010), 536.

Indeed, Kuznetsov's novel, published for the first time in the summer and fall issues of the literary periodical *Iunost'* (Youth),[182] owed its appearance to the same politico-cultural climate that facilitated the publication of Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar." It was published thanks to its approval by the new editor of the literary periodical, the Stalin Prize winner Boris Polevoi, who had won his fame as a World War II correspondent and as a writer of fictional works related to that era. Not unlike the editor-in-chief of *Literaturnaya gazeta*, Valery Kosolapov, Polevoi, who extended the circulation of *Iunost'* from 640,000 to 2,000,000, also wished to attract the young and emerging writers of the 1960s generation to take an active part in his periodical. [183]

The novel came only two years after a major power shift in the Soviet hierarchy took place with the ouster of Nikita Khrushchev on October 15 1964, carried out by the collective leadership that replaced him, now headed by Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin. As much as the new leadership was critical of Khrushchev on many issues, including his mercurial attitude toward artistic freedom, the new Presidium led by Brezhnev-Kosygin wished to maintain for a while the *modus vivendi* of cooperation between the regime and the intelligentsia. As a matter of fact, not only did this relative relaxation in the literary arena persist, it was even extended, especially in the specific context of our study. On the whole, the first years of the Kremlin power change saw less discrimination against Jews in the Soviet Union and greater tolerance of Jewish culture. These two years witnessed a surge in the number of books published containing Jewish themes, including the Holocaust, a rise that was also apparent in Soviet Yiddish literature, to be discussed in chapter four. Among the most conspicuous signs that the new Soviet heads of state wished to display more laxity toward their Jewish subjects was the appearance of the novel *Babi Yar* by Kuznetsov.

[182] Anatolii Kuznetsov, "Babi Yar," *Iunost'* 8-10 (1966).
[183] Sheldon, 143.

When juxtaposing the two works, Yevtushenko's poem and Kuznetsov's novel, the two seem strikingly similar and equally disparate as far as the impetus that led to their composition is concerned. On the one hand, both texts rest upon a similar moral premise: the demand of the younger generation of Soviet writers to tell their audience the truth and only the truth, as a *sine qua non* to a better, purer and more moral life that would be properly guided by the original principles of Marx and Lenin. On the other hand, if for Yevtushenko what obstructed this truth from governing Soviet life was anti-Semitism – both its existence and the categorical refusal to admit it – Kuznetsov conceived of the term "truth" in a more literal sense. For him, what posed the greatest threat to a life guided by the truth was not mendacity, but, rather, ignorance. Instead of fashioning his work (especially in its originally published version) as an attack against old-guard, Stalinist anti-Semites, the designated readers of Kuznetsov's novel were primarily young people who might have, out of lack of interest in the topic or due to the work of the censorship, remained completely ignorant of the unimaginable atrocities that took place in their country a few decades earlier. Kuznetsov, whose novel begins with the sentence "this book contains nothing but the truth,"[184] addresses his young audience with the following exhortations:

[184] A. Anatoli (Kuznetsov), *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel*, trans. David Floyd (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 1970, 13. All the citations from Kuznetsov' novel will be quoted from Floyd's translation. For the first full Russian version of the novel see: A. Anatolii, *Babi Yar: roman-dokument* (Frankfurt: Posev, 1970). Except for the *Iunost'* edition, the novel also appeared in the USSR in book form. See: *Babii yar: roman-dokument* (Moscow: Maladaya gvardiia, 1967). The Floyd edition contains the expanded version of the novel that includes the parts excised by the Soviet censor as well as later additions introduced by Kuznetsov in exile. In order to highlight the distinctiveness of each part of the novel, the Floyd edition has the censored component printed in regular typeface, the uncensored in a bold one, and the additions introduced while in exile in brackets. The novel also appeared three years earlier in its first English edition under a different title: *Babi Yar: A Documentary Novel* (New York: Dial, 1967).

> "If you have already taken up this book and have had the patience to read this far, I congratulate you, and I would beg you in that case, please do not drop it, but read it to the end.
>
> You see, what I am offering you is after all not an ordinary novel. It is a document, an exact picture of what happened. Just imagine that had you been born just one historical moment sooner, this might have been your life **and not just something to pick up and read** … You could have been me; you could have been born in Kiev, in Kurenyovka, and I could have been you, reading this page."[185]

For Kuznetsov, this battle against ignorance was two-edged: the moral imperative to uproot ignorance was a demand he made first and foremost of himself. His *Babi Yar* may be best understood as the product of this life-long battle, the complexity of which may be realized only when one carefully reads his novel in its evolutionary process.

Indeed, this battle with the indifference toward the atrocities that had been committed on Soviet soil during World War II is reflected not only in the novel itself but in the intricate process that accompanied its composition. This process has already been amply described by Richard Sheldon and Leona Toker, yet is worth reiterating briefly. The story begins with Kuznetsov's first published work, the novella *Sequel to a Legend* (1958) that saw the light of day only after it was heavily censored, to the chagrin of its author.[186] Embittered by this experience, Kuznetsov was appalled when he learned that his new work *Babi Yar* would be subject to more

[185] Kuznetsov, 65. Emphasis in the original.

[186] This novella was among the pieces that inaugurated the genre of the semi-confessional "young prose" of the Thaw period, works that sought to revitalize communists values and rebel against what was perceived by their authors as an older, stagnating Stalin-era generation. See Leona Toker, "Anatolii Kuznetsov," in: Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. 299: Holocaust Novelists, ed. Ephraim Sicher (Gale: 2004) 195-200.

than 300 editorial changes that would lead to the elimination of about a quarter of the novel's scope. According to Sheldon, who based his account on Kuznetsov's own testimonies, when Kuznetsov learned that his work would be printed only in this truncated form, he demanded the manuscript back from the *Iunost'* editor-in-chief Polevoi, and when refused, grabbed it and later tore it to pieces. As it transpired, however, the editors of *Iunost'* had another copy of the manuscript, and by Kuznetsov's own testimony, it was only due to his dire financial straits that he gave his consent to its publication.[187]

After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in the Prague Spring of 1968, Kuznetsov realized that his work would never see the light of day in its unabridged form in the Soviet Union. This bitter realization drove him to plan his escape from the USSR. In order to win the trust of the authorities, he began collaborating with the KGB by composing secret denunciations of major Soviet artists, including his former classmate Yevgeny Yevtushenko.[188] This treacherous practice turned out to be Kuznetsov's ticket to freedom: in July of 1969 he was allowed to travel to London, presumably in order to do biographical research on Lenin's life as a Russian émigré in the British capital.[189] Upon Kuznetsov's arrival in London, he eluded the person who was supposed to track his whereabouts while there, and managed to find asylum in the U.K. He brought in his belongings the allegedly original, uncensored version of the novel stored in microfilm (he buried his manuscripts in a forest, outside Tula, his city of residence back

[187] Sheldon, 144.
[188] Toker, "Anatolii Kuznetsov," 195-200 Sheldon, 145.
[189] Kuznetsov's son Alexei provides interesting background details about the trip. Prior to the trip, Kuznetsov declared that he would like to work on a new novel dealing with one of the early congresses of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party in London. Kuznetsov insisted that he would be allowed to travel to the city, to 'feel its atmosphere,' be able to visit Karl Marx's grave and spend time in the British Museum library, where Vladimir I. Lenin had worked. Kuznetsov junior also notes that what helped his father get the consent of the authorities for this writing project was the imminent centennial of Lenin's birth. See: Aleksei Kuznetsov, *Mezhdu grinvichem i kurenyovkoi: pis'ma anatoliya Kuznetsova materi iz emigratsii v kiev*," (Moscow: Zaharov, 2002), 11.

then),[190] and managed to republish the book accompanied by additional comments that he incorporated into the text while in exile.

Wishing to dissociate himself from his past, Kuznetsov invented a new literary persona - A. Anatoli, and under this name the novel *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel* was published in its complete form in 1970, appearing both in Russian (in Frankfurt) and English (in New York). Kuznetsov's defection to the West left an indelible mark on the final shape that his *Babi Yar* took. Strikingly, the underlying ideologies of the novel's first and last versions are mutually exclusive. When one reads the 1970 version of the novel it is astounding to realize how the censored parts, together with the later additions introduced by Kuznetsov from his London exile do not complement the *Iunost'* addition, but, rather, undo it. This peculiar co-existence of these two versions has repercussions that stretch far beyond our concern with the Babi Yar massacre. The novel may very well function as a case-in-point of the role played by the censor as writer that any student of Soviet literature during the Thaw period should consider.

A Testimony of the Writer as a Young Man

Before we turn to a deeper analysis of these two ideological points-of-view and consider the intricate way in which they co-exist and yet conflict with each other, it is necessary to observe one of the features of the novel that underlies both versions: the particular genre in which Kuznetsov decided to write his work – the documentary novel. In contrast to the choice of Yevtushenko to invoke the memory of Babi Yar via the poetic mode in order to strike a chord in his readers, to rouse their emotions and awaken their conscience, the main drive of Kuznetsov's

[190] *Russkie pisateli 20 veka*, s.v. "Kuznetsov, Anatolii Vasil'evich."

novel was to establish the facts about Babi Yar. As the literary critic Emil Staiger asserts, it is in the lyrical mode, the one adopted by Yevtushenko, where there is no distance between subject and object, where "the 'I' swims along in the transience of things."[191] By contrast, a work of prose – and especially if the work in question lays a claim to veracity – may maintain a clearer demarcation line between the self and reality, and would be thus less concerned with subjective feelings and more geared toward establishing the novel's fictional reality.

Because of Kuznetsov's almost obsessive desire to render the facts about Babi Yar's history mainly during the Nazi occupation, from September 1941–November 1943, a wide audience of Soviet readers learned for the first time the full details about the carnage at the ravine, about events that the autobiographical protagonist, young Tolia, witnessed while growing up during the war years in Kurenyovka, a suburb of Kiev adjacent to Babi Yar. Only for brief intervals does the novel depart from this chronological timeframe. One of these chronological shifts occurs when Kuznetsov turns to a discussion of the Ukrainian famine of 1932-1933, the historical event known as the Holodomor. Another shift occurs when dealing with the attempts to destroy Babi Yar during the Khrushchev era. While these two deviations from the novel's chronological sweep are significant, it should be noted that they occur only in its uncensored version.[192]

For the most part, the main intent of the novel is to provide concrete details about life under Nazi occupation in Kiev in general, including the two dreadful days in the fall of 1941

[191] Emil Staiger, *Basic Concepts of Poetics*, trans. Janette C. Hudson and Luanne T. Frank, ed., Marianne Burkhard and Luanne T. Frank (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 181.

[192] For the section on the man-made famine that occurred because of Stalin's forced collectivization policy, a crime that, as Kuznetsov confesses in his novel, his staunch Stalinist father partook in, see: Kuznetsov, 120-122. On the attempts to flood Babi Yar after the war with pulp, leading to its tragic flooding, and the first mass ceremony at the site conducted on the 25th anniversary of the massacre, see: Idem, 471-75.

when the Babi Yar massacre wore on. This pursuit of factuality is the main reason that prompted Kuznetsov to make a very specific generic choice when designing his novel, by giving it the shape of a documentary novel. On numerous occasions, Kuznetsov incorporated into the novel authentic documents pertaining to the Nazi occupation, mainly in the form of excerpts from the local newspapers *Ukrainskoye slovo* and *Novoye ukrainskoye slovo* that were at his disposal while working on the novel.

Significantly, this specific generic choice made the novel a suitable candidate to be included in two different 20th-century literary canons: Holocaust documentary fiction and Gulag literature. Both these sub-genres of the documentary novel share a basic common denominator: they are underlain by the author's desire to endow his work with a strong sense of authenticity, to win the attention of the reader not only by bringing forth materials hitherto unknown, but also by utilizing the writer's rhetorical faculties. At the highest, moral level the effect on the reader that the author wishes to achieve is to present himself or herself as the rare human being 'who has been there' and managed to come back. While this is not always the case in documentary novels, in Kuznetsov's novel this pursuit of the reader's attention is stretched to the extreme: the author narrates the plot in the first person singular; the main character is himself as a youngster; and, lastly, the narrator relentlessly repeats his opening statement in the novel that "it all really happened."

In his work *Writing and Re-writing the Holocaust*, James Young dwells on the documentary novel as a common genre used by Holocaust writers so as to endow their work with the greatest degree of credibility. These writers, of course, face a challenge greater than that of diarists and memoirists, whose credibility, while never guaranteed, is often far less called into

question.[193] Young notes, though, that the narrator's impulse in Holocaust fiction to insist on a documentary link between the text and its inspiring events has not been limited to diarists and memoirists – it no less applies to many novelists and playwrights who feature the Holocaust in their works. Kuznetsov's case in this respect is unique, as it is an account of documentary-fiction only in its final form. As Kuznetsov relates in the novel itself, the nucleus of the novel initially took shape as a diary that the young Kuznetsov started keeping as early as 1943.[194] Kuznetsov relates in the novel that after the war, as the anti-Semitic atmosphere of the late Stalin years intensified, he realized the danger of keeping such a personal, incriminating account and decided to get rid of it. In this respect, Kuznetsov makes the uttermost endeavor in the novel to make the case that his work is nothing more than a record of past events, not rendered in the form of a diary only due to some sorry circumstances.

Young goes on to argue that some writers of documentary fiction on the Holocaust espouse this writing strategy "out of fear that the rhetoricity of their literary medium inadvertently confers fictiveness onto events themselves."[195] Other writers, however, make this generic choice for more aesthetic and dramatic reasons. Young rightfully includes Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* in this discussion of Holocaust documentary fiction. It is very clear, though, that the novel belongs to the first category of documentary novels; that it follows the rules of this genre not for primarily aesthetic reasons. Admittedly, the narrator's insistence that he is telling nothing but the truth is one of the artistic merits of the work. This constant insistence that has the effect of "pounding on the readers head" is one of the central artistic devices utilized by Kuznetsov, in a work, one of the chief goals of which is to confront its young reader with human nature's

[193] James Young. *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequence of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 25.
[194] Kuznetsov, 13.
[195] Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, 51.

unlimited capacity for brutality. As Nina Tumarkin puts it, the adjective that would most suitably describe the novel is "relentless."[196] Kuznetsov consciously chooses narration in the first person and incessantly reiterates his claim to authenticity in order to provide a seamless account of cruelty and suffering that he is deliberately unwilling to relieve by any momentary humoristic anecdotes.

Notwithstanding the aesthetic merit of this sense of urgency, Kuznetsov's main goal here is not to achieve any artistic heights, but, rather, the rendition of a sound, coherent and most credible story about Kiev under Nazi occupation: to describe events to which – Kuznetsov was right to assume – many readers in the Soviet Union remained oblivious. Kuznetsov makes it very clear from the outset that his novel has nothing to do with aesthetic aspirations. He strives to highlight the fact that the hyphenated *roman-dokument* is a genre in its own right, distinct not only from the Soviet socialist realist novel (which he considers phony and deceiving, the portrayal of an ideal world that could not be more remote from what he saw as the dystopian Soviet reality), but from the tradition of European realism as well. The school of realism, we should bear in mind, never called into question the need to conjure up a fictional world that would reflect, like a mirror, the real one. Even in its most radical form, as emblematized, for instance, in the works of the nineteenth-century French masters of realism, like Balzac or Zola who insisted that the human experience may be understood only by the rendition of the protagonists' full cultural and socio-economic background (their assets, income, place of residence, attire, social status, social circle), there was never a real denial of a demarcation line dividing reality and fiction. Yet this is exactly what Kuznetsov claims to be doing in his novel:

[196] Tumarkin, 123.

> **I am writing this book now without bothering about any literary rules** [or any political systems, frontiers, censors or national prejudices].
>
> **I am writing it as though I were giving evidence under oath in the very highest court and I am ready to answer for every single word. This book records only the truth – AS IT REALLY HAPPENED.** [197]

One of the main strategies of Kuznetsov is precisely the blurring of these lines between fiction and reality. The novel implies that its readers should not waste their time reading the typical Soviet fictional accounts about the war years, which provide their readers with a grossly distorted image of historical reality. Yet, despite these ambitious goals, *Babi Yar* is not the pure transmission of facts that Kuznetsov presents it to be. The author's confidence that his is an unmediated account of the war given with the utmost veracity does not stand up to careful scrutiny. First, the novel contains numerous dialogues conducted within the narrator's domestic sphere, conversations that were clearly not transcribed verbatim. Second, the testimony of Dina Pronicheva, the Kiev Puppet Theater actress who was among the Babi Yar massacre's only survivors (a document lying at the core of Kuznetsov's discussion of the massacre), is only a second-hand account, based on an interview that Kuznetsov had conducted with her. Apparently, this artistic choice betrays the author's realization that in absentia from the scene of the murder itself he did not have the moral right or sufficient experience to submit his own fictional account of the massacre.[198] Third, as the author confides to his readers, he was too young to remember

[197] Kuznetsov, 14. Emphasis in the original.

[198] Young, 55. While Kuznetsov insists in the prelude to Pronicheva's account that he submitted her account "from her own words, without adding anything of my own," the historian Karel Berkhoff has recently called this proclamation into question. In his careful analysis of the twelve testimonies that Dina Pronicheva submitted from 1946-1968 dealing with her survival of the Babi Yar massacre, Berkhoff further undermines Kuznetsov's claim for veracity in his novel. While his exploration of all these documents points to Pronicheva's consistency and reliability, he points to the fact that Kuznetsov's account includes greater details. Berkhoff raises the suspicion that these

the unfolding events under the Nazi occupation and was not sufficiently mature to grasp their significance. It was his mother who helped him reconstruct the novel's supposedly unembellished reality.

In light of the gap between Kuznetsov's claim to total veracity and the variegated sources and voices from which he drew, the puzzling question remains why Kuznetsov saw himself suitable to be the author of a Holocaust testimony rendered in the format of a documentary novel. Young provides an answer by categorizing the novel within the realm of the specific genre of Holocaust documentary fiction. By correlating *Babi Yar* with *Treblinka* by Jean-François Steiner, *The White Hotel* by D.M. Thomas or Gerald Green's *Holocaust*, Young contends, it is possible to make the claim that Kuznetsov was searching here for an appropriate genre that would befit his topic – i.e., the Holocaust as it unfolded in the Ukrainian capital. And like other Holocaust fiction writers, so the argument goes, Kuznetsov purports to enhance the veracity of the events described in the novel by way of supporting them with purely historical documents and sources, a practice that would minimize the fictiveness of his plot and endow the novel with "the rhetoric of fact."[199]

While this reading of Babi Yar through the lens of Holocaust documentary fiction undoubtedly helps illuminate the distinctiveness of *Babi Yar*, it faces one major difficulty. No doubt, Kuznetsov's novel carries the name of the ravine and was indeed the groundbreaking work that exposed the Soviet public to the atrocities in Babi Yar for the first time. But the novel's actual plot only overlaps with the historical phenomenon that has become ingrained in

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additions were a result of the novelist's "notion that he had some artistic license." See: Karel 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 the Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization* (Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 305.

[199] Young, 62.

the Western collective memory as the Final Solution or the Holocaust of European Jewry. While Young joins a group of scholars who have preferred to view the novel through the lens of the Holocaust, the fact remains that neither in the *Iunost'* version nor in the one published in exile in 1970 does Kuznetsov frame his *Babi Yar* in the context of the unique tragedy that befell the Jewish people. This fact, indeed, should not only be highlighted, but be more closely explored by anyone wishing not only to better understand the work's main message and ideological underpinnings, but also to understand it as a staple feature of the specific historical conditions that spawned its creation.

A Counter-Argument to Yevtushenko

So far we have mentioned the classification of *Babi Yar* as a part of the larger corpus of Holocaust literature and pondered the difficulty it poses in view of the fact that the concept of the Holocaust itself was quite foreign to Kuznetsov, as it was for many other Soviet writers. Rather than view the novel as a species of Holocaust documentary fiction, Leona Toker prefers to place it within the contours of the literature of testimony, a far broader genre, which gives voice to a very diverse set of texts dealing with human ordeals. While the Holocaust surely looms large among them, it is not the only experience that drove writers to blend documentation and fictionalization. Another body of literature, in which the same kind of negotiation is carried out, is Gulag literature and it is to this sub-genre that Toker dedicates much of her essay "Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose."[200] This reading of Kuznetsov's novel from the angle of testimony literature helps Toker, *inter alia*, to explain the existence of the work in multiple

[200] Leona Toker, "Toward a Poetic of Documentary Prose – from the Perspective of Gulag Testimonies," *Poetic Today* 18, no. 2 (1997): 187-222.

versions as well as its printing in a 'messy' edition like the one prepared in 1970, in which the text's creation process is embodied in the two different typefaces and the comments in square brackets. Toker notes that while this hard-to-follow structure would be perceived in realistic prose as a shortcoming, in documentary prose it turns into a virtue, for it indicates the author's "uncompromising pursuit of factual and moral truth."[201]

Beyond this curious point, the inclusion of *Babi Yar* within the frame of Gulag literature does more historical justice to Kuznetsov's novel. Likewise, this classifying choice also helps flesh out the moral foundations upon which it rests. While Kuznetsov, in a manner no different from other Soviet writers, did not look at the Babi Yar massacre through the lens of the Holocaust, but rather the Gulag literature inaugurated by Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* had a direct impact on his decision to submit his own story of survival.[202] The question then becomes: To what survival did Kuznetsov dedicate this intimate, confessional novel?

One possible answer would be that this is a story of survival under Nazi occupation. If this is the case, then it should be emphasized that Kuznetsov's object of exploration is the general Soviet population, including himself (in the novel he takes pains to mention the extent to which his life was hanging by a thread by listing twenty different transgressions that he had committed during the war, each potentially punishable by death).[203] Indeed, on numerous occasions throughout the novel – in both the original and the later version – Kuznetsov underlines the multi-national nature of Babi Yar. While the novel recounts Pronicheva's testimony in its first half, it gradually transpires that the novel includes in the list of Babi Yar's victims multiple groups that vary from labor camp inmates and prisoners of war to Roma, the

[201] Ibid., 196.
[202] *Russkie pisateli 20 veka*, s.v. "Kuznetsov, Anatolii Vasil'evich."
[203] Kuznetsov, 420.

Dynamo Kiev football team players,[204] and even those who "met their deaths later in Babi Yar because of the ban on keeping pigeons." [205]

While the credibility of Kuznetsov's main argument need not be called into question, his conception of the ravine as a Soviet site bearing no distinctive meaning to the suffering of the Jewish people is a fact that must not be overlooked. In one of the earliest scenes in the novel, Kuznetsov, upon his encounter with an old man, sets the ideological tone of the novel, which would later go as far as positing that Babi Yar was not just an ordinary mass grave where the bodies of humans of different ethnicities lie, but was, rather, a symbol for the common fate shared on Soviet soil by different ethnic groups during World War II:

> "'Please, mister,' I asked, 'was it here they shot the Jews, or farther on?' The old man stopped, looked me up and down and said:
>
> 'And what about all the Russians who were killed here? And the Ukrainians and other kinds of people?'"[206]

Soon afterward the narrator reaches a stream in which he recognizes pieces of the victims' bones being washed, a specter that helped him locate "the place where the Jews, Russians, Ukrainians and people of other nationalities had been shot …I picked up one of the pieces weighing four or five pounds and took it with me to keep. It contains the ashes of many people, all mixed up together – a sort of international mixture."[207]

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[204] Ibid., 292.
[205] Ibid., 155.
[206] Ibid., 16, 17.
[207] Ibid.

Kuznetsov's conception of Babi Yar as an international slaughter site is a fact that cannot be downplayed and it would be wrong to argue that it holds true only with regard to the version of the novel originally published in the USSR. Clearly, with regard to the original version, this "internationalist" stance helped Kuznetsov see his work published in the USSR. There is nothing necessarily remarkable about this "internationalist" outlook in view of the fact that it was submitted by a young man who was half-Russian, half-Ukrainian.[208] It is equally important to note that these "internationalist," or rather universalistic comments made by Kuznetsov throughout the novel, do not and should not earn him the epithet of an anti-Semite. Kuznetsov tried to establish the facts, and the facts indeed reveal that not only Jews were killed at Babi Yar.

On the whole, Kuznetsov submits a fairly balanced account of the events that took place in Babi Yar. Clearly, his account of the Babi Yar massacre itself, provided in full detail and without concealing the fact that its targets were Jews, qualifies *Babi Yar* as a groundbreaking work in the history of Babi Yar's commemoration. Yet, if one wonders why a regime that stifled any attempt to correlate Babi Yar with Jewish victimhood, not only did not frown upon this new novel, but, rather, allowed its publication, and even its translation into English with hardly any editorial changes made to Pronicheva's account, the answer lies in the minor space that the tragedy of the Jews occupies in the novel. Interestingly, it is not the claim that members of other nationalities were killed in Babi Yar that took from *Babi Yar*, as far as Soviet officialdom was concerned, its ideological sting. Rather, the recurrence of this "internationalist" argument and the attempt to put in the spotlight the suffering of the entire Soviet population trapped in the Nazi-occupied zone is what diminishes the distinctiveness of the Babi Yar massacre as the first moment in European history when a major European city became *Judenrein*.

[208] Ibid., 67.

More than anything else, it is the minor room that the Babi Yar massacre of Kiev Jews occupies in the novel that, not only allowed the publication of the original version of the novel, but even justified it. Boris Polevoi , who carefully observed the novel before its publication and could have easily thwarted it, made the quite puzzling claim that Kuznetsov's novel would counter-balance what he saw as Yevtushenko's overemphasis on Babi Yar's Jewish context.[209] While on first sight puzzling, this argument is validated if one considers the minor place that Jews occupy in the novel among other victims and, more importantly, Kuznetsov's failure to conceive of the Jews' murder as a part of a grander scheme to carry out genocide. On a few occasions throughout the novel, for example, Kuznetsov raises the hypothesis that the Babi Yar massacre was carried out as a vengeful, impulsive act on the part of the Nazis, as retribution for the blowing up of buildings on Khreshchatik Street in downtown Kiev.[210] While Kuznetsov draws a true historical correlation between the explosions on Khreshchatik and the pretext for the perpetration of the massacre, the placing of the massacre in the midst of a whirlwind of savagery and destruction is exactly what impressed the one who gave the novel his approbation. Polevoi could not have missed realizing the potential of the novel to constitute an account of the war rendered by a non-Jew, who rather than exclaim that "he is a Jew" as did Yevtushenko, preferred to honor all of those who died in Babi Yar, irrespective of their national origins.

Lastly, to the reasons for the novel's approval we must add another. While Kuznetsov insisted time and again that his work was a document only couched in the form of a novel, those who approved it did not fail to realize its lack of historical credibility. While the official historiography of the Great Patriotic War would continue to downplay the Jewish identity of those among Babi Yar's victims, *Babi Yar* would be judged for what it was: a work of fiction,

[209] Clowes, 171.
[210] Kuznetsov, 88, 152.

based on the recollections of a young and naïve individual who was only twelve when the Nazis entered the city of Kiev; a youngster who throughout the novel is easily influenced by the adults that surround him and has a hard time making sense of the events unfolding before his eyes.

One Novel, Two Paths: Permitted Dissent and Defection

The expanded version of the novel printed in 1970, while, like the original version, is far from a credible historiographical work, is a far less naïve account, submitted by a mature writer who has by then been fully sobered by life under both Nazi and Soviet rule; a writer, who was now far more prepared to make sense of the wartime events. We have already noted that the complete version of Kuznetsov's novel was radically different from the one published in *Iunost'*. While the two versions, for the most part, follow the same plot-line in the grand scheme of things, it is their 'ideological facet of focalization' (the abstract array of values that are embedded in every literary work,)[211] that set them apart from each other. In effect, the two versions offer an account of Tolia's life in the occupied zone so different from each other that when reading the 1970 edition of the novel where the two are juxtaposed one is almost compelled to believe that two different authors were responsible for their composition.

To put it another way, Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* is a good example of a novel where the censor becomes, not merely a participant in the literary process, but rather, an almost independent player in it. In contrast to the final version of the novel that constitutes an indictment of the Soviet system as a totalitarian one, a system by no means better or less

[211] For a good summary of the different facets of focalization in a work of fiction see: Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 83.

inhuman than Nazi Germany, the reader cannot find even a trace of this train of thought in the 1966 *Iuonst*' version. The Ukrainian famine of 1932-1933, the blowing up of the old Kiev-Pechersk monastery by the Soviets, the flooding of Babi Yar during the early Khrushchev years, resulting in the Kurenyovka tragedy: these and many other events are all missing from the novel that came out through official Soviet publication channels.

When considering the final version of the novel only, it becomes clear that for Kuznetsov, who wished to fashion his novel along the lines of the genre of testimony literature, what lies at the core of this novel was not only the survival of the Nazi occupation, but also the far broader survival of life under both the Soviets and Nazis, under two equally evil and destructive totalitarian systems. There is little doubt that when Kuznetsov read the *Iunost*' version of his novel and realized to what degree his semi-autobiographical account had been distorted, he was anything but pleased. At the same time, though, we should bear in mind that in a dictatorial system where high levels of vigilance were in effect in the arena of literature, Kuznetsov could also see his novel as an achievement. As opposed to Vasily Grossman, who was told by Suslov that his *Life and Fate* – a work which drew the same link between Nazism and Communism –would not see the light of day in the Soviet Union for the next 300 years, Kuznetsov saw his novel, not only being published, but also becoming a bestseller, bestowing upon the author both honor and honoraria.

If we borrow two terms from Leona Toker that illuminate the uniqueness of the literary process in the USSR, the term 'target audience,' as a reference to the designated readers of a work, and the term 'hurdle audience,' as a reference to the censor of the text, the reader whose

job is "to obstruct its accessibility to the target audience,"[212] it is easier to describe Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* as a work that passed the 'hurdle audience' only to a limited extent. While the general contours of Kuznetsov's testimony were kept, the novel failed to pass the 'hurdle audience' at the ideological level. What the 'target audience' received, was not a humanist, perhaps even pacifist work renouncing any kind of "ism," any sort of political oppression, but rather a Soviet-style antiwar novel that suited both the socialist tenet of *Druzhba narodov* (the friendship of peoples) and Moscow's attempt to fancy itself as the international community's peace-keeper during the early Brezhnev years.

In one of his conversations on "Radio Freedom" which took place during the early 1970s from his London exile, Kuznetsov recalled the revulsion he felt when he realized that his novel was a pawn played by those above him in the Soviet literary hierarchy, who tried to publicize him as a Soviet "antiwar" writer. Thereupon, this bitter realization completely disillusioned Kuznetsov with the practice of permitted dissent. When faced with the choice of whether to win minor battles with the Soviet censor or to see his entire work printed in exile, Kuznetsov chose, ultimately, the latter course of action.

Still, when considering the intricate connection between the representation of Babi Yar in Soviet Russian literature and the specific historical conditions of the Thaw period, we must bear in mind that the story of the Babi Yar massacre did not constitute a real hurdle on Kuznetsov's road to freedom. To a certain extent, Edith Clowes is correct when she asserts that many of the novel's reviews deemphasized Babi Yar's Jewish context because the abridged version of the

[212] Leona Toker, "Target Audience, Hurdle Audience, and the General Reader: Varlam Shalamov's Art of Testimony," *Poetics Today* 26, no. 2 (2005): 281.

novel "allowed the readers to see a more generalized picture of suffering."[213] No doubt, the reading of the full version that contains materials on the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign and the post-Stalin era attempts to eradicate Babi Yar altogether, helps bring the massacre of September 29-30 to the fore. Nonetheless, when carefully comparing the two versions, one cannot avoid the impression that the expanded version, while taking issue with so many of the statements made by Kuznetsov in the *Iunost'* edition, leaves the story about the massacre for the most part intact.

As Kuznetsov's chief target in the expanded version is the Soviet regime rather than the Nazis, the room that the Babi Yar massacre occupies in it, on the whole, is only further diminished. Concomitantly, his failure to grasp the Babi Yar massacre as a part of a grander genocidal scheme applies to the unabridged version as much as to the original one. One way to make sense of Kuznetsov's failure to set Babi Yar within the broader framework of what Lucy Dawidowicz called "Hitler's war against the Jews," would be to insist that in order to endow the novel with a sense of immediacy and render it as an autobiographical novel presented from the very narrow angle of one young individual, Kuznetsov had to focus on the Babi Yar massacre only and detach it from the wider context of the Final Solution.

This explanation, however, is very precarious: the reading of the unabridged version of the novel plainly shows that when it comes to atrocities perpetrated by the Soviets, Kuznetsov never fails to conceive of them in the broadest terms, without considering them to be contingent upon any specific circumstances, like the correlation he draws between the explosions on Khreshchatik and the Babi Yar massacre. Take for example Kuznetsov's discussion of the Holodomor, the man-made famine that was carried out by Stalin's henchmen in rural Ukraine in the early 1930s. For Kuznetsov, it was the far fresher memories of Soviet terror, of which the

[213] Clowes, 173.

Holodomor loomed large, that prompted the writing of the novel and far less the recollections of life under the Nazis. This would sound strange to most readers of the novel today, given its title and focus on the years of the Nazi occupation. Admittedly, this argument might have sounded preposterous to the original 'target audience' of the novel, to the readers of the *Iunost'* version who could not have realized its anti-Soviet undertones, which were, of course, purged by the novel's 'hurdle audience.' Yet, in its full form, it is the attack leveled at the Soviet system – and the story of the man who had survived life under it – that constitutes a poignant and bitter part of Kuznetsov's criticism of totalitarianism and his defense of freedom.

To consolidate this reading of *Babi Yar* in its final version as an anti-Soviet novel written by a Russian dissident living in exile, we should revisit Kuznetsov's participation in the program aired on Radio Liberty under the heading "A Writer at the Microphone." If one wishes to argue that while still in the Soviet Union, it was a lack of vocabulary that prevented Kuznetsov from grasping the deeper meaning of the Holocaust, in his radio conversation no. 25, entitled "Famine," he borrows the Western term genocide, coined by Raphael Lemkin, in a discussion of the Holodomor. For Kuznetsov the writer, as it turns out, it was the Holodomor, and not the Holocaust, that deserved the world's attention as the greatest crime against humanity perpetrated during the 20th century:

> I do not know, whether certain documents dealing with the famine of 1932-33 in the Ukraine and Kuban have been preserved in the Soviet secret archives. Organized in the Ukraine a decade before Babi Yar … that genocide was yet far greater than Hitler's: a number of researchers estimated the number of dead out of the famine to reach seven million. […] in such a short time, and even more so –

> and this should be emphasized – in an absolutely peaceful time, without any war – this was, in my opinion, the largest genocidal act in the history of humanity[214]

For Kuznetsov, the Holodomor was not only the most horrifying event of the 20th century, it was also a far less known and documented one, an event that was still shrouded in mystery and could not be disclosed to the Soviet public in his documentary novel. What Kuznetsov does here, and without necessarily meaning to engage in a futile dispute on 'who had suffered more,' is to relegate the Holocaust to a secondary place below the Holodomor. The former, he argues, took a smaller toll of victims and came only after the latter. While the data provided here by Kuznetsov will certainly continue to engage historians who will grapple with the question of whether or not the Holodomor was consciously perpetrated as a genocidal operation and its exact number of victims, we may still be able to derive an important conclusion from the above citation. Kuznetsov's words teach us about the close link drawn in his mind -- before his defection and after – not between Babi Yar and the Holocaust, but rather the tragedy that befell Ukrainian peasants, one that haunted Kuznetsov in particular as a half Ukrainian native and the son of a man who took part in Stalin's murderous collectivization of the Ukrainian countryside.

This correlation between the two events does not diminish the value of Kuznetsov's work in the particular context of Babi Yar when appraised in hindsight: Kuznetsov was the first to provide the Soviet public with a full-blown report on the killings at the ravine; he did not refrain from indicating that its prime victims were Jews. When read through the lens of the Thaw period, this piece emerges, like that of Yevtushenko, as one step among many in the winding and gradual negotiation that took place between writers and censors about the limits of the

[214] Kuznetsov, Babii yar, p. 565 (author's translation).

permissible regarding writing on Babi Yar. As in the case of Yevtushenko, when set in the right historical context, *Babi Yar* the novel also emerges as an artifact of "permitted dissent." In its originally published form, the work does little to challenge the general Party line on the Holocaust and Babi Yar other than providing Dina Pronicheva's full testimony about the massacre. While the novel has often been catalogued as a part of the genre of Holocaust literature, our study shows that the Holocaust occupies a rather minor place in the novel. And although the study of *Babi Yar* in its 1970 edition may arguably fall beyond the scope of our study – works published in exile were, all in all, free of the specific limitations that Soviet writers faced during the years of the Thaw – it was necessary for our investigation in order to highlight Kuznetsov's unique stance toward Babi Yar. As the unabridged version illustrates, the reason Kuznetsov did not put the Babi Yar massacre of Kiev Jews in the spotlight of his work might have had little to do with the constraints of censorship. His preference, rather, stems from a genuine choice of a young Soviet writer to render an account of his own survival of the two totalitarian systems of the twentieth century. It betrays the unique case of a "traveling dissident" who found himself in exile and never came back; of a man who demonstrated in his work that between the two poles, the one where Babi Yar's Jewish connection is completely denied, and where the massacre is construed as a part of the Holocaust of European Jewry, lies a spectrum of many other possibilities.

Part II

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Chapter Four

Babi Yar in the Soviet Yiddish Mirror: A Historical Overview

The Yiddish Kiev Circle

Unlike the evolution of Babi Yar in the Soviet-Russian sphere, where it served as a magnet for practitioners of 'permitted dissent' to pressure Moscow to broaden the realms of the permissible, the Soviet Yiddish writers who wished to leave a literary monument to those who lay buried in Babi Yar had far more modest goals in mind. For many members of the latter group, Babi Yar was not the terrifying name of a far-flung, forgotten ravine, somewhere outside Kiev. It was rather the graveyard of their loved ones -- husbands and wives, relatives, friends and neighbors. Without taking anything away from the solemnity with which the artistic works by Nekrasov, Yevtushenko, Shostakovich and Kuznetsov were endowed, the process through which the representation of Babi Yar in the Soviet Yiddish sphere had crystalized was far more personal, and for many of them – far more tragic. The Soviet Yiddish writers were, after all, a group of Jews for whom the identification with the victims was an inevitable truth, not the product of a poetical odyssey in time like the one Yevgeny Yevtushenko, fancying himself a biblical Hebrew or an ancient Jew, had embarked upon. As opposed to Yevtushenko, these were not writers who had to meet Anatoly Kuznetsov at the Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow to learn about the tragedy that had taken place at Babi Yar. Rather, their first encounter with the name Babi Yar, and for some of them-- their first visits to the site -- took place as early as 1944. It happened in the immediate aftermath of Kiev's liberation, once the evacuated Kiev Jews who had survived

the war started to return to the city -- bereaved, homeless and, for the most part, unwelcomed by a Ukrainian population that had in many instances expropriated their apartments and belonging, and in some cases had even taken active part in the murder of their brethren.

With very few exceptions, the Yiddish writers who engaged the theme of Babi Yar in their works were all members of the Kiev circle of Yiddish writers. Yiddish cultural activity in the city took a variety of forms from the time of its emergence as a center of Jewish nationalism and socialism as well as a hub for Yiddish modernism following the revolution of 1905 up until the post-Stalin era, a time when Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union was severely curtailed.[215] Prior to the outbreak of the Civil War and the pogroms that came on its heels, Kiev was a magnet for Yiddish writers who wished to experiment with modernist trends. It was home to the *Kultur-lige* (Culture League), the largest network of Yiddish publishing houses, writers and cultural centers that was established in 1918 and resumed its operation as an official Soviet organization after the hiatus caused by the Civil War and the pogroms that followed.[216]

While Kiev was, prior to the October Revolution, the most important center for Yiddish modernism, home to some of the best Jewish writers of the early 20th century: Perets Markish, Dovid Begelson, Dovid Hofshteyn, Der Nister, Ley Kvitko and others, its preeminence would be contested later on by the new Yiddish cultural centers that started to mushroom after the Civil War: Moscow, Kharkov and Minsk.[217] Nonetheless, despite its many transformations, the most notable of which was the shift from a plethora of independent cultural organizations to a uniform body, funded and supervised by the government and connected to the Soviet Writer's Union

[215] David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Yiddish Culture*, 1918-1930 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 91.
[216] Ibid., 103.
[217] Ibid., 123, 144.

since the early 1930s, the Kiev circle of Yiddish writers remained dominant so long as Yiddish cultural activities were allowed to exist in the USSR.

In 1944, in the wake of Kiev's liberation, the remaining writers and cultural activists who had survived the turbulent events of the war and the Holocaust started to come back to the city. These writers now came back to what used to be a hub for the state-sponsored Soviet cultural apparatus, which at its zenith included day schools, theaters, daily newspapers and literary journals, publishing houses, cultural clubs, libraries and research institutions, all running their activities in the Yiddish language.[218] Emblematizing the promise of the first 'dictatorship of the proletariat' to help the Jewish people build its own national culture, predicated on what the new regime saw as just, socialist foundations, these institutions all operated during much of the interwar period in Yiddish.

The majority of the writers whose works will be explored in this chapter and the next were part of this new, Soviet Yiddish cultural project and were connected in one way or another to the Yiddish literary apparatus that existed in interwar Kiev. Despite the size of Kiev as a major Jewish metropolis, due to the centralized nature of the Soviet cultural apparatus, from the mid-1920s onward, this was a tight-knit group of writers who were on intimate terms with each other, who often published in the same Yiddish literary journals and magazines, attended literary events in local factories, and attended the lectures delivered by both Meir Viner and Max Erik, the primary literary critics and historians who taught at Kiev's primary Jewish research center, the Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture.[219] Although Kiev's local Yiddish intelligentsia was

[218] For a detailed list of Yiddish cultural institutions operating in the Ukraine see: Esther Rosenthal-Shneiderman , *Oyf vegn un umvegn: zikhroynes, geshe'enishen, perzenlekhkeytn*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Farlag Y.L. Perets, 1978), 126-131.

[219] This institute was founded in 1929 as the reorganization of the Department of Jewish Culture operating under the aegis of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. For a description of this institution beyond its depiction in

cliquish by nature, due to the very centralized and vigilant nature of the cultural and political system of which it was a part, the ideological make-up of its Yiddish writers was not as uniform as one might think. Among them were young writers who were nurtured by the Soviet system, together with older ones whose views and artistic style were shaped prior to the October Revolution. One may also find in this group party members and writers leaning toward the 'fellow traveler' position.

While all these cultural gaps never shook the intimate shape of the Kiev Yiddish intelligentsia, in the wake of the destruction wrought by World War II, many of its members could reunite around a new locus – the common grave on the outskirts of town, in which many of their friends and relatives found their deaths: Babi Yar. Having lived through a series of calamities--the Great Terror of the mid-1930s, the havoc wrought by World War II and the anti-Semitic campaigns of the last years of Stalinism--many of these writers and cultural activists found themselves writing and publishing again in the Ukrainian capital, in the Yiddish language. In comparison with their secure position in prewar Soviet culture and society, the new literary activity of the Kiev Yiddish writers, who were fortunate enough to return from the GULAG and resume their literary activities in the early 1960s, were mere fragments of what used to be a rich and solid Jewish cultural edifice.

Yet for all of their intimate relations and commonality of experience, the bitter truth is this: Rare was a Jewish writer who, in the new climate of the post-Stalin era, would allude to Babi Yar and how much more so, to its Jewish victims. Why was so, given, as we have seen, that

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the memoir by Rosenthal-Shnaiderman who was one of its staff members see: Vladimir Bilovitski, " Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture," The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, accessed 12 December 2012, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Institute_of_Jewish_Proletarian_Culture,

no such absolute taboo existed in the sister sphere of Russian letters? To provide an explanation, we must review the fluctuations of Soviet policy vis-à-vis its Jewish subjects.

Socialist in Content, Jewish in Form

The seeds of the challenge that Babi Yar posed for Yiddish writers were sown, in fact, decades before the massacre itself in the years preceding the October Revolution. It was already then, when both Lenin and his successor, Stalin, were searching for a proper Marxist definition of the Jewish people and a policy that could be accorded to it, that the general ideological contours of the still embryonic Soviet Yiddish culture were given form. As Benjamin Pinkus notes, it was Lenin, who, following the line of his teacher Karl Marx, argued from the outset of his career that the Jews were "not a nation but a historical remnant that owes its existence to the persistence of anti-Semitism."[220] For Lenin -- as for his successor Joseph Stalin -- only a nation could be defined as a group possessing both a common territory and a common language. Hence, world Jewry constituted merely a sect, not a nation.[221] This negative attitude, however, toward the Jews as an ethnic group, "whose future," to quote Stalin, "is denied and whose very existence is yet to be proved,"[222] precluded neither Lenin nor Stalin from enabling the establishment of a semi-autonomous Jewish administrative and cultural apparatus conducted in Yiddish.

[220] Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews*, 11.

[221] This negative attitude was also reflected later on in the definition of the Jews as a "nationality" (natsionalnost), the lowest category in the Soviet ranking of nations: below a nation, a people, or even a "minute people " (narondnost) like the small ethnic groups living in Siberia and the Northern Caucasus. The term "nationality" was mainly political as it had to be recorded on all passports from December 1932. This practice allowed the Soviet regime to treat the Jews as scattered individuals on the one hand, but at the same time devise a system that would identify them and assist the Soviet state in introducing any discriminatory policies aimed at Soviet Jews, on the other. See Ibid., 14.

[222] *Ibid*., 12

Later on, however, recognizing the viability of the Jewish minority in their country, it was Stalin who wished to remedy the limbo state in which Soviet Jews were situated by assigning them a territory, the sine-qua-non of true nationhood. This plan, conceived in 1928 to establish a Jewish national 'federative entity' in the Far East territory of Birobidzhan[223] signaled, for a while, a turnaround in the Soviet negative attitude toward the sustenance of Soviet Jews as a distinct national minority. But as it became clear that Birobidzhan was too far and too underdeveloped to attract the by then highly urban and educated Jewish population, Soviet Jews realized that a simple territorial solution was not the panacea to their precarious position among other Soviet national minority groups.

Although the Birobidzhan enterprise was overall a failure, during the 1920s the highly variegated Soviet Yiddish culture, fully funded by the state, was the envy of many Jews abroad. Some of the Yiddish literary world's key writers, among them Dovid Bergelson, Peretz Markish, Dovid Hofshteyn and Moyshe Kulbak and others, flocked to the Soviet Union during those years, believing that a true, viable home for the Yiddish language had been found only in the USSR. That the Soviet state signaled in the cultural arena the wave of the future was evidenced, not only by its central Jewish institutions, like the Jewish Section of the Communist Party (The Evsektsia). As mentioned already, a plethora of cultural and educational institutions conducted by Jews, in a Jewish language, were set up by the still new-born Soviet regime: numerous newspapers and literary periodicals, professional and amateur theaters, research institutions,

[223] Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: the History of a National Minority* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 72.

museums, a network of daily schools, and even local administrative institutions, such as courts and police stations, all functioned from the early 1920s in the Yiddish language.[224]

Later on, most of these institutions witnessed a gradual decline in the wake of Stalin's cultural revolution of the late 1920s, a grand policy that was designed, among other things, to turn the USSR from a fairly egalitarian union of its member nations into a country where the Russian people had a "leading position … among the equal nationalities of the Soviet Union."[225] In the 1930s, during the years of the Great Terror, Yiddish institutions and their members stood under constant attack due to Stalin's reversal of the egalitarian policies he and Lenin had put in place earlier. But in the new atmosphere hostile to national particularism Jews were not singled out. Rather, they had their 'fair share' of the burden of Stalinist terror along with Ukrainian, or Belorussian nationalists, and some would say –even an easier share. It would take more than a decade for this hostile attitude toward non-Russian ethnicities to turn into an anti-Semitic campaign, launched in November 1948. A witch-hunt directed against hundreds of Jewish intellectuals, so-called 'rootless cosmopolitans;' this campaign, orchestrated by the aging and increasingly paranoid Stalin, escalated into the arrests of hundreds of Soviet Yiddish cultural activists, the execution of some of the foremost Soviet Yiddish writers, among them Dovid Bergelson, Leib Kvitko, Perets Markish, Itsik Fefer, and Dovid Hofshteyn, and the complete effacement of Yiddish literature from the Soviet cultural scene.

[224] Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence, 89.*

[225] Hans Kohn, "Soviet Communism and Nationalism: Three Stages of Historical Development," in: Edward Allworth, ed. *Soviet Nationality Problems* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971), 57. As Benjamin Pinkus notes, Stalin's turn from the internationalist stance of Lenin to 'Socialism in one country' also affected the closure of non-Russian nationalist institutions in general and the Yiddish ones in particular as it freed the Soviet government from the need to care too much about its image abroad. See Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union*, 62.

In this cultural climate, in which the rights of Soviet Jews as members of a national minority in a precarious legal state were constantly called into question; in this environment, in which Jews had to constantly prove that their language, literature and culture might still be able to subscribe to the Stalinist maxim of "socialist in content and national in form, " it is easier to understand, when seen in hindsight, why elaborating on the theme of Babi Yar in Yiddish literature was a challenge for the Soviet Yiddish writers. For a Jewish writer, using a Jewish language and having only Jews as designated readers, writing about the site that had become a symbol for the suffering of the Jewish people during World War II was not an easy task. As long as Jewish national expressions were regarded by Moscow as undesirable, in a country that only recently had purged its representative Jewish writers, writing (and even more so, publishing a work) about Babi Yar, about a theme highly charged with a Jewish meaning and in a Jewish language, was not a simple matter. When observing the variety of works written on Babi Yar in the Soviet Union, it emerges with almost no exceptions that historical context matters. Each period in Soviet history carried its own blessings and misfortunes. Ironically, the war years and the immediate aftermath of the war, a time when Soviet Jewry faced the greatest *khurbn* (Yiddish for destruction) in Jewish history, was a time that witnessed a momentary revival of Yiddish culture in the USSR, thus preparing the ground for the appearance of the first works on Babi Yar in Yiddish.

The War and Last Years of Stalinism

In the early 1930s the first signs foreshadowing the future demise of Soviet Yiddish culture were already apparent: the closure of the Evsektsia, the Yiddish organ *Der Emes* and the network of Yiddish schools among other Yiddish institutions signaled the imminent demise of the Soviet Yiddish cultural enterprise. But the outbreak of World War II on the eastern front on 22 June 1941 brought this otherwise linear process to a temporary halt. The Nazi attack, and especially the disarray into which the Red Army and the civilian administration had been thrown on the western frontier, prompted Stalin to mitigate the Russification trend of the preceding decade and supplant it by a policy that displayed a positive attitude toward national minority cultures in the country.

This new move stemmed from Stalin's recognition of national sentiments as vital for motivating the minorities under his control (including Ukrainians and Byelorussians who were now living under Nazi occupation and whose loyalty to Moscow could not be taken for granted) to join the war effort and help drive out the Nazi invaders.[226] In a parallel measure meant to achieve the same goal, Stalin sanctioned the revival of the hitherto repressed Russian Orthodox Church and other religious institutions throughout the country. For the first time, the first atheist state in the history of humanity recognized the vital role that religious institutions – and sentiments – could play in the lives of the Soviet population.[227] In order to both channel these sentiments in the desired direction and improve the image of the Soviet Union abroad, Stalin ordered the establishment of The Soviet for the Russian Orthodox Affairs in September 1943, and The Soviet for Religious Affairs in May 1944. The latter body would oversee the activities

[226] Yehoshua Gilboa, *The Black Years of Soviet Jewry: 1939-1953* (Boston Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 104.
[227] Mordechai Altshuler, *Yahadut bamakhbesh ha-Sovieti*, 13, 23.

of all the other religions practiced in the USSR, including Judaism.[228] And so, the propagandistic potential of religion had to now be fully exploited.

This twofold move toward greater religious and artistic freedom had a double impact on Soviet Jews: no sooner had these decisions been put into effect than a revival of both Jewish synagogues and cultural creativity was set in motion. At the focus of the latter stood the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC), formed in 1942, the primary goal of which was to garner the political and financial support of Jewish communities in the West for Russia's war effort.[229] The JAFC was the only official Jewish institution active during the war years, and while conceived as a vehicle for propaganda, it did not limit itself to political activities, but aspired, during the darkest days in the history of the Jewish people, to revitalize Jewish literary and cultural activities in Yiddish and offer both material and cultural support to Yiddish writers.[230] Although Stalin had no special interest in overemphasizing the uniqueness of the tragedy that befell Soviet Jews during the war, one may find in the course of the JAFC's existence, before it was disbanded in 1948, a large number of Yiddish publications written under the impact of the greatest catastrophe that the Jewish people had known, including numerous reports on Nazi atrocities against Jews in the committee's organ *Eynikayt* (Unity).

The rumors about the Babi Yar massacre, not unlike other reports of multiple cases of mass murder of which Jews constituted the chief target, reached the Soviet Yiddish cultural elite

[228] Altshuler, Ibid., 27, 30. Altshuler notes that on the eve of the Second World War only a handful of synagogues were still functioning in the Soviet Union; most of them remained empty. This situation was altered when, soon after the outbreak of the war, Jews in the many Soviet cities thronged to new synagogues and old ones . Among those attending were many Jewish refugees who fled the western frontier to the Russian heartland. Later on, The Soviet for Religious Affairs started to supervise the legalization of Jewish community centers (*obshiny*, which in the Soviet sense, it should be noted, was a reference to synagogues), in many localities. By 1948, there were 161 such communities registered in the USSR. See idem, 16, 24, 48.

[229] Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence*, 145.

[230] Ibid., 145.

while many of its members were serving their country miles away from the scene of the atrocities, either on the battlefield or in evacuation.[231] These Yiddish writers were now caught up in the sense of shock and agony over the fate of entire Jewish communities that had existed in the Soviet western frontier for ages and were now wiped out instantaneously. If a staple feature of Soviet Yiddish literature prior to the Holocaust was the writers' departure from the Jewish past, they were now coming back to their roots. Equally important, they now received from Moscow the signal that such emotional rapprochement with their Jewish identity was possible, under the new circumstances of the Nazi invasion.

What characterized this new chapter in Soviet Yiddish literature that lasted up until the onset of the campaign against "Rootless Cosmopolitans" was the intensification of Jewish national sentiments among Soviet Yiddish artists and identification with the fate of their people during the darkest days of their history. This development cannot be exaggerated: indeed, after years of getting used to viewing Yiddish literature as a mere vehicle for the dissemination of socialist propaganda, they now saw it as a bridge between the present and the pre-revolutionary past, the time when Yiddish literature knew no schism between west and east. [232] Yet, this upswing of a Jewish national self-consciousness among Yiddish writers, while enduring for a few years, was ill-fated. As the Yiddish literature scholar Khone Shmeruk contends, this Soviet Yiddish renaissance was merely a product of a *tactical* move on the part of Stalin. The war

[231] During the Nazi invasion over fifty Soviet Yiddish writers fell at the front. See: S.L. Shneiderman, "Yiddish in the USSR," *New York Times Book Review*, 15 November, 1970, 71.

[232] While this renaissance of Jewish nationalism in Soviet Yiddish literature was characterized by the elaboration of themes that up until the outbreak of the war were either neglected or suppressed, it also had an important linguistic aspect. With the outbreak of the war and the news about the mass murders of Jews, one may discern in the language of many Soviet Yiddish writers a new predilection to include more Hebrew words and expressions, including terms and concepts drawn from biblical Hebrew, a practice that was overwhelmingly banned during the 1930s. This development was another indication of the Soviet Yiddish writers' desire to view themselves as a part of a long-standing Yiddish literary and linguistic continuum rooted in the in the medieval Ashkenazi past. See Khone Shmeruk, "Sifrut Yidish biVrit-hamo'atsot," *Behinot* 1 (1970): 24.

period, Shmeruk argues, was a rare moment when the national aspirations and pathos of Soviet Yiddish writers coalesced with the interests of the entire Jewish people, within and beyond the USSR, and most importantly – with the specific wartime interests of the Soviet government.[233] It therefore did not take too long after the end of the war for Stalin to realize that the potential for exploiting Soviet Yiddish culture as an effective propaganda instrument had already been exhausted, a realization that prompted him, *inter alia*, to first shut down all Yiddish cultural institutions, and later – to order the purging of their key members.

While Shmeruk underlines the uniqueness of this period as a rare time when Yiddish writers could give vent to their national feelings, Harriet Murav views the same epoch through a different lens, dwelling at greater length on the irreconcilability between the two key features of works that appeared during the war and its aftermath by Yiddish writers. Some of these works reflected the need for mobilization, for a literature of war and hatred that would drive the Jewish multitudes to the Red Army. [234] Others were literary works of a very different nature, reflecting the need for a literature that would turn its gaze to loss and mourning, to reflecting the enormous toll that the Nazi attack took on European Jews, and Soviet Jews among them. According to

[233] Ibid., 23-24.

[234] This unique feature of war-time Soviet Yiddish literature, focusing on the theme of revenge was observed by the two great American Yiddish literature critics, Nahman Mayzel and Shmuel Niger, the former, a Soviet sympathizer (who moderated his support for Moscow in the wake of the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign) and the latter, a vehement critique of the course that Soviet Jewish literature had taken prior to the outbreak of World War II. Mayzel, aware of the absence of a specific Jewish reaction in Soviet Yiddish literary responses to the war and the abundance of works that viewed the Jews as no more than rank-and-file members of the larger Soviet nation (Markish's poem, echoing the slogan espoused by the Soviet regime during the war "For the People and the Fatherland" is representative of this trend) – concentrated on the uniqueness of the Soviet-Jewish response to the Nazis. He noted that in contrast to many Yiddish writers in other countries who wrote about the war from a distance, it was only the Soviet Yiddish writers who took active part in the military struggle against the Nazis. See: Nahman Mayzel, *Dos yidishe shafn un der yidisher shrayber in sovetnfarband* (New York: Yikuf, 1959), 82. Shmuel Niger, by contrast, was not impressed by what he saw as empty slogans, as the transmission of hackneyed Soviet war propaganda in a Jewish language, geared toward a Jewish audience. Nonetheless, even Niger had to soften his tone and explain to his American readers that in the Soviet Union, in a country where "one is totally preoccupied, and one has to be preoccupied by one thing – getting rid of the dangerous and murderous foe," Soviet Yiddish literature had to emphasize the themes of heroism and revenge. See: Shmuel Niger, *Yidishe shrayber in Sovet rusland* (New York: Altveltlekhn kultur kongres, 1958), 254-255, 424.

Murav, during the war itself, both Russian-Jewish writers and Yiddish writers could still embody in their lives and embed in their works the 'Soviet' and the 'Jew' as two categories that overlap – "not seamlessly but closely enough."[235] In its aftermath, once the dimensions of the destruction became clearer, the Soviet Yiddish writers, grieving over the annihilation of an ancient Jewish civilization that many of them had earlier derided, began to realize how unsuitable the language of hatred and revenge was to deal with the reality of mass shootings and industrial killing.

In the particular context of Babi Yar's handling in the Soviet Yiddish sphere, wartime reports on the massacres that had taken place at the ravine are, indeed, not typical of what we would usually find in works published in the West that could be labeled Holocaust literature. Before we turn to a discussion of the references to Babi Yar themselves, it should be noted that these were very few: both in the reports by Yiddish correspondents *Eyniket* about the massacres at the ravine and in belletristic works. In contrast to the large number of works and reportage on the Warsaw Ghetto, for instance, or on the death factories of Auschwitz and Treblinka, on Holocaust sites situated outside the Soviet Union and hence safe to write about, the number of references to Babi Yar in the immediate years after the carnage there were quite few. This fact by itself is immensely important as it shows that even in the heyday of the freedom that Soviet Yiddish writers were given to express their national sentiments, writing about Babi Yar was something extraordinary. As we observe the two major literary works on Babi Yar of the era, "The Mother Rachel" by Aaron Kushnirov and *War* by Perets Markish, we must bear in mind that this was something unusual, even for a period that witnessed some degree of relaxed censorship.

[235] Murav, 119.

The very few references to Babi Yar, though, do not suggest that the *Eynikayt* editors meant to relegate Babi Yar to a lower priority. Suffice it to note that in its October 5, 1944 issue, in a front page article carrying the title "Eynikayt in nekome" (Unity in Revenge), Solomon Mikhoels, the head of the JAFC, listed the war sites which "will never be erased from our memory" in the following order: Babi Yar, Traktorni (in Kharkov), Maidanek, Treblinka, Trostinets (in Minsk), followed by "the Warsaw, Vilna, Minsk, Ghettos, the millions murdered in Bessarabia, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania."[236] This contextualization of Babi Yar with a list of Holocaust sites, coupled by the assertion that "together with the Red Army, together with all Soviet peoples, we [that is, Soviet Jews] draw closer to the day of anti-fascist victory…,"[237] implies that Babi Yar was construed by Mikhoels as a site pertaining to the destruction of European Jews.

A few months later, however, this current is reversed with an article entitled "Zeyer ondenk lebt" (Their Memory is Alive), published on September 29, 1945, ostensibly to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the massacre. The subject of the article, however, is not the Jews of Kiev but rather the POWs of the Sirets labor camp near Babi Yar, whose uprising shall forever be engraved in the collective memory of the Yiddish organ's readers. The emphasis in the two articles on revenge and resistance help further obfuscate the magnitude of the rupture that the war had caused between the old Jewish way of life, which despite the tribulations of the early 20th century had been preserved to some limited extent, and the new, totally bleak reality of a total destruction emerging in the aftermath of the war.

[236] Sh. Mikhoels, "Eynikayt in nekome," *Eynikayt*, 5 October 1944.
[237] Ibid.

Why did Mikhoels employ the title "Their Memory is Alive" not to engrave on the minds of Soviet Jews the memory of those who had been killed in Babi Yar, but to turn instead to the memory of the prisoners of war and 'de-Judaize' it? We have already seen that another major *Eynikayt* contributor, Ilya Ehrenburg, gave the first reference to Babi Yar published in *Eynikayt* the title "Sanctified Earth," also in order to mean something else: the battlefield. These two titles, in fact, foreshadow the way the theme of Babi Yar would be handled by Soviet Yiddish writers in the next period, that of the Thaw, and in many ways, during the Brezhnev years as well. Without being able to ascertain what went on in the mind of each writer, we are able to recognize two conflicting tendencies that mimic the two positions described by Murav: a call for mobilization, on the one hand, and confrontation with destruction, on the other. One is a tendency to refer to the experience of the Great Patriotic War explicitly, and view Jews as one group of victims among others. Another, is the view of Babi Yar as a distinctly Jewish slaughter site – expressed only implicitly – and a metonymy for the Jewish people's destruction as a whole.

If this roundabout way of dealing with the Jewish aspect of Babi Yar is evident in *Eynikayt* and would later characterize some of the works appearing in the course of the post-Stalin era, during the war years and in their immediate aftermath, we find two Yiddish works, both published in 1948, that boldly portray the murder of the Jews at Babi Yar: *War* by Perets Markish and "The Mother Rachel" by Aaron Kushnirov. Both writers had spent substantial time in interwar Kiev, but had become by then key players in the Moscow Yiddish literary scene. Both works also appeared for the first time in Moscow, the first in book form and the second in

the Yiddish literary almanac *Heymland*. Their appearance, thus, endowed the theme of Babi Yar with a national resonance that transcended any local boundaries.[238]

When placed on a broader historical continuum, the two works may be regarded as transitional. In them, we may find traces of the Soviet Yiddish response to the Nazi invasion: a call for revenge, preoccupation with graphic description of Nazi violence and an overly heroic, saintly depiction of the Red Army. However, the theme of loss and the glimpse into what had been lost outweighs in these postwar pieces the attention given to revenge and heroism. In Kushnirov's poem, the singing of the praises of the Red Army is conspicuous. His affection for the Red Army was not that of an observer – Kushnirov was a Red Army officer decorated with three medals for the part he played in the war.[239] Yet these sentiments, remarkably, appear toward the end of his long poem and seem rather artificially grafted on to a poem otherwise suffused with Jewish nationalist emotions and Biblical imagery, a longing for the Jewish past and reflections on the Jewish people's devastation.

The greatest virtue of the poem is its reflection on loss on two levels concurrently – the national and the personal. The Mother Rachel of the poem, as it turns out, is not only a mother, but a grandmother and great-grandmother. She is a lonely woman whose descendants have, fortunately, left the city. Rachel herself spent "over seventy of her eighty years" in her old house on Tshumacki street, a place that used to feel like home, where she knew every house and floor, she thinks to herself, while wondering "why they all look now so foreign and secluded…" The reference to her motherhood is meant to turn her personal plight into a national one, as the old

[238]Arn Kushnirov, "Di muter Rokhl," *Heymland: literarish-kinstlerisher almanakh* 5 (1948): 36-40. I am indebted to Gennady Estraikh for recently publishing this poem in the Yiddish *Forverts*. Aron Kushnirov, "Di muter Rokhl," *Forverts*, 30 September – 6 October 2011, 13. The poem tells the story of an 80-year-old Kiev Jewess whose fate was to march, "like all other Jews," to Babi Yar.

[239] Mayzel, 120.

Rachel of Kiev shares a similar fate with the biblical Matriarch Rachel – a tragic, unexpected death on the road.

Kushnirov, in his work, thereby turns Babi Yar into a Jewish space. His poem mentions a heroic struggle of a Soviet seaman with his Nazi captors, but for him, and he makes it most clear, Babi Yar is the site, whither Rachel is now ordered to go, ”like all the other Jews….” Moreover, the hero selected for the poem is another testimony to the great length to which Kushnirov was willing to go in endowing his poem with Jewish national sentiments, done at the expense of the *druzhba narodov*, the so-called ‘friendship of nations.” If during the 1930s the young generation of Soviet Yiddish writers looked at the older generation as men of the old and decaying order, living relics of the bourgeois past, the mother Rachel, who had spent most of her life in Kiev under tsarism and now looks fondly at that past, most certainly falls short of being considered a proper Soviet hero.

Filled with many elements that would later become the staple features of Holocaust literature: a solemn, affectionate portrayal of the Jewish individual, done in a restrained tone and underlining the moral superiority of the victim – the poem still contains the common literary tropes abundant in Yiddish literature of the war years. Even though by 1948 there was no longer a practical need to write a ‘literature of mobilization,’ in the poem’s plot, right after reaching its climax when Rachel stretches her hands toward her German oppressors, thinking of her helplessness, she thinks to herself:

נו הרגעט מיך, עס טוט מיר אפילו ניט וויי,

וואָס נאָך קענט איר טאָן, אַז עס טוט מיר ניט וויי,

דאַנק גאָט, מיינע קינדער אין רויטער אַרמיי,

דאַנק גאָט איך באַדאַרף דאָך ניט ווייגען אויף זיי,

די זין מיינע זיינען אין רויטער אַרמיי,

און אייניקלעך האָב איך אין רויטער אַרמיי...

נישקשה, זי לעבט נאָך, די רויטער אַרמיי...[240]

Kill me – it doesn't even hurt,

What more could you do to cause me pain,

Thank God that my children are in the Red Army,

Thank God that I don't need to cry over them

My sons both serve in the Red Army

And I have grandchildren in the Red Army

Yes, she still lives, the Red Army

The praise for the Red Army do suggest that the poem hinges on two different axes: that of Soviet Jewry's destruction – an ethnic group linked now to its age-old history – and that of the Great Patriotic War. The conclusion of the poem, with the killing by the Nazis of both Rachel and an injured Soviet seaman who had been carried to Babi Yar, may be seen as proof that the poem sets the two master narratives in a state of equilibrium. This, however, is only partially

[240] Kushnirov, "Di muter Rokhl, *Heymland*, 39. Orthography standardized.

correct. For no matter how many times the praises of the Red Army repeat themselves, no matter how long the hiatus of optimism these lines can bring, and no matter how brave the Soviet seaman is (who in his final moments tries to resist his aggressors), these all do not eclipse an otherwise highly sentimental, reflective portrayal of Babi Yar as a symbol of a Jewish national catastrophe, carried out through the biblical archetype of Rachel the matriarch.

If the poem by Kushnirov is still situated at the crossroad between the literature of mobilization, hate and revenge and that of mourning and commemoration, the four-volume epic *War* by Markish, a title from which the author deliberately omitted the conventional adjective *foterlendishe* (Great Patriotic), marks the crossing of a line toward the latter realm. Although, as Murav notes, the poem deals with the question of human suffering and does not focus on the tragedy of the Jews, its hero, Gur-Aryeh (a young lion in Hebrew, an image referring to the symbol of Israel in the Bible), [241] is struck by the destruction of his own kin to the point of no full recovery. If the archetype of the matriarch Rachel helps Kushnirov turn Babi Yar into a Jewish national symbol of destruction, Markish does so through the figure of Gur-Aryeh, the Soviet-Jewish man, who had survived the shootings at Babi Yar and managed to escape the ravine. If for Kushnirov Babi Yar is a symbol of complete loss, for Markish it also marks the beginning of a new phase in Jewish history. Standing over Babi Yar, Gur-Aryeh recalls the eschatological metaphor drawn from the book of Ezekiel of the valley of the dried bones soon to be resurrected.[242]

That for Markish Babi Yar is not only a valley of death but of life as well, does not diminish his awareness of the real dimensions of the loss. The prophetic language he resorts to is

[241] Murav, 170.
[242] Perets Markish, *Milhome*, vol. 1 (New York: Ikuf, 1956), 129.

not meant to achieve an artificial effect of hope and consolation. On the contrary, the very fact that Gur-Aryeh had been killed and came back to life suggests that he will always belong to two worlds, that of the dead and that of the living, with no ability to ever bridge them. The soldier within him will continue with the war effort and defeat the Nazis. But the Jew will stay with his brethren in the ravine, destroyed and erased.

If in his poem "To the Jewish Fighter," published in *Eynikayt* on August 31, 1943, around the time when the Soviet military started to march into lands populated by native Germans,[243] Markish's response to every slaughtered child and every defiled sister was taking revenge upon a German city, Gur Aryeh becomes now fully aware of the futility of revenge as a means to compensate for loss. In *War,* Markish seems to have given up any hope of reconciling the 'Soviet' and the 'Jew,'[244] the grand project that he had embraced wholeheartedly earlier when he left Poland and moved to the Soviet Union, aspiring thereby to find a remedy for the Jewish people by re-forging it as an equal member in the Soviet multi-ethnic grand scheme.

Markish's work is remarkable for placing the Babi Yar massacre at the core of a monumental work that traces the destruction of European Jews both within and beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union. The epic poem itself testifies to the long way that Markish has gone from his earlier war works that came up with a far less complex reaction to the unfolding tragedy of the Jews: the call to mobilize the Soviet Jewish man into the Red Army, summoning him to first defend his motherland and then wreak vengeance upon its invaders. This change of mood in the oeuvre of Markish marks the transition from the war-time responses to the

[243] The poem was reprinted in: Khone Shmeruk, ed., *A shpigl oyf a shteyn: antologye - poezye un proze fun tsvelf farshnitene yidishe shraybers in ratn-farband* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988; photo-offset of the 1964 edition), 490-92.

[244] Murav, 169.

Holocaust, endowed with a sense of immediacy, to the more philosophical probing and theological responses emerging only after the smoke and dust of war have settled. Little could Perets Markish know that the Soviet Yiddish writers who would choose a few years later to represent the Babi Yar massacre in their work would also emerge from the grave in which the blood of Markish and other Jewish writers flowed, leave the Gulag and come back to the land of the living.

The Years of Silence

In 1948, the year that witnessed first the murder of the Anti-Fascist Jewish Committee's head Solomon Mikhoels and later on the abolishment of the committee itself, Stalin launched his battle against Soviet Yiddish culture. Thereafter, its last vestiges were destroyed one after another: local Jewish sections in Soviet Writers' Unions were disbanded, virtually all Yiddish newspapers, periodicals and books ceased to appear, and the main Yiddish theaters were closed down.[245] The condition of Jews and Jewish culture during this period reached its nadir in 1952 with the murder of the most towering Yiddish cultural figures: Perets Markish, Dovid Bergelson, ItsikFefer, Dovid Hofshteyn, Leib Kvitko and others. It was followed by the witch-hunt of Jewish physicians, "the murderers in white gowns," unleashed in January 1953 by the alarmingly more paranoid and Judophobic Stalin, a new campaign that was thwarted only by his death two months later.

During the immediate years of the post-Stalin era, a tectonic shift could be felt in the Soviet Russian cultural domain. As we have seen in the first chapter, this was a time when the

[245] Altshuler, *Yahadut bamakhbesh haSovieti*, 102.

collective leadership that succeeded Stalin realized the grave need for a comprehensive overhaul of the stagnating Soviet state: its totalitarian economy, politics and culture. The minor arena of Yiddish literature, however, remained, for the time being, somewhat impervious to these changes. That the Soviet Yiddish clock was frozen in the Stalin era was in many ways true, but some apparent changes did take place. Stalin's legacy of anti-Semitic terror was, to a certain extent, undone. And Yiddish culture started to gradually emerge from a static condition of complete non-existence. The first, extremely modest, harbinger of a rehabilitation of Yiddish letters was the publication of a small book by Sholem Aleichem in Russian translation in 1954.[246] Then, the release from the Gulag of dozens of Yiddish writers and cultural activists was set in motion, [247] coupled with the posthumous rehabilitation of Perets Markish, the first Soviet Yiddish writer whose murder was disclosed by the Khrushchev administration.[248] The next step was the resumption, in 1959, of Yiddish publishing in the USSR after a decade of complete silence.[249] No matter how gradual, hesitant changes these were, they did send a signal to those who wished to revive Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union that Moscow was now willing to veer

[246] Altshuler, *Yahadut Berit haMo'atsot beaspaklariyah shel itonut Yidish bePolin*(Jerusaelm: Hebrew University, 1975), xi.

[247] The first Yiddish literati who had survived the Stalinist Gulag started to come back from exile in 1954-55. See: Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War* (London: Legenda, 2008), 48;

[248]For the account of Markish's wife Esther, who was notified about the writer's death on November 27, 1955 see: Esther Markish, *The Long Return* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 241. About a month later, the literary weekly *Literaturnaya gazeta* announced the foundation of a committee to preside over Markish's legacy. Yiddish cultural activists in the west could take cue from this communication to learn that Markish was no longer alive (as many had suspected) and that his name and reputation had been fully recovered. See Idem, 248; Gennady Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*, 18.

[249] Benjamin Pinkus points out that not only substantial, but also technical obstacles accounted for the delay in the resumption of Yiddish publications in the USSR. See Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews*, 266. Pinkus, though, joins virtually all scholars who offered a critical analysis of Soviet Yiddish publications and contends that the chief reason for the delay was the hope of Soviet officials that the demand for the revival of Soviet Yiddish culture would abate parallel to the decline in the number of Yiddish speakers in the Soviet Union. Most representative of this approach was Mikhail Suslov (then a Central Committee and presidium member and later on the chief party ideologue during the Brezhnev years) who, in 1956, asserted that Yiddish culture was dead and was not worth the effort rehabilitating. See: Abraham Brumberg, "*Sovyetish Heymland* and the Dilemmas of Jewish Life in the USSR," *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, no. 3 (1972): 28.

away from the legacy of Stalinism and to allow Soviet Jews in general and Soviet Jewish intellectuals and artists in particular a benign degree of personal security.

These gradual changes suggested that Khrushchev's attitude to Jewish culture would be a far cry from the brutal repressions of the late Stalin years. But the refusal to revive Soviet Yiddish culture and elevate it back to its interwar status remained unchanged. In his groundbreaking Secret Speech at the Twentieth Party Congress, Khrushchev made no reference to Stalin's recent anti-Semitic repressions.[250] This ambivalence toward Jews and Jewish culture was manifested in the fact that, on the one hand, anti-Semitic terrorism came to a halt; while on the other hand, those responsible for it remained in power.[251] This state of limbo turned Soviet Jews only more insecure and fearful that anti-Jewish persecutions, still freshly stored in their memory, might resume. [252]

Furthermore, the new regime's negative stance toward the restoration of Soviet Yiddish culture ran parallel to other restrictions imposed on Soviet Jews that were meant to curb the very limited religious freedoms that they had been allowed at the outbreak of the German-Russian War. While these measures were taken as part of a comprehensive ideological attack against religion in general conducted from 1957-1964, it was hard not to notice the mendacious anti-Semitic character of the campaign against the Jewish religion in which Judaism was presented as a reactionary, unscientific entity, inciting enmity between Jews and non-Jews.[253] The direct

[250] Nisan Rozental , 89.
[251] Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*, 51.
[252]Rozental, 89.
[253] Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence*, 164. In January 1959, Khrushchev ratified this anti-religious campaign that he saw as an indispensable part of the "transition from socialism to communism. See: Altshuler, *Yahadut bamakhbesh haSovieti*," 159.

outcome of this campaign was a surge of anti-Semitic sentiments among rank-and-file Soviet citizens who were now exposed to anti-Semitic propaganda of the most virulent kind.[254]

To the propagandistic elements of this new attack against Judaism, promulgated in the midst of an era popularly remembered as a time of greater openness to diverse opinions and relaxation of state terror, were added other measures. These were all intended to further alienate Jews from mainstream Soviet society, from each other, and from their tradition: the closure of synagogues and the harassment of Jews attending those that remained open; the ban on baking matza; the ban on establishing contacts with foreign Jews;[255] and, lastly, the more subtly anti-Semitic character of the economic trials that involved a large number of Jewish defendants charged with "speculation."[256]

In this environment, so hostile to accommodating any Jewish national and religious aspirations, it goes without saying that the restoration of Yiddish culture to the prominence that it had enjoyed up until the campaign against "Rootless Cosmopolitans" was not on the mind of Nikita Khrushchev, who after the secret speech of 1956 and the "anti-Party coup" turned into the unassailable leader of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev's unwritten doctrine of maintaining a deep-seated prejudice toward the Jews, a trace of his Russian peasant background, while bringing

[254] As Zvi Gitelman notes, while the anti-religious campaigns of the early 1920s were carried out by the Evsektsia mainly in the Yiddish language, making, thus, the slandering of Judaism available exclusively for Jews, the Khrushchev campaign was executed in languages accessible to non-Jews. The outcome of this linguistic choice was a surge of anti-Semitic sentiments. Most malicious of the anti-Semitic propaganda works of the time was *Judaism without Embellishment* by Vadim Kichko, published in Kiev in 1963 by the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. See Gitelman, *A century of Ambivalence*, 165.

[255] A vivid portrayal of Jewish life in the Soviet Union in the early 1960s was given by the writer Elie Wiesel in a book that brought the anti-Jewish repressions implemented by the Khrushchev regime to the attention of the public in the west. See Wiesel, *The Jews of Silence*.

[256] Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence*, 159-168. Mordecahi Altshuler notes that the battle against the "black economy," while ostensibly conducted irrespective of the campaign against Judaism was, in reality, correlated with it as the Soviet authorities tried to blacken the image of the Jewish communal activists operating the few synagogues still functioning in the country as "charlatans who under the camouflage of religion engage in illegal acts." See Altshuler, *Yahadut bamakhbesh haSovieti, 168.*

state-sanctioned violence toward them to a halt, had an indelible impact on Yiddish literature's response to the Holocaust in general, and the Babi Yar massacre in particular. While Yiddish literature was always a minor literature, the little sister of the Russian-Soviet one, the attack against Jews and the extremely limited amount of Yiddish works whose publication was approved turned Soviet Yiddish literature of the Thaw period into a vestige. True, due to the lack of a common Jewish territory, the practitioners of Yiddish culture always felt that their world was precarious, hanging by a thread. But now, with a minute number of works allowed to appear every year, and with only one Yiddish periodical, *Sovetish heymland*, that began to appear in 1961, Soviet Yiddish writers could easily take their cue and realize on their own how limited and how careful they would have to be when invoking the memory of a sensitive issue like Babi Yar in their works. While the very few works on Babi Yar that did appear on the pages of *Sovetish heymland* are the focus of the following chapter, these are all exceptions: rare moments and works in which the ravine of Babi Yar is mentioned in the most oblique way.

That Soviet Yiddish literature of the Thaw period did not nurture anyone like Yevtushenko, who would not only touch upon the memory of the ravine but also openly protest its neglect, is not at all hard to understand. The three conditions that helped produce a *shetidesyatnik* the likes of Yevtushenko were not met in the case of the Soviet Yiddish writers who made their debut during the late Thaw and for the most part on the pages of the *Sovetish heymland*. First, unlike an emerging talent such as Yevtushenko, who could choose between the left-leaning or the right-leaning Soviet intelligentsia, affiliated with such periodicals as *Novyi Mir* and *Oktyabr'* respectively, Soviet Yiddish writers had but a single, ideologically homogenous periodical that due to its precarious existence had to assume a very conservative

character.[257]Second, unlike young Russian writers of the Thaw period, the Soviet Yiddish writers had first-hand experience of the Stalinist terror. As Abraham Brumberg points out, more than half of them spent time in prison until the mass releases of Gulag inmates began in the mid-1950s.[258] Needless to say, the very few of them who had lived through the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign untouched, lived in constant fear of arrest, exile, or execution. Many of them were broken men and women, who based on their own life experience, lacked any enthusiasm for dangerous political adventures. Third, and no less important, the majority of the Soviet Yiddish writers who contributed to *Sovetish heymland* were now men and women in their fifties. In other words, twenty important years that would typically make one more sober separated them from figures like Yevtushenko, Kuznetsov or Voznesenski.

Finally, it should be recalled that the very appearance of a new, handsomely produced literary journal in the Yiddish language was itself the product of outside pressure on Moscow by the regime's Soviet sympathizers in the West, among them many Jews. Emerging from a state of nonexistence in the late 1950s into a more stable one in August of 1961, Soviet Yiddish literature was by no means ready to deal with the controversial subject of Babi Yar. The stopgap solution, therefore, was to find an alternative platform for literary works and journalistic reports on Babi Yar in the Polish Soviet satellite. Here, at last, was a safe path where the Russian big sister had never treaded.

[257] Joseph and Abraham Brumberg, *Sovyetish Heymland -An Analysis* (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1966), 34.
[258] Abraham Brumberg, "*Sovyetish Heymland and the Dilemmas"*, 33.

Babi Yar in Communist Poland

Parallel to the shut-down of Soviet Yiddish institutions and the arrest of writers and artists in the Soviet Union, a process that brought Soviet Yiddish cultural activity to a complete standstill, the Polish government enjoyed, at that time, some degree of flexibility to form its own policy vis-à-vis Yiddish culture. Indeed, as opposed to the Soviet decision to withdraw from the earlier acceptance of the Jews as a legitimate national minority possessing its own language and even its own territory, the Polish authorities enabled the Holocaust survivors who remained in Poland and the refugees who started to come back to Poland to set up an officially sanctioned and government-funded Jewish community organization known as the Central Committee of Polish Jews. This body oversaw a variety of cultural activities: Polish radio programs in Yiddish, schools, a publishing house, a theater and a Yiddish press.[259] Short-lived and able to exist as a Jewish communal umbrella organization only so long as it served the immediate interests of the Polish government (who sought, at that time, support from Jewish philanthropic organizations),[260] this body, renamed in 1950 the Social-Cultural Union of the Jews in Poland, survived, even though the extent of its autonomy and range of activities was curbed.

The facilitation of Yiddish cultural life in the postwar Republic of Poland (from 1952-1989 it would be called The People's Republic of Poland), while conceived as a Polish project, also played an instrumental role in fostering Yiddish culture on Soviet territory. Some Soviet writers – the most salient example being Itsik Kipnis with his *On khokhmes, on kheshboynes* (Without Thinking, without Calculation), a work suffused with Jewish patriotism – dared to send

[259] Eleonora Bergman, "Yiddish in Poland after 1945," in: *Yiddish and the Left*, eds. Mikhail Krutikov and Gennady Estraikh (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), 169.

[260] David Engel, "The Reconstruction of Jewish Communal Institutions in Postwar Poland: The Origins of the Central Committee of Polish Jews, 1944-1945," *East European Politics and Societies* 10, no. 1 (1996): 87-88, 92, 101.

their work to Poland even after it had been rejected for publication in the USSR, or when they realized that the work should be sent to the former as it had no chance of being published in the latter.[261] In light of the complete shutdown of the Yiddish press (except for the parochial and remote *Birobidzhaner shtern*) and Yiddish book publishing between the years 1948-1959, communist Poland became the main channel through which some of the Soviet Yiddish writers who had survived the arrests and purges could continue to write and connect to their readers. This connection to Soviet Yiddish readers was possible since many issues of Polish Yiddish books as well as press publications, such as *Dos naye lebn*, *Floks-shtime* and *Yidishe shriftn*, were sent abroad, including to readers in the USSR.

In this last respect, the Communist Yiddish Polish press here played a peculiar role: it provided Soviet Jews with a properly socialist, extra-territorial cultural platform that prevented the complete demise of Soviet Yiddish literature. As Mordechai Altshuler explains, this paradoxical situation, one that was certainly not encouraged by Moscow, was tolerated. Indirectly, this condition helped Moscow to have information about Jewish activities in the USSR, to reach out beyond the Iron Curtain and to also set a 'safety valve' by way of which pressure coming from Soviet Yiddish writers could be securely released. [262] In a sense, the Polish Yiddish press amounted to a middle-ground between two modes of publication – the illegal *tamizdat* mode, i.e. the sending of a work for publication abroad, typically in a Western country, and the legal practice of "permitted dissent" explored in the first part of our study.

It is noteworthy that while active during the years when Yiddish publications in the Soviet Union were non-existent, the Polish Yiddish press continued to provide a 'safety valve'

[261] See Itsik Kipnis, *On khokhmes, on kheshboynes, etc.*
[262] Mordechai Altshuler, ed., *Yahadut Berit haMo'atsot beaspaklariyah,* xiv.

even in the ensuing decade after the debut of *Sovetish heymland* in the summer of 1961, edited by Arn Vergelis, about whom much more will be said in the pages to come. It was in the Polish Yiddish newspaper *Folks-shtime* and the literary periodical *Yidishe shriftn* that one could find references during the Thaw period to two topics that never loomed large in *Sovetish heymland*: the murder of the Soviet Yiddish writers (epitomized in the milestone article "Our Pain and Consolation" by the editors of the *Folks-shtime* that affirmed, for the first time, the rumors circulating about the murders to western audiences), and the Holocaust.[263]

With regard to the latter topic, a glimpse into the works published in the Polish Yiddish press illuminates its ability to construct the Holocaust as a Jewish event in a fashion very similar to *War* by Markish and "The Mother Rachel" by Kushnirov, published in the USSR prior to the Stalinist anti-Semitic campaigns . It was, for instance, about a year before the appearance of *Sovetish heymland* that the Soviet Yiddish poet Moyshe Teyf published a poem in the Polish *Folks-shtime* with the title "Six Million" and used this as a mnemonic for the Jewish people's tragedy.[264]

Remarkably, the greater openness to commemorating the Holocaust was not only the result of the general political mood prevailing in postwar Eastern Europe. It was also a result of internal conflicts among Yiddish literati on both sides of the Soviet-Polish border. As Hersh Smoliar, the editor of the *Folks-shtime*, reminisced, during a stay in Poland in 1965, Aron Vergelis "demanded that the editors of the Polish Yiddish press will publish works written by Soviet writers only after consulting him. He was supported by Avrom Guntar, his loyal assistant,

[263] "Undzer veytik un undzer treyst," *Folks-shtime*, 4 April, 1956. The article appeared in English in Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews*, 211. For a list of the publication related to the Holocaust appearing in the Soviet Yiddish press see Ibid., 39-48.

[264] Moyshe Teyf, "Zeks milion," *Folks-shtime,* 16 April, 1960, 5.

who argued that the terms 'Yiddish, Jews and Judaism' are too prominent in *Folks-shtime*."[265] This ideological gap created a rift between the main Soviet Yiddish literary venue and its Polish equivalent was also apparent in the narrower context of Babi Yar's commemoration.

In the course of the Thaw period, the *Folks-shtime* displayed a high level of openness toward literary works on Babi Yar that highlighted its Jewish context, publishing them with no major delay. Admittedly, standing above all these works was "Babi Yar" by Yevgeny Yevtushenko that appeared in *Folks-shtime* in Yiddish translation on October 3, 1961, only a few days after its debut in *Literaturnaya gazeta*. The response of *Sovetish heymland* to the "earthquake" that "Babi Yar" had triggered paled in comparison with this; the farthest that Vergelis was willing to go, was to publish an ideologically conservative poem by Yevtushenko with the title "The Queen Beauty".[266] It thus transpired that in contrast with its Polish equivalent, *Sovetish heymland* could only obliquely pay honor to a Soviet non-Jewish writer who dared to link Babi Yar with the tragedy of the Jews.

While the dull and highly filtered-out way in which this process of Babi Yar's commemoration in *Sovetish heymland* played itself out, orchestrated by its editor Aron Vergelis, is the focus of the next chapter, for now we will draw a few comparisons between the Polish newspaper and the Soviet periodical. For instance, while *Sovetish heymland* only laconically noted in its "Notes on the Calendar: Writers and Works" section that Dmitry Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony set to music five of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poems,[267] *Folks-shitme*, in its "Jewish News" column, dedicated an entire front page entry to the "Symphony to the Poem

[265] Altshuler, *Yahadut Berit haMo'atsot beaspaklariyah*, 21
[266] Yevgeni Yevtushenko, "Di malke sheynheyt," *Sovetish heymland* October-November 1961.
[267] "Notitsn for calendar," *Sovetish Heymland* 9 (1966): 160.

"Babi Yar" Performed in Moscow."[268] Here, the author notes that Babi Yar is the "mass grave of 80,000 Kiev Jews, murdered by the Hitlerites," and adds that the symphony is dedicated to the Jewish victims of fascism. By the same token, whereas *Sovetish heymland* chose to categorically ignore the contest opened in January 1966 at the Kiev based Architect's House designed to introduce to the public different sketches for the proposed official Babi Yar monument and to select the winning project, *Folks-shtime* followed this development quite closely. As early as the summer of 1965, it communicated to its readers about the decision made by the Soviet Ukrainian authorities to lay a memorial at Babi Yar.[269]

Brezhnev's Mild Thaw

Having surveyed the evolution of Babi Yar's literary commemoration during the war, during the last years of Stalinism and during the Thaw years, both in the USSR and Poland, let us turn to the last era included in the chronological timeframe of our study, the one in which the largest number of works on Babi Yar appeared in the Soviet Yiddish literary arena. As we have noted in the first part of our study, the term "Thaw" in the general context of Soviet history is associated with the policies espoused by Nikita Khrushchev and altered by the more conservative rule of Leonid Brezhnev. While Brezhnev's revisionist policies won him the unflattering title of 'Neo-Stalinist,' insofar as Babi Yar was concerned, the term 'Thaw' accurately describes what happened in the Soviet Yiddish literary sphere during the Brezhnev era.

[268] *Folks-shtime*, 2 October 1965, 1.

[269] Sh. Rabinovitsh, "In babi-yar vert geshtelt a denkmol," August 28 1965, 1. See also a short blurb in the "Jewish News" column: "33 proyektn fun a denkmol in babi yar," 22 January 1966, 1.

The transition between these two modes of leadership occurred suddenly, on October 15 1964, when in an unprecedented step, a Soviet leader did not die while in office but, rather, was forced into retirement.[270] The ousting of Khrushchev by his presidium members would usher in a new and prolonged era in Soviet history, recognized only in retrospect as *Zastoi* or the era of Stagnation. The new regime was led, initially, by the duumvirate Brezhnev-Kosygin. Toward the beginning of the 1970s, while the decision making process was still primarily based on the consent of the presidium members, Leonid Brezhnev would gradually emerge as *primus inter pares* in the Kremlin's hierarchy.[271] Those who had worked behind the scenes to oust Khrushchev were now weary of the contradictory nature of his policies. They saw them as an unviable form of moderate dictatorship, partially susceptible to criticism by its subjects. To those who succeeded Khrushchev it was clear that the Soviet regime would not be able to sustain its revolutionary vibrancy and, at the same time, keep the existing political and social order intact.

Nonetheless, the Brezhnev regime that replaced Khrushchev's suffered from inner contradictions that were no less severe. The Brezhnev years, to begin with, were the first time relative economic prosperity was felt throughout the country. Yet this material comfort turned out to be very deceptive. When evaluated in hindsight, this attainment of economic stability has been seen by many historians as one of the chief factors that set in motion the financial collapse of the Soviet system.[272] This was also a time when the Soviet leadership insisted – as opposed to Khrushchev's proclivity toward utopianism[273] – that Soviet citizens already lived in a state of "developed socialism," i.e., that the main objectives of the October Revolution had already been

[270] For a vivid description of the coup that forced Khrushchev out of office see: William Taubman, *Khrushchev: the Man and His Era* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 3-17.
[271] Peter Kenez, 214-215.
[272] Ibid., 218; Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 401-410.
[273] Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, 216, 218.

realized. At the same time, though, at no prior point in Soviet history was the Soviet elite, including Brezhnev himself, so much afflicted by so much corruption, including but not limited to, the reign of nepotism and self-indulgence in extravagant lifestyles. Another internal contradiction was the feeling of the Soviet populace (as well as the international community) that the Soviet regime was so stable that it would last for generations; a feeling that was contrasted by the growing alienation of this public from the ideals and tenets of Marxism-Leninism, which by now were perceived by most Soviet citizens as nothing more than a hodge-podge of empty slogans and bankrupt dreams.[274]

On top of all this, another contradictory feature of the Brezhnev regime that is especially relevant to our discussion has to do with its position on freedom of speech in the social sciences, an aggregate of disciplines that in the Soviet Union also embraced literature, philosophy and history.[275] The Brezhnev era was characterized by two conflicting tendencies. During this period there was a great leap back to the pre-Thaw period, to the tightening of censorship and control on writers, artists and intellectuals. In contrast to the liberal intelligentsia of the Khrushchev era that sought a strategy of cooperation with the Kremlin, in the Brezhnev period "permitted dissent" gave way to a new generation of dissidents who dared to challenge the entire moral foundation upon which the Soviet system rested and was not satisfied with the concrete, specific criticisms of the older generation of intellectuals. As early as 1965, dissent crystallized in the USSR in the form of a nationwide movement and turned *samizdat* (self-published materials, illegally printed and circulated) into its primary vehicle of expression and outreach.[276] As both the regime and the dissidents grew ideologically apart from each other, the pressure exerted on the latter became

[274] Ibid., 222-223, 416, 418.
[275] Ibid., 419.
[276] Rudolph Tokes, "Varieties of Soviet Dissent: an Overview," in: Idem., ed., *Dissent in the USSR: Politics, Ideology and People* (Baltimore and London, the John Hopkins University Press, 1975), 11.

ever greater and came to include confinement to labor camps and mental asylums, and, in some cases, forced emigration as well.

However, in clear contrast with the attack on dissidents, the banning of Solzhenitsyn's new works and the later exiling of their author, and even the most famous case of the Daniel-Sinyavsky Trial that marked the beginning of the Thaw's end, the Brezhnev regime displayed a degree of tolerance toward a variety of authors, both living and deceased, whose opinions often stood in direct conflict with the tenets of Marxism-Leninism.[277] While it seems, at first glance, random, or perhaps even senseless, this highly nuanced censorship did have its own inherent rationale: if Khrushchev, like Stalin before him, showed a great deal of involvement in literary affairs, the *apparatchik* Brezhnev set the doctrine pretty straight: first-rate literature and art – even when imbued with emotional and intellectual depth that could potentially challenge the Soviet way of life – were permitted so long as the regime did not consider them to constitute an immediate threat to its own stability.[278] Remembering all too-well the dark years of the Great Terror, both Brezhnev and his colleagues in the Presidium (later it changed its name to the Politburo) manifested, in this policy, a wish to find equilibrium in the shape of a regime that kept dissent in check for the sake of the regime's own survival on the one hand, while ensuring that its crack-down would not spiral out of control into purges and mass terror, on the other. As the historian and political science scholar Archie Brown put it, the top leadership of the Party and

[277] The film maker Andrei Tarkovski, the theater director and performer Vladimir Vysotski, and many others belong to this group among living artists. Among the deceased, one may mention Osip Mandelshtam, Fyodor M. Dostoevsky and Franz Kakfa, whose works started to be printed in the USSR either for the first time or after decades. See: Martin Dewhirst, "Soviet Russian Literature and Literary Policy," in: Archie Brown and Michael Kaser, eds. *The Soviet Union since the Fall of Khrushchev*," 187; Service, 415.

[278] Archie Brown," Political Developments: Some Conclusions and Interpretation," in: *The Soviet Union since the Fall of Khrushchev*, 231.

government came to the sober realization that "de-Stalinization is potentially as dangerous for them as re-Stalinization."[279]

This attempt to achieve a delicate balance between intellectual and ideological currents that could be tolerated, and the ones that had to be suppressed also played itself out on the scene of Soviet Jewish life. In the aftermath of the June 1967 Six-Day War a Jewish dissident emigration movement sprung up. The movement captured the attention of the world with the Leningrad Trial of December 1970, when a group of Jewish activists were arrested for plotting to hijack an airplane and to force its crew to land in Israel. In reaction to the arrest of its members, the Soviet authorities increased vigilance of Zionist activists and began launching anti-Israel campaigns.[280] Zionism, an ideology that had always been regarded by Moscow as "bourgeois" and anathema to socialism, had to be stamped out as long as the price to pay for this on the international arena was not too high. In the specific context of Babi Yar, this ambivalence was felt as well: while official ceremonies at the ravine mentioning no connection between the site and Jews and condemning Zionism took place at the site, the authorities would disperse the unofficial gathering of Jews at the site during the anniversary of the massacre of September 29-30, 1941 and arrest and charge some of its attendees for Zionist provocations.

While the authorities during the Brezhnev years were highly sensitive to grass-roots activities of Jews at the site of Babi Yar itself, the very minor Soviet-Yiddish cultural establishment of these years was categorized differently. It was primarily seen by Moscow as an

[279] Ibid., 233.

[280] As Abraham Brumberg notes, in the wake of this renewed campaign against Zionism, the Soviet regime would now conjure up the theme of Birobidzhan by way of countering Israel's claim to be the national homeland of the Jewish people worldwide. Evidently, as a part of this anti-Zionist attack, *Sovetish Heymland* became a useful vehicle to serve its propaganda purposes. See Abraham Brumberg, "*Sovyetish Heymland* and the Dilemmas," 27-41.

ideological and cultural entity that did not constitute any threat to the regime's stability and to the social order. This held true especially with regard to Soviet Yiddish literature as the publishing of mainly middle-brow literature with a limited circulation and in a language becoming increasingly obscure, amounted to hardly any discernible risk to the Soviet censorship. As the statistical data showed, the number of Yiddish speakers in the USSR was constantly declining. Yiddish culture no longer constituted a feasible alternative to the assimilatory trends among Soviet Jews, who were, overall, being drawn further and further away from the orbit of Jewish culture.

The decline of Yiddish language and literature was accompanied by developments in the Middle East that also impacted the position of Soviet Yiddish literature. In the midst of a renewed campaign against Zionism, Yiddish literature could now be regarded as a cultural platform that could be well-exploited by Moscow to counter-balance what it considered the pernicious and alarmingly growing influence of Zionism on the minds of Soviet Jews. Thus, the irrelevance of Soviet Yiddish literature as a tool of dissent and its potential expediency as a propaganda tool in the battle against Zionism may explain the Soviet regime's dual attitude to Yiddish culture in the post-Khrushchev era. Together, they helped create a peculiar situation in which a general trend of neo-Stalinism was much felt in the country, affecting Jewish dissidents among other anti-government groups, while the narrow sphere of Soviet Yiddish literature enjoyed something of a mini-thaw. [281]

[281] As Benjamin Pinkus notes, it is possible to distinguish between two periods of strong anti-Semitism in postwar Soviet history: 1948-53, 1959-63, and two periods of greater tolerance: 1953-55, 1965-1966. See: Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews*, 101.

One important area in which this easing of pressure found expression was the publication of Yiddish books in the USSR. While no single Yiddish book was published between 1961 and 1963, the first three years of the collective regime led by Brezhnev and Kosygin saw the publication of sixteen works in Yiddish.[282] Parallel to this, beginning in January 1965, *Sovetish heymland* turned from a bi-monthly into a monthly publication and its scope was enlarged as well. According to a survey done by Joseph and Abraham Brumberg, of the material that appeared in *Sovetish heymland* around this time, the growth in the quantity of Yiddish works was accompanied by an improvement in their quality.[283] In many of these works, it seems as though the journal's contributors and editor dispensed with purely propagandistic literature in favor of works that discussed contemporary Jewish life in the USSR, the Jewish pre-revolutionary past and the Holocaust as well. This increase in both quality and quantity also left some apparent marks on the treatment of Babi Yar in Soviet Yiddish literature.

It is finally possible to find, along with the occasional works on Babi Yar that seem more like editorial "accidents," a group of works that elaborate on the theme. While the relative security that Yiddish writers experienced at that time encouraged some of them to conjure up some of their long-suppressed memories of the Holocaust, the emergence of a Great Patriotic War cult, reaching its apogee between 1964-1980, also helped release the 'safety valve' that for years precluded many publications on the war in general, and Babi Yar in particular to occupy center stage[284]. As Nina Tumarkin notes, the coming to the fore of World War II memories, a process that was in its embryonic phase under Khrushchev, led to the construction of Soviet

[282] Ibid., 265.
[283] Joseph and Abraham Brumberg, *Sovyetish Heymland – an Analysis*, 31.

[284] Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead*, 134.

memorials throughout the country during the Brezhnev years. Among them were the Volgograd Memorial (unveiled in 1967) , the Brest Fortress-Hero Memorial Ensemble (completed in 1971), the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier memorial, and also the two monuments erected in Babi Yar, the small obelisk of 1966 and the massive statue by Lisenko unveiled a decade later.

Parallel to these changes on the ground, we find for the first time a serious growth of Yiddish publications on Babi Yar appearing not only in *Sovetish heymland* but in book form as well, among them works that had been waiting for more than two decades to be published in the Soviet Union. Two of them, to be discussed in Chapter Five, an essay-story by Itsik Kipnis and a poem by Shike Driz, both carrying the title "Babi Yar," are works of great value and may be regarded as the 'classics' of Babi Yar's representation in the Yiddish sphere. The rest, poems by Dore Khaykine, Motl Talalayevsky and Shloyma Cherniavsky, approach the massacre less directly and often situate Babi Yar on the brink between the Holocaust and the Great Patriotic War, leaving the tension between the two master narratives suspended. While the literary value of the latter group of Yiddish works on Babi Yar varies, they are interesting more as artistic tropes, reflecting the cultural climate and the boundaries of the permissible allowed for Yiddish writers during the post-Stalin years.

Chapter Five

"Babi Yar" in Yiddish:

The Work of Itsik Kipnis and Shike Driz

Let Us Go There by Foot: Itsik Kipnis's "Babi Yar"

In the previous chapter we surveyed the three stages in the evolution of Babi Yar's literary representation in the Soviet Union, extending our exploration not only to literary works, but to journalistic reportage as well. Our division into three eras – the late Stalin era, the Thaw, and the era of Stagnation, revealed that it was precisely in the course of the Thaw that the suppression of Babi Yar in Yiddish literature reached its peak; a time when anyone who wanted to obtain information about the massacre and its commemoration or read in Yiddish translation the major works on Babi Yar written in Russian and Ukrainian, had to get hold of these works and articles published in the Polish Soviet satellite.

The piece that most poignantly demonstrates the evolution of this three-phase process is the essay-story by Itsik Kipnis entitled "Babi Yar." The chronological trajectory described in the last chapter suits the long process of this piece's fruition, spanning a quarter of a century. A work that challenged Soviet dogma on so many levels, its process of evolution, from conception to publication, exactly mimics the three stages discussed above. It was a work that could be written only during the last months of the war, when Jewish national sentiments found the fullest

expression in Yiddish literary works. During the Thaw, all Kipnis could do, a year before Yevgeny Yevtushenko would turn Babi Yar into an international issue, was publish the work abroad through a communist-leaning Yiddish publication channel (the American-Yiddish publication house Ikuf).[285] Evidently, the virtual silence of the Yiddish literary sources published within the USSR during this period, coupled by the signal sent by Khrushchev following the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU that the years of purges and mass terror were over, encouraged Kipnis to send the work to New York. Lastly, in 1969, by the time that there was a large number of works in both Russian and Yiddish relating in detail what had happened in Babi Yar and by the time a modest monument could already be found at the ravine, Kipnis was finally able to publish this remarkable work in his collection of stories *Tsum lebn* (To life) via the publishing house Sovetskii Pisatel' (The Soviet writer).[286]

Itsik Kipnis, who was born in the shtetl of Sloveshno in 1896 and began his literary career in 1922 in Soviet Kiev, had already won international acclaim from major Yiddish literary critics and writers, among them Shmuel Niger, Zalman Reyzen and Dovid Bergelson. While Kipnis had no 'tainted' literary past, i.e. he belonged to the group of young Yiddish writers who started publishing their works following the October Revolution, his style singled him out as a writer who maintained a precarious balance between the pre-revolutionary world of the past, and the Soviet path of the future. Among his works written prior to the outbreak of the war, the one that brought him to the forefront of the young generation of Yiddish writers was *Khadoshim un teg: a khronik* (Months and Days: a Chronicle) that was published in 1926 and rendered a nostalgic picture of the Shtetl in which he grew up, offering a loving portrayal of its religious and semi-religious tradesmen. Seen by the aforementioned literary critics as the cornerstone of the

[285] Itsik Kipnis, *Untervegns un andere dertseylungen* (New York: Ikuf, 1960), 347-352.
[286] Ibid., *Tsum lebn: dertseylungen* (Moscow: Sovetski pisatel, 1969), 205-210.

new Soviet Yiddish literature, as a piece in which an affectionate portrayal, a la Sholem Aleichem, of the Shtetl is offered, and the post-Revolutionary reality of civil war and pogroms are interwoven, *Months and Days* brought Kipnis into his first clash with the Soviet literary establishment. As Ester Rosenthal Shneiderman notes, this was, after all, the same Shtetl that the new regime, assisted by the Jewish section of the Communist Party, the Evsektsiia, was fighting ferociously to transform, defining its inhabitants as *lishentsy*, as superfluous, non-productive parasites, devoid of the basic civil rights granted to Soviet citizens at that time.[287] As Mordechai Altshuler notes, equally controversial was the depiction of the Civil War of 1918-1919, in the course of which gangs of Ukrainians in the vicinity Sloveschno raided the town and brutally attacked the Jews. Kipnis even dared to give voice to the feelings of revenge shared by his townsmen, feelings that were his own as well.[288] Kipnis soon turned, according to Rosenthal-Shneiderman, into a 'white crow' among black ones: a reference to the old Russian image of the individual who cannot fit into the collective.[289]

Almost two decades after *Months and Days* came out, history forced Kipnis to revisit the topic and again offer a portrayal of a Jewish community, now the one of postwar Kiev, engulfed by the same two desires: the first, to cling to each other and recover from a new cycle of anti-Jewish violence and to do so as members of a distinct ethnic group, sharing age-old historical ties and living in complete alienation from the surrounding nations; and the second – to recover from the ruins of the bygone world through an act of revenge toward their new oppressors – the German people.

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[287] Esther Rosenthal-Shneiderman, "Itsik kipnis, aza vi ikh ken im (tsu zany vern a ben shivim)," *Di Goldene Keyt* 61 (1967): 130-132.

[288] Mordechai Altshuler, "Itsik Kipnis- The 'White Crow' of Soviet Yiddish Literature," *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe* 2 (2004): 69.

[289] Rosenthal-Shneiderman, "Itsik kipnis,"127.

Although it was written while the Red Army was still marching westward, heading to Berlin, Harriet Murav cogently classifies "Babi Yar," written only five months after Kipnis returned to the city as a work primarily concerned with postwar reconstruction.[290] Written almost a year after Kiev's liberation on November 6, 1943, the story-essay was written on the occasion of the third anniversary of the Babi Yar massacre.

The density that characterizes "Babi Yar" is already apparent in its first paragraph. Kipnis begins the story by reminding his readers that today is the 29th of September. Perhaps the younger generation of his readers, who were already schooled in the first atheist state in history, needed this kind of reminder about the fact that for Jews, the anniversary of the deceased is called *yortsayt*, a time when Jews attend the grave of the deceased, light candles and listen to the immediate relatives of the dead reciting the Aramaic prayer of the Kaddish. From the generic point of view, this introductory section of "Babi Yar" comes in the form of a newspaper's editorial: it refers to events that are about to take place on that day, and this sense of immediacy is underscored by Kipnis's direct address to his readers.[291]

Immediately after these introductory comments, Kipnis changes his tone abruptly. He makes it very clear that this is no lesson in Jewish ethnography, for

נאָר ס׳איז נאָך אפשר ניט אויסגעבויט געוואָרן דער זאַל, דער ריזיקער טעמפל, וואָס זאָל אריינגעמען
אין זיך אזוי פיל פייערן, אַזאַ צאָל אָנגעצונדענע ליכט... אָבער דאָ רוקט זיך אונטער אַן אַנדערער
געדאַנק, וואָס רוימט אונדז איין: נאַרעלע, עס ברענען דאָך פייערן אויף גרויסע שטחים, און אויף

[290] Murav, 245. When the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, Kipnis, like many other Soviet writers, was allowed to be evacuated to the Soviet inland. Initially, his family stayed in a village in the northern Caucasus, but once the Nazis reached the area he was allowed to be included in the railroad workers and moved to Saratov. See: Altshuler, "Itsik Kipnis," 72-73.

[291] This journalistic character of the work accounts perhaps for the error committed by two scholars, Yehoshua Gilboa and Richard Sheldon, the former in the broader context of Soviet Yiddish culture during the war and the latter in an article dedicated to Babi Yar who remarked that it was first published on September 29, 1944 without giving clear reference to its provenance. See Gilboa, 143; Sheldon, 127.

ווייטע שטרעקעס! עס פלאַמען און עס פלאַקערן דעם שונאס אויסגעפוצטע שטעט! באַרעכן עס!...

נעם עס אן אויפן חשבון פונעם הייליקן גרויסן יארצייט.[292]

> The great hall or the gigantic temple has not yet been built that could house so many flames, so many candles…. But here another thought comes to the fore that whispers: you fool; fires are burning now over vast reaches, into far-off distances! ... The decorated cities of the foe are now blazing and flaming! Bear it in mind!... All it all up on the account of the holy mighty *yortsayt*.

For Kinpis, the memory of the massacre at Babi Yar attains its true, profound meaning only when reconfigured into a Jewish rite of remembering. Whereas the ritual is meant to be perpetuated from now until the end of time, Kipnis's gaze is fixed on the present moment, for the only way to commemorate the unprecedented genocide that had taken place at the site is through the act of revenge exacted at this very moment by the Red Army upon the civilian German population.

In his work *Against the Apocalypse*, surveying the Jewish response to destruction from biblical times through the modern age, the scholar David Roskies demonstrates how Jewish writers in different epochs responded to anti-Jewish persecution by invoking archetypes drawn from Jewish tradition. He argues that throughout the ages, of all Jewish traditions, it is the response to catastrophe that is the "most viable, coherent and covenantal".[293] In lieu of the recording of factual data about each tragedy that befell the Jews throughout their time-honored

[292] Kipnis, *Tsum lebn*, 205.

[293] David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 10.

history, Jews have preferred, according to Roskies, to present the deep meaning of their suffering by conjuring up timeless archetypes.[294] The imagery invoked by Kipnis seamlessly joins the literary works surveyed by Roskies. The resorting to Jewish archetypes does not end with the lighting of candles on the *yortsayt*, a ritual that for Kipnis embodies in that given moment Jewish collective memory carried out through the vehicle of the Red Army's revenge. Later on in the story, Kipnis makes use of another Jewish archetype, that of the Jewish ritual wine glass, to link the third anniversary of the massacre to the Jewish people's ancient tradition:

> אונדזערע הערצער האָבן זיך אָנגעסיליעט אַרום אַ היפשן פאַרוואקסענעם שטיק פלאַץ, וואָס זעט אויס ווי א פיר-עקיקער בעכער. אַ כוס, וואָס אויף זיין דעק איז נישט קיין אויסגעטרוקענער וויין, נאָר בלוט וואָס האָט אונטער רעגנס און שניי אָנגעוואָרן זיין קאָליר.[295]

> Our hearts have converged around a large overgrown place, that looks like a square goblet. A glass, on whose rim no drops of wine remain, but rather blood that has lost its color from the rain and snow.

If one Jewish ritual embodies the dimensions of the revenge taking place in the fall of 1944, the other one, that of the benediction of a glass of wine, stands for Babi Yar itself, the ravine that turned into the ghostly abode of what used to be the prewar Jewish community of Kiev.

The theme of revenge, represented at the beginning of "Babi Yar" by the image of the *yortsayt* candles, resurfaces throughout Kipnis's brief work. Of all the references to revenge,

[294] Ibid., 35.
[295] Kipnis, *Untervegns*, 350.

though, the image of the burning cities of Germany is the only one that was included in the text's final version, published in the USSR. All other similar references to revenge were excised from it, and appeared only in the version that appeared in New York. In this respect, "Babi Yar," joins a large number of Soviet Yiddish works published both within and the beyond the borders of the Soviet Union containing textual discrepancies between the work meant for "domestic consumption" and the one published abroad.[296] We will leave for now the question about why the issue of revenge was curtailed in the Soviet version. For now, let us note that in the New York version of "Babi Yar," Kipnis turns revenge into the work's framework. It begins with the blazing cities of Germany and with Kipnis sharing with his readers his innermost thoughts that his hope right now is that some woman in Germany named Greta, waiting for her beloved one Hans to come back from the front would not die in the Ally air raids, but, rather, would stay crippled, "howling with her broken back, looking at her trampled and choked little snakes."[297] At the end of the essay-story in its version published in New York, Kipnis returns to the theme of revenge when he describes the Jews returning from Babi Yar, passing by a camp for Nazi prisoners of war. This rendezvous between the relatives and acquaintances of the victims with their now-wretched former oppressors, is for Kipnis a sign that the balance between the two groups has been altered for good:

[296] The comparative study of Soviet Yiddish literary works as they appeared in their Soviet version with the one published abroad was initiated by the scholar Khone Shmeruk. The scholarly apparatus that accompanies *A shpigl oyf a shteyn*, his landmark anthology of the work of twelve Soviet writers murdered by Stalin's henchmen, contains synoptic comparison of variant readings of the same work published in the USSR and abroad. See: Khone Shmeruk, ed., *A shpigl oyf a shteyn* , 773-804.

[297] Kipnis, *Untervegns*, 347.

פאַר דריי יאָר איז באַבי יאַר געווען דער אָפגרונט פון "כל באיה לא ישובון." ווער ס׳איז אַהין אַוועק איז שוין צוריק נישט געקומען. שונאים האָבן זיך געפרייט: באַבי יאַר, די לעצטע אַכסניאַ פונעם יידישן פאָלק, דאָס לעצטע פינטעלע פונעם יידישן וועזן. באַבי יאַר – דאָס וואָרט מיט וואָס ס׳ענדיקט זיך די געשיכטע פון א פאָלק. אַזוי האָט דער שונא ביי זיך געפועלט צוריק מיט דריי יאָר. און איצט זענען אלע אַנקעגן באַבי יאַר אַ לאַגער ווו געפאַנגענע דייטשן פאַרקן שיך אין זייערע גשווירן, עסן פון זיך די לייז. מיר קוקן אויף זיי מיט עקל, ווי אויף צעפוילטן אָפוורף, און ביי זיי קריכן אַרויס די אויגן פאַר קנאה – זיי זענען פאַר זיך מענטשן.[298]

Three years ago Babi Yar was the abyss where "None who go thither ever return " [Proverbs 2:19]. Those who left for there never returned. The enemy rejoiced: Babi Yar, the last abode of the Jewish people, the last speck of Jewish existence. Babi Yar – the word, with which the history of a people comes to an end. That's what the foe decided three years ago. And now, one may see in front of Babi Yar a camp for captive German soldiers rubbing their shoes in their wounds, eating the lice of their own bodies. We look at them with disgust, as if on rotting garbage, their eyes bulge with envy – they see before them human beings.

It comes as quite a shock to the twenty-first century reader to read this expanded ending of Kipnis's "Babi Yar," which speaks about the recovery of Jewish dignity through an act of revenge, through the act of dehumanization of those who have only a while ago considered the Jews to be sub-human. When read in its historical context, as a work written before the conclusion of World War II, however, it becomes clear that Kipnis, like his colleagues Kushnirov and Markish, can make sense of the Holocaust and the Soviet victory only as two complementary events: the crime and the punishment, the victimization and the revenge. The theme of revenge is in line with the periodization of Holocaust memory set forth by David

[298] Ibid., 352.

Roskies. So long as Holocaust memory still resided within the confines of each individual community, "the plain style, which is thought of today as the gold standard of Holocaust writing, was never a foregone conclusion."[299] Thus, long before Holocaust writers would dwell on the most profound philosophical repercussions of the Holocaust, wonder whether it is not categorically barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, as the cultural critic Theodor Adorno put it, "Babi Yar" echoes the voice of an incipient Holocaust literature that is not only unwilling to forgive and forget, but rather gives vent to the most instinctive and base sentiments of retribution.

"Relentless" was the adjective used by Nina Tumarkin to describe the style of Anatoly Kuznetsov's novel *Babi Yar*. If this is true of a work written two decades after the Nazi occupation of Kiev, how much more so is it true of Kipnis's "Babi Yar," written under the immediate impact of the Nazi occupation in a city the center of which was destroyed, was stricken by hunger and poverty, and where the spectacle of starved Nazi prisoners of war could still be seen. As much as Kipnis' imagery is driven by the desire to render an unembellished portrayal of the horrific condition of the mass grave, complemented by a no less brutal description of the German civilian population and military now under attack, relentlessness also characterizes its structure.

We noted earlier that Kipnis opens "Babi Yar" by adopting the voice of the reporter. Later on, while he maintains this voice, informing his readers not present at the ravine about the mass procession heading there, Kipnis pauses to tell his readers that "from the beginning" (that is, from the moment he came back to Kiev) he had one request from the Jews like him who were starting to return to Kiev after its liberation, lying "deep in his heart:"

[299] Roskies and Diamant, *Holocaust Literature*, 113.

מיינע פריינט, לאָמיר ניט פאָרן אין טראַמווייען. לאָמיר גיין צו פוס! לאָמיר בעסער גיין מיט דעם וועג. מיט די גאַסן, וואָס זיינען פול איבער די ברעגן מט די נאָד לעבעדיקע לייבער פון אונדזערע ברידער. זיי זיינען געגאַנגען פון פאָדאָל און דעמיעווקע. פון קורעניאָווקע און פון שליאַווקע. גרויס און קליין וואַסילקאָווסקע האָבן פאַרעטערעריש ארויסגעלאָזן פון זייערע הויפן גאַנצע און האַלבע משפחות, יונגע און באַיאָרטע, קליינע קינדער און אלטע לייט ... האָבן זיי צונויפגעגאַסן ווי אין אַ טייך פון פאַרשניידונג און פון אומקום. זיי זיינען געגאַנגען אפגענאַרטע און באנומענע, געדיכט און צונויפגעטוליעטע, און האָבן אָנגעפירט אַ פחד אויף די וואָס האָבן זיי צוגעזען, כאָטש אייניקע פון זיי זיינענען געווען אָנגעטאָן אינעם בעסטן, וואָס מען האָט פאַרמאָגט.[300]

My friends! Let us not take the tram there. Let us go by foot, let us go on that road, on those streets which are full to overflowing with the living bodies of our brothers. They came from Podol, Demyevke. From Kurenyovke,. Big and Little Vasilkovske expelled from their courtyards whole and half families, young and old, little children and old people… they poured together like a river of death and annihilation. They went there deceived and as if possessed, close together, clinging to one another, terrifying those who caught sight of them, although some of them were dressed in the best clothes they had.

Right afterwards, Kipnis asks his readers whether they knew the sisters Dolin, the two old inhabitants of Kiev. He moves swiftly from addressing his readers in the second person to a different point of focalization: that of the omniscient writer, who now begins to tell the story of the sisters Emma and Eva, narrating their inner thoughts of fear, doubt and disbelief as they had to leave their apartment and set out on the march to Babi Yar, reassuring themselves that such an enormous crowd could not be going to their deaths. By delving into the minds of the victims, Kipnis enhances the feeling of terror and disbelief that was shared by the more than 33,000 Jews who were ordered to make their last way to Babi Yar three years before.

[300] Kipnis, *Tsum lebn*, 205-206.

The act of going to Babi Yar by foot that for Kipnis becomes a moral dictum is grounded not only in the need to pay tribute to the victims through this act. Kipnis gives voice here – obliquely yet fairly intelligibly – to the fear that if he chose not to reach the ravine by foot, he might encounter on the Kiev public tram "a foreign look [that] may unwittingly coarsely abrade my look."[301] While the identity of that foreign look is not fully disclosed, Kipnis's intent here is clear: he manages in a concise phrase to describe the psychological pressure that the Jewish survivors who had returned to Kiev after it was re-occupied by the Red Army in November 1943 had to now endure as they were met with the hostility of a large segment of the local population. In one concise sentence Kipnis boldly evinces a great awareness (and of course, a great deal of courage expressing this awareness in print) of this new condition. In the new reality of postwar Kiev he expresses the fear that as much as Babi Yar functioned as a centripetal force that brought Soviet Jews back together, it also operated as a centrifugal one, further alienating them from the rest of the Soviet population.

In her brief article dedicated to "Babi Yar," Rosenthal-Shneiderman credits Kipnis for being the one who dared to open the wound of Babi Yar's neglect, years before Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Anatoly Kuznetsov did so.[302] When surveying Yiddish works dedicated to Babi Yar published during the war, we have noted that initially, before Soviet Yiddish writers started to allow themselves more liberty to express their national sentiments, the tragedy that befell the Jewish people was read through the lens of the Great Patriotic War. "To the People and the Fatherland," exclaimed Perets Markish, referring to the general fight joined by Soviet Jews and members of other Soviet ethnicities to defend the motherland and drive out the Nazi

[301] Kipnis, *Tsum lebn*, 207; Cited in Gilboa, 143.
[302] Rosenthal-Shneiderman, "Itsik Kipnises 'babi yar,'" *Lebns-fragen* 347/348 (1981): 7.

invader.[303] Kipnis, by contrast, does not offer the point-of-view of the Soviet Jewish fighter, who could more easily share – despite the anti-Semitism endemic to the Red Army – a feeling of solidarity with his non-Jewish brothers-in-arm. Instead, his is a look at Babi Yar from the standpoint of the returning evacuee. The author, who came to Kiev with a group of radio personnel in April, 1944, was among the group of Yiddish writers and cultural activists, including his close friend, the celebrated poet Dovid Hofshteyn, who joined together in organizing the mass gathering on the third anniversary of the massacre. For these returning evacuees, by September 1944, the so-called 'friendship of all Soviet peoples' had turned into a completely empty slogan. Instead of friendship, Kipnis and his fellow evacuees encountered a hostile population that had in many instances taken over Jewish property and 'welcomed' the retuning Jews without concealing feelings of enmity and bitterness about the appearance of the Jewish returnees.

In this atmosphere, highly negative to the prospects of Jewish cultural communal and cultural rehabilitation, Kipnis realizes how slim the chance is that the Soviet authorities would undertake the restoration of Babi Yar and bring the annual gathering at the site under its auspices. According to Rosenthal-Shneiderman, Kipnis's hope that someone would break the silence at Babi Yar, that "someone might come and address the people with a word,"[304] is a carefully disguised reference exactly to those who most noticeably did not show up at Babi Yar on that day:

"ווער איז דער 'עמעצער', אויף וועמענס טרייסט-וואָרט וואַרטן איצט די פאַראָבלטע יידן ביים
גרוב פון זייערע זיבעציק טויזנט פאַרפיניקטע בריידער און שוועסטער?

[303] Perets Markish, *Far folk un heymland* (Moscow: Emes, 1943).
[304] Kipnis, *Untervegns,* 351.

דער ׳עמעצער׳, דאָס מיינט – די באָלשעוויסטישע פירער פון אוקראַינישן פאָלק, פון ,די אייגענע׳ וועמענס זין און טעכטער האָבן מיט אַזאַ לייכטער האַנט מיטגעהאָלפן די דייטשע רוצחים אויסראָטן די, וואָס ליגן דאָ באַגראָבן אָן אַ מצבה...

אָבער קיינער קומט נישט."[305]

"Who is that 'someone' on whose words of consolation the Jews are waiting, mourning at the ravine for their 70,000 tormented brothers and sisters?

That 'someone' means – the Bolshevik leaders of the Ukrainian people, of our 'folks' whose sons and daughters helped the German murderers, with an easy hand, to exterminate those who lie here buried without a grave stone.

But no one comes..."

Those 'folks' (*di eygene*) mentioned by Rosental-Shneiderman refer to the thoughts that hover on the mind of Kipnis as he encounters other Jews and joins them on the way toward Babi Yar: "somewhere deep in one's mind leaps a thought … what is at stake here are certain grievances against one's folks, that need to be resolved with no noise, as befitting things that need to remain among folks."

Rosenthal-Shneiderman further clarifies the identity of that 'someone,' (*emetser*) whose absence from the memorial service was painfully and silently noticed by Kipnis: the members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Ukraine, who according to her could not rise to the occasion "because it was busy with far more important things – with making the decision to allow back to the Ukraine as few as possible of its past Jewish residents … sending a

[305] Rozental Shneiderman, "Itsik Kipnises 'babi yar,'"7.

representative to Babi Yar would have been contradictory to the whole line of the Soviet rulers."[306] The terms 'someone' and 'one's folks' are a species of Doublespeak, the euphemistic speech that flourishes under totalitarian regimes. Nothing stands in greater contrast than the blunt, direct way in which Kipnis describes the grievances his kin have toward the German people. Thus, the two allusive terms *emetser* and *di eygene* mark the boundaries of the permissible of "Babi Yar:" what could be said about the atrocities committed by the Nazis, could be only vaguely hinted with regard to their collaborators and the Soviet authorities who now seemed to be backing the latter at the expense of Kiev's returning Jews.

In the absence of the authorities' representatives at the ravine, Kipnis imagines that he is the one to fill the void as he desires to whisper in the ear of each of his fellows who attended the third anniversary of the Babi Yar massacre. In Kipnis's address, with which the version of the story that that saw the light of day in the Soviet Union ends, the journalist and narrator of the work's beginning, turns now into a biblical prophet:

> טייערע ברידער, לאָמיר זיך אויפהייבן פון דער ערד, לאָמיר זיך אַרומטרייסלען פון אַש און אופשיינען מיט דער גאַנצער ליכטיקייט, וואָס יעדער איינער פאַרמאָגט אין זיך ... אַ מענטש, באַ וועלכן מע האָט אַפגעריסן אַ פוס אָדער אַ האַנט און אפילו אַ פינגער איינעם, ווערט מיט עפעס גענערט און ווינציקער, ווי ער איז געווען. נאָר אַ פאָלק, אַ פאָלק, וועו ס׳רייסט זיך אויס אַף אים אַ קלאָג, ווי ס׳איז צו אונדז פאַרגאַנגען, אַ פאָלק, אַז מע פאַרטיליקט אים אַף האַלב, און דריי פערטל, איז ווי א טראָפן וואַסער, ווי א קיילעכל קוועקזילבער. דו שטשיפעסט אָפ פון אים אַ העלפט, נאָר די צווייטע העלפט פאַרקיילעכיקט זיך, פילט זיך אָן און ווערט צוריק גאַנץ.
>
> לאָמיר זשע אופשטיין פון דער ערד, לאָמיר זיך אויסגלייכן![307]

Dear Brothers, let us rise from the earth, let us shake the ashes from us and flare up with all the light stored in each of us... As the body of a man, whose foot, hand or even one finger has been amputated becomes incomplete, smaller than what it used to be. But a people, a people. When it befalls a disaster, like the one we endured; a people – when

[306] Ibid.
[307] Kipnis, *Tsum lebn*, 210.

> you divide it by half, or into three thirds, is like a drip of water, like a round drop of quicksilver. You pluck half of it out, but the second half rounds off, is filled in and turns back to being full.
>
> Let us rise from the earth, let us stand up strong.

These stirring words echo the famous prophecy of the Valley of the Dry Bones from the Book of Ezekiel (Ez. 37:1-14). In Kipnis' cyclical conception of Jewish history, the Biblical prophet's words of solace offered to the people of Judea in the wake of the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE, gain relevancy again in the fall of 1944. But in its first iteration, as we recall, these words of prophetic solace were not the last word. Kipnis reserved the last word for the encounter between the Jews coming back from Babi Yar with the Nazi prisoners of war. The original version, as published in New York, ended with the sweet smell of revenge.

Other conspicuous differences exist between the American and Soviet versions that demand an explanation. Indeed, in the version of "Babi Yar" published in Moscow the author refers neither to the fact that Babi Yar's prime victims were Jews nor to the ethnic identity of those who came to Babi Yar on the occasion of the massacre's third anniversary. In the version published abroad, however, Kipnis does not begin his imagined prophetic speech with the words "dear brothers," but rather with the words "Jews, dear brothers." In this version Kipnis describes his encounter with 'a young Jew,' a man he is not acquainted with who approaches him on the way home back from Babi Yar:

- יידן – זאָגט ער – גייען אויף באַבי יאַר געגנוג.
- און יידן - ענטפער איך אים – גייען פון באַבי יאַר, קיין עין-הרע, גאַנץ און געזונט.[308]

- There are enough Jews – he says – who go to Babi Yar.
- And Jews – I answer – come back from Babi Yar in one piece, thank God.

Thus, inasmuch as Babi Yar used to be the hub of the Jewish people's death, it will now, become the wellspring of the Jewish people's renewal.

All told, there are two significant omissions from the Soviet version: the detailed description of wretched Soviet civilians and prisoners of war mentioned earlier, and the clear reference to Jews as both Babi Yar's victims and the crowds that gathered at the site three years later. The omission of the suffering Germans from the later Soviet version might be explained as reflecting a tendency to update the text in accordance with the spirit of the time. It may well be that these sections were excised from the work in its Soviet version in order to highlight the victimization of the Jews, present their suffering as a crime too enormous to be avenged. But as for the absence of the word 'Jews' in the text, here we come across an omission typical of Babi Yar's representation in the Soviet Yiddish sphere. As we shall see in the next chapter, Kipnis was not the only Soviet Yiddish writer who omitted the term "Jews" from the portrayal of Babi Yar, blurring thereby the site's linkage to the Holocaust of European Jewry.

[308] Kipnis, U*ntervegns*, 352.

Apparently recognizing that drawing an explicit link between Babi Yar and Jews would hurt his chance to see his story-essay published in the USSR, Kipnis must have felt that many other components of the text make the subject matter of his text – Babi Yar's Jewish victims – clear enough. The mass shootings that took place in Babi Yar, we recall, spanned a time period far longer than two days. By focusing his attention on the anniversary of the massacre that took place on September 29-30, Kipnis left no room for ambiguity about who the primary victims that concerned him were. The Jewish subtext of the work was only further augmented as he drew upon Jewish archetypes and customs in his portrayal of this occasion of the anniversary. When reading the works of Soviet Yiddish writers of the next generation who were more at ease accommodating to the new Soviet way of life, the connection between Babi Yar and the Holocaust will only be further blurred. These writers, described in the next chapter, further clouded Babi Yar's linkage to the Holocaust, tending to portray it, rather, as a Great Patriotic War site.

A Lullaby to Babi Yar: Shike Driz

If "Babi Yar" by Itsik Kipnis is a work that is still awaiting recognition as a masterpiece of Holocaust literature, the poem "Babi Yar" by Shike (Yevsei) Driz is the one work of Soviet-Yiddish literature that has achieved recognition from audiences and readers far and wide. This has much to do with the fact that the poem is a song– in the guise of a lullaby. In an interesting parallel between the declamatory mode of Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar", the generic character of Driz's work is what made it so appealing as a performance piece. Indeed, the poem became a staple in the repertoire of the Yiddish folk singer Nehama Lifshitz, whose career as a Soviet

Yiddish singer between the years 1955-1969 turned her, in the words of Yaacov Ro'i, into "the center of the Jewish national movement and made her in many ways its focus, its symbol, and its heroine."[309] During these years Lifshitz toured Jewish communities throughout the entire Soviet Union and offered her audiences a rare thread that could connect Soviet Jews, both young and old, to the treasure trove of Yiddish and Hebrew literature and folklore. By virtue of the inclusion of Driz's song in her repertoire, set to score by Riva Boyarsky, the poem gained great popularity on both sides of the Iron Curtain, when it was included, three decades after it was written, in the collection of "Song of the Holocaust" entitled *We Are Here*, containing over forty Yiddish songs written in the ghettos and Nazi labor camps and edited by Eleanor Mlotek and Malke Gottleib.[310]

In addition to the poem's remarkable career as the only work of Yiddish literature surveyed here that does not need to be rescued from oblivion, the poem is also noteworthy for another reason: this is a Holocaust song, that depicts Babi Yar ever so graphically yet does so in the form of a children's song, as a lullaby or cradle song, whose main function ostensibly is to sooth and lull a child to sleep. As we shall see, the fashioning of "Babi Yar" as a lullaby encapsulates not only the poem's overt meaning, but through its 'generic DNA.' Driz, like Kipnis, appropriates Babi Yar as an unequivocal Jewish memory site.

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[309] Ya'acov Ro'i, "Nehama Lifshitz: Symbol of the Jewish National Awakening," in: Yaacov Ro'i and Avi Beker eds., *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*, 169. Nehama Lifshitz belonged to a small group of actors and singers who were given very limited permission to appear in front of Jewish audiences following the death of Stalin. During the two decades of her career as a singer (she initially sang in a variety of Soviet languages but not in Yiddish) Lifshitz was affiliated with the Lithuanian SSR Philharmonic society. Three main reasons accounted for her ability to sustain her career for decades: the greater open-mindedness of Soviet officials in the Baltic states toward the nurturing of non-Russian ethnic cultures, Lifshitz's membership in the Communist Party, and the benefit Moscow could gain from Lifshitz's partaking in tours of "cultural diplomacy" to western countries as a way of showcasing the vibrancy of Yiddish culture in the USSR.

[310] Eleanor Mlotek and Malke Gottleib, eds., *We are Here: Songs of the Holocaust* (New York: The Workmen's Circle and Hippocrene Books, 1983), 60-61.

While the choice of a lullaby for a work about the Babi Yar massacre might seem to the reader strange, for its author, another member of the Kiev circle of Yiddish writers, invoking the memory of Babi Yar through a literary mode designated for children was a natural choice, if we bear in mind that Shike Driz was one of the foremost Yiddish children's song writers in the Soviet Union. Born in the Ukrainian shtetl of Krasne, Driz left for Kiev on his own when he was fourteen and enrolled in the Kiev Art Institute, dreaming of becoming a sculptor. He came from a very humble background, "from a family of artisans who have never lost their love for humor, for a witty proverb and a merry song," according to Chaim Beider."[311] The cheerful atmosphere in which Driz grew up left an indelible mark on the career of a man who composed numerous playful and humorous poems intended for the youngest age-group of Yiddish readers.

The frivolity of his character, however, while perfectly suiting a Yiddish children's poet, was also a perfect disguise for a man who was a heavy drinker, and was well aware from the outset of his career of the artistic constraints of the literary system of which he was a contributor. In many of his poems, the frivolity, in fact, serves as a cover for works endowed with Jewish nationalist sentiments.[312] While the decline of Driz's career had already begun in the 1930s when he lost his readers, an outcome of the liquidation of the state-run Yiddish schools and Yiddish publishing houses specializing in children's books, [313] matters for Driz got far worse when he was arrested and sentenced to a labor camp during the height of Stalin's anti-Cosmopolitan

[311] Chaim Beider, *Leksikon fun yidishe shrayber in ratn-farband* (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 2011), 105.

[312] Yosef Kerler, *Geklibene proze*: *Eseyen, zikhroynes, dertseylungen* (Jerusalem: Yerushalaymer almanakh, 1991), 159. See also: Yosef Kerler, "Hayetsira hasifrutit haYehudit-Sovyetit batekufa hapost-Stalinistit," in *Tarbut Yehudit Bivrit-Hamo'atsot*, ed. Arye Tartakower (Jerusalem: Jewish World Congress, 1972), 40-72. As Dov Ber Kerler notes, while some of Driz's children's songs were characterized by a serious tone, the ones he wrote for adults were often playful, something that made it further difficult to set clear boundaries between the two. See: Dov-Ber Kerler, "Shike Driz," *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed December 12, 2012, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Driz_Shike

[313] Beider, 106.

campaign. It was only in the Thaw period, through the venue of *Sovetish heymland*, that Driz's career as a Yiddish children's poet resumed.

Like the story-essay by Kipnis, Driz's poem overlaps more than one period in the history of Soviet Yiddish literature: while written in 1953, during the very early Thaw, the poem was published in the Soviet Union for the first time in 1969. Included in Driz's collection *Di ferte strune* (The fourth string), it appeared in the same year that Kipnis's work came out.[314] Together, the publication of these two works testifies to the conditions of relative freedom of expression for Yiddish writers during a period that we have already labeled as the 'mild Thaw' of the Brezhnev years.

Due to the work's significance and brevity, let us cite it in full, then turn to an analysis of its thematic and generic components:

וואָלט איך אופגעהאַנגען דאָס וויגל אַף אַ באַלקן,
געהוידעט און געהוידעט מיין יינגעלע מיין יאַנקל,
איז די שטוב אַנטרונען מיטן פלאַם און פייער,
ווו זשע זאָל איך הוידען מיין יינגעלע מיין טייערס?

מיט דערנער און מיט קראָפעווע
פאַרוואַקסן זיינען סטעזשקעס,
פון שטילע, ווייסע טויבן –
געוואָרן האָלעווועשקעס...

וואָלט איך אופגעהאַנגען דאָס וויגל אַף א ביימל
געהוידעט און געהוידעט מיין יינגעלע מיין שלייַמל –
איז מיר ניט געבליבן קיין פאָדעם פון קיין ציד,
איז מיר ניט געבליבן קיין בענדל פון קיין שיך.

קיין צווייגל ניט, קיין בלעטל...
פון דעם דעמב דעם הוילן

[314] Shike Driz, *Di Ferte Strune* (Sovetski Pisatel, Moscow, 1969), 135-136.

געבליבן איז א בערגעלע
טליענדיקע קוילן...

וואָלט איך אָפגעשוירן די צעפ מיינע די לאַנגע
און אוף זיי דאָס וויגעלע, דאָס וויגל אופגעהאַנגען,
ווייס איך ניט , ווו זיינען זיי, די ביינדעלעך, אַצינדער,
די ביינדעלעך די טייערע פון ביידע מיינע קינדער.

העלפט מיר, מאַמעס,
העלפט מיר אויסקלאָגן מיין ניגון!
העלפט מיר, מאמעס, העלפט מיר
דעם באַבי יאר פאַרוויגן[315]!

I would hang the cradle on a beam,

And rock, and rock my little boy, my Yankl.

But the home has vanished in a flame of fire,

So how can I rock my little boy, my dear one?

With thorns and nettles

Are the footpaths covered,

The quiet white doves

Become cinders…

I would hang the cradle on a little tree,

And rock, and rock my little boy, my Shleyml.

But I have been left without a thread of bed cover,

But I have been left without a shoelace.

[315] Ibid., 136.

No little branch, no little leaf…

From the oak, the hollow one,

Has remained a little hill

of glowing coals…

I would shear my braids, my long ones,

And hang on them the cradle, the cradle,

But I do not know where to look for the little bones now,

The dear little bones of both my children.

Help me, mothers, help me,

To wail to the end my melody.

Help me, mothers, help me.

To lull Babi Yar to sleep.[316]

From the very first reading of the poem, the incongruence between form and content instantly leaps to mind: on the one hand, here is a poem dealing with a mother lulling her children to sleep; on the other hand, its subject is the carnage at Babi Yar. While in the later

[316] Cited in Dov Noy, "The Model of the Yiddish Lullaby," Studies in Yiddish Literature and Folklore 7 (1986): 223.

canonized versions of the poem it would be called "The Babi Yar Cradle Song," in Driz's printed version this generic designation is missing. As someone steeped in the idiom of the folk, however, Driz understood that the lullabies of many nations share a predilection toward the frightening and sincere, due, in all likelihood, to the parental fears of the speaker.[317] Still, a lullaby whose subject is mass murder would seem to stretch the genre to its limit. What is more, the fact that in "Babi Yar" the narrator is a mother who has already lost her two children, Yankl and Shleyml, to the Nazi slaughter, a woman trying to sooth dead children, rather than half-asleep, living children, further underscores the incongruence in Driz's poem between content and form.

The poem is included in Driz' collection the *Fourth String* in a section given the Hebrew title "*Po nikbar*" (Here lie buried). As the use of Hebrew and the thematic scope of this section suggest, Driz intended to place his "Babi Yar" in the context of other songs related to the Holocaust. As a prelude to "Babi Yar", Driz included another poem entitled "*Luftbalonen*" (Baloons), recounting the story of a man who brings a balloon to his dead grandson, buried in Babi Yar. Like "*Luftbalonen*," written in 1945, "Babi Yar" concerns an imaginary relationship between a living adult and a dead child. In both poems, the adult displays concern for the child by attempting to provide the latter with something material: a balloon in one, and a cradle in the other, a cradle which the mother wishes to hang on an inanimate beam, a tree, and finally, her own braids. In both poems, the adult's action can be construed in two conflicting ways: as a testimony to the adult's feelings of affection toward the child, and equally, of the adult's inability to cope with the loss and make sense of its repercussions. The juxtaposition of the two poems only sharpens the interplay of love and madness. For a woman to be searching for the bones of

[317] Emer O'Sullivan, *Historical Dictionary of Children's Literature* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 166.

her two children, Yankl and Shleyml, to no avail already testifies to the positioning of the poem's heroine on the brink of sanity. The fashioning of the poem as a lullaby, only helps throw into high relief this dismal condition of the mother. While the content of the poem suggests her acceptance of the children's death, the forming of the poem as a lullaby suggests the very opposite: an attempt to connect to them and to all the dead children whose bodies were lying in Babi Yar.

Why a lullaby? As Dov Noy illustrates in his structural analysis of Yiddish lullabies, which cites a version of Driz's poem, he positions the lullaby at the heart of the Yiddish folksong repertoire.[318] According to Noy, every authentic Yiddish lullaby must display the following six features: (a) an infant directly addressed by the singer; (b) a mention of the function of lulling; (c) a three-part structure, often modeled on the pattern of *gradatio*; (d) an absent father; (e) the future greatness of the infant, and finally, (f).extraordinary events (either supernatural or uncanny). By analyzing "Babi Yar" according to these six standard features of the *viglid*, Noy reaches a surprising conclusion : that although Driz's poem partakes of the genre of the wailing song, featuring a she-Job heroine, it cannot be considered a true Yiddish lullaby. That is because only three of the standard elements of the *viglid* are in evidence: the three-part structure (the transition from the beam in the first stanza, to a tree in the second and the mother's braids in the third) as well as the *gradatio* (the repetition of "volt ikh…"), the absent father, and the unrealistic elements (an attempt to lull to sleep dead children in Babi Yar).

If Driz's work falls short of constituting a bona fide Yiddish cradle song, what, then, made him draw upon lullaby motifs, if only partially? First, the model of the Yiddish lullaby

[318] Noy's research shows that in a sample of 3,558 Yiddish folksongs there are two hundred lullabies. Noy further adds that it is hard to find a modern Yiddish poet who has not written a lullaby or used motifs derived from this genre in his/her poetry. See: Noy, 209.

allowed Driz to underscore the bleakness that pervades both Babi Yar and his literary memorial dedicated to it; second, that it is through the genre of the *viglid* that Driz alludes to the cultural DNA of the people described in it. Put another way, the distinct Jewish medium of the *viglid* is for Driz a vehicle, not the only one though, to allude to the fact that the victims of Babi Yar he is concerned with were Jewish, and so is the mourning mother-speaker, something that is not explicitly indicated in the body of the poem.

Upon closer inspection, it may be argued that "Babi Yar" does not contain all the standard features of the Yiddish lullaby because it is, in fact, an anti-*viglid*, a poem in which the main premise of the genre has been turned on its head. If in the lullaby the mother-singer acts as an intermediary between the real child, lying in her bed, and the realm of the fantastic or uncanny, in "Babi Yar" the opposite happens. Here, it is the children Yankl and Shloyml and the acts of singing them to sleep which is unreal. Conversely, what is expected to belong to the fantastic or uncanny is now real: a ravine filled with the charred, unrecognizable yet partially exposed bodies of thousands of children. In short, Driz is exploiting the genre of the *viglid* only partially in order to heighten the enormity of the tragedy that took place at Babi Yar as well as the mother's misery. The speaker in this poem is either unwilling or unable to accept her new condition as a bereaved mother.

By encrypting the poem with the markers of a lullaby, Driz signals that this is a poem dealing with the massacre of Jews in Babi Yar and not the members of other national groups. What Kipnis does by concentrating on September 29th, and by elaborating in his story-essay on Jewish customs, archetypes and rhetoric, Driz does most powerfully through the elaboration of *viglid* motifs in the poem. No doubt, the model of the *vigild*, only partially adopted, is not the only clue that the reader has that Driz's view of Babi Yar gravitates toward the master narrative

of the Holocaust. The names of the two boys, and most conspicuously the choice of the Yiddish language as Driz's vehicle of expression give the reader a similar indication about the identity of the victims. Nonetheless, for a poem written and published in a cultural and political system that had for decades expunged from Yiddish culture anyone and anything that could smack of the Jewish religion, literature and culture, the choice of language did not seem adequate for Driz for a poem dealing with the symbol of Jewish victimhood during World War II as it unfolded on Soviet soil.

What could not be said in the poem's content was therefore said through its genre. In a way, for Driz the form of the *viglid* had a twofold function. It served as a key and a lock, both revealing the deeper, latent subject matter, while at the same time, encrypting it. It was a key, insofar as the initiated reader could identify its intertextual connection with the larger corpus of Yiddish lullabies. It acted as a lock, because no generic choice was more impervious, obfuscated and misleading for a poem subverting Moscow's view of Babi Yar than a folksy children's song, written by a writer whose regular contributions to *Sovetish heymland* were always published under the rubric "*Far kleyn un groys*" (For young and old), songs that for the most part, were characterized by merry word plays, written in trochaic meter, a staple of children's poetry, and topics that were characteristically light-hearted, even silly.

Indeed, if one is to look for an explanation for the appearance of such a Jewish-national poem in the Soviet Union, there could be perhaps no better way to mask its heterodox message than by the fashioning of Shike Driz as no more than poet for the "young and old." Most certainly, what was allowed in the Soviet Russian sphere at the beginning of the 1960s, i.e., the publishing of a poem on Babi Yar in the declamatory, revolutionary style of Yevtushenko, was out of question in the Soviet Yiddish cultural system. Driz, who was very well aware of this,

offered his own memorial to Babi Yar – modest and cryptic, one that was fraught with neither the ambition nor the mass appeal that characterized Yevtushenko's poem.

The fate of "Babi Yar" by Driz would have been similar to many other products of Soviet Yiddish literature during the post-Stalin era, had it not been for its inclusion in the repertoire of the Yiddish folksinger Nehama Lifshitz. The poem, slightly modified to fit the mode of singing and set to music by Riva Boyarsky was one of the highlights of Lifshitz' repertoire that included translations of songs to Yiddish from Russian, old Yiddish folksongs and the works of contemporary Soviet Yiddish writers. When analyzing Driz's poem along his six-point structure of the *viglid*, Noy notes that the poem did not go through a substantial process of folklorization, that is, the process that "alters the literary (written or printed) item into an ethno-political (oral) one," and therefore he prefers to regard it as an art song, rather than a folksong. [319] Noy, however, overlooks the fact that it was through the performance of the poem by Lifshitz that "Babi Yar" was transformed from a marginal work, published in one Yiddish book of a very modest circulation, into a classical piece. More than anywhere else, this transformation is evidenced in the poem's title provided by Noy, "The Babi Yar Cradle Song," an addition missing from the poem's original, written publication. While Noy may be right that the song did not gain universal currency, it was through the performing of the poem by Lifshitz that it came to be regarded by her Soviet Jewish audience as a lullaby, a change that speaks volumes of the process of folklorization that Driz's original "Babi Yar" had undergone.

Thus, it was through the performances of Nehama Lifshitz that this otherwise forgotten poem turned into an expression of Jewish national self-assertion in the Soviet Union, a work that turned Driz's implicit, personal view of Babi Yar into something both explicit and widespread.

[319] Ibid., 213, 225.

One can only imagine the amount of courage it required on the part of Lifshitz to perform this song in the first concert she gave in Kiev, in December 1959, in a city where not only the memory of Babi Yar, but also, other repressive measures directed at the local Jewish community were in effect, and where public concerts carrying any Jewish content were a rarity.[320] In her interviews conducted after her immigration to Israel, Lifshitz noted that she would usually sing Driz's song last. But –

> To sing about Babi Yar in Kiev was not like singing about it elsewhere. Here no one applauded. The hall seemed to be electrified. The entire audience rose to its feet like one man and stood in absolute silence, in the atmosphere of fear that characterized the Jews of Kiev … 'this was a curtain of tears.' As she left the hall people stood outside, still silently weeping, in order to touch her hand or sleeve as though she was a holy person.[321]

Perhaps of all the cultural artifacts in Yiddish surveyed thus far, the December 1959 performance of "Babi Yar" by Nehama Lifshitz in the city of Kiev is the closest manifestation of Dina Spechler's term "permitted dissent." To what extent this performance was something the local authorities in Kiev permitted really, is attested by the fact that Lifshitz was reprimanded for including in her repertoire too much Jewish content and too little praise for the Soviet conquest of space, and that her next concerts in the city were called off.[322] As we shall see in our next chapter, the ambitions that cultural figures like Itsik Kipnis, Shike Driz and Nehama Lifshitz had in the post-Stalin years, to imagine Soviet Yiddish literature as an outlet for a future Jewish cultural renaissance in the USSR, were dashed by a Soviet Yiddish literary establishment that

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[320] Ro'i, 179.
[321] Ibid.. For the performance of the poem, composed by R. Boyarskii, go to: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSyfZLpeefY, accessed 28 September 2012.
[322] Ro'i, 172.

regarded faithfulness to the Soviet regime and the Party line on every crucial ideological matter a *sine qua non* of its own survival.

Chapter Six

At Those Ditches:

Babi Yar in Yiddish Poetry (1961-1976)

The Martyrs of Babi Yar: Aaron Vergelis

In the 1975 June issue of *Sovetish heymland*, the single Soviet Yiddish periodical published in the Soviet Union during the Cold War Era, a curious article with no prelude entitled "The Memorial at Babi Yar will Stand Forever" could not have been missed by the periodical's committed readers.[323] Though buried at the end of the issue, it seemed for a moment that the almost complete silence about the Babi Yar massacre strictly observed by the journal thus far was coming to an end. The author of this six -page article was no other than Aaron Vergelis, the poet who had been the journal's editor-in-chief for the past 14 years and still enjoyed the status of towering authority in Soviet Yiddish cultural affairs.

Born in 1918, Vergelis was a product of the Soviet grand project of human engineering that intended, among other things, to alter the geographical, socio-economic and cultural face of Soviet Jewry. When he was twelve, his family moved from Volhynia to the Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan in the Far East where the young Vergelis, a salt-of-the earth- Jewish cow herder, published his first poems.[324] No sooner had Vergelis settled in the Soviet capital, following the conclusion of World War II, than his rise to eminence began. He became the

[323] Arn Vergelis, "Der denkmol in babi Yar vet shteyn ledoyres," *Sovetish heymland* 6 (1975): 158-164.

[324] Gennady Estraikh, "Aron Vergelis: The Perfect Jewish Homo Sovieticus," *East European Jewish Affairs* 27, no. 2 (1997): 3.

youngest member of the Moscow Yiddish literary elite as the head of the Moscow Yiddish radio program, a secretary of the Writers' Union Yiddish section and a participant in the editorial board of the Moscow-based Yiddish periodical *Heymland*.[325] In spite of this impressive record for an emerging Soviet literati, Vergelis had been known beyond the realms of the Soviet Union only during the Thaw Period. This happened when, after more than a decade of a complete halt in the publishing of Yiddish literary works in the USSR, the Soviet regime decided to revive Yiddish culture – ever so partially – and appointed Vergelis as the editor-in-chief of its flagship publication.

In general, Vergelis won this stature not only by virtue of his Birobidzhan past, his ability to claim and fancy himself to be the favorite Jewish son of the Soviet fatherland, but, first and foremost, by his slavish loyalty to the Soviet dogma for which he was repaid with the trust of his bosses. His silence over the Babi Yar massacre, observed thus far, did not surprise any of his readers who followed his poetry, articles and editorial comments that had appeared on the pages of *Sovetish heymland*, the periodical conceived as a bi-monthly in the summer of 1961 and turned, four years later, into a monthly. But now – more than three decades after the massacre of Kiev Jews at the ravine had taken place – it was apparently time to give the primary Holocaust site found in the USSR adequate attention. The occasion on which the article appeared was not incidental: Vergelis offered here a reportage of his recent visit to the special section of the Ukrainian construction department "Gosstroy" where the last preparations to erect the official, fifteen-meter-tall monument dedicated to the Soviet citizens and prisoners of war who had been shot in Babi Yar were going full speed ahead.

[325] Ibid., 4.

While the theme of Babi Yar would surface every now and then in the pages of *Sovetish heymland* , mostly the work of the members of the Kiev circle of Yiddish writers, who had resided in interwar Kiev and whose relatives and friends were among the massacre's victims, it was hard to miss the screaming absence of Babi Yar among the plethora of poems, short stories, serialized novels, scholarly articles and news reports in the primary platform for Yiddish literary works during the post-Stalin era. Now, nearly twenty-four years after the September 29-30, 1941 massacre of Kiev Jews, the journal's editor finally found the moment auspicious to offer a sentimental depiction of Babi Yar, expressed in the most hyperbolic terms:

> דער יאַר הינטער קיעוו, אָט דער דאָזיקער אַלטער יאַר, דער דורכגעווייטיקטער מיט אומויסשעפלעכן טרויער, דער באַשאַנקענער מיט אַן אייגענעם אלולדיקן קלימאַט, מיט לופט שטילקייט, מיט הימל סודותדיקייט, מיט, וואָלט איך זאָגן, אַ באזונדער לייב-און-נשמה, דער צוגעפריעטער, אַנגעבראָקנעטער, קימאט דורכזיכטיקער אין דער הייך און לאבירינטיש-אויסגאַנגלאָזער אין דער טיף, דער אָנגעזאַפטער מיט בלוט און מיט טרערן, דער לחלוטין פוסטער און אין דער זעלבער צייט געדיכט באַפעלקטער – מיט וואָס און מיט וועמען ווייסט איין גאט אין הימל – דער דאזיקער ערד- חלק באַ דער זייט פונעם גרויעם דניפראָ, צופוסנס באַ דער מאַמען פון די רוסישע שטעט, ער איז אייביק געווען אַ באַבי יאַר, ניט קיין אַנדערער.[326]

The ravine on the outskirts of Kiev, that old ravine drenched with inexhaustible sorrow, endowed with its own melancholy climate[327], with the silence of its air, with the secrecy of its skies, with, so to speak, a unique body-and-soul … This piece of land, almost transparent from above and endlessly-labyrinthine from deep under; soaked with blood and tears, completely empty and, at the same time, densely populated – with what and with whom God only knows – on the banks of the gray Dnieper, at the foot of the mother of the Russian cities – it was always Babi Yar, not another ravine [*yar*].

[326] Vergelis, "Der Denkmol," 158. Orthography normalized.

[327] In the Yiddish original the author refers to the month of Elul, the time when it was customary for Jews to visit the graves of their ancestors.

Confirming the stature of Babi Yar as a site of symbolic proportions and going as far as making the peculiar assertion that the ravine has been a locus of horror and doom since time immemorial, Aaron Vergelis found no reason to justify to his readers the practice of silence that had been hitherto so meticulously observed in *Sovetish heymland*. As we have already seen, it was in other cultural platforms, both in the USSR and elsewhere, that the works on Babi Yar were published in Russian and in Yiddish. In all likelihood, Vergelis's readers needed no such introductory explanation for the article's timely appearance. Nearly ten years after the Khrushchev Thaw came to an end, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was about to reverse its decades-long policy of silence with regard to Babi Yar. The minor granite plaque heralding the future construction of a monument at Babi Yar, laid at the site as early as 1966,[328] was about to be supplanted by a compelling, megalithic structure, featuring ill-fated victims on one side and brave Soviet POWs on the other. It was a sign that a major change on the part of the Soviet regime toward Babi Yar was about to take place, a sign that Vergelis, the man who could always skillfully follow the zigzags of Soviet policy, could not miss.

Babi Yar was finally about to turn from a 'memory black hole' in the Soviet official memory of Nazi-Occupied Kiev, into a public, legitimate focal point for the commemoration of one of the most horrific events in the history of World War II on Soviet soil. But did these preparations for the erection of an official monument at the site constitute a dramatic change in the Soviet authorities' attitude to Babi Yar's memory? The answer would be yes, only so long as Babi Yar was deemed an exclusively Great Patriotic War site. More than anything else, the remarkably long article by Vergelis was only a confirmation that *Sovetish heymland* would continue to do what it had done since its inception – faithfully follow Soviet officialdom.

[328] The plaque is mentioned in Aanatoly Kuznetsov's novel; Kuznetsov, 475.

Recognizing that the Soviet authorities were about to extract Babi Yar from its previous state of nearly complete oblivion and were now turning it into a memory locus, where "in 1941-1943 The German Fascist Invaders executed more than 100,000 citizens of the city of Kiev,"[329] as the bronze tablet of the new monument would suggest, Vergelis aligned himself with this new position.

Remarkably, of all Yiddish literati, no one went to such lengths as Vergelis to *explicitly* state that Babi Yar's memory was one-dimensional, belonging exclusively within the orbit of the Great Patriotic War. As we noted in the Introduction, many Western scholars during the Cold War displayed a similar inability to link Babi Yar's to more than one memory orbit. One of them, William Korey, when attempting to tackle one of the most difficult challenges posed by Babi Yar, its uniqueness as a mass grave not only for both Jews and non-Jews, but also for both civilians and soldiers, pointed out that the Soviet prisoners of war shot in Babi Yar were often targeted for being Jewish.[330] Korey, no doubt, referred here to a well-documented Nazi practice. Vergelis, quite strikingly, corroborated in his article the exact same historical data: he was also referring to the murder of both civilians and military personnel who were Jewish. Yet, he did so in order to make the diametrically opposite argument. Recollecting a conversation he had had at the *Sovetish heymland* office with a group of Jewish tourists from California who wanted to find out how the memory of the 70,000 Jews killed in Babi Yar would be remembered, Vergelis found it necessary to educate them. His words merit full citation:

[329] Dawidowicz, "Babi Yar's Legacy."
[330] Korey, "Forty Years ago at Babi Yar: Reliving the Crime," 31.

אין באַבי יאַר ליגן 70 טויזנט מענטשן, דערשאָסענע דערפאַר ווייל זיי זיינען געווען יידן, 40 טויזנט – ווייל זיי זיינענען געווען רויטאַרמייער, 10 טויזנט – ווייל זיי האבן געהערט צו די קאָמוניסטישער פאַרטיי אָדער צו קאָמיוג. אַזאַ צעטיילונג האָבן געמאַכט די פאַשיסטן : אָבער ווער פאַרשטייט ניט, אַז סיי צווישן דער יידישער באַפעלקערונג, סיי צווישן די סאָלדאַטן און קאָמאַנדירן פון דער רויטער אַרמיי זיינען געווען טויזנטער און טויזענטער קאָמוניסטן און קאָמסאַמעלצעס. פון דער צווייטער זייט, זיינען דען צווישן די רויטאַרמייער און צווישן די קיעווער אונטערערדלער ווייניק געווען יידן?

באַ אַלע דערשאָסענע, אומהאָפהענגיק, צי זיי זיינען פרויען צי מאַנצבילן, קינדער צי אַלטע לייט, צי יידן צי ניט יידן – באַ אַלע קדושים האָט דאס בלוט, וואָס מע האָט ארויסגעלאזט פון זייערע אָדערן, געהאַט איין פאַרב.[331]

In Babi Yar lie 70,000 dead, shot because they were Jews, 40 thousands – because they were Red Army soldiers, 10 thousands – because they belonged to the Communist party or the Communist Youth Movement. These distinctions were made by the fascists: but who does not understand that both within the Jewish population and among the soldiers and commanders of the Red Army there thousands and thousands of communists and Communist Youth members. On the other hand, were there few Jews among the Red Army soldiers and the underground fighters?

For all of those murdered, no matter whether they were women or men, children or elderly, Jews or n on-Jews – for all those martyrs, the blood that had been spilled out of their veins, had one color.

More than anything else, by invoking the conversation with his American guests, Vergelis wished to validate as well as justify the rationale that had underlain the Soviet official handling of Babi Yar for decades. It was only the fascists, so Vergelis's argument went, and implicitly, their imperialist Western successors, who would apply the Nazi racial dogma in order to arbitrarily distinguish Jews from non-Jews. As for himself, Vergelis made it clear, for a Jew

[331] Vergelis, "Der Denkmol in babi yar," 159. Orthography normalized.

fully assimilated into Soviet society, and no less important, for the victims of the Babi Yar tragedy themselves, this kind of racial or ethnic distinctions were superfluous, obsolete and groundless. The *kdoyshim*, a Yiddish word derived from Biblical Hebrew denoting "Jewish martyrs," the victims of anti-Jewish persecutions, now meant something new in Vergelis's lexicon: it was a reference to communists, to those who had been killed in Babi Yar for their loyalty to their Soviet motherland irrespective of their ethnic background.[332]

It would be no exaggeration to state that, to borrow Gary Rosenshield's term, Vergelis was de-Judaizing Babi Yar; that is, almost completely emptying the site of any distinct Jewish meaning.[333] Here is the only case of someone who most explicitly associated Babi Yar with the Great Patriotic War, refusing to accept the Holocaust as a legitimate lens through which the Babi Yar massacre, like other anti-Jewish Nazi genocidal operations perpetrated on Soviet soil, may be observed. Vergelis', to be sure, was the most extreme articulation of this one-directional memory, but under his stewardship there existed a broad spectrum of obfuscation and Doublespeak.

[332] For literary sources on the medieval concept of Kiddush Hashem, see David Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction*: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), xx-xx.

[333] Gary Rosenshield, "Socialist Realism and the Holocaust: Jewish Life and Death in Anatoly Rybakov's Heavy Sand," *PMLA* 111, no. 2 (1996): 248. Rosenshield uses this term in his evaluation of one of the most important novels published in the Soviet Union dealing with the Holocaust in the Ukraine: *Heavy Sand* by Anatoly Rybakov. Appearing in 1979, the novel depicts the life and death of a family of Jewish craftsmen who are positively portrayed as "salt-of-the earth," savvy and industrious workers. According to Rosenshield, this characterization, underpinned by the maxim of Socialist Realism, debunks many stereotypes about the wily and dishonest Jewish trader of the Shtetl. Yet, in many other respects, it drains Rybakov's Jews of any distinctly Jewish cultural attributes.

Babi Yar in *Sovetish heymland*

In 1959, after a hiatus of more than a decade, a time when the Yiddish letter almost completely disappeared from the Soviet cultural scene, printing of Yiddish works resumed in the USSR with the appearance of a few books of mainly Yiddish classics. Thereupon, new works started to appear in August of 1961 with the launching of *Sovetish heymland*, under the auspices of the Soviet Writer's Union.[334] When it first appeared, the Soviet Minister of Culture made it very clear that it was conceived in order to appease some Soviet sympathizers in the West, after much "pleading and sobbing" on their part.[335] In the first two years of its existence the journal focused almost entirely on the Soviet reality and assumed an unmistakably propagandistic tone, a trend that persisted yet was somewhat mitigated a few years later when greater attention began to be given to Jewish themes.

Among the occasional references made in *Sovetish heymland* to inherently Jewish subjects, the Holocaust occupied quite a central place, especially since the middle of the 1960s. When one peruses the stories, reports and poetry elaborating on the Holocaust in *Sovetish heymland* it is hard to overlook the great disparity between the room allotted to Babi Yar – a site that assumed such a symbolic role among Soviet Jews – and the far greater space assigned to other Holocaust sites and events. Despite the very conservative character of the periodical, the

[334] More than anything else, it was this tactical move toward the appeasement of communist leaning activists in the west - among them many Jews - that lay behind Khrushchev's regime's willingness to deviate from its attitude to Yiddish culture as a relic of the past and allow its partial recovery in the form of an officially sanctioned bi-monthly Yiddish publication. When the journal first appeared, the Soviet Minister of Culture made no secret of the fact that it was only foreign pressure, and no reconsideration of the Soviet stance toward Yiddish that accounted for the Yiddish journal's conception. See: Abraham Brumberg, "*Sovyetish Heymland* and the Dilemmas" 28. Estraikh notes another reason for this Soviet concession: the wish to meet these foreign protesters on the dire straits of Soviet Yiddish culture half-way by allowing only the establishment of a journal and the limited renewal of Yiddish book printing, as opposed to the far more ambitious wishes of many Soviet sympathizers in the west to see the recreation of Soviet Yiddish culture according to the Polish communal organization model. See Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*, 64-65.

[335] Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*, 113. See also: Abraham Brumberg, "*Sovyetish Heymland* and the Dilemmas," 28.

tragedy of European Jewry during the war was by no means a topic that the editor-in-chief felt compelled to categorically ignore. Evidently, as long as the works of prose, poetry or documentary materials connected with the memory of the Holocaust did not blatantly violate the official Soviet narrative of a Great Patriotic War – a narrative according to which both the living and the dead were all Soviet brothers, irrespective of their ethnic roots – their writers could, with little difficulty, receive the consent of the periodical's editorial board.

A case-in-point for the double standard held by the periodical's editorial board, drawing a clear distinction between Babi Yar and other Holocaust sites, is the comprehensive coverage given to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in an issue appearing in April 1963 on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary. No doubt, the coverage of the topic, impressive as it was, was fraught with Soviet clichés and factual errors, most evident in the leading historical article in the issue entitled "The Great Battle between the Ghetto Walls," written by the editor-in-chief of the Polish *Folks-shtime*, Hersh Smolyar.[336] At the same time that this central chapter of the Holocaust was given considerable attention, the readers of *Sovetish heymland* had to "dig" really deep to find any mention of Babi Yar.

While during the first half of the 1960s such excavations would have yielded very little, after the ouster of Khrushchev in the fall of 1964 and as the Thaw period approached its last two years, the trickle of references to Babi Yar, while never turning into a torrent, did grow

[336]Hersh Smolyar, "Di groyse shlakht tsvishn di geto-vent," *Sovetish Heymland* 2 (1963): 131-139. On the historical distortion in the article see: Joseph and Abraham Brumberg, *Sovyetish Heymland – an Analysis*, 16. Smolyar credits the underground Polish Communist Party in leading to the uprising, something that cannot be substantiated by historical data. While downplaying the contribution of the Zionists to the uprising, Smolyar does describe the uprising overall as a battle fought by Jews. The mentioning of Mordechai Anielewicz, the leader of the Zionist youth group Hashomer Hatsair and the head of the Z.O.B. (The Jewish Fighting Organization) as one of the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is another sign that *Sovetish Heymland* did not categorically deny the relevance of the uprising to the Holocaust.

considerably, both in the journal itself and in work appearing in book form. In the very first years of *Sovetish heymland*'s existence, though, the silence over Babi Yar was almost complete. We have already mentioned the appearance of Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" only in the Polish *Folks-shtime*. If the main point that Yevtushenko wanted to bring home was to bring Babi Yar closer to the orbit of the Holocaust, *Sovetish heymland* would invoke the name of Babi Yar by way of linking it to the general war experience.

A good example of this view of Babi Yar as a Great Patriotic War site is an illustration appearing on the very first issue of *Sovetish heymland*. Made by the Russian painter Boris Prorokov, it featured three women who came to Babi Yar to mourn and honor their dead. [337] The illustration's title "Babi Yar" and the biographical comments describing Prorokov's work, made no reference to the Jewish identity of either the mourners or those who had been victimized at the ravine. Prorokov's illustration appearing here, in this celebratory issue of the journal that promised to vitalize Soviet Yiddish literature, foreshadowed the future treatment of Babi Yar in *Sovetish heymland*. In line with Vergelis' attempt to gloss over the relevancy of Babi Yar as a Jewish site, what the illustration by Prorokov does is to delineate from the outset the contours of Jewish national sentiments that the journal had set for itself. While Holocaust related atrocities would be mentioned and even elaborately portrayed in *Sovetish heymland*, sometimes with reference to the victims of one atrocity as Jews, Babi Yar would continue to constitute a "black hole" in the Soviet memory of the Holocaust, being preserved, paradoxically, in a journal written in a Jewish language and designated almost entirely for a Jewish audience.

[337] See *Sovetish heymland* 1 (1961): 49.

A Black Crow: Motl Talalayevsky

That the illustration by Prorokov was a prelude to a trend is evidenced in the works published in *Sovetish heymland* in its ensuing issues. The next Yiddish writer who obliquely touched upon the massacre of Kiev Jews at Babi Yar was the Yiddish poet and writer Motl (Matvei) Talalayevsky (1908-1978). Born in the town of Makhnatshke in the Zhitomir region, Ukraine, Talalayevsky belonged to the generation of Soviet Yiddish writers whose literary career commenced after the October Revolution. Talalayevsky, who spent his boyhood and adolescence in Kiev where he studied at the Yiddish branch of the Department of Literature at the University of Kiev was, like many other among his cohort, a Jewish *Homo Sovieticus,* in our context, the new type of Jewish man, who was born and nurtured in the Soviet motherland and who had fully internalized the communist dogma without being 'contaminated' by any relation to the pre-revolutionary past, or exposure to Western culture.[338] As a graduate of the Soviet youth movements, the Young Pioneers and the Young Communist League (*Komsomol*), Talalayevsky, more than being the visionary of the Soviet Yiddish literary enterprise, was one of its products.

While the adaption to the new reality of a multi-ethnic empire in which minority cultures are fostered yet in an anti-religious, socialist environment, did not come easy to writers who had been reared in and had been shaped by the traditional Jewish milieu, it was far easier for Talalayevsky and his cohort to undergo this adjustment. Although Talalayevsky made his Yiddish debut in 1926, only a few years after Itsik Kipnis, these two writers came, in many ways, from two different worlds. The contrast was reflected not only in their work but in their personal lives as well. In her article dedicated to Kipnis on the occasion of his 70th birthday, Esther Rosenthal-Shneiderman writes about the grudges that Kipnis held toward Talalayevsky. As a Party member

[338] Estraikh, "Aron Vergelis: The Perfect Jewish Homo Sovieticus," 3.

and the one in charge of the ideological purity of the Yiddish almanac, *Der shtern*, appearing in Kiev in the late 1940s, Talalayevsky was one of the many detractors of Kipnis's expression of Jewish national sentiments" [339]

When considering the outlook of the two, it is hard, in fact, to imagine a starker contrast: on the one hand there was Kipnis, the 'white crow', nostalgic, homesick for the shtetl, a man longing for the bygone Jewish ways of life, who, from his early career, faced harsh criticism for his ideological ineptitude. And on the other, Talalayevsky, the ideologically 'clean' writer, who embodied the birth of the new Jewish man that the Soviet Union aspired to create. This was a contrast not only between two different outlooks of a Jewish writer into the legacy of his own people. It was also a watershed dividing between the tsarist past and the Soviet present. After all, it was the minor writer Talalayevsky, and not the internationally acclaimed Kipnis, who emblematized in his work the Soviet image of the future. A writer who used the Yiddish language in order to promote socialism and further the internationalist cause; a writer who saw the existence of a multi-ethnic culture as only a transitional stage toward the dissolving of all national particularities in the future dictatorship of the proletariat, was a far better candidate for stardom in post-Revolution Russia than a writer who was psychologically unable to sever his ties to the past.

Indeed, the future effacement of all ethnic distinctions was already evident in the literary career of the young Talalayevsky, the poet, novelist, playwright and translator, who published in Yiddish, Ukrainian and Russian, demonstrating thereby the ability to transcend the narrow confines of the Jewish world.[340] This linguistic precocity, though, came at the expense of familiarity with the roots of Yiddish literature, as well as with the Jewish age-old literary legacy.

[339] Rosenthal-Shneiderman, "Itsik Kipnis, aza vi ikh ken im," 155.
[340] Beider, 159.

The Soviet Yiddish literature critic and historian Maks Erik, a man who aspired to preserve this legacy within the framework of Soviet culture, was abhorred when he realized how ill-familiar Talalayevsky was in matters that concerned traditional Jewish culture. Erik condescendingly called him a 'Yiddish poet' - *a yidisher poet*, that is, a poet whose only identity mark as a Jew was his use of the Yiddish language as a vehicle of expression. No doubt, Talalayevsky was with this regard not the only one. About another writer of his cohort, Erik bitterly commented that "for this young man the Jewish people has not even existed prior to the October Revolution."[341] However, and this should be borne in mind, it is precisely this obliviousness to the Jewish past that ensured the rise of Talalayevsky to primacy, and was also precisely what saved him from the purges of the late 1930s that took the life of Erik, among many other Yiddish cultural activists who came to the Soviet Union from capitalist Poland and whose political purity was contested during the years of the Great Terror.

If Motl Talalayevsky was a Soviet writer whose language of expression happened to be Yiddish, a writer who embodied in his work and career a multinational stance and opposition to national particularism,[342] one experience did shake his hitherto firm belief in the so-called brotherhood of all Soviet peoples. In the wake of the war, after joining the Red Army and serving at the front as an officer and journalist (his reports would appear in the organ of the JAFC *Eynikeyt*), Talalayevsky started searching for his Jewish roots. In a poem entitled "My Second

[341] Rosenthal-Shneiderman, *Oyf Vegn un Umvegn*, vol. 2, 212.

[342] Interestingly, Talalayevsky was consistent in his opposition to nationalist deviation and did not center his attack on Yiddish writers only. In September 1947 he expressed his multinational stance by partaking in the writing of a collective article, published in the Ukrainian literary magazine *Literaturna hazeta*, which fulminated against Itsik Kipnis's Jewish nationalist sentiments expressed only a few months earlier in his aforementioned story "Without Thinking, without Calculation." See Rosenthal-Shneiderman, "Itsik Kipnis, aza vi ikh ken im," 155. Similarly, Talalayevsky was no less hostile to Soviet Ukrainian writers whose works also deviated from the maxim of 'national in form, socialist in content.' As Mordechai Altshuler points out, when Talalayevsky appeared before the presidium of the Ukrainian Writer's Union in order to condemn Kipnis' controversial story, he devoted the lion's share of his speech to an attack against Ukrainian writers whose works were also 'contaminated' by Ukrainian nationalist moods. See Altshuler, "Itsik Kipnis," 84-85.

Beginning," he even expressed torment and self-doubt about his earlier careless attitude to his people's legacy and wished to do penance for it.[343] In 1951, after the poem had been discovered in his notes during the midst of the Stalinist anti-Cosmopolitan campaign, Talalayevsky was arrested while on a poetry reading tour in the southern Ukrainian city of Nikolayev and was released in 1954 from a labor camp in Central Asia. Unlike Kipnis, who even after his release from the Gulag remained for a while a pariah and was forbidden from living in Kiev, Talalayevsky was re-inducted into the Communist Party,[344] started to publish both original works and translations in Russian and Ukrainian, and, as early as 1961, became a frequent contributor of *Sovetish heymland*.[345]

Perhaps it was the bitter memories of the Gulag, or maybe the renewed membership in the Communist Party (which carried both privilege and the fear one of losing it) that the works of Talalayevsky published in *Sovetish heymland* or in book form during the post-Stalin era were highly conservative in character. It requires some effort to find any allusions to the Holocaust lurking beneath the properly socialist-realist and exceedingly optimistic façade of his poetry. It may well be that for Talalayevsky, the commitment to the Jewish language, the number of speakers of which were constantly dwindling in the Soviet Union like anywhere else, was enough of a statement of his Jewish roots. But if one is to search for parallel expressions of commitment to his Jewish identity during this period in the poet's message, rather than his medium, the task becomes much more difficult.

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[343] Beider, 159.

[344] Rosenthal-Shneiderman , Oyf vegn un umvegn, vol. 2, 355.

[345] Bogdan Kozachenko, "'...Gde tvoya rodina, brat?' matvei talalayevskii: mezhdu kosmopolitizmom i kosmosom," *Zerkalo nedeli* 27 December 2008,accessed 12 December 2012, http://zn.ua/CULTURE/gde_tvoya_rodina,_brat_matvey_talalaevskiy_mezhdu_kosmopolitizmom_i_kosmosom-55788.html.

Curiously, in the rare moments during which Talalayevsky does choose to manifest this kind of a bond with the fate of his people and to do so in the most personal fashion, that is, by reminiscing on the tragedy of his own family members, he connects to his Jewish roots by invoking – though in a very allusive and elusive way – the memories of the Babi Yar massacre. The circumlocutory manner in which he mentions the massacre of Kiev Jews is evidenced in the following poem, entitled "At Those Ditches:"

ניין, ניט קיין נייגער האָט געפירט מיין האַרץ
אַהער, צו אָט די גרינע, טיפע ריוון...
שוין צוואַנציק יאָר אַדורך פון יענעם האַרבסט,
וועו כ׳וואָלט באַדאַרפט דאָ זיצן שבעה,
נאָך דעמעלט כ׳בין געווען פון דאַנען ווייט
און בלויז געהערט פון די אָנצאָליקע הריגות...
ס׳איז שטיל אַרום, נאָר דאַכט זיך, אַז ער שרייט –
מיין ברודער שרייט פון אָט די טיפע ריוון[346].

No, it wasn't curiosity that led my heart,
Here, to these green, deep ditches….
Twenty years have passed since that fall,
When I had to sit shiva here,
At that time, I was far away
And only heard of the countless murders…
It is quiet here, but it seems to me, that he screams –
My brother cries out from these deep ditches.

[346] Motl Talalayevsky, "Ba yene rivn," *Sovetish heymland* 6 (1963): 66. Orthography normalized.

Talalayevsky portrays a typical Soviet postwar landscape of a serene, unmarked and seemingly forgotten pit, where the dead bodies of dozens of thousands of the Nazis' victims lay. As much as the ideological outlook of Talalayevsky is so much removed from that of Kipnis, he emulates the latter when he refers to the mass grave by invoking a Jewish mourner's ritual. If Kipnis spoke in his "Babi Yar" about the *yortsayt*, Talalayevsky conjures up the *shiv'ah* (*shive* in Yiddish), the observation of seven days of mourning of a first-degree relative. The comparison between the two writers is, again, very telling. For if Kipnis, eschewing in the Soviet version of his "Babi Yar" a clear reference to Jewish victims, Talalayevsky left the identity of the ditches unidentified and alludes to its Jewish victims only by mentioning the practice of the seven days of mourning.

It turns out only at the very last line of the poem that the poet is not afflicted by feelings of remorse for failing to mourn the victims at the nameless ditches as a Jewish collective. Rather, it is the death of his own brother that concerns him. The reference to his brother is what gives the reader familiar with Talalayevsky's oeuvre a clue that the locus concerned in the poem is none other than Babi Yar. The key to unlock the secret of the location of the ditches may be found in an earlier and longer poem by Talalayevsky, carrying the title "Kiev." In this fairly conservative poem abounding with hyperbolic Soviet self-praise, a poem that hails the postwar capital of the Ukrainian SSR, the green, the forever-young city where "on Shevchenko's bright boulevard stands Lenin's monument crowned with bright glory…,"[347] Talalayevsky refers directly to Babi Yar and identifies it as his brother's burial ground:

[347] Motl Talalayevsky, "Kiev," *Sovetish heymland* 4 (1962): 6.

ניט ווייט פון פאָדאָל ליגט דער באַבי יאַר.

די סעדער אַרום – זויבער גרין און צעבליט,

נאָר די ביימער דאָ זינגען אַ באַזונדערע ליד...

כ׳בלייב שטיין אַף א רגע, און רייד ניט און שווייג,

איך קוק אף דעם בוים מיט דער נאַקעטער צווייג –

ס׳איז מיין אייביקער איידעס... מיט יאָרן צוריק

געהאַנגען אַף אים איז אַ דייטשישער שטריק.

דער דייטשישער שטריק, דער פאַרשאָלטענער שטריק,

וואָס האָט דאָ מיין ברודער אין אַנגסטן דערשטיקט....[348]

Not far from Podol lies Babi Yar.

The cedars around it are blooming and clean,

But a different song the trees there sing...

I stand there for a moment, not talking, in silence,

I look at the tree with a naked branch –

It’s my eternal witness... years ago

a German rope was hanging from it.

The German rope, the accursed rope,

that in cold sweat strangled my brother there.

[348] Ibid., 5. Orthography normalized.

Only by juxtaposing these few lines "hiding" in the middle of a poem stretching over four pages with the concise "At those Ditches," is it possible to ascertain that the massacre portrayed in the poem took place in Babi Yar.

Notably, neither "Kiev" nor "At Those ditches" approaches the Babi Yar massacre in a way that would pay honor to its Jewish dead as victims of genocide. While in "Kiev" Talalayevsky, for some reason, does not refrain from explicitly spelling out the name Babi Yar, his depiction of the Soviet-Jewish experience during World War II is compromised in a different respect. The poem "Kiev", overall, other than including the two words "Babi Yar", is a bona fide Soviet poem of the Cold War period. The poem concludes with the call of an older veteran to his son, now a young soldier, to protect the Soviet motherland "wherever you are and whenever the ominous hour (*beyze sho*) will find you." Babi Yar and the haunting memories of the war are approached by Talalayevsky only in the narrow, officially sanctioned constrains of the Soviet *druzhba narodov*, the aforementioned "Brotherhood of the (Soviet) Nations." "Kiev," it turns out, is a eulogy to two of Talalayevsky's brothers-in-arms: the Jewish Ziame Kornblum and the Ukrainian Vadim Brotshenko, whose heroism the poet extolls:

ס׳איז גרויס די צאָל פון קיעווער טרייסט זין,
וואָס האָבן זייער פלאַם דערטראָגן ביז בערלין...
פאַר קיעוו אָפגעצאָלט פאַר בלוט אף זיינע שטייגער,
פאַר טאַטנס, מאַמעס און פאַר קינדער קליינע,
פאַר אַלע אומגעבראַכטע און פאַר קדושים אַלע,
פאַר מיין פריינט, וואָס זיינען דאָ געפאַלן,
פאַר זיאַמע קאָרנבלום און בראָטשענקא וואַדים.[349]

[349] Ibid., 4. Orthography normalized.

The number of Kiev's devoted sons is great,

those who carried their flame all the way to Berlin...

For Kiev has paid back for the blood on its stones,

for fathers, mothers and the children the little,

For all those murdered and for all of our martyrs,

For my friends who died here,

For Zyame Kornblum and Brotshke Vadim.

In these words, Talalayevsky, who was a decorated Red Army major and also took part in the march to Berlin,[350] aligns himself in this stanza with Vergelis's contextualization of Babi Yar as a Great Patrioitc War site. Babi Yar here is a topic that cuts across all ethnic boundaries without attributing any significance to its Jewish facet. So too, it is only the two brothers-in-arms, the Jewish and Ukrainian that deserve the title *kdoyshim* and deserve their full name to be mentioned. The other victims of war, the mass of fathers, mothers and small children who died in the ditches remain anonymous. For this reason, not unlike "By those Ditches," "Kiev" is a poem that dares not to deviate from Moscow's official narrative of World War II.

In summary, it is by the most cryptic means that Motl Talalayevsky refers in his two poems published in the early years of *Sovetish heymland*'s existence to Babi Yar. Moreover, if the Yiddish writers discussed thus far tended to correlate Babi Yar with the master narrative of the genocide of European Jews, for Talalayevsky the site remains tightly connected with the

[350] On the heroic feats of Talalayevsky the "poet and fighter" see: Y. Dobrushin, A dikhter – a shlakhtman," *Eynikayt*, 8 September, 1945, 3.

memories of the Great Patriotic War. If, as noted earlier, the angle from which Itsik Kipnis looked at Babi Yar was that of the evacuee who encountered a hostile environment, a different angle was viewed by the Red Army major who had returned from battle and despite the fact that anti-Semitic moods were endemic to the Soviet military no less than to the civilian populace, could not let the ideal image of a Soviet brotherhood be dashed by a more complex reality. Yet, this inclination to view Babi Yar as a Great Patriotic War site, should not be explained only in terms of Talalayevsky's wartime experience. For a writer who, from the early years of his career, understood that prominence on the Soviet literary scene was predicated on ideological purity, it seems that there was no other choice than to refer to Babi Yar in the most oblique manner, in a way that was politically proper. That Talalayevsky was not the only one to pursue this course is evidenced in the work of another Yiddish poet, Dore Khaykine, who, like him, occupied a primary place in the poetry section of *Sovetish heymland* – a result not of her rare literary gift, but rather of her staunch political loyalty.

Back to that Same Road: Dore Khaykine

Like Kipnis, Driz and Talalayevsky, the Soviet Yiddish poet Dore Khaykine (1913-2006) was a member of the Yiddish circle of writers during the interwar period. A native of Chernigov, she resettled in the Ukrainian capital in the aftermath of the war. Like many other Yiddish writers of her cohort, Khaykine came from a humble background and moved to Kiev not to pursue a splendid literary career, but in order to find employment as a weaver in one of the city's textile factories.[351] She too belonged to the new generation of proletarian writers whose record was a

[351] Beider, 191.

"blank slate," not contaminated by pre-Revolutionary 'politically-incorrect' literary works or non-communist political affiliations. The fate of a weaver-turned-poet reflected a larger trend in the Soviet literature of the mid-1930s following the establishment of the Soviet Writers' Union in 1932, the disbandment of all literary groups active in the country and the increase in Party control over literary activity.

Khaykine made her debut just before this grand transition from Soviet culture as a revolutionary entity capable of embracing a whole range of modernist trends in art to a vehicle of Stalin's totalitarian Cultural Revolution that envisioned writers as "engineers of the human soul," namely – merely as useful vehicles in the Soviet propaganda machine. Khaykine's first poem appeared in the Yiddish journal *Prolit*, a journal that already signaled Soviet literature's future path. As David Shneer notes, the appearance in early 1928 of *Prolit*, an abbreviation for proletarian literature, coincided with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution and the rise to eminence of literature that was not only created for the proletariat, but, rather, forged by it. In the same vein, the scholar Evgeny Dobrenko, turning his attention to the mainstream of Soviet literature rather than concentrating on rare talents like Pasternak, Mandelstam or Akhmatova, also underlined that literary creativity in the Soviet Union of the Stalin era was a mass phenomenon. In many cases, he argues, those who filled the ranks of the new cohort of Soviet writers were workers – sometimes even semi-literate – who had been ushered into the literary world through creative writing workshops and amateur literary groups.[352]

That Khaykine deserves to be classified as a worker who only by accident was included in the group of the most prolific Soviet Yiddish poets of the post-Stalin era might be somewhat

[352] Dobrenko comments that at one point in the history of the Soviet Writers' Union its membership reached about 10,000 writers. See: Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer: Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture*, trans. Jesse Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xiv.

exaggerated. Yet, like the case of her fellow Yiddish poet Talalayevsky, what accounted for Khaykine's rise to prominence was not poetic innovativeness or a particular message of her own, but willingness to pay lip service to those who controlled the literary means of production in the Soviet state. Before the war Khaykine was a minor figure on the scene of Soviet Yiddish culture – in the early 1930s we find her working as an assistant bibliographer at the Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture, having published only one collection of poems, as late as 1938.[353] After the decade-long hiatus of Yiddish publication in the USSR in the wake of the Stalinist anti-Semitic campaigns, Khaykine had the privilege to publish a poem in the first issue of *Sovetish heymland* and to become one of its contributors.

Similar to other members of the Kiev circle of Yiddish writers, Khaykine also engaged the theme of Babi Yar in two of her poems. In the first, "Der zelber veg" (That same road) Babi Yar lies at the very heart of the poem's narrative, yet the name Babi Yar is never mentioned. The second poem, "Ikh bin dort oykh geven" (I Too Was There), albeit mentioning Babi Yar only in passing, is a work that places Babi Yar in the broader context of World War II and is hence pertinent to our discussion. Despite her frequent contributions to Soviet Yiddish literature's flagship journal, it was not here, but in the anthology of the new generation of Soviet Yiddish poetry entitled *Horizontn* (Horizons) that appeared in 1965 in a modest press run of 5000 copies, that "That Same Road" was first published.[354]

The poem bears some resemblance to another work discussed earlier: "Babi Yar" by Itsik Kipnis. Both were written in the same year, 1944, in the immediate aftermath of Kiev's

[353] Beider, 191; Rosenthal-Shnaiderman, *Oyf vEgn un umvegn*, vol. 2, 217, 279-280.

[354] See: Dore Khaykine, "Der zelber veg," in: Arn Vergelis, ed., *Horizontn: fun der hayntsaytiker sovetisher yiddisher dikhtung* (Moscow: Sovetski pisatel, 1965), 340-42. The poem was also published in one of Khaykine's later collections of poems. See: Dore Khaykine, *Fun ale mayne vegn: lider* (Moscow: Sovetsky pisatel, 1975), 163-164.

liberation but their publication was delayed until the Brezhnev era. Substantively, both were works reflecting the experience of the returning evacuee. Khaykine, who spent the war in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, in its north-eastern city of Kustanay, describes what seems like a first encounter with Babi Yar:

דער זעלבער וועג. די זעלבע זאַמדן ווייסע,
די זעלבע גרינע ביימער ביי דער שליאַך.
עס קאָן אַ האַרץ פון ווייטעק זיך צעררייסן,
און ליידן קאָן א מענטשלעך האַרץ אַ סך.

מיט יענעם זעלבן וועג איך גיי אַצינדערט
מיט וועלכען זיי זיינען געגאַנגען אָן אַ צאָל –
די שוועסטער מיינע מיט די מאַמעס, מיט די קינדער
פון דער דעמעיעווקע, קליינוואַסילקאָוער און פּאָדאָל.[355]

That same road. The same white sands,
The same green trees by the dirt road.
A heart can rip from pain,
And a human heart can endure a lot.
I take the road now
That they, the many have taken before –
My sisters with their mothers and their children
From Demyevke, Vasilkov Minor and Podol.

[355] Dore Khaykine, “Der Zelber Veg,” in: *Horizontn*, 340-42.

Having returned to Kiev, the speaker wishes to march through the same streets that led her kin to their death; to turn the road to Babi Yar into a Holocaust *Via Dolorosa*, that could help those who were not there to relive the two days of terror experienced by their loved-ones, the time when "a young woman, exactly like me cuddled her child so close to her heart." Khaykine, it is clear, defines the massacres that took place at Babi Yar as a Jewish event. Her focus on the death of women and children and on a massive march toward the ravine is indicative of the subject of the poem, as well as of the objects of Nazi terror depicted in it. If these hints seem too oblique, by providing the names Demeyevke, Kleyn Vasilkov and Podol – districts that were heavily populated by Jews in interwar Kiev – Khaykine makes the Jewish identity of the victims clear.

Clear, provided the reader is intimately familiar with the geography and demography of Kiev. Nowhere in the poem can one find any mention of "Babi Yar." "That Same Road" is a striking example of how Holocaust literature took shape in a Soviet context during the time that David Roskies calls "Communal Memory." On the one hand, the poem is endowed with a sense of immediacy: like virtually all other Soviet Yiddish works on Babi Yar it does not recognize the Holocaust as a separate category nor stops to dwell on its far-reaching ethical or philosophical implications. This is a poem written at a time when the memory of Nazi atrocities was still fresh and raw, highly malleable. The designated reader of the poem is not the broadest readership one can imagine, but, rather, the small community of Yiddish readers who know something about Jewish Kiev of the interwar years.

On the other hand, the absence of an explicit reference to Babi Yar does not only stem from the designation of this poem as part of a local, communal memory. The political end that it serves should not be overlooked. For not unlike the ditches depicted by Talalayevsky, the

omission of the name Babi Yar makes the poem almost invisible, hardly a candidate for a canonical poem on the massacre of Kiev Jews if it dares not mention the dreadful name Babi Yar out loud. The absence of the ravine's name, while superfluous for the Kiev Yiddish reader, was necessary in order to endow the poem with the proper underlying political direction.

In "I Too Was There" Khaykine places Babi Yar in an historical context that would only further enhance its political aptness. If the first poem centered on the feelings of guilt of the one who escaped the Nazi beast, in the second, recalling her evacuation east, on the way to Siberia, boarding a troop train, Khaykine remembers to thank her rescuer:

ס׳האָט מיך מיין לאַנד אַזוי געראַטעוועט פון פייער –
פון אומקום שרעקלעכען אין באַבי יאַר.
די קליינע קינדער מיינע, מיך,
מיין מאמע מיין געטרייע
אוועקגעפירט וואָס ווייטער פון געפאַר.[356]

My land has saved me from the fire –

From a horrible death in Babi Yar.

The small children, myself,

My mom my beloved

It moved us from peril, no matter how far.

[356] Dore Khaykine, "Ikh bin dort oykh geven," *Sovetish Heymland* 10 (1968): 56-57.

The slanted rhyme most central in the poem -- *Babi Yar-gefar* (Babi Yar-peril) only helps to highlight the gratitude Khaykine expresses toward the Soviet authorities, who, as she contends in the poem, recognized the urgent need to evacuate Soviet Jews like her from the scene of atrocities. In what is essentially, an ode to the Soviet motherland that rescued thousands of Jews by allowing them to board the trains designated for the withdrawing Red Army and essential industries, Khaykine is much more at ease referring to Babi Yar without the need to camouflage the identity of the site. In order to achieve this heightened sense of political-correctness, there is nothing better than to make mention of Lenin:

האָט אויסגעשפרייט פאַר מיר דער טאָג סיבירער ווייטן,
פאַר נאַכט דעם הימל אויסגעשטערנט העל.
און מיר האָט זיך דערנאָך די גאַנצע צייט געדוכט:
איך זע דעם פלאַם פון שייטער,
וואָס האָט נאָך לענינען גערהיט אָט דאָ פון קעלט.[357]

The day has spread out for me the Siberian expanse,

At night the sky was bright from the stars.

The whole time I thought to myself:

Here's the flame of the pyre,

The one that kept Lenin from the cold.

[357] Ibid., 56.

To sum up, when compared with two other members of the Kiev circle discussed earlier, it is possible to place Dore Khaykine's view of Babi Yar somewhere in-between that of Kipnis and Talalayevsky. With the former, she shares the experience of the retuning evacuee who is confronted for the first time by the destruction of his community, a calamity that the writer was fortunate to evade. Khaykine, like Kipnis, construes Babi Yar as a Jewish locus, focusing on "her sisters," on the Jewish women accompanied by their children on their last road, leading to Babi Yar. Khaykine also aligns herself with a member of her cohort – the bona fide Yiddish poet Talalayevsky. Refraining from a direct reference to the ravine on the outskirts of Kiev, or doing so only in order to contrast Nazi cruelty with Soviet nobility, Khaykine, like Talalayevsky, blurs the boundaries between the Soviet official narrative of the Babi Yar massacre and the view of it retained by Itsik Kipnis, and to a lesser extent by Driz as well – as an exclusively Jewish tragedy.

As few and far between as are the references to Babi Yar, in the works of Khaykine and Talalayevsky, in the case of Shloyme Cherniavsky, (1909-1974) the reader needs to cross linguistic territories before finding such a poem in a posthumously published work, appearing in Russian translation.

Shloyme Cherniavsky: The Mother-Child Metonymy

Last is by no means least, though it is certainly ironic that the most powerful Yiddish poem on Babi Yar was written by an almost unknown poet and never saw the light of day in its original language. (1909-1974). While never mentioning "Jews", the untitled poem about Babi Yar by Shloyme Cherniavsky deserves to be compared, substantively and stylistically, with the Russian "Babi Yar" by Yevtushenko. The fact that Cherniavsky was a frequent contributor to *Sovetish*

heymland yet never managed to get the work published during his lifetime, provides us with another clue that the downplaying of Babi Yar in the Soviet Yiddish mainstream platform was no mere oversight, but rather was indicative of cultural suppression.

From the very few biographical details available about him, we know that Shloyma Cherniavsky was disabled from birth and was raised in an orphanage after the murder of his parents in a pogrom. Cherniavsky was one of the very few Yiddish writers who avoided the anti-Jewish repressions of the late Stalin era. He was a prolific writer, but managed during his lifetime to see only two poetry collections of his published, both prior to the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War.[358] In 1975, about a year after his death, his finest poems were translated into Russian and appeared in an anthology carrying the title *Po-moskovskomu vremeni* (On Moscow time). Even though his work occasionally appeared in *Sovetish heymland*, it was here, and only in Russian translation, that his chilling poem on Babi Yar appeared.

As noted earlier, Cherniavsky's approach to Babi Yar bears a striking resemblance to that of Yevtushenko: both works reflect on a visit to the site before the first official monument was laid there; i.e., the obelisk erected in 1966. Both poems contemplate the oxymoronic character of Babi Yar as a site blending natural scenery and images of horror; both contrast the dedication of the speaker to the victims' memory with the site's neglect, with the careless manner in which Soviet officialdom treated the memory of the dead. While Yevtushenko, the non-Jewish poet, traveled to Babi Yar from Moscow to see this neglect for himself, the Kievan Cherniavsky seemed almost forced, impelled to be there. "A horrible disaster swept through," (промчалась страшная беда...) he exclaims, and then pauses to think about this sense of compulsion :

[358] Beider, 169-170.

В какой же горестной надежде
я прихажу сиуда, как прежде?
Зачем я прихожу сюда?

In what desperate hope,
Am I coming here, like before?
Why am I coming here?

While the poem itself is undated, it is clear that the speaker's recent visit to the site is projected onto an earlier one, taking place in 1944, a pivotal year in the history of Babi Yar's representation that, as we have already seen, marks the watershed between the immediate war experience and postwar reconstruction:

Сорок чтевертый давний год.
Душа от ужаса ослепла.
Над Бабьим Яром тучи пепла
еще раз ветер пронесет....

Вот башмачок лежит в траве...
Он полусгнил... А где ребенок?
Ладони матери спросонок
по детской бродят голове....

Они коснутся нежных щек...
Они скользнут... не руки - тени...

В траве сгнивает башмачок...

Он чей?

И кто его наденет?

Над Бабьим Яром ветра свист.

Что было даром? Что недаром?

Летит листва над Бабьим Яром.

На Башмачок ложится лист.[359]

That by-gone year of forty-four

The soul has turned blind from sorrow.

Once again the wind will carry clouds of ash

Over Babi Yar …

A little child's shoe lies on the grass

It's half-rotten… but where's the child?

The mother's hands, she's half-awake

They wander over the child's head…

They touch upon his gentle cheeks…

They slide – not hands - but shadows…

A child's shoe rots here on the grass,

But whose?

And who will put it on?

[359] Shloyme Cherniavsky, *Po moskovskomu vremini: lirika raznyh let* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1975), 134.

Over Babi Yar – the wind's whistle.

What was in vain, and what was not?

The leaves are flying over Babi Yar.

A leaf descends on a shoe.

In Cherniavsky's poem, the Jewish identity of the victims is pointed out only metonymically, via the child's slipper and the image-shadow of his mother's hands, a clear allusion to the death of children and women at Babi Yar, mainly on September 29-30, 1941. Cherniavsky does not elaborate on any Jewish archetype, genre, traditional custom or theme. The poem, in this respect, may seem to fit well into the category of a Great Patriotic War, underlining the theme of suffering. Yet the focus on the civilian population that was murdered at Babi Yar, coupled by the graphic descriptions of the site's condition, situates the poem firmly within the corpus of Holocaust poetry.

Here, in other words, is another case of a poem slightly deviating from Moscow's line, appearing at the very end of a work that appeared only in translation, only after its author was already dead. To those who might suggest that a Yiddish poem in a Russian translation was tantamount to more exposure, a testimony perhaps to permissibility of the topics concerned in the poem, we may respond by referring to the very limited circulation of the work – only a few thousand copies – a standard rate for Yiddish poetry books. If we take into account the amount of books sent to private readers and libraries overseas, then the number of copies available in the Soviet Union was even smaller. In sum, while this confessional poem by Cherniavsky may be on par with Yevtushenko's work, both confessional, declamatory pieces, centering on the confrontation of the living witness-visitor with the dead corpses at Babi Yar, corpses of innocent

civilians, the poor circulation of Cherniavsky's poem and its existence only in a posthumous translation ensured that no Yevgeny Yevtushenko would emerge in the Soviet Yiddish sphere.

The Meanings of Dissent

The discussion of the work by Driz and Kipnis, Talalayevsky, Khaykine and Cherniavsky, all appearing in the Soviet Union during the period at the core of our discussion – the Thaw and the decade that followed it – helps establish the patterns that underlay the representation of Babi Yar in Soviet Yiddish literature when putting all these disparate pieces of the literary puzzle together. These patterns include the tendency on the part of *Sovetish heymland* and other Soviet Yiddish publications to overshadow the Babi Yar massacre by other events pertaining to the Holocaust; the circulation of these works among only a small audience, and, the referencing of Babi Yar only in allusive, carefully measured ways. Most crucially, we have observed that the Kiev Yiddish writers carefully avoided any consistent correlation between the Babi Yar massacre and the Holocaust of European Jewry.

In other words, when carefully investigating all of these texts and paying equal attention to their publication date and place, the specific historical context in which they appeared, it is possible to discern a certain pattern of cultural suppression affecting them all. What could be said in the mainstream literary platforms in Russian – even though this might have irritated the Party bosses presiding literary matters – had to be marginalized, almost ignored in Yiddish. This was a twofold suppressive process, for if we draw internal comparisons among the Yiddish works, it

emerges that those informed by the view of Babi Yar as A Great Patriotic War site – the most conspicuous among them being "Kiev" by Talalayevsky – appeared in the forefront of the Soviet sphere's flagship publication *Sovetish heymalnd*, whereas "Babi Yar" by Kipnis appeared at the very end of his collection of stories, published twenty-five years after it had been composed and in a book of a small circulation.

Diverse as this group of writers may be, when looking at the postwar Kiev Circle of writers as a group, as the members of the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia who survived the Stalinist purges and chose to partake in the difficult and very partial recovery that Soviet Yiddish culture during the Post-Stalin era, one wonders what made them erect such a modest literary memorial to the Jewish victims of Babi Yar? Why didn't these writers choose to place Babi Yar more firmly, conspicuously, within the inner circle of the Holocaust?

When all is said and done, it bears remembering that for the Kiev Yiddish writers there was good reason to align oneself with the Party stance toward Babi Yar. In the Soviet Yiddish literary apparatus, which generally assumed a conservative character and had only one functioning periodical in the whole country, what mattered beyond anything else was one's ability to write works that manifested loyalty to the owners of the means of literary production, namely, to the Soviet regime. While the demand to write paeans to the Soviet regime was not as draconian as during the 1930s, and was not a matter of life or death, paying lip service to Communist ideology, not poetic gift or originality, was the decisive factor that distinguished an obscure writer from a prolific one. As some of the Kiev Yiddish writers had fresh, first-hand memories of Soviet persecution from the late Stalin years and had known, in the flesh, what might happen to those giving vent to their Jewish national sentiments, it may well be that these works on Babi Yar reflect a wish to "stay on track," avoid mentioning Babi Yar as a Holocaust

site, and making sure not to manifest any heterodox thoughts. As they may have known well, such deviationist expressions of Jewish national sentiments always had the potential of catching up to them later, as was the fate of many Yiddish writers during the peak of the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign.

As a reminder that the Kiev Yiddish writers were exposed to political pressure even during an epoch in Soviet history often nostalgically remembered as a time of artistic vibrancy and political relaxation, we may mention the fact that in the Ukraine in general and Kiev in particular the suppression of Jewish culture and religion was felt more strongly than in other parts of the USSR, in a republic and a city that became, as early as 1971, a hub for the dissident movement of Jews who had "betrayed" their Soviet motherland by demanding the right to leave it. In the specific context of Babi Yar, this budding dissident movement was responsible for the mass ceremonies, both legally and illegally conducted, that took place at Babi Yar from the mid-1960s onward. This political pressure, however, spawning the backlash in the shape of the Jewish dissident movement, also shows the flip side of the coin. It shows that while a party member like Aron Vergelis the editor, or Motl Talalayevsky the poet – perhaps the most extreme examples of members of the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia who construed Babi Yar mainly as a Great Patriotic War site – preferred to align themselves with Moscow on this matter, there were Jews who chose to risk their personal security and do the opposite. In contrast with the attitude of these two men, a Jewish factory worker of the younger generation, a man named Boris Kochubievsky, was arrested for his Zionist activities following an illegal ceremony taking place at Babi Yar in 1968 where he proclaimed that "here lies a part of the Jewish people."[360] Kochubievsky was arrested for doing exactly what his Soviet Yiddish co-religionists refused to

[360] Sheldon, 146; Pinkus, *Tehiyah utekumah leumit*, 278.

do: to assert that Babi Yar is a Holocaust site and a Jewish site and to do so by way of squarely confronting Moscow on its decades-long neglect of the site.

Kochubievsky's stance regarding Babi Yar, so different from the one taken by the Soviet Yiddish cultural establishment, may be taken as a mark of a generational gap between two groups. On the one side of this conflict was the cohort of aging Yiddish writers, veterans of the battlefields and Gulags who had by the late-1960s come to see the Soviet Union as their 'Soviet Homeland,' for better or worse, despite the limited opportunities it allowed to develop a sustainable Jewish culture. On the other side was the first generation of Jewish dissidents who, in the wake of the Thaw, became completely disillusioned with ever being able to reconcile the Soviet and the Jewish, and wished instead to pursue a new Jewish life elsewhere, beyond the Iron Curtain. Yet before rushing to the conclusion, a staple feature of the Cold War scholarship, that what was at stake was an ideological clash between old and young, Communist stalwarts and dissidents, it is worth looking at the Yiddish works on Babi Yar and their composers through a different lens and recognizing the flip-side of the coin.

True, virtually all the works touching upon the theme of Babi Yar in Yiddish literature tended to tone down the connection between Babi Yar and Jews. Some of them even correlated the death of the Jews in Babi Yar with that of other nationalities, or concealed from the reader the exact identity of the ravine. Nonetheless, one must remember that it was by virtue of these writers that some – albeit very few – poignant works on Babi Yar did find their way into the officially sanctioned Soviet Yiddish literature. As Rudolph Tőkés reminds us, while dissent may be narrowly defined as an act of protest against an oppressive dictatorial regime, as a head-on confrontation of a single citizen or members of a group with the state, the term may also be construed in a broader sense as an existential experience; a spiritual act of defiance that may not

necessarily be followed by any external manifestations.[361] The commemoration of Babi Yar in the Soviet Yiddish sphere does fall, indeed, into this categorization of dissent. It is quite easy to discern the underlying subversive drive in the writing of Kipnis, who other than the omission of the term 'Jews' did use every tool at his disposal to orient Babi Yar toward the circle of the Holocaust. But even when considering the more ambivalent writers, or those who used more oblique methods, one is compelled to appreciate the fair amount of courage it took this group of writers to put Babi Yar on the map of Soviet Yiddish belles-letters. The personal tone of Talalayevsky, the burden of memories haunting the poem of Khaykine, the grief of a crazed Jewish mother who had lost her two sons portrayed by Driz, or the bleak vision of the neglected, ghostly ravine visited by Cherniavsky – these all underscore the portrayal of a site that for Soviet officialdom remained a complete 'memory black hole' up until the mid-1960s. Being fully aware that the agony, theirs as much as that of their people, had hardly any room in Soviet officialdom's memory of WWII, we must acknowledge the fact that none of these writers fully capitulated to the psychological pressure exerted on Soviets Jews, and still found *a* way – perhaps not *the* way – to rescue Babi Yar from oblivion and place it on Yiddish literature's real, geographical map.

The evaluation of the underlying motivations of the Soviet Yiddish writers may thus be interpreted in more than one way. It is thus, possible to see the Kiev Yiddish writers as a group who consciously chose to subscribe to the marginalization of Babi Yar by Moscow, and vice versa – to recognize the effort they made to sustain the site in the collective memory of their readers. But a more complete assessment of the crystallizing of Babi Yar's memory in Soviet Yiddish belles-lettres is possible only if we come full circle and examine the contribution to this

[361] Rudolf Tőkés "Varieties of Soviet Dissent: An Overview," 31.

literary process by another player, a Moscow Yiddish poet – Aron Vergelis, whose unabashed support for the Party line vis-à-vis Babi Yar has already been illustrated.

"What Makes Yiddish Literature Vibrant?"

Clearly, in an era of relative freedom of expression, the editors of literary journals were limited in their ability to determine the ideological direction of the literary platform under their supervision and prescribe the exact underlying ideology that each work on Babi Yar had to have. Yet, while not omnipotent, literary editors in the more decentralized post-Stalin era were still given a great degree of discretion to give literary works their final shape.[362] It is important to note that this relatively significant power of editors to act independently without getting the central censorship apparatus Glavlit involved, while practiced across the board,[363] was greatly magnified in the case of Aron Vergelis because he was given even more liberty in *Sovetish heymland* as he wore two different hats – that of the editor and that of censor.[364]

[362] Katerina Clark comments that the main difference between Russian literature of the 19th century and the Soviet one that succeeded it lies in the fact that the Soviet government "has not only censored the writers – has told them what they must *not* write; it has also told them what they *must* write." See Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 253. Evgeny Dobrenko goes even one step further, arguing that in the Soviet Union the question of the censorship's role cannot really exist as the writer is the real bearer of the Soviet ideology: he is the one to create it and he is, conversely, the one who is being created by it. See: Evgeny Dobrenko, T*he Making of the State Writer*, xviii.

[363] See the interview with the man who worked in *Glvalit* since 1961 and headed its fourth Department of "artistic and political literature" in: Steven Richmond, "'The Eye of the state:' An Interview with Soviet Chief Censor Vladimir Solodin," *Russian Review* 56, no. 4 (1997): 581-590. As Solodin notes, working censors operated in each publishing house or newspaper. Only if problems arose with a certain work that seemed to have crossed ideological lines, the local Glavlit staff would involve the central bureau in Moscow.

[364] Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*, 82. The amalgamation of these two roles was nothing unusual during both the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years during which literary freedom existed in a very limited form. Although the Soviet central censorship body *Glavlit* remained in place, most literary works of that era were "filtered" through the intervention of the editor (a person the regime, obviously, deemed trustworthy) or through the so-called practice of "self-censorship." Gennady Estraikh illuminates this twofold role played by Vergelis when he contends that despite Vergelis' position as the unchallenged authority in Soviet Yiddish cultural affairs of his era, the Party leader Brezhnev and other members of the Politburo were surprised to find out in 1973 that a Yiddish periodical even existed in the USSR "edited by a certain Aron Vergelis." This comment speaks volumes of the de-centralized

While *Sovetish heymland* was not the only literary platform in Yiddish available in the USSR and although its editorial board was not an ideologically homogenous entity and rivalries among its members were not a rarity, the power of Vergelis over the supervision of literary works in Yiddish published within the USSR was never matched. Admittedly, some of these rivalries assumed a more personal nature. Yet, in one fundamental respect, the divide in the ranks of *Sovetish heymland* concerned the space that the Holocaust had to occupy in a proper Soviet Yiddish journal. During a meeting held on November 29, 1962 to address the demand of a group of Yiddish writers to replace Vergelis (they considered him, for various reasons, unsuitable for the position of the journal's editor), the Yiddish poet Yosef Kerler, who later immigrated to Israel and became an anti-communist activist, lashed out at Vergelis:

> It must be noted that the journal deliberately enforces the policy of silencing, not only with regard to the Stalin era of the Cult of Personality, but to Hitler's brutality against the [civilian] population during the years of the Great Patriotic War. As an exception to this rule, one may mention the recently published notes from the Riga ghetto that have been lying around in the editorial board's office from the journal's inception. It is well-known that our Polish comrades have sent back all the copies of issue no. 4 of *Sovetish Heymland*. They did it as an act of protest of the fact that the journal failed to mention in this issue the 19th anniversary of the heroic uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. [This was done] while the progressive press across the world went to great lengths to mark this date, endeavoring to inform public opinion against neo-Fascism, Revanchism and about the dangers of a nuclear war. [365]

Earlier that year, the manuscript of the autobiographical story *Ikh muz dertseyln* (I have to tell) by Masha Rolnikeite, the diary of a Lithuanian Jewish girl relating her hardships growing up

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character that Soviet censorship assumed during the era of Stagnation. See Estraikh: Aron Vergelis: "The Perfect Jewish Homo Sovieticus," 13.

[365] Cited in Gennday Estraikh, "'Sovetish heymland': der zhurnal vos hot zikh bavizn mit 50 yor tsurik," *Forverts*, 29 July 2011, accessed 12 December 2012, http://yiddish.forward.com/node/3811.

in the Vilna Ghetto, was also rejected by Vergelis. This did not thwart, however, the publication of the work: it appeared later on in both Lithuanian and Russian and, in 1965, even in Yiddish through the channels of the Polish Yiddish cultural apparatus.[366] We have already noted the stark difference between the room allocated to Babi Yar in *Sovetish heymland* and the space assigned to it in the Yiddish organ of the Polish Communist Party, *Folks-shtime*. The words of Kerler and the case of Rolnikeite provide yet another clue about the general absence of Babi Yar from the mainstream of Soviet Yiddish literature. Without ignoring the fact that the ideology inherent to a given literary text always reflects the view of its author, there is enough evidence to suggest that an 'invisible hand' was operating here to a certain degree, allowing Cherniavsky's poem to appear only in Russian translation, Khaykine's and Driz's to appear only in poetry collections meant for a small circle of readers, or to offer a translation from Russian to Yiddish only of an insignificant poem by Yevtushenko in that tumultuous Fall of 1961.

That this 'invisible hand' toning down the memory of Babi Yar as a Jewish site in Yiddish literature belonged, indeed, to Vergelis the editor-censor, cannot be proven with the data at our disposal. But as much as future archival work may shed light on this question, what lies at the crux of this issue is the general ideological make-up of Soviet Yiddish literature as one that did not completely refrain from touching upon the Holocaust, but always did so in a way that would not result in a blunt clash with Moscow's ideological line. And what was prescribed for the treatment of the Holocaust as a general rule was even more apparent with regard to Babi Yar, its most controversial site in the USSR. When exploring the weltanschauung of Aron Vergelis, when defining his view of the character of Soviet Yiddish literature and the role it had to play in the larger framework of Soviet culture, it is easier to construe the works surveyed above on Babi

[366] Estraikh, *Yiddish and the Cold War*, 89.

Yar, published in the post-Stalin era, as more than random works in which the memory of Babi Yar was to some extent suppressed. The image of what Soviet Yiddish literature had to be, helps establish, in other words, the suppression of Babi Yar as a part of a general pattern.

The paradoxical world of Vergelis is a subject that has already been amply discussed. It has already drawn sufficient attention on the part of Soviet-Jewish history scholars who have pointed to the editor's adoption of Suslov's stance toward Yiddish culture as a dead culture on the one hand, while on the other hand, justifying the need to sustain it so long as lovers of the Yiddish word could yet be found in the USSR.[367] Whereas a full analysis of the duality of Vergelis's vision of the Soviet-Jewish experience oversteps the bounds of this study, it is important to revisit these conflicting inclinations as they may help us better understand the literary process that shaped the commemoration of Babi Yar in the Soviet Yiddish cultural sphere.

The quotation from Vergelis's article written before the inauguration of the official monument at Babi Yar with which we opened our discussion of Babi Yar in the Soviet Yiddish sphere makes it very clear that for Vergelis, Babi Yar could play a prominent role in Soviet-Jewish memory only if the compound term "Soviet-Jewish" signified an amalgamated, rather than a hyphenated, identity. According to Vergelis, only one who counts the Jewish and the non-Jewish victims as one indistinguishable group of communists can grasp the true historical meaning of Babi Yar. Vergelis's debate, mentioned in the article, with his American-Jewish guests gives the impression that the question at stake concerned who could more accurately place Babi Yar in its historical context. But a closer look at the legacy of Vergelis may reveal that his words with respect to Babi Yar were only one facet of a full-fledged literary theory that defined the role that Soviet-Yiddish literature of the postwar period was destined to play.

[367] Joseph and Abraham Brumberg, *Sovyetish Heymland – an Analysis,* 23

In his article "Mit vos iz lebedik di yidishe literatur" (What Makes Yiddish Literature Vibrant),[368] a piece in which he attempts to define the tasks of Soviet Yiddish literature, Vergelis takes issue with non-communist Yiddish intellectuals living in America who envisioned Yiddish literature's role as the preserver of the essence of Eastern European Jewish civilization in the wake of its demise. For Vergelis, this drive for preservation was a sign of the decay and irrelevancy endemic to the American Yiddish cultural figures such as Isaac Bashevis Singer, his brother Israel Joshua and the literary critic Shmuel Niger. Although Vergelis invokes this call for preservation made by the American writers decades earlier, he does so in order to make a concrete point – that if Yiddish literature had any place in the world of the 20th century Jew, it was only if it was capable of portraying the unique condition of the Jew living in "the atomic and space era, in the era of social and anti-colonial revolutions, of giant industrial revolutions."[369] In contrast to what he viewed as an anachronistic contemplation of the bygone Jewish past, of the shtetl reality as perpetuated by the three masters of Yiddish literature, Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem and Peretz, Vergelis took pride in the fact that postwar Soviet Yiddish literature evinced interest in the shtetl of the present, in the place where now, in the Communist motherland, Jews continued to live happily as fully integrated members of Soviet society freed from the suffocating constraints of the ghetto mentality that their American "bourgeois" brethren insisted, for some reason, on maintaining.

Vergelis's conception of Soviet Yiddish literature in this article pertains to a far broader topic and may so far be hardly relevant to our discussion. Yet toward the end of his discussion he draws a significant link between the break that Soviet Yiddish literature had with the ghetto mentality (with what he dubs as "Jewish affairs" or *yidishe asokim*), and the proper way that the

[368] Aron Vergelis, "Mit vos iz lebedik di yidishe literatur," *Sovetish heymland* 2 (1967): 124-135.
[369] Ibid., 125.

Holocaust had to be portrayed in Soviet-Yiddish literature. For Vergelis, as it turns out, the unwillingness to read the atrocities that took place on Soviet soil during the Nazi occupation, among them the Babi Yar massacre, through the lens of the Holocaust of European Jewry, by no means constituted an act of betrayal. Rather, it was an attempt to endow Yiddish literature with some relevancy to the world surrounding it in order to keep Yiddish literature alive. To read these events in a different way was, according to Vergelis, something tantamount to an anachronistic, "back to the ghetto" mentality, where the Jews and non-Jews live and die in two totally different spaces:

> ווי אַזוי שילדערט אַ בירגערלעכער יידישער שרייבער די אַנטיהיטלערישע מלחמה, אַשטייגער? ווען מען לייענט זיין ווערק, קאָן זיך אויסדוכטן, אַז ס'איז געווען אַ מלחמה פון דייטשן קעגן יידן. די סאָוועטישע יידישע מלחמה-ראָמאַנען (פּ. מארקישעס, י. פאַליקמאַנס) שטעלן אוף דאָס בילד פון דער וועלט-מלחמה מיט אירע מעכטיקע קאָאַליציעס און סטראַטעגישע מאַשטאבן. דער סוזשעטישער פאָקוס איז ביי זיי די אייגענע נאַציאנאלע סביבה – אַרום פראָבלעמען פון קאַמף, מאַרטיראָלאָגיע, העלדישקייט פון דעם יידישן פָאלק.[370]

> How would a bourgeois writer portray the war against Hitler, for example? When one reads his work, it may seem as though this was a war of Germans against Jews. The Soviet Yiddish war novels (by P. Markish, Y. Falikman) construct the [true] picture of the World War with its mighty coalitions and in its [entire] strategic scope. The plot's focus in the works of these writers is their own ethnic environment – touching upon issues of battle as well as the martyrology and heroism of the Jewish people.

This quotation from Vergelis's literary manifesto helps recognize the underlying ideological premise upon which the representation of Babi Yar in postwar Soviet-Yiddish literature rested. From Vergelis' words it follows that unlike the excessively nationalistic

[370] Ibid, 134. Orthography normalized.

character that Soviet-Yiddish literature assumed during the war and the immediate postwar years, the time was now auspicious to leap back to the Soviet-Yiddish literature of Stalin's late 1920s and early 1930s, which was predominated by the socialist element far more than the nationalist one. If Vergelis' contention can be taken here at face value, then the very minor role that Babi Yar played in the Soviet literary sphere was not the outcome of external coercion, but, on the contrary, a reflection of the wish of Yiddish cultural activists, the stature of Vergelis, to *fully* internalize Soviet dogma. In summary, the downplaying of Babi Yar in the Soviet Yiddish sphere emerges, not as a chain of mere literary "accidents", but rather as a central element in the Soviet Yiddish literary edifice. Evidently, for a "perfect Jewish *Homo Sovieticus*,*"* as Gennady Estraikh describes Vergelis, presenting Babi Yar as merely a Great Patriotic War site, is exactly what, according to Vergelis, "made Yiddish literature vibrant."

Epilogue

In September 1987, at a commemorative event dedicated to the Jewish victims of Babi Yar held at the Jewish section of a Moscow cemetery, Samuil Zivs, the third speaker on this evening, came to address the crowds. Zivs, the deputy chairman of the Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Public, an official propaganda body hosting key Jewish cultural and political figures that had been set up in 1983, came to reiterate Moscow's longstanding stance toward Babi Yar. He reminded his audience that Babi Yar was indeed the mass graveyard of Jews. Yet, he continued, these victims were defending their motherland – they died as Soviet citizens, for the sake of a country that now a growing number of Soviet citizens of Jewish origin were asking to leave, betraying, in the eyes of Zivs, the Soviet martyrs of Babi Yar.[371]

As a holder of a key position in an official Soviet organization, Zivs was apparently instructed to deliver the decades old Soviet stance toward Babi Yar: that the ravine was the emblem, not of the destruction of European Jewry, but rather, of the effort made by Soviet citizens crossing all ethnic boundaries to drive away and defeat the fascist invader. But now, with *glasnost'* in full swing, he was not met by the silent consent of his audience, but rather by booing, signaling that Zivs, like Aron Vergelis, another member of the committee, were figures of the past. In addition to the booing, the permission given to a number of local Jewish groups to convene the ceremony, among which the Jewish refusniks were predominant, signaled for the first time that the Soviet government, ever since it decided to turn Babi Yar into a "memory

[371] Willaim Korey, "A Monument over Babi Yar?",72.

black-hole" in the mid-1940s, was now willing to openly acknowledge or even encourage a new public discourse about Babi Yar.

The beginning of a real change in the Soviet official view of Babi Yar that this commemorative event marked, was a part of a grander tectonic shift in Soviet culture, heralded by the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev and the launching of *glasnost'*. The new program, marking a real cultural revolution in Soviet politics, encouraged, *inter alia*, the filling in of the "blank spots" of Soviet history.[372] The regime's willingness to revisit and revise the memory of Babi Yar was therefore not an incidental, isolated gesture, or a testimony to the capitulation of the Soviet government to pressure both domestic and diplomatic. It reflected a profound recognition of those in power in the Kremlin as well as those in power in Kiev, that the "safety valve" screwed so tightly during the Cold War, allowing only a limited amount of literary works on Babi Yar to surface, was about to finally be loosened altogether.

This is indeed what happened in the following years: what started as an event held in Moscow and attended by both Zionist activists and vigilant KGB agents turned fairly rapidly into a full-blown wave of activities revolving around Babi Yar, now in Kiev rather than the Russian capital. These were all geared toward the complete undoing of Babi Yar as a "memory black-hole." In a way, the process that began in 1966 with the laying at the ravine of a plaque announcing the arrival of an imminent, permanent monument at the site (a monument that in reality took about a decade to lay at the site) was about to now reach completion. If the megalithic structure erected in Babi Yar in July 1976 featured the Soviet prisoners of war and civilians whose ethnic identity was glossed over, in September of 1991, soon before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, another monument would be placed nearby it: a monument

[372] Ibid.

standing for the Jewish victims of Babi Yar exclusively. A structure featuring a menorah and designed by the artist Yuri Paskevich was unveiled in September 1991, as a part of the week of ceremonies - now not only permitted, but rather officially sanctioned and participated in by the newly independent Ukrainian government – to mark the 50th anniversary of the massacre.[373]

Only less than two months earlier, in a gesture indicating that Babi Yar was no longer a divisive issue on the Cold War front, President George Bush, upon his visit to the Ukrainian capital, visited Babi Yar and became the first head of state to visit the ravine.[374] Significantly, President Bush chose in his speech not only to openly discuss the murder of Jews at the ravine while mentioning alongside them other victims of the "Nazi madman:" gypsies, communists and Christians. He also wished to conclude his address with a citation of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" that now, thirty years after it first appeared, became a poetic symbol of the victory of freedom and truthfulness against bigotry or prejudice.[375]

The events of the summer and fall of 1991 suggested that Babi Yar would alter its face forever, turning from a Soviet site, expunged of any ethnic distinctiveness, into a Jewish site. This was an impression easy to receive if one considered the fact that all government-dissident tensions of the past were now dissolved. Commemorating Babi Yar as a Jewish site seemed now to be a goal shared by both the former dissident Jewish groups and the Ukrainian government. Whereas, for the former, the battle to allow the free emigration of Soviet Jews was now decisively won, the latter lent its support for the commemorative effort. A time-honored opponent of Soviet Russification policies and the suppression of national minorities, the

[373] Mankoff, 411.
[374] Korey, 74.
[375] For the president's speech at Babi Yar see: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=19865, accessed 20 December, 2012.

Ukrainian government wished to align itself with the view of Babi Yar as a Jewish memory space.

While the visit of President Bush heralded this new development, his comments about the death of Jews, Gypsies, communists and Christians foreshadowed the failure of Babi Yar to turn into the exclusive domain of the now rejuvenated Jewish community of Kiev. Half a century of Soviet suppression, targeting a highly diverse group of Soviet victims left, evidently, an indelible mark on Babi Yar. As the post-Soviet era wore on, it turned out that the suppression of Jewish memory in Babi Yar was the first among several others. The erection in 2000 of a cross in the precincts of Babi Yar only 30-40 meters away from the Menorah by a group of Orthodox Christians to mark the murder of two monks there in 1941; and the erection of another one, commemorating the death of OUN members (the Ukrainian nationalist organization that prior to its victimization by the Nazis played an active role in the slaughtering of Jews) – these actions sent a clear signal to the Kiev Jewish community. They made it clear that the battle of histories endemic to Babi Yar would continue, now waged in the open, assuming perhaps an even more disturbing nature.

As Jeff Mankoff notes, many Ukrainian Jews were appalled by the attempts of OUN veterans and supporters to take possession of Babi Yar, depriving the Jews one more time of what they deemed as their rightful demand to turn Babi Yar into a sacred Holocaust site rather than merely a broad platform containing a plethora of conflicting memories.[376] It seemed as though both sides of the debate, the local Jewish community of Kiev and the Ukrainian activists were unprepared to meet the new challenge of the post-Soviet era: the transformation of Babi Yar from a site standing for a uniform Soviet narrative, towering above and suppressing any

[376] Mankoff, 413.

alternative memory not aligned with it, into the arena of what the scholar Michael Rothberg dubs as "multi-directional memory."[377] Rothberg's book, offering a new paradigm that would guarantee the inclusion of multiple memories of genocide and mass victimization, centers on the "battles of history" playing themselves out in the West during the era of Post-colonialism. Perhaps the ethnic minorities populating the western frontier of the Former Soviet Union could be attentive to his claim that national master narratives of victimhood do not have to interact one with the other as a part of a "zero-sum struggle for preeminence."[378] National memories and myths, he argues, in other words, do not need to annul each other.

Relevant as Rothberg's model of "peaceful coexistence" may be for other parts of the world, the fight to end the battles over the memory of Babi Yar in an eastern European context of a time-honored Jewish-Ukrainian enmity seems, in the second decade of the new millennium, quite hopeless. The emergence of the *holokost*, now a Russian term more and more in common use in Post-Soviet Russian and the Ukraine, denoting the annihilation of European Jewry during World War II, on Soviet territories and beyond them, coupled by the resurfacing of the *holodomor* (the term gaining currency in the independent Ukrainian state, referring to the man-made famine of the early 1930s launched by Stalin and targeting ethnic Ukrainian peasants) stand as of today little chance of reconciliation. In a way, the story of Babi Yar in the post-Soviet era may be construed as that of multi-directional memory playing itself out as a zero sum game, precisely as the kind of battle for preeminence that Rothberg believes can be avoided.

This story of openly conflicting memories, however, is not the one told in our study. For rather than amounting to an open arena, on which each ethnic group could explicitly elaborate its

[377] Michael Rothberg, *Multi-Directional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
[378] Ibid., 3.

own memory, demanding a monopoly over Babi Yar as a memory-space, the story of Babi Yar in Soviet literature is that of the crystallization of a fairly uniform memory. Created by individual writers who all saw their works published through the official Soviet cultural channels, the memory of Babi Yar as represented in Russian and Yiddish literature was the product of a delicate negotiation between the writer and the state. Given the Soviet view of the site as one of Great Patriotic War and its attempt to hush up its relevance to the Holocaust, the outcome of this negotiating process was a memory that conflated these two master narratives, to varying degrees.

Throughout the study presented here we explored literary works dedicated to Babi Yar pertaining to two different literary domains: the Russian and the Yiddish one. While following the analytical model set forth in the bi-lingual study of Harriet Murav, *Music from a Speeding Train*, the present study drew a clear distinction between the two literary spheres. As a study conjoining two academic disciplines - history and literary criticism, the methodological premise our study rested upon was the need to clearly divide these two spheres. We did so in order to underline the different political conditions under which Russian and Yiddish literature operated in the Soviet Union: the former, constituting the Soviet major literature and the latter, a minor one, facing a dramatic decline following Stalin's brutal anti-Semitic campaigns of the late 1940s.

First, we recognized a chronological gap between the two spheres: while the theme of Babi Yar was present in both Russian and Yiddish literature during the immediate aftermath of the war, right before the onset of the anti-Cosmopolitan campaign, in the ensuing decades, the Soviet political mood shaped the memory of Babi Yar in each arena differently. Thus, greater freedom to align Babi Yar with the narrative of the Holocaust was allowed only in the Russian literary arena during the heyday of Soviet cultural openness, in the Thaw period (and especially

during its latter part, from 1961-1966). The letter by Nekrasov that foreshadowed this trend was joined by Yevtushenko's poem, Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony and the novel by Anatoly Kuznetsov. During the same period, no parallel elaboration of Babi Yar's memory was apparent in Yiddish letters. Yet, during the Brezhnev years, when Yiddish literature no longer posed an ideological threat to the Soviet view of its Jews as a rapidly assimilating minority; and when, to a certain extent – Yiddish literature could be exploited as a part of the Cold War campaign against Zionism and the state of Israel, a more benign degree of openness toward Babi Yar was allowed.

Second, the comparative study between Babi Yar in Russian and Yiddish literature as two distinct entities showed that the degree of suppression characterizing literary works in each of these spheres were different. Parallel to the chronological trajectory, we have seen a thematic one: while Nekrasov was the one who fired the first shot in the battle for the commemoration of Babi Yar, the Russian artists who followed in his footprints – Yevtushenko, Shostakovich and Kuznetsov all touched upon Babi Yar, to one degree or another, as a Jewish memory-space, doing so fairly explicitly. In the Soviet Yiddish sphere, the contrary trend was dominant: the very few works on Babi Yar by Kipnis, Driz, Talalayevsky, Khaykine and Cherniavsky all to one degree or another, referred to Babi Yar as a Jewish space only obliquely.

When looking at these two systems, as one contiguous entity, it becomes easier to recognize both chronological and thematic connections between two spheres that, after all, co-existed in the same country. The view of Babi Yar's literary representation from this angle reveals that it was only after primary Russian intellectuals joined the battle to commemorate Babi Yar that Yiddish literati started to see their works dedicated to this theme published, sometimes, as in the case of Kipnis and Khaykine, over two decades after they had been written. That it was the grander Russian literary sphere that affected the minor Yiddish one and not the

other way around is indisputable, and so is the claim that Russian writers had a greater degree of freedom to raise the issue of Babi Yar. Yet, when looking at the Soviet system as a whole, it becomes clear that all of the works presented here, to one degree or another, subscribed to the same ideology – to the view of Babi Yar as the borderline between the tragedy that befell the Jewish and the Soviet people. As we have seen, the Russian works explored in this study, while labeled during the Cold War as emblems of Soviet dissidence, of the struggle to bring the Soviet regime to acknowledge the occurrence of the Holocaust in its realm, addressed not only the suffering of the Jews, but of the Soviet people as well. If Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" in its first version underscored the suffering of Jews, we have seen that in its version set for Shostakovich's symphony, its focus, by contrast, was on the narrative of the Great Patriotic War. Parallel to this, we recognized that none of the Yiddish works discussed here offered an exclusive view of Babi Yar as a Jewish site. And while this was done to varying degrees (in Kipnis' "Babi Yar" the story's Jewish meaning is blurred with the omission of the word "Jews"; in Talalayevsky's poem "Kiev" Babi Yar unambiguously appears as a Great Patriotic War site), in Yiddish literature, as in the Russian one, Babi Yar's representation assumed a rather uniform character.

When juxtaposed one to the other, the theme of Babi Yar emerges as a double-edged "safety valve" that assumed in each literary arena a very different character. If in the Soviet Russian literary sphere Babi Yar was picked up by Soviet intellectuals in order to broaden the boundaries of the permissible, to open up for discussion recently suppressed themes, in the Soviet Yiddish sphere Babi Yar assumed a different function. It was precisely in the literary sphere hosting Jewish writers only, and designated to an exclusively Jewish audience, that the representation of Babi Yar underlay, not the loosening, but, rather, the safe tightening of the valve. In Yiddish literature, in other words, Babi Yar, rather than marking the broadening of

public discourse, marked its borderline, signaling the limits imposed in the USSR on the Jews' ability to nurture a culture of their own in a Soviet form.

While the past decade has witnessed the appearance of a number of scholarly works that revise the issue of Soviet Jewish identity, making the claim, to borrow Anna Shternshis's coinage, that the "Soviet and the kosher" were two culture and identity tropes far more reconcilable than previously acknowledged, the conclusion of our reading of works dedicated to Babi Yar in the two languages calls into question this revisionist trend.[379] Our study reveals that when it came to the quintessential Holocaust site on Soviet soil, it was non-Jewish artists, doing so in a non-Jewish language, that could refer – and to a limited degree – to Babi Yar as a Jewish site. While the post-Soviet debate whether Soviet Jewish culture was indeed a "thin" one, as the Zvi Gitelman sees it,[380] must be explored far more broadly, and not by zeroing in on one memory-space, Babi Yar, due to its prominence and symbolic meaning may very well exemplify the degree of "thinness." This skim character is evidenced in the ability of Soviet Jews to rightfully preserve the memory of their dead, victims of the greatest calamity that Jewish history has ever known. While the search for reconciliation between the Soviet and the Jewish, a rightful and fruitful one indeed, will be further pursued in the future by scholars in the post-Soviet era, the memory of Babi Yar, shaped in both Russian and Yiddish literature by both Jewish and non-Jewish writers, can hardly be viewed as a bridge between the two.

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[379] As only a sample of these works we may mention the following: Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006); Jeffrey Veidlinger. *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006); David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Yiddish Culture;* Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); Harriet Murav, *Music from a Speeding Train*; It is noteworthy that only the latter work, by Murav, is dedicated to a discussion of Soviet culture in the post-Stalin era. The other works cover the interwar years, a time when the conditions to develop an autonomous Jewish culture in the USSR were much more propitious than in the decades under discussion in our study.

[380] Zvi Gitelman, "Thinking about Being Jewish in Russian and Ukraine," in: *Jewish Life After the USSR*, eds., Z. Gitelman, M. Glants, and M.I. Goldman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 49.

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