

Babi Yar, the Tragedy of Kiev's Jews

Victoria Khiterer

Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University

The mass murder of European Jews by the Nazis gathered momentum in September 1941 at the ravine of Babi Yar in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, then in the Soviet Union, which had just been occupied by the German Army. Here is where the Nazis had their first experience with luring tens of thousands of Jews into a trap from which escape was practically impossible and death almost certain. In a few days the Nazis killed over a 100 thousand Jews, practically the entire Jewish population of Kiev at that time.

A careful examination the events surrounding the Babi Yar massacre provides insight into the development of the tricks used by the Germans during the Holocaust to entice Jews to leave their homes and go to the designated gathering places from which they were ushered to their execution.

In spite of the importance of Babi Yar as a testing ground for the Nazi's vile chicanery and limitless cruelty, surprisingly little serious scholarly research been published about these tragic events at the end of the summer of 1941. My article uncovers details essential to understanding the actions of the Jewish victims, their German executioners as well as the local collaborators who assisted the Nazis.

The sparse literature about the horrifying events at Babi Yar includes George St. George's¹ book "*The Road to Babyl Yar*" (Neville Spearman, 1967), based mainly on the documentary novel by Anatoly Kuznetsov, "*Babi Yar*." Kuznetsov's novel is based on his own memories and the recollections of a few other survivors.[1] The *Black Book*, published in Russian, devotes 10 pages to Babi Yar.[2] *The Black Book*, as published in English, devotes only five pages to this horrible massacre.[3] Some key Nazi documents regarding the Babi Yar massacre have been published by Lucy Dawidowicz in "*A Holocaust Reader*." [4] However these documents do not fully explain the reasons for the change of the Nazi policy toward Jews: why did the Nazis in Kiev switch from their policy of concentrating Jews in ghettos to the mass murder of tens of thousands of the civil Jewish population? The few books in Russian about Babi Yar also do not give an answer to this central question. These Russian books were written by amateurs and contain more memoirs than historical analyses of the events.

So the tragedy of the Jews in Babi Yar is famous and unknown at the same time. It is famous as one of most horrible crimes of the Nazis, while in western historiography there does not exist a single comprehensive scholarly analysis of this tragedy. Western, as well as Ukrainian scholars, have thus far not provided analyses of key questions about Babi Yar. They have not explained why the first extermination of an entire the Jewish population of a major city occurred in Kiev during World War II.

Before the occupation of Kiev, the Nazis usually gathered all the Jewish population of a conquered city into ghettos. There were persecutions and executions of Jews in ghettos before the Babi Yar massacre, but not the total extermination of all of a Jewish population. In the "Jewish capital" of Berdichev the mass murder of Jews began in early September 1941, however all Jews

¹ George St. George (1904 - ?) – author of several books on Soviet history and travel in the Soviet Union.

were not executed at that time. The Nazis selected the most skilled artisans and left them alive. The ghetto in Berdichev existed until the end of April 1942. So the execution of Kiev Jewry was the first case of the annihilation of all the Jewish population of a city and the first mass murder of this scale, when, over a few days, more than 100 thousand Jews were killed.

Historians continue to debate the widely varying estimates of the number of Jews murdered in Babi Yar. Depending upon the source, the number of Jews murdered in Babi Yar was anywhere from 33,771 to 150,000. It is impossible to know with any precision how many Jews were in the Kiev at the moment of the Nazi occupation on September 20th, how many Jews were able to evacuate, how many Kievan Jews were mobilized into the Soviet Army, and how many Jewish refugees were in the city. At the time of the chaotic retreat of the Soviet Army, nobody thought about such statistics, of course. German statistics of the number of Jews massacred in Babi Yar also are not reliable for reasons I will explain below.

The main sources about the Babi Yar tragedy are memories of eyewitnesses – Ukrainian gentiles, the few hundred Kievan Jews who survived and some of the Nazi perpetrators.

To understand why and how the mass murder of Kiev Jews occurred in Babi Yar, I have reconstructed the events in Kiev at the end of the summer to the beginning of the fall of 1941 in chronological order.

According to the *Concise Jewish Encyclopaedia*, in 1939 the Jews of Kiev comprised about 20% of the total population, or about 175,000 people.[5]

The German army occupied Kiev on September 20, 1941. A few days later, on September 28th, Einsatzgruppe C, the Nazi paramilitary extermination unit in Kiev, reported:

There are probably 150,000 Jews in Kiev. To check this information has been impossible thus far.[6]

As mentioned previously, it is unknown how many Jews were able to leave Kiev prior to the arrival of the Germans. Jews were not evacuated as a group and nobody counted how many escaped. People who worked at military plants and members of their families typically left the city together with the equipment of their plants. This is how my grandmother and mother survived.

My grandfather worked before World War II as a dentist at the Kiev military plant “*Arsenal*” (large plants and factories in the Soviet Union had their own clinics and hospitals). As a medical doctor, my grandfather was mobilized into the Army in the first days of the war. His family (including his wife, 2 daughters, parents, sister and mother-in-law) were left in Kiev with the personnel of the “*Arsenal*” plant.

I remember the recollections of my grandmother, Gittel Brovarnik, about their escape. My grandmother had great doubts about whether or not she should go. She had two children, and her youngest, my mother, was only 2 years old and quite sick at that moment. My grandmother was afraid that if she started to travel with a sick child who had a contagious illness, people might throw her and the child off the train. She also did not have any news from her husband who had been drafted into the Army. My grandmother was afraid that, if she left Kiev, letters from her husband would never reach her. So she decided to stay in the city. Thus, when the evacuation of the workers and their families was organized from the plant “*Arsenal*,” she did not go, but instead sent her husband’s unmarried sister and her own oldest daughter with her. In the big rush of the evacuation nobody carefully checked the passengers’ names and thus Fira Brovarnik boarded the train instead of my grandmother Gittel.

At the end of August 1941, when the battles between the Nazi and Soviet armies were already near Kiev, it became obvious that Kiev would be surrendered to the Germans. My grandmother went to the “*Arsenal*” plant to find out if the plant administration had any information about her husband. She met the director, a Russian named Chebotarev. She introduced herself as the wife of the “*Arsenal*” dentist Ilia Brovarnik. The director of the plant was very surprised to see her in Kiev. He told her,

Why are you still in Kiev? You should leave the city immediately. You are Jewish and can not stay here under the Germans.

He let her and her baby go with the equipment of the “*Arsenal*” plant in a freight train. The train went from Kiev to the city Votkinsk in the Urals in a two-week journey, with nobody providing any food for her and her sick child. When the train stopped at railway stations my grandmother traded in her belongings for food. Finally they arrived at the final destination. Later she found that her husband (my grandfather) had worked throughout the war as a dental surgeon in several hospitals. She repeated this story many times during her life with great appreciation for the director of the plant “*Arsenal*,” who saved her life and that of my mother.

A good question regarding my grandmother’s story: how did the Russian director of the “*Arsenal*” plant, Chebotarev, know that Jewish people should not stay in Kiev under the Nazi regime? Certainly Kiev Jews were not aware of the severity of their risk. Probably the Soviet administration had more information about the Nazi regime than the common people. Of course, only a fraction of Kiev Jews had the chance to leave. The evacuees included the workers of military plants, the Soviet and Communist administrators, and scientific and scholarly elite, and members of their immediate families. But even among these categories many people, including Jews, remained in Kiev. Some did not want to leave because they had sick or old members of their family who could not survive the long journey. Some were angry at the Soviet regime, and thought that under Nazi occupation life would be better.[7] The second husband of my great-grandmother refused leave Kiev. She begged him to go, but he said:

I remember the Germans from World War I, [when they occupied Kiev] this is a civilized nation. When they will come to Kiev I and my son [from his first marriage] will open the store and we will trade.[8]

My great-grandmother left her husband in Kiev. He was killed along with his son a few weeks later at Babi Yar.

In 1941 many old Jewish people in Kiev remembered the occupation of the city by Germans during World War I. During this prior occupation an earlier generation of Germans stopped Jewish pogroms in Ukraine. They established an order that was more or less effective in protecting all nationalities that lived there, including Jews. So their historical memory had a fatal role for many older Kievan Jews. They lacked accurate information about the Nazi regime. Many of them thought of the Germans as a “*European Nation*” and that the Nazi occupation couldn’t possibly be worse than the Bolshevik regime.[9] After the signing of the Friendship Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939, Soviet propaganda stopped all criticism of the Nazi regime and fostered the idea that Nazi Germany was friendly toward the USSR. Therefore many Jews in the Soviet Union knew nothing about the intensifying persecution of Jewish populations by the Nazis in Germany and in German occupied countries.[10] The older

generation could not imagine what dramatic changes had happened in Germany since World War I. After the Germans invaded the Soviet Union, Soviet propaganda persuaded people that Kiev would never be surrendered to the Nazis. Presumably the Soviet leaders believed this themselves until late July 1941. Josef Stalin ignored the conclusion of the Chief of the Soviet Headquarters, Georgy Zhukov, regarding the need to withdraw the Soviet Army from Kiev. Stalin stubbornly stated “*Kiev was and is Soviet.*”[11] In July 1941 Nazi troops were already near Kiev. Then not only Zhukov, but also the commanders of the South-Western front, appealed to Stalin, Commander in Chief of the Soviet Army, regarding the military necessity of abandoning Kiev. But Stalin ordered them to continue to defend the city.

This military ignorance and stubbornness of Stalin caused a great defeat of the Soviet Army: five Soviet armies were surrounded near Kiev, the commanders of the South-Western front, Generals Mikhail Kirponos, Vasiliy Tupikov, and Mikhail Burmistenko, as well as thousands of their soldiers were killed. More than half a million Soviet troops were captured by the Germans near Kiev.[12]

Some historians claim that the Soviet leaders should have warned the Jewish population that the Nazi occupiers would be very dangerous for them.[13] In reality the Soviet leaders did not think then about the Jewish population; they were not even thinking very clearly about saving their own army. At the beginning of the war Stalin lost touch with reality, and gave the Soviet citizens unrealistic promises that were impossible to accomplish. Unfortunately, a significant part of the Soviet population trusted his promises as practically the word of God. Thus, when the Nazis occupied Kiev on September 20, 1941, the city population was dismayed. Soviet propaganda had persuaded them that Kiev would never be surrendered to the Nazis, misleading many people who otherwise might have escaped.

The claim of the historian Leni Yahil that “A large percentage of these [Kiev] Jews had made their escape before the Germans arrived” is not credible.[14] The majority of Kiev Jews could not easily leave the city because only a few categories of people were evacuated. To go without the organized evacuation was quite difficult: there were long lines for tickets in the first month of war, thereafter tickets for trains were not sold to civilians at all. All trains and boats were used to ship out military plants and for military transport needs.[15] So the majority of Kiev Jews and Jewish refugees were left stuck in Kiev. By my estimation only about 20,000 – 30,000 Kiev Jews were able to escape before the Germans took control of the city.²

² Nobody counted the number of Kievans who left the city by their nationality. Soviet historians, citing a report of the Communist party, claimed that over 335 thousand people left Kiev. [16] I consider this number exaggerated by a factor of two or three times for the following reason. The total population of Kiev according to the census of 1939 was 847,000. [17] Evacuation from Kiev was possible only with the plants and factories. According to different sources, just 197 out of 1176 plant were evacuated from Kiev together with the people that worked there and their families.[18] Of course these were military plants that were most necessary for defense of the country. So there were sent out from Kiev only about 17% of the industrial enterprises with their workers. There are no statistics on how many people were sent with them. The Soviet authorities counted the evacuated plants, but not the people. We just could estimate that total number of people that were able to leave Kiev with these plants should not be higher than 10-15% of total population of the city. Thus 100-150 thousand people went out from Kiev. The percentage of the Jewish population that left the city was not likely to be greater than their fraction of the general population. Thus if we count 10-15% of the total Jewish population we can estimate that approximately 20-30 thousands Jews went with their plants. We can then approximate the number of Jews were left in Kiev. To the last pre-war census of the Jewish population in Kiev in 1939 – 175,000 people we should add about 10 – 15 thousand Jewish refugees from the western part of the Soviet Union, and subtract 20 – 30 thousand Jews who went with their plants and subtract about 35 – 40 thousand Kiev Jews who were mobilized into the army (about this number of Kievan Jewish men were of mobilization age at beginning of the war)[19]. My calculation thus shows that 115,000 to 135,000 Jews [= 175,000 + 10,000 (15,000) - 20,000 (30,000) – 35,000 (40,000)] were left in Kiev when the Nazi occupied the city.

The Nazi occupation of Kiev continued for 778 days. In Kiev the Nazis met more severe resistance than they had experienced in their prior occupations of other European capitals. On September 24, several large buildings in the downtown area of Kiev, on Kreshchatik Street and Proreznaiia Street, were blown up, including the German Army headquarters and the hotel “*Continental*” where many German officers were quartered. On September 25 the resulting fire continued to spread in the center of the city. The explosions and fire destroyed the area about one square mile. [20]

These events were described by Nazi General Alfred Jodl³ during his testimony at Nuremberg⁴,

... hardly had we occupied the city when one tremendous explosion after another occurred. The major part of the inner city burned down, 50,000 people were made homeless. German soldiers were used to fight the flames and suffered considerable losses, because further large amounts of explosives went up into the air during the fire. [21]

Jodl further testified that,

At first, the local commander at Kiev thought that it was sabotage on the part of the population; but then we found a demolition chart, listing fifty or sixty objectives in Kiev which already a long time ago had been prepared for destruction; and this chart was, in fact, correct, as investigation by engineers proved at once. At least forty more objectives were ready to be blown up; for the most part, remote-control was to set off the explosion by means of radio waves. I myself had the original of this demolition chart in my hands. [22]

Hundreds of German soldiers were killed in the explosions and fires. Several partisan groups worked underground in the city. Kiev was turned in an arena of total war.[23]

The Nazis blamed the Jews for these explosions. During the fire on Khreshchatik Street they caught and killed one young Jew, who had cut the water hose that the Germans were using to suppress the fire.[24] This case was used by the Nazis to justify the massacre of the Jews in Babi Yar as revenge against the Jews for the terrorist explosions in the city. The Nazi military commanders in Kiev decided that the appropriate response to this would be the elimination of all Jews in the city.[25] However, the civil Jewish population had absolutely nothing to do with the explosions.

The Nazi chose the ravine of Babi Yar as the place for the mass murder of Kiev Jews because of its relatively remote location. Babi Yar is located about six miles from the center of the city; at that time it still was on the edge of Kiev.

On the morning of September 29, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which is the most sacred of Jewish religious holidays, the Jews of Kiev were assembled and marched to the

³ Alfred Jodl, German Chief of Staff. Throughout World War II, Jodl served as Hitler’s chief adviser on military strategy. He surrendered to the British in May 1945, and was tried at Nuremberg.

⁴ Nuremberg Trials were the first international war-crimes trials which began in November 1945 in Nuremberg, Germany. The International Military Tribunal (IMT) was set up by the victorious Allies (the U.S., France, Great Britain and the Soviet Union) at the end of World War II. Prosecutors from those four countries accused a total of 22 Nazi German officials on three basic charges – conspiring and ultimately launching an “aggressive war,” committing war crimes and committing “crimes against humanity.” (<http://www.facts.com/icof/nurem.htm>)

vicinity of the ravine. Not far from the edge of the ravine they were told to strip off their clothes and remove their valuables. In groups they were marched to the edge, where they were shot and fell into the Yar.

We have the Nazi's description of the mass murders in Babi Yar. The *Operations Situation Report, Einsatzgruppe C*, from October 7, 1941 stated:

Public feeling against the Jews was very strong, partly because of the better economic situation of the Jews under Bolshevist regime and their activities as NKVD informers and agents, partly because of the explosions and the resulting fires (which deprived about 25,000 people of shelter). As an added factor, it was proven that the Jews participated in the arson. The population expected appropriate retaliatory measures by the German authorities. Consequently, all Jews of Kiev were ordered, in agreement with the city commander, to appear on Monday, September 29, by 8 a.m., at a designated place. These announcements were posted throughout the city by members of the Ukrainian militia. At the same time it was announced orally that all Jews were to be resettled. In collaboration with the Einsatzgruppe staff and 2 commandos of the Police Regiment South, the Sonderkommando 4a executed 33,771 Jews on September 29 and 30. Money, valuables, underwear, and clothing were confiscated and placed in part of the disposal of the NSV for the use of Volksdeutsche (i.e. the German residents of Kiev) and in part given to the city's administrative authorities for the use of the needy population.[26]

Several fabrications in this report are used to justify the murder of the Jews. First is the false claim regarding the better economic situation of Jews under the Bolshevist regime and their activities in the NKVD which are both shown to be untrue many times in historical literature.[27] The other untruth was that the massacre of Kiev Jews was a justified retaliation for the explosions and fire in the city. SS detachments that had already executed the Jews in other places arrived in Kiev on September 21 – 25.[28] Thus, the mass murder of the Kiev Jews was being prepared in advance of the explosions on the 24th. Obviously Nazi commanders must have realized that military professionals, not the local Jewish population, organized the destruction in the city. Therefore, the explanation of the massacre of Jews in Babi Yar as an act of retaliation for the explosions in the city was designed as a bureaucratic justification for the killings.

Another clear fabrication, this one been widely propagated and believed, is the Nazi count of 33,771 as the number of the Jews killed in Babi Yar. From the memories of dozens people who survived Babi Yar (among them Russians and Ukrainians, who came to see their Jewish members of families and friends off to their relocation), only one eye-witness mentioned that the Nazis registered Jews before executing them.[29] All other witnesses described, with many minute details, all their experiences at Babi Yar and the executions and did not mention the registration of the victims. We can assume that Jews were registered, and thus counted, only in the beginning, but then the Nazis stopped it. Why? The answer on this question we can find in the *Operations Situation Report # 128, Einsatzgruppe C*,

...originally we estimated arrival [to Babi Yar] of only 5 – 6 thousands of Jews, but there actually arrived about 30 thousand Jews, that believed until the last moment of liquidation, that they would be resettled, because of the great work of the [Nazi] propaganda. [30]

Thus many more people came to Babi Yar than the Nazis originally expected. We can assume that the registration process took too much time and slowed down the executions, and the Nazis soon stopped registering their victims.

As the historian Felix Levitas wrote,

The executors did not have enough time to finish their job. Therefore they began to put two people together head by head so that by one bullet would kill two people. The wounded people were killed by shovels, children thrown in the Yar alive and buried with them.[31]

The guard of the nearby Lukianovskoe cemetery, Sergey Ivanovich Lutsenko, was a witness to this tragedy. He said that the arriving Jewish people completely filled Lukianovskuii, Degtiarskuii, Lagernuii and Melnikova streets, and the three cemeteries that are located near Babi Yar. The Nazis ordered that the Jews leave their belongings and divided them into groups of about 100 people each and took them to Babi Yar. He saw from his guardhouse how Germans shot people in Babi Yar with the automatic guns and machine-guns. Before their execution the Nazis forced people to undress. Young children were thrown into the pit alive. Lutsenko testified that

They shot people from the morning to night. At night the Germans went to sleep, the rest of people [who they had not killed yet] they locked in empty garages. This continued for five days. Nazi brought more and more people [to Babi Yar], and from there returned only trucks with people's clothes.[32]

The massacre Jews in Kiev operated not just on September 29 and 30 as described in *Operations Situation Report, Einsatzgruppe C*, from October 7, 1941, but continued unabated until October 3rd. Several gentile witnesses confirmed after the war that the mass murder of Jews in Babi Yar lasted for 5 days. Evidence shows that more than 100 thousand Jews were murdered there, not 33,771 as claimed in the Nazi report. [33] The Nazi report of an exact number of executed Jews can not be correct, because there is no evidence that the Nazis registered their victims or kept an exact count. Also, if only 33,771 Jews were killed, it is not possible to explain the disappearance of the rest of the 115,000 – 135,000 Jews stranded in Kiev at the start of the German occupation.

The approximate number of victim at Babi Yar was confirmed by the testimony of the surviving prisoners of the concentration camps “Syrets” who were forced by the Nazis two years later to destroy all evidence of the execution in Babi Yar. They testified that in Babi Yar 60 huge fireplaces were built for cremations and that in each of these fireplaces about 2,500 – 3,000 bodies were burned. Thus a total of 150,000 – 180,000 corpses of Babi Yar victims were cremated.[34]

At the Nuremberg Trial a statement was entered by the Special State Commission for Investigation of Destruction and Atrocity Committed by the Nazis in the City Kiev (document USSR – 9), that stated that, based on incomplete information, more than 195,000 Soviet citizens were killed by Nazi in Kiev, including:

- 1) 100 thousand people in Babi Yar;
- 2) 68 thousand prisoners of war and civilians in the Darnitsa concentration camp;
- 3) 25 thousand prisoners of war and civilians in the Syrets concentration camp... [35]

Why did the Nazi report indicate the number of the Jews killed at Babi Yar as exactly 33,771? The report was required to provide some definitive number to give evidence of a fast and efficient operation. The Einsatzgruppe C execution unit did not want to write to Berlin the truth that they were not able to count the number of their victims.

The first huge massacre of Jews during the World War II occurred in Kiev, because Nazis there were peculiarly angry about the explosions in the city, which killed many German officers and soldiers. The occupation troops were probably shocked and infuriated by unexpected resistance that they met in Kiev. The Nazi authorities needed to find and punish whoever was responsible for the explosions. They could not find and take revenge on the Soviet commandos who actually planted the explosives before the Soviet troops left Kiev. Thus Kiev Jewry became a convenient scapegoat for the Nazi problems and military casualties in the city.[36]

Some Holocaust revisionists⁵ have asked why the Jews did not resist and why they came to Babi Yar as “sheep to slaughter?” When, on September 28th, the following announcement appeared throughout Kiev, the Jewish population was afraid to disobey the instructions, because the Nazi threatened to shoot anybody breaking these orders:

All Yids [Zhydy, an insult in Russian] living in the city of Kiev and its vicinity must to come by 8 o'clock on the morning of Monday, September 29th, 1941, to the corner of Melnikovsky and Dokhturov Streets (near the cemeteries).

They are to take with them documents, money, valuables, as well as warm clothes, underwear and etc.

Any Yids not carrying out this instruction and who is found elsewhere will be shot.

Any civilian entering apartments left by the Yids and stealing property will be shot. [37]

The majority of the Jewish victims took this to mean that they would be resettled, as they also understood from rumors spread by the Nazi's local collaborators. Near the designated assembly point there was a railway station and the Jews believed that they were going to embark there. By the time Kiev Jews realized that the Nazis were going to murder them, it was far too late to organize any resistance or to attempt to escape. The streets near Babi Yar were surrounded by three sets of guards (first row were Ukrainian police, the second Nazis and Ukrainian police and third only Nazis) all armed with automatic rifles and machine guns.[38] What could unarmed people do once they were tricked to take the first step into this trap?

Babi Yar subsequently continued to be an execution spot for many months. Jews from other parts of the Ukraine were brought there for execution. Until the liberation of Kiev by the Red Army on November 6th 1943, almost 200,000 people may have been murdered in Babi Yar, among them were about 115,000 – 135,000 Jews from Kiev and its surroundings plus Ukrainian citizens, Soviet prisoners of war, and Gypsies.[39]

⁵ Holocaust revisionism is the rejection of some or all of the generally accepted history of the Holocaust, whereby Nazi Germany and its associates committed genocide murdering millions of Jews during World War II, following the orders of Adolf Hitler.

Not more than a few hundred Jews survived in Kiev during the Nazi occupation. Their gentile relatives and friends hid them. Since 1990 the Jewish Board of Ukraine has given the title “*Righteous of Babi Yar*” to 431 gentiles in Kiev who hid Jews during the war.[40] People who hid Jews in Kiev as well as in other places during the Nazi occupation put under mortal danger not only their own life, but also the lives of the all the members of their families. Thus we can see that the number of people who received the title “*Righteous of Babi Yar*” was perhaps twice the number of Jewish survivors in Kiev. If some gentile family hid Jews in Kiev during the Nazi occupation all its members, including their children, received this title, because all these people were under the same threat.

Why didn't the gentile inhabitants of Kiev save more of their Jewish neighbors? To answer this question we must understand that the Nazi occupation was a terrible tragedy not only for the Jewish population, but also for all inhabitants of Kiev. According to the census of 1939, 847,000 people lived in Kiev. When Kiev was liberated by the Soviet Army on November 6, 1943 there were, according to *The Black Book*, only 70,000 people there; while Kuznetsov wrote that 180,000 were present.[41] Even these two very different numbers show that there was an enormous loss in the Kiev population. Where did these people disappear to? More than 100,000 Jews were killed. More than 100,000 Kiev residents were sent by the Nazi as slave-labors to Germany, where many of them died.[42] Probably about 100,000 – 150,000 were able to escape before the Nazi occupation. About same number of Kiev residents were soldiers at the front. The remainder of about 300,000 – 400,000 stayed in Kiev during the Nazi occupation. Kuznetsov wrote:

Every third person in Kiev was killed during the occupation. If we include those who died of hunger, never returned from Germany and so forth, we could say that every second person in Kiev perished.[43]

When the Nazis retreated from Kiev they decided to send all the remaining city population to Germany. Kuznetsov wrote:

In reality it worked this way.

The troops began the roundup on the outskirts of town, driving everyone out into the streets – those who could walk and those who couldn't - prodding them with rifle butts, with blows or by firing in the air. People were given only a few minutes to prepare. They were told that Kiev was to be evacuated to Germany; there would be no such city anymore.

It was dismayingly reminiscent of the procession of Jews in 1941. Masses of people were on the move, including wailing children, the aged and sick.[44]

The report to the Soviet Government of the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, Nikita Khrushchev, on November 8, 1943, gave a similar view of the situation in Kiev. Khrushchev wrote:

The Germans attempted to drive away all the population of the city. They rounded up people with dogs specially trained for hunting people...

Germans made a mass murder of people that hid from being sent off to Germany... They succeeded in driving out from the city a significant majority of the population. Kiev makes the impression of an extinct city.[45]

So we could see that the civilian gentile population of Kiev were themselves quite defenseless and thus could not defend their Jewish neighbors. This statement, of course, does not include the Nazi collaborators in Kiev. Without the collaborators' denunciations of Jews and participation in their mass murder, more Jewish people certainly would have survived.

The collaboration of some Ukrainians with the Nazi is a very painful topic for Ukrainians today. During the Babi Yar massacre the Ukrainian police had an auxiliary role. The Ukrainian police, together with Nazis, guarded the Jews on their way to Babi Yar and at the place of execution. Some Babi Yar survivors remembered that the Nazi soldiers and Ukrainian policemen beat Jewish victims before their execution. However, no evidence exists that the Ukrainian police participated in the act of actually shooting the Jews. This task was accomplished by the SS detachments.

There is a strong historical basis for the view that that the Nazis were able to more efficiently accomplish their policy of mass murder of the Jews in East Europe due to the strong anti-Semitism of a significant part of the local population. But many local collaborators were even more primitive than historians have envisioned. There are several well documented cases where Nazis and collaborators willingly exchanged Jews for expensive jewelry, if this exchange was proposed to them by gentiles.[46] These people were ruled only by desire to get money by any means. Some gentiles denounced hidden Jews to Nazis in the anticipation of a reward, receiving Jewish property, Jewish apartments, etc. I think that the number of these kind of collaborators in Ukraine was greater than the number of committed anti-Semites.

Beginning in July 1943 SS personnel were given the task of eliminating all evidence of the massacre. To achieve this the corpses were exhumed and burnt. The task of exhumation, moving and burning the corpses was forced on inmates of the Syrets concentration camp. An eyewitness report of October 1945 by a member of the Schutzpolizei (German Security Police) stated among other things:

Every prisoner was shackled on both legs with a 2-4 meter long chain... The piles of corpses were not set on fire at regular intervals, but whenever one or more piles were ready, they were covered with wood and soaked with oil and gasoline and then ignited.[47]

SS Colonel Paul Blobel testified in his statement dated 18 June 1947, which was read on 8 April 1948 before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, that he had been assigned the task of destroying all evidence of the executions carried out by German forces in the East. [48] This action was begun in the early summer of 1942. [49]

Blobel described the scene at Babi Yar as the Germans tried to cover up their atrocities,

During my visit in August (1943) I myself witnessed the burning of corpses in a mass grave near Kiev. This grave was approximately 55 meters long, 3 meters wide and 2.5 meters deep. After the cover had been removed, the corpses were covered with inflammable materials and set on fire. About two days passed before the fire had burned down to the bottom of the trench. Afterwards the grave was filled in and all traces thereby virtually obliterated. Because of the

advance of the front it not possible to destroy the mass graves located in the South and East which had resulted from execution by the task groups. [50].

Aided by land-moving machinery, the task was completed in six weeks. Little trace, apparently, was left. With the exception of fifteen prisoners, who knew what their ultimate fate was likely to be, and who escaped, the Syrets concentration camp inmates who had carried out this work were executed by the SS.[51]

In spite of the Nazis' attempt to keep secret the mass murder of Jews in Kiev, it became known around the world just three months after the tragedy.

On December 31, 1941, the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* newspaper, published in New York, wrote:

... the latest report from Kiev which reached here today through secret channels gives a horrible picture of what has happened to the Jews in that city since the Nazi occupation. The report reveals that in addition to executing practically the entire Jewish male population of Kiev on the charge that the Jews who remained in the city were 'Soviet spies and guerrillas', the Nazi military command ordered thousands of Jews confined in mined cemetery grounds. The victims, most of them women, were blown up by the exploding mines. Those who survived were machine-gunned to death by the German soldiers. (Earlier reports estimate that 52,000 Jews were murdered in Kiev when the Nazis first occupied the city.)

In a memorandum sent on January 6, 1942, to all countries with which the USSR maintained diplomatic relations, the Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov stated:

A frightful slaughter and terror actions were committed by the German invaders in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev. During three days the German robbers shot and killed 52,000 men, women, old people and children... Soviet citizens who escaped from Kiev give a terrible description of one of these mass murders: in the Jewish cemetery of Kiev a large number of Jews, many of whom were women and children, were brought together before they were shot they were stripped of their clothes and beaten. The first group destined for death was forced to lie on the bottom of the pit with their faces downward and they were shot with automatic rifles. Afterwards, the Germans covered the corpses with a little earth and put on top a second layer, and killed them as well with automatic rifles...[52]

After World War II the Soviet authorities changed their attitude toward the Babi Yar tragedy. Starting with the "anti-cosmopolitan" (i.e. anti-Jewish) campaign of 1948-1949 in the Soviet Union, an effort was made to eliminate all references to Babi Yar. Even after the death of Stalin in 1953, Soviet rulers continued this policy. Some intellectuals rose in the press the question of the commemoration of the victims of Babi Yar. The writer Victor Nekrasov called for the building of a memorial in Babi Yar in an article in "*Literaturnaia Gazeta*" on October 10, 1959. Nekrasov protested in his article against the official plans to transform the ravine into a sport stadium.[53]

Yevgeny Yevtushenko published his poem *Babi Yar* on September 19, 1961 in the same newspaper.[54] Yevtushenko later said in the introduction to his book *Early Poems* that this poem was his reaction to anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union and the unwillingness of Soviet authorities to built a monument to the Jewish victims of Nazism. When this poem was written there was no



An impressive monument “*To the Soviet citizens - the victims of fascism*” was built in Babi Yar in 1976. However, the inscriptions on the monument did not bother to mention that the vast majority of these victims were killed because they were Jewish.

Finally in 1991 a second memorial, a Menorah, was built at Babi Yar. This memorial has been the site of ceremonies with world and religious leaders including President Bush in 1991, President Clinton in 1995 and Pope John Paul II in 2001.



The murder of the greatest part of the Kiev Jewish community during World War II irreparably damaged its numbers. Never did the Jewish population in Kiev reach its pre-war point of 175 thousand. Today, after the Jewish emigration of the 1990's, only 14 thousand Jews live in Kiev.

After the first huge massacre of Jews during World War II in Babi Yar, the Nazis murdered the Jewish populations in many other places. The Babi Yar massacre marked a new turn in the Nazi policy toward Jews from severe persecution to the total extermination of all Jews.

Soviet authorities after World War II made taboo the public discussion of the Babi Yar tragedy as well as the Holocaust overall. Today, finally, Babi Yar has become widely known as a symbol of Nazi brutality and the tragedy of Jewish people during the Holocaust.

In 1988 the "Memory of Babi Yar" Foundation was established in Kiev by the Jewish community. This organization is gathering information about the victims of Babi Yar and organizes memorial meetings on the Day of the Memory of Babi Yar (September 29). Memorial ceremonies devoted to the Babi Yar tragedy also take place in Israel and the U.S. More than 60 years have past since the brutal murder of Kiev's Jews in Babi Yar, but the tremendous pain of this tragedy will continue forever. Today the facts about the Babi Yar massacre have become known throughout the world. The study of this tragedy has become part of the school program in history in Ukraine, after long suppression under the Soviets. I hope that this tragedy of Kiev Jewry will always be remembered and that the innocent victims of this unforgivable act of Nazi brutality will never be forgotten.

Notes

1. Kuznetsov, Anatoly. *Babi Yar. Documentary Novel*. (The Dial Press, New York, 1967).
2. *Chernaia Kniga*. Compiled by the editors Vasily Grossman and Ilia Erenburg. (Kiev, 1991): 22-32.
3. *The Black Book. The Nazi Crimes Against the Jewish People*. (Nexus Press, New York, 1981): 359-365.
4. *A Holocaust Reader*. Edited, with introductions and notes, by Lucy S. Dawidowicz. (Behrman House, Inc. New York, 1975): 89 - 90.
5. *Kratkaia Evreiskaia Entsiklopedia*. (Jerusalem, 1988) IV: 257.
6. *Katastrofa ta Opir Ukrain'skogo evreistva (1941- 1944). Narisy z istorii Holokostu i Oporu v Ukraini*. Editor-compiler S. Elisavetsky. (Kiev, 1999): 94.
7. *Ibid*, 88-89; Kuznetsov, Anatoly. *Babi Yar. Roman-dokument*, (Kiev, 1991): 46-48.
8. Oral history told to me by my grandmother, Gittel Brovarnik.
9. Levitas, Ilia. *Pravedniki Babiego Yara*. (Kiev, 2001): 4-5.
10. Kuznetsov, Anatoly. *Babi Yar. Roman-dokument*, (Kiev, 1991): 77.11. *Katastrofa ta Opir Ukrain'skogo evreistva (1941- 1944). Narisy z istorii Holokostu i Oporu v Ukraini*. Editor-compiler S. Elisavetsky. (Kiev, 1999): 88.
11. *Katastrofa ta Opir Ukrain'skogo evreistva (1941 – 1944). Narisy z istorii Holokostu i Oporu v Ukraini*. Editor-compiler S. Elisavetsky. (Kiev, 1999): 88.
12. *Ibid.*, 89-91.
13. *Ibid.*, 88; . *Pamiat' Babiego Yara. Vospominania. Dokumenty*. Author-Compiler Ilia Levitas. (Kiev, 2001): 9.
14. Leni Yahil. *The Holocaust. The fate of European Jewry, 1932-1945*. (Oxford University Press, 1990): 257.
15. *Istoria Kieva*. Main editor A. Kasimenko. ((Kiev, 1964). Vol. II: 407, 478.
16. Kyiv. *Entsiklopedychnyi dovidnyk*. Ed. A.V. Kudrytskyi. Kyiv, 1981: 22.
17. *Ibid*.
18. Kyiv. *Istoriia mist i sil Ukrain'skoi RSR*. Main editor P.T. Toron'ko. Kyiv, 1968: 424; *Istoria Kieva*. Main editor A. Kasimenko. (Kiev, 1964). Vol. II: 407.
19. *Pamiat' Babiego Yara. Vospominania. Dokumenty*. Author-Compiler Ilia Levitas. (Kiev, 2001): 238.
20. Khreshchatyk. *Kul'turologichnyi putivnyk*. Editor-compiler V. Gruzin. (Kyiv, 1997): 20-21.
21. General Jodl, on June 4, 1946, The Trial of German Major War Criminals Sitting at Nuremberg, Germany. 306. (<http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/imt/tgmwc/tgmwc-15/tgmwc-15-146-03.shtml>)
22. *Ibid*.
23. *Khreshchatyk. Kul'turologichnyi putivnyk*. Editor-compiler V. Gruzin. (Kyiv, 1997): 20-21.
24. *Pamiat' Babiego Yara. Vospominania. Dokumenty*. Author-Compiler Ilia Levitas. (Kiev, 2001): 11.
25. *A Holocaust Reader*. Edited, with introductions and notes, by Lucy S. Dawidowicz. (Behrman House, Inc. New York, 1975): 89-90.
26. *Ibid.*, 90.
27. B.D. Brutskus. *Evreiskoe naselenie pod kommunisticheskoy vlastiu*. Evrei i russkaia revolutsia. Materialy i isledovania. Editor-compiler O.V. Budnitskiy. (Moscow-Jerusalem, 1999): 296-319; L. Krichevsky. *Evrei v Apparate VChKa- OGPU v 20-e gody*. *Ibid.*, 320-350; . Victoria Khiterer “Ob’ektivno sozdavshaiasia ekonomicheskaia katastrofa.” *Evreiskie mestechki v*

- 1920-h godah. Vestnik Evreiskogo Universiteta v Moskve. 1995. N 1(8), pp. 212-216; A. Naiman. *Evreiskoe zemledelie v Ukraine v 1930-e gody*. Ibid., 217-222.
28. *A Holocaust Reader*. Edited, with introductions and notes, by Lucy S. Dawidowicz. (Behrman House, Inc. New York, 1975): 89.
29. *Pamiat' Babiego Yara. Vospominania. Dokumenty*. Author-Compiler Ilia Levitas. (Kiev, 2001): 184.
30. *Katastrofa ta Opir Ukrain's'kogo evreistva (1941- 1944). Narysy z istorii Holokostu i Oporu v Ukraini*. Editor-compiler S. Elisavetsky. (Kiev, 1999): 99.
31. Ibid., 98.
32. Ibid.
33. *A Holocaust Reader*. Edited, with introductions and notes, by Lucy S. Dawidowicz. (Behrman House, Inc. New York, 1975): 90.
34. *Pamiat' Babiego Yara. Vospominania. Dokumenty*. Author-Compiler Ilia Levitas. (Kiev, 2001): 20.
35. Ibid., 232-233.
36. Ibid., 9-11.
37. Ibid., 12.
38. Levitas, F. Shimansky, M. *Babi Yar. Stranitsy tragedii*. (Kiev, 1991): 20.
39. *Pamiat' Babiego Yara. Vospominania. Dokumenty*. Author-Compiler Ilia Levitas. (Kiev, 2001): 1-56, 232-233; Levitas, F. Shimansky, M. *Babi Yar. Stranitsy tragedii*. (Kiev, 1991): 101.
40. Levitas, Ilia. *Pravedniki Babiego Yara*. (Kiev, 2001): 6.
41. *The Black Book. The Nazi Crimes Against the Jewish People*. (Nexus Press, New York, 1981): 360; Kyiv. Entsiklopedichnyi dovidnyk. Editor A. Kudrytsky. (Kyiv, 1981): 22; Kuznetsov, Anatoly. *Babi Yar. Documentary Novel*. (The Dial Press, New York, 1967): 399.
42. *Istoria Kieva*. Main editor A. Kasimenko. (Kiev, 1964). Vol. II: 440.
43. Kuznetsov, Anatoly. *Babi Yar. Documentary Novel*. (The Dial Press, New York, 1967): 399.
44. Ibid., 328.
45. *Istoria Kieva*. Main editor A. Kasimenko. ((Kiev, 1964). Vol. II: 499.
46. Levitas, Ilia. *Pravedniki Babiego Yara*. (Kiev, 2001): I, 165, 172.
47. Erhard Roy Wein. *Jewish Fates in Kiev 1941-1943. Nothing is forgotten*. (http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide/publ_intro.htm)
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Bauer, Yehuda. *A History of the Holocaust*. (Franklin Watts, 1982): 198-199.
53. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. (Jerusalem, 1971). IV. 29 –30.
54. Ibid.
55. Yevtushenko, Yevgeny. *Early Poems*. (Marion Boyars, 1990): Introduction.
56. Ibid, 145.
57. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. (Jerusalem, 1971). IV. 29 –30; *Katastrofa ta Opir Ukrain's'kogo evreistva (1941- 1944). Narysy z istorii Holokostu i Oporu v Ukraini*. Editor-compiler S. Elisavetsky. (Kiev, 1999): 115.