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# **Babyn Yar in Kyiv: A Place of Tragedies, Memory, and Struggle**

Babi Jar w Kijowie – miejsce tragedii,  
pamięci i zmagień

### **Abstract**

Babyn Yar is a historical area on the outskirts of Kyiv, which became the site of terrible crimes committed in Ukraine by the Soviet and Nazi totalitarian regimes. In the 1930s, victims of the Holodomor and Stalinist repressions were secretly buried here. During the Nazi occupation of 1941–1943, about 100,000 people were shot, including up to 40,000 Jews. The killers of both regimes made great efforts to eliminate not only the graves of their victims, but also their memory. The long-term struggle to preserve the historical memory of the crimes committed in this place made Babyn Yar a well-known symbol of the Holocaust. At the same time, the place became a place to fight for civil rights, freedom and own historical memory for next generations. In the last 30 years, attempts to memorialise Babyn Yar turned it into a battlefield with Russian historical narratives, and during the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, this space of memory became one of the markers of the genocidal manifestations of the Russian Federation against Ukraine.

### **Keywords**

Babyn Yar, Holocaust, World War II, Russian-Ukrainian war, Kurenivka tragedy, genocide

### **Abstrakt**

Babi Jar to obszar znajdujący się na przedmieściach Kijowa, który był miejscem masowych zbrodni popełnionych w Ukrainie pod sowiecką i nazistowską okupacją. W latach 30. XX w. miejsce to było wykorzystywane do potajemnych pochówków ofiar Wielkiego Głodu (Holodomoru) i stalinowskich represji. Podczas niemieckiej okupacji Ukrainy (1941–1943) zostało zamordowanych tutaj ok. 100 tys. osób, w tym nawet 40 tys. Żydów. Oprawcy starali się ukryć swoje zbrodnie, nie tylko zacierając ślady pochówku Ofiar, lecz także eliminując pamięć o nich. Długoletnia walka o zachowanie pamięci o zbrodniach popełnionych w tym miejscu sprawiła, że Babi Jar stał się znanym i rozpoznawalnym symbolem Holokaustu. Jednocześnie miejsce to jest przestrzenią walki o prawa obywatelskie, wolność i własną pamięć historyczną. W ciągu ostatnich 30 lat próby upamiętnienia Babiego Jaru przekształciły to miejsce w pole bitwy z rosyjskimi narracjami historycznymi, a podczas pełnoskalowej wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej ta przestrzeń pamięci stała się jednym z symboli ludobójczych działań Federacji Rosyjskiej wobec Ukrainy.

### **Słowa kluczowe**

Babi Jar, Holocaust, II wojna światowa, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, katastrofa kureniwska, ludobójstwo

Babyn Yar is known in the world as a tract on the outskirts of Kyiv, with an area of 70 hectares, where in 1941 the mass murder of Jews took place. However, considering the history of this place in a broader chronological framework, a larger area should be considered. In addition to the ravine of the same name, there are also a number of nearby historical districts: Kurenivka, Syrets, Lukyanivka, Dorogozhichi, the territory of the Pavlov Hospital, etc. Researcher Vladyslav Hrynevych defines this territory as 130 hectares (1,3 sq. km) and calls it "Great Babyn Yar" (GBY).<sup>1</sup>

Before the Soviet occupation, brick factories worked in GBY, including Mark Zaitsev. In 1911, the foreman of this factory, the Jew Menahem-Mendel Beilis, was accused of the ritual murder of 13-year-old Andriy Yushchinsky, whose body was found in a cave near the factory. The investigation in the "Beilis case" lasted two years. In the autumn of 1913, a trial took place in Kyiv, which was widely covered in the world press. As a result, Mendel Beilis was acquitted.

The architectural objects of GBY include St. Cyril's church of the 12th century, the Psychiatric hospital named after Academician Ivan P. Pavlov, as well as a number of cemeteries – Cyril's Orthodox, Jewish, Karaim, Muslim, Military, Lukyaniv, Brotherhood. In the last two, in the 1930s, peasants who died during the Holodomor of 1932–1933 and political opponents tortured in NKVD prisons were buried in unmarked graves.<sup>2</sup>

Having started the World War II together with Hitler's Germany on September 1, 1939, the Soviet Union soon found itself on the side that was attacked. Three months after the start of the German-Soviet war (June 22, 1941), Kyiv was occupied. On September 19, 1941, German troops entered the city. More than 665,000 Red Army soldiers were encircled.<sup>3</sup> Only a small part managed to escape, the rest ended up in German captivity or fled to the territory occupied by the Wehrmacht.

About 400,000 citizens remained in Kyiv, of which less than 10% were Jews.<sup>4</sup> Those who remained were primarily old people, women, children, or those who were disloyal to the Bolsheviks. Soviet propaganda kept silent about Hitler's anti-Semitic and racist policy for two years and did not prepare the population for such a test. A witness to the occupation of the Ukrainian capital Fedir Pigido-Pravoberezhny wrote in his memoirs:

**In the pre-war years, anti-Soviet attitudes among Jews were quite widespread, especially among the Jewish intelligentsia – doctors, lawyers, economists, engineering and technical workers, as well as partly among former craftsmen. Therefore, it is not surprising**

- 1 P.-R. Magocsi, V. Hrynevych, *Babyn Yar: History and Memory...*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24M8oUCdDH0> (access: 1.10.2024).
- 2 M. Kostiv, I. Petrenko, *A Chance for Survival: Kyiv During the Holodomor*, <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/articles/2020/12/1/158581> (access: 1.10.2024); K. Lypkivskyi, *Three Crosses at the Lukyaniv Cemetery*, "Day" 2014, No. 78.
- 3 M. Koval, *Kyiv Defense Operation*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Ukrainian History*, t. 4, "Ka-Kom", ed. by V. Smolii et al., Kyiv 2007, p. 228.
- 4 A. Kruglov, *The Tragedy of Baby Yar in German Documents*, Dnipropetrovsk 2011, p. 6.

that a significant part of the Jews did not evacuate to the East, not because they did not have the opportunity, but because they did not want to, thinking that no matter how bad things were with Hitler, it would still be better than with Stalin.<sup>5</sup>

However, from the first days of its rule, the Wehrmacht began to persecute ideologically stigmatised population groups, including Jews. At first, Jewish prisoners of war and Jews detained by military patrols as "suspicious" were involved in the dangerous work of demining and clearing the territory. However, after a series of explosions carried out on September 24, 1941 by sappers of the Red Army and the NKVD in the centre of Kyiv, the Nazi occupation leadership developed the so-called "act of revenge".

When it became clear to the Soviet leadership that the troops would not be able to hold the city, the NKVD and engineering units of the 37<sup>th</sup> Army began mining Kyiv. According to the plan developed in Moscow, it was supposed to turn the central part of the city into a terrible mine trap. As early as September 20, 1941, the observation deck of the Upper Lavra was blown up with a radio mine, where the chief of artillery of the 29<sup>th</sup> Army Corps of the Wehrmacht was killed. On September 24, 1941, the main explosions were heard. A secret Soviet report stated:

September 24, at noon, the building of the 'Spartak' hotel, which housed the German commandant's office, and the building of the 'Children's World' store, on the corner of St. Khreshchatyk and Prorizny. As a result, large fires started that could not be extinguished due to lack of water. To put out the fires, a German fire brigade arrived in Kyiv, pumping water from the Dnipro with hoses. During the extinguishing of the fires, the partisans cut the hoses twice. The culprits were not found. As a result of the explosion in the building of the German commandant's office, up to 300 Germans and several dozen cars were killed. The fire covered the entire Khreshchatyk, it lasted until September, 28 [...].<sup>6</sup>

The intended demoralisation of the German troops in Kyiv did not happen. Instead, the German generals decided to play this card in their favour. Despite the fact that the organisers of the Khreshchatyk arson were well known, Kyiv Jews were declared guilty. On September 27–28, 1941,

5 F. Pigido-Pravoberezhny, *Great Patriotic War: Memories and Reflections of an Eyewitness*, Winnipeg 1954, p. 108.

6 *Detailed Note from the Deputy People's Commissar of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR S. Savchenko to the Secretary of the Central Committee of the CP(b) U N. Khrushchev Dated December 4, 1941*, [in:] "Documents of Russian History. Bulletin of the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation" 1995, No. 3, p. 137–142.

the first shootings took place in GBY. The victims were 1,600 Jewish hostages from among civilians and prisoners of war.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the printing house of the 6th German Army issued 2,000 copies of announcements ordering the Jews of Kyiv and its surroundings to appear on Monday, September 29, 1941, at 8 o'clock "at the corner of Melnikova and Dokterivska Streets". The Jews were also ordered to bring documents, money, valuables, warm clothes, and bed linen with them. On September 28, 1941, announcements in three languages (Russian, Ukrainian and German) were posted around the city. Rumours spread in Kyiv that Jews would be rounded up for resettlement.

On September 29, 1941, at 4 o'clock in the morning, police battalions began to surround the streets through which the victims were supposed to move, as well as the very place of the murder – Babyn Yar. Sonderkommando 4a under the command of Paul Blobel, the headquarters of operational group "C", reinforced by the 45<sup>th</sup> and 303<sup>rd</sup> battalions of the police regiment "South" and a detachment of the Ukrainian auxiliary police took part in the operation. The total number of SS and police forces in the city at that time reached 1,500 people.<sup>8</sup>

On September 29, 1941, at the appointed time, Jews began to gather near the Jewish cemetery. The arrivals were directed to the eastern fence of the nearby Military Cemetery. There, warm clothes, jewellery and documents were taken from them and sent on. Several thousand German policemen directed the flow, stood around, monitored the order, and then divided people into groups (women and men) and already near the place of execution forced the victims to undress and go down into the ravine. There they were placed face down and killed with shots to the back of the head. This was repeated layer by layer. By the end of the day, the Germans had managed to shoot two-thirds of those who came – about 22,000. Other condemned were herded into empty garages on the Tabirna street for the night. On the next day, September 30, they were also shot. German sappers then blew up the sides of the ravine to bury the bodies and forced the POWs to level the bottom of the ravine. On October 2, 1941, the leadership of the Einsatz group reported to Berlin:

**In cooperation with the headquarters of the group and two detachments of the police regiment 'South', the Sonderkommando 4a executed 33,771 Jews in Kyiv on September, 29 and 30.<sup>9</sup>**

7 V. Nakhmanovych, *Babyn Yar as a Symbol of the Holocaust and Other Tragedies of the Second World War*, [in:] *Babyn Yar: History and Memory*, ed. by P. R. Magocsi and V. Hrynevych, Kyiv 2016, p. 99.

8 A. Kruglov, *The Tragedy of Babyn Yar in German Documents...*, p. 7.

9 *Collection of Documents and Materials About the Extermination of the Jews of Ukraine by the Nazis in 1941–1944*, ed. by A. Kruglov, Kyiv 2002, p. 80.

This is how Babyn Yar acquired a new meaning: from a historical site, it became a symbol of the Holocaust, or according to Patrick Dubois' more apt definition, a symbol of the "Holocaust by Bullets".<sup>10</sup>

However, throughout the Nazi occupation of Kyiv, Babyn Yar remained a crime scene. Found Jews, Roma, communists, mentally disordered people, members of the Nationalist and Communist Resistance movement, prisoners, hostages, etc., were shot there. According to historians, this space became a mass grave for more than 100,000 people.<sup>11</sup> The Nazi and Soviet regimes alternately tried to hide the tragedy of Babyn Yar, destroying the traces of the crime and the bodies of the victims. Each time these actions led to further tragedies.

In August 1943, the German occupation administration was threatened by the capture of Kyiv by Soviet troops. An order came from Berlin to identify the places of mass burials of Jews, exhume and burn the bodies (*Sonderaktion 1005*). To carry this out, the task was entrusted to the same Paul Blobel, under whose command the mass murders of Jews in Babyn Yar had taken place on September 29–30, 1941. 327 prisoners of the Syretsk Camp, which was located nearby, were transferred to a tract where they dug up and burned the corpses of the victims every day. The bones were mechanically crushed, and the ashes were scattered on the ground. On the night of September 28–29, 1943, the prisoners made a desperate escape. Most of them died. Only 15 people managed to escape.<sup>12</sup>

In Soviet propaganda, the mass killing of the civilian population in Babyn Yar was never officially denied. At first, it was not hidden that the main victims were Jews. The first reports about Babyn Yar in the Soviet press appeared two months after the tragedy. On November 19, 1941, the newspapers "Pravda" and "Izvestia" published TASS information (from New York) about the execution of "52 thousand Jews – men, women, children" by the Nazis in Kyiv. On January 7, 1942, the newspaper "Pravda" published the Note of the People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs of the USSR Vyacheslav Molotov, which, in particular, referred to the "executions of Jews in Kyiv, Lviv, Odesa, Kamianets-Podilskyi, Dnipropetrovsk, Mariupol, Kerch".

On November 6, 1943, Soviet troops again entered Kyiv. The Extraordinary State Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of the German-Fascist Invaders and Their Accomplices began working in the city. It recorded the crimes committed by the Germans and informed the public about them. Due to evidence of burning corpses in 1943, mass exhumations were not carried out in Babyn Yar. Based on the testimony of Kyiv citizens, interrogations of executioners, intelligence data, and

10 P. Desbois, *Porteur de mémoires: sur les traces de la Shoah par balles*, Paris 2007.

11 M. Koval, *Babyn Yar*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Ukrainian History*, t. 1 „A-B”, ed. by V. Smolij et al., Kyiv 2003, p. 157.

12 *Kyiv. War, Power, Society. 1939–1945. According to the Documents of the Soviet Special Services and the Nazi Occupation Administration*, Kyiv 2014, p. 81.

reports from special departments of the Extraordinary State Commission, a report was prepared in which the shooting of tens of thousands of Kyiv Jews in Babyn Yar was noted. However, after the approval of the report in Moscow, even passing references to Jews disappeared from its text. In the new edition, it sounded like this:

**On September 29, 1941, Hitler's bandits drove thousands of peaceful Soviet citizens to the corner of Melnikova and Dokterevska Streets. The executioners took those who had gathered to Babyn Yar, took away all their jewellery, and then shot them.**<sup>13</sup>

Continuing to replace references to the executed Jews with the euphemism "peaceful Soviet citizens", Stalin's propaganda erased the memory of the Holocaust as well. And the "uncomfortable" questions about the friendship and pact between the two dictators, the war "with little blood on foreign territory", the huge number of prisoners of the "invincible Red Army", etc., also disappeared. The issue of the directors and performers of the Khreshchatyk arson in 1941 also disappeared (the Germans were named as the culprits). They did not mention the lack of informing the Soviet population about Hitler's racial policy, etc. Instead, historical myths of the Great Patriotic War, the leading role in the defeat of Nazism of the Russian people and "fraternal Slavic peoples", and the cult of warrior-heroes were actively formed and planted in the USSR. In addition, the state policy of the USSR towards Jews from the end of World War II to 1991 ranged from overt to veiled anti-Semitism.

At first, Stalin actively supported the newly created state of Israel. On May 17, 1948, the USSR was the first to recognise the Jewish state, and even provided (through Czechoslovakia) military aid. However, when Israel's orientation toward an alliance with the United States became obvious, the attitude towards the new country changed radically. This immediately affected the fate of Soviet Jews. Their sympathies for Israel began to be perceived as "potentially dangerous", "manifestations of disloyalty and Zionism".

The fate of the first monument in Babyn Yar is included in the logic of state policy. On March 13, 1945, the Soviet People's Committee and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine issued a resolution "On the construction of a monumental monument on the territory of Babyn Yar". It was planned to be built by 1947, but the matter did not move forward. At the beginning of 1960, the construction of the monument was cancelled due to "significant costs for anti-erosion works".<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, large-scale work on the physical elimination of Babyn Yar as an "inconvenient place" was allocated significant funding. But another attempt to hide the crime scene gathered a new crop of victims.

13 V. Hrynevych, *Babyn Yar after Babyn Yar*, [in:] *Babyn Yar: History and Memory...*, p. 115.

14 A. Anisimov, *Kyiv Flood: Kurenivka Tragedy March 13, 1961*, Kyiv 2003, p. 13.

Fig. 1  
Monument to "Soviet citizens  
and prisoners of war soldiers  
and officers of the Soviet  
Army, shot by German fascists  
in Babyn Yar", 1976,  
photo by L. Rybchenko



During the 1950s, the territory of Babyn Yar was washed away in Kyiv. A sand-clay mixture was delivered from the quarries of the brick factories to the ravine through pipes. On March 13, 1961, a large-scale man-made disaster occurred, which was called the Kurenivka tragedy. On the morning of that day, the mixture broke through the dam, a shaft of dense mass 4 m high and 20 m wide crawled down, breaking everything in its path. Lava flooded an area of tens of hectares. No-one who got in its way stood a chance. According to official information, 145 people died, according to unofficial information – 1,500 people. 68 residential buildings, 13 administrative and industrial buildings, and a tram depot were destroyed. Information about the Kurenivka tragedy was hushed up as much as possible, only "unhealthy judgments", according to the definition in secret reports of the KGB, were heard among Kyivans:

**It was not necessary to make fun of the memory of those who died in Babyn Yar, that is why such a disaster happened...<sup>15</sup>**

After the Kurenivka tragedy, the redevelopment of the GBY territory continued. In the following decade, a residential complex, a sports complex, a highway, and a TV tower with a TV centre were built here. Cemeteries on Melnikov street, Jewish, Military, Muslim, Kyriliv orthodox were liquidated. A recreation park with an area of 118 hectares (1,18 sq. km) was built on the territory of the GBY. The former relief of the area has actually disappeared. A small part of the upper part of the ravine remained partially unchanged, where the process of memorialisation began 35 years after the tragedy of the mass murder of Jews.

The first official monument on the territory of Babyn Yar was opened on July 2, 1976 (Fig. 1). The multi-figure bronze composition of the

<sup>15</sup> T. Yevstafieva, *The Kurenivka Tragedy. How and Why It Happened*, [https://www.istpravda.com.ua/research/2016/03/13/31140/view\\_print/](https://www.istpravda.com.ua/research/2016/03/13/31140/view_print/) (access: 1.10.2024).



monument was accompanied by a plaque with an inscription in Ukrainian: "Here in 1941–1945 German-fascist invaders shot more than one hundred thousand citizens of the city of Kyiv and prisoners of war". For dozens of years, this monument became a permanent place for holding official commemorative events on regular anniversaries of the tragedy. This event, on the one hand, was the result of an active struggle by the public, and on the other, an attempt by the party leadership to take the initiative and give the commemoration the correct ideological content.

Every year on the anniversary of the tragedy, at the site of the mass shooting of Kyiv Jews, spontaneous gatherings of native victims were held. Over time, they turned into mass public meetings, the number of participants of which steadily increased. Babyn Yar became not only a place of remembrance for the dead, but also a platform for public demonstrations where Jews were outraged by the refusal to leave for emigration to Israel, the oppression of their identity and culture by the authorities, as well as the general violation of the ideals of dignity and freedom in the USSR. Ukrainian dissidents joined the participants of the meetings.

The speech at a rally in Babyn Yar on September 29, 1966 by the Ukrainian publicist, philosopher, and literary critic Ivan Dzyuba, who was under the supervision of the KGB for his political views, gained wide publicity. He integrated the Babyn Yar tragedy into the coordinates of the Ukrainian collective memory:

**Babyn Yar is a tragedy for all humanity, but it happened on Ukrainian soil, and therefore a Ukrainian has no right to forget about it, just like a Jew. Babyn Yar is our common tragedy, it is a tragedy, first of all, of the Ukrainian and Jewish peoples. Fascism brought this tragedy to our people. However, we must not forget that fascism does not begin with Babyn Yar and does not end there. Fascism begins with disrespect for man, and ends with the destruction of man, the destruction of nations.<sup>16</sup>**

Cultural figures also played a significant role in the memorialisation of Babyn Yar. In the summer of 1961, the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko visited Babyn Yar. Deeply impressed by what he saw, he read the poem "Babyn Yar" ("There are no monuments above Babyn Yar") at a creative evening that same day, which became a kind of poetic catalyst for attention to this topic. In December 1962, in Moscow, the composer Dmytro Shostakovich presented his Symphony No. 13, in the first part of which the vocal part was written to the words of Yevtushenko's poem. In 1966, the Moscow magazine "Yunost" published an abridged version of Anatoly Kuznetsov's documentary novel "Babyn Yar". The activity of

16 I. Dzyuba, *Speech on the 25th Anniversary of the Shootings in Babyn Yar*, <http://ua.judaicacenter.kiev.ua/tekst-vistupuivana-dzyubi-u-25-ti-rokovini-rozstriliv-u-babinomu-yaru/> (access: 1.10.2024).

the writer and dissident Viktor Nekrasov also influenced the installation of the monument in Babyn Yar.

Therefore, contrary to the permanent attempts of the Nazis and Communists to erase the memory of the tragedy of the Jews, the topic of Babyn Yar entered the Soviet public space. However, the Soviet leadership never dared to publicly admit the fact that the German occupiers in Babyn Yar did not kill Soviet people because they were Soviet, but Jews, just because they were Jews. In 1979, a delegation from the USA, including Elie Wiesel, visited Babyn Yar. He emphasised that this place had become sacred for Jews long before the monument was erected here and expressed indignation that there was no mention of Jewish victims on the memorial plaque near the monument. Instead, in 1989, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, translations of the previous inscription in Russian and Yiddish appeared on a plaque near the monument in Babyn Yar.

Ukraine's independence in 1991 coincided with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Babyn Yar tragedy. The official recognition of the Jewish tragedy was to prove to the world the commitment of modern Ukraine to democratic and humanist values. The speech of the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian SSR Leonid Kravchuk (the future first President of Ukraine) at the requiem meeting confirmed these intentions:

We declare to the whole world that the ideological considerations of the former regime in Ukraine, which despised human rights and the rights of peoples, hid from people the historical truth about the tragedy of Babyn Yar, that most of the victims of mass shootings here fell to the fate of Jews, it was a genocide, and the blame for it lies not only with the fascists, but also with those who did not stop the killers in time. We take part of it on ourselves. Today's sad celebrations are at the same time a good opportunity to apologise to the Jewish people, against whom so many injustices have been committed in our history.<sup>17</sup>

During the commemoration of the anniversary of the tragedy, the opening of the Menorah monument (Fig. 2), the awarding of the Righteous Among the Nations, the international scientific conference "Babyn Yar: History and its Lessons", the screening of films and documentary exhibitions took place. The event was the performance of Requiem-Kaddish "Babyn Yar" by the Ukrainian composer Yevhen Stankevich to the words of the poet Dmytro Pavlychko.

However, the official declaration of acceptance of the Jewish tradition of memory did not become the final argument in the memorialisation of Babyn Yar. In the absence of a national model of memory,

17 L. Kravchuk, *Speech of the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine L. Kravchuk at the Memorial Ceremony in Babyn Yar on October 5, 1991*, "Voice of Ukraine" 1991, October 8, p. 1–2.

in the following years, more than 30 different monuments and signs appeared on the territory of the GBY, erected by various organisations, with the aim of perpetuating the memory of "their own victims". According to the analysis of the researcher Vitaly Nakhmanovych, the memorial mosaic of the GBY corresponds to nine different mythologies related to the history of World War II and the Holocaust and more.<sup>18</sup>

The Soviet heritage includes the already mentioned monument (1976), as well as a memorial sign to the prisoners of the Syretsk concentration camp (1991), crosses (2010) with Soviet narratives about the shot sailors, and monuments to the shot football players of the mythologised "match of death".

Jewish memory, apart from the Menorah (1991), is represented by the monument "Children shot in Babyn Yar in 1941" (2001, Fig. 3) and a granite stone with the inscription: "This is where the 'Road of Death' began, along which on September 29, 1941, the fascist occupiers drove Jews to Babyn Yar to be shot". The combination of Jewish and Soviet mythologies became the monument to the Soviet underground worker of Jewish origin Tetiana Markus (2009).

Ukrainian memory is recorded in a number of memorial signs. The wooden cross and three granite slabs with the names of 62 victims contain the inscription: "In 1941–1943, in occupied Kyiv, 621 members of the anti-Nazi underground of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) died in the struggle for an independent Ukrainian State, among them the outstanding poet Olena Teliga. Babyn Yar became their mass grave. Glory to the heroes!" (1992). Also, a separate monument was erected nearby to the figure of the national liberation movement, member of the OUN, poet Olena Teliga (2017).

The Roma memory of the tragedy of Babyn Yar has suffered the greatest obstacles. An attempt to erect a monument in the form of a "gypsy hut" in 2001 was rejected by the city authorities. For some time, the *kibitka* was exhibited in the city of Kamianets-Podilskyi and returned to Babyn Yar only in 2016.

Another group of memorials is related to the history of the elimination of patients from the Pavlov Psychiatric Hospital. First, a large granite block with a cross and a six-pointed star engraved on it was placed, with the inscription: "In memory of the 751st patient of the hospital who died at the hands of the Hitler regime in 1941–1942. Eternal memory" (2001). A couple of years later, two more memorial signs were erected, one to the similarly shot patients of the hospital (2003), the other to its employees who managed to save some of their wards from death (2004).

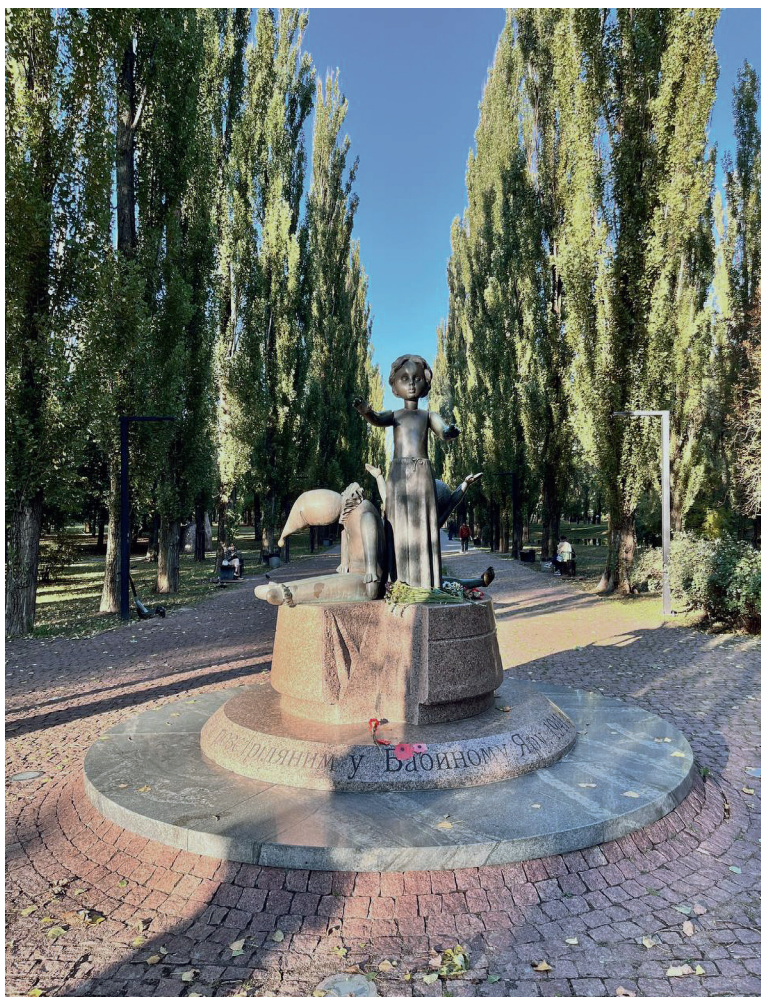
Representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate created their own place of memory on the site of the former Kyrylivske Orthodox Cemetery. Initially, five iron crosses were installed here in memory of the shot priests (1990–2000s), later a wooden chapel appeared (2012).

18 V. Nakhmanovych, *Babyn Yar as a symbol of the Holocaust...*, p. 320–326.

Fig. 2  
Memorial sign "Menorah"  
to the Jews shot in Babyn Yar,  
1991, photo by L. Rybchenko



Fig. 3  
Monument to the children  
shot in Babyn Yar, 2001,  
photo by L. Rybchenko





Three more groups of signs are connected with the events of the war: crosses in memory of German prisoners of war (1999); a monument to the writer Anatoly Kuznetsov – the author of the novel-documentary “Babyn Yar” (2009) and a stele dedicated to Ukrainian ostarbeiters (2005).

In addition, there are three memorial signs to the victims of the Kurenivka tragedy on the territory of the GBY (1995, 2006, 2011).

Despite the appearance of new monuments in the GBY, the absence of a single architectural and landscape ensemble at the memorial site was obvious. Foreign and philanthropic initiatives to build a large Museum, historical and educational centre or Jewish community in this space began to appear permanently. But no project was ever implemented due to strong public opposition from both representatives of the Jewish community and Ukrainian activists. Controversies surrounding the construction of, in particular, the “Heritage” Jewish Community Centre with funds from the American Jewish distribution committee Joint in 2001, and the Museum with a religious and educational centre by the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress headed by Vadym Rabinovych in 2006 revealed the main cornerstone issues.

First of all, Jewish tradition forbids building on graves. Jewish public figures called the concepts of the projects, which included “commemoration through the revival and glorification of the culture and traditions of the fallen, [...] fun on the bones”. In addition, representatives of Ukrainian society expressed their dissatisfaction with the entrenchment of Jewish domination in the territory of the GBY. At a time when the Jewish community and the world outside of Ukraine saw Babyn Yar as a symbol of the Holocaust, for Ukrainian nationalists, Roma, and Kyivans it is a symbol of their tragedies of the period of Nazi occupation, as well as the burial place of Holodomor victims, victims of Stalinist repressions, the Kurenivka tragedy, etc. All these circumstances and opinions had to be taken into account when preparing new initiatives.

The state did not participate in the process of memorialisation of GBY, limiting itself to formal support of any initiatives. At the same time, the process of creating the State Historical-Memorial Reserve “Babyn Yar” continued. The decree on its establishment was issued by President Viktor Yushchenko in 2005, but only in 2007 did its real work under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism begin. In 2008, the reserve was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, and two years later it was granted the status of “National” and land was allocated. In 2016, the National Historical and Memorial Reserve received premises from the state – the building of the former office of the Jewish Lukyaniv Cemetery.

In 2014, after the victory of the Revolution of Dignity and the escape of President Yanukovich, Russia resorted to the annexation of Crimea and hostilities in Donbas. The Russian-Ukrainian war began. It significantly accelerated the processes of formation of Ukrainian identity and liberation from pro-Soviet and pro-Russian sentiments, which were returned to in recent years by the fugitive president.

In 2015, four laws of the so-called decommunisation package were adopted:

1. on condemnation of the communist and Nazi regimes, which prohibits their propaganda and symbols;
2. on access to the archives of repressive bodies, declassifying the archives of the VChK – NKVD – KGB;
3. on the perpetuation of the victory over Nazism, which adds May 8 to May 9 as the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation and replaces the “Great Patriotic War” with “World War II” in official usage;
4. on the legal status of the fighters for the independence of Ukraine, which recognises as such not only the participants of the battles of 1941–1945, but also all movements opposed to the Soviet government, from the 1920s to 1991.

In the Decree of the President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko dated August 12, 2015 about events in connection with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Babyn Yar tragedy, the space of Babyn Yar was associated with the Holocaust and with the tragedy of other victims buried in this mass grave:

**In order to perpetuate the memory of one of the most tragic pages of the Holocaust – the mass murder of the Jews of Kyiv, honouring the victims of the crimes committed by the Nazis during the occupation of the capital of Ukraine – civilians of all nationalities, prisoners of war, participants of the Ukrainian liberation movement, as well as for the unification society’s efforts to prevent the recurrence of crimes against humanity, to unite the people around the idea of building a legal European state in Ukraine capable of protecting all its citizens, in support of Ukrainian and international public initiatives and in connection with the 75th anniversary of the beginning of the tragic events in Babyn Yar decrees [...].<sup>19</sup>**

Next, numerous measures were listed, among which a special place was given to the arrangement of this historical space and the development of the National Historical and Memorial Reserve “Babyn Yar”: holding an international competition of projects for the prospective development of the reserve; clarifying the boundaries and protection zones of the reserve, working out the issue of the possibility of their expansion, as well as clarifying the list of monuments and other objects located on the territory of the reserve; working out the issue of creating a museum of the history of Babyn Yar and its location, etc.

So, the Ukrainian state finally developed a detailed plan to honour the memory of the victims of the Holocaust and other victims of the Nazis, and also took care of the development prospects of the National Historical and Memorial Reserve “Babyn Yar”.

<sup>19</sup> Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 471/2015 dated August 12, 2015 “On Measures in Connection with the 75th Anniversary of the Babyn Yar Tragedy”, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/471/2015#Text> (access: 1.10.2024).

The Committee of National Historical Memorialisation of the Reserve "Babyn Yar" was established. The narrative of the project for the future memorial was prepared by a group of scientists of the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Another version of the project was provided by a group of organisations: The Public Committee of Babyn Yar, the Jewish Community of Ukraine and the Canadian-Ukrainian charitable organisation "Ukrainian-Jewish Meeting" (UJE). With the support of the International Union of Architects (Paris), UJE held the International Architectural Competition of the Babyn Yar Memorial Park. Dorohozhitsky Necropolis.<sup>20</sup> It demonstrated wide possibilities and prospects, but the matter did not move forward, in particular due to the appearance of another "player" on this field of memory.

Three Russian oligarchs: Herman Khan, Pavlo Fuchs, and Mykhailo Fridman founded the Charity Organization Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Charity Fund and announced their intention to create the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre in the space of the GBY by 2021. Natives of Ukraine, they already conducted philanthropic activities in Lviv, Kharkiv and Kyiv. Their interest in the memorialisation of Babyn Yar was explained by the fact that their relatives also died in this place. Because of this, it seemed unfair to them that there was still no memorial institution in Ukraine dedicated to the tragedy of the Holocaust, in particular, Babyn Yar.

Presidents Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelenskyy have consistently supported the activities of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre. Under the conditions of the war and the imposition by Russian propaganda of the image of the modern Ukrainian government as "Bandерite" and "fascist", as well as in the absence of budget funds to finance the state project, the idea of creating a European-level Holocaust museum in Ukraine with private money looked quite attractive. In addition, it was assumed that this project would acquire international status.

The Supervisory Board of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre includes the Mayor of Kyiv Vitaliy Klitschko, businessman Viktor Pinchuk, human rights activist and Soviet dissident Natan Shcharanskyy, former President of Poland Alexander Kwaśniewski and other representatives of the world's political elite. Public and Academic Councils operated at the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre. Holocaust researchers from Israel, Germany, France, and the USA were invited to the latter. The development of the concept was led by the Dutch scientist Karel Berkhof.

In the course of 2017–2019, a conceptual base – "Basic Historical Narrative" – was prepared by the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre, and an international architectural competition was held for the construction of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Complex, in which more than

20 *International Architectural Competition of Ideas for the Creation of a Memorial Park in Kyiv, Ukraine: Babyn Yar, Dorogozhytsky Necropolis*. Public Committee „Babyn Yar”, <http://konkurs.kby.kiev.ua/uk/> (access: 1.10.2024).

160 architects and architectural bureaus participated from 36 countries of the world.

After the appointment at the end of 2019 of the odious Moscow film director Ilya Khrzhanovskyy to the position of art director of the Moscow Art Gallery, the vector of the institution's activities changed in the direction of "quick" art projects. On the territory of GBY, the following spiritual space was opened – the symbolic synagogue "A place for reflection"; Marina Abramović's crystal wall of weeping (Fig. 4); an installation with the names of the victims of the tragedy – "Mirror Field" (Fig. 5), a series of installations "Looking into the past", etc. In the academic area, attention was focused on establishing the names of the victims of Babyn Yar according to archival sources. In the plans for 2022, the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre planned to open the first museum space – Kurgan.<sup>21</sup> In the future – The Museum of the tragedy of Babyn Yar, The Museum of memory of the victims, The Museum of forgetting the tragedy, The Museum of the area of Babyn Yar, the Museum of the history of the victims – Roma and other groups of slain Kyivans.<sup>22</sup>

The most controversial finished product of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre is the documentary film directed by Serhiy Loznytsia *Babyn Yar. Context* (2021), recognised at the Cannes Film Festival as the best foreign documentary film. Ukrainian critics pointed out that the director created a film not so much about German crimes, but about the collective responsibility of Ukrainians for the Holocaust – "Ukrainian collaboration".<sup>23</sup>

Real "wars of memory" began around the commemoration of Babyn Yar with the appearance of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre. An active group of Ukrainian historians, united around the Institute of the History of Ukraine of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, publicly criticised the activities of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre. Former dissident Yosyp Zisels formulated the joint position as follows:

**We want the Holocaust Memorial and Museum projects to be Ukrainian projects. They should be created jointly by the Ukrainian state and Ukrainian civil society, not by Russian oligarchs, with a political goal that is quite clear to us – to harm the image of Ukraine... We suspect, and not without reason, that this project solves important political goals for modern Russia in that real war, which it**

21 "Names" – List of Victims of Babyn Yar, <https://babynyar.org/ua/names/about> (access: 1.10.2024).

22 Zelenskyy and Khrzhanovskyy Talked About Babyn Yar at the „Ukraine 30“ Forum, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3279576-zelenskij-vidkriv-forumukraina-30-gumanitarna-politika.html> (access: 1.10.2024).

23 A. Gerasim, *How the Private Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center Explains to Ukrainians That They Collaborated With the Nazis*, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/105052/yak-pryvatnyj-memorialnyj-centr-golokostu-babyn-yar-poyasnyuye-ukrayincyam-sho-my-spivpracyuvaly-z-nacystamy> (access: 1.10.2024).



conducts with Ukraine, as well as in the information war and the distortion of the image of Ukraine, which Russia is trying to impose on the whole world... This goal is to present Ukraine as a fascist, anti-Semitic and nationalist state, which has always been violated and human rights continue to be violated. And the museum, in the form in which it is offered by the creators today, is intended to serve this very purpose.<sup>24</sup>

On February 17, 2022, a message appeared on the official website of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre on the further unification of all interested parties in the issue of the memorialisation of Babyn Yar:

**The comprehensive memorialisation of the historical territories of the Babyn Yar tract will take place within the framework of a public-private partnership, because the implementation of such a project is possible only with active participation of the state and the city.<sup>25</sup>**

There was mention of the plans to create a unique complex of museums and memorial objects in 10 years on an area of 130 hectares, which after the end of the term of the public-private partnership would become the property of the state and the territorial community of Kyiv.<sup>26</sup> Such a turn of events in the "war of memories" was quite unexpected even for many participants in the process. Which real actions were to take place according to the announced intentions remains unknown. Tragic events engulfed Ukraine, put the country on the verge of survival, and the memorialisation of Babyn Yar – on a long pause.

On February 24, 2022, a full-scale invasion of the troops of the Russian Federation into the territory of Ukraine began. Already in the first days of the attack, Babyn Yar was at the centre of events. On March 1, 2022, the Russian army fired missiles at the Kyiv TV tower, and the Memorial complex of Babyn Yar was damaged. Five people died and the same number were injured.<sup>27</sup> Information about the attack became one of the topics of conversation between the presidents of the United States and Ukraine, Joe Biden and Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Wide coverage of the shelling of Babyn Yar by international news agencies, references to the victims of the Holocaust to a certain extent pushed the

24 Y. Zisels, *What Is Happening Around Babyn Yar Today?*, <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/columns/2018/09/3/152870/> (access: 1.10.2024).

25 *The Memorial in Babyn Yar Will Become State Property*, <https://babynyar.org/ua/news/490> (access: 1.10.2024).

26 *In Kyiv, an Open Competition of Ideas for the Arrangement of the Territory of Babyn Yar Is Held*, <https://babynyar.org/ua/news/488/u-kyievi-provodiat-vidkrytyi-arkhitekturnyi-konkurs-z-oblashtuvannia-terytorii-babynoho-yaru> (access: 1.10.2024).

27 *The Russian Occupiers Fired at the TV Tower in Kyiv; There Are Wounded and Dead*, <https://zn.ua/ukr/UKRAINE/rosijski-okupanti-obstriljali-televezhu-u-kijevi.html> (access: 01.10.2024).

Fig. 4  
The "Crystal Wailing Wall"  
installation by Marina  
Abramović 2021,  
photo by L. Rybchenko



Fig. 5  
Audiovisual installation  
"Mirror field", 2020,  
photo by L. Rybchenko



world and the Ukrainians themselves to understand that the so-called "special military operation" announced by Putin at the beginning of the full-scale invasion of was actually a full-fledged war, and "denazification" was a propaganda fake. Further official references to Babyn Yar appeared in the context of solving the most important tasks of the struggling country.

Photos of the bodies of civilian residents of Bucha, Izyum and Kherson killed by the Russian occupiers exhumed on the newly liberated Ukrainian territories were compared with photos of the mass grave of Babyn Yar. After proving the facts of mass torture, deportations, sexual violence, abduction of children, etc. On May 22, 2023, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly recognised Russia's crimes against Ukraine as genocide.

The decisive factor for Ukraine is the preservation of high motivation of the society for the further struggle and the help of allies. On the 83<sup>rd</sup>

anniversary of the Babyn Yar tragedy, September 29, 2024, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wrote on his Facebook page:

Babyn Yar is a terrible symbol of the fact that the most terrible crimes take place when the world chooses not to notice, to be silent, to be indifferent, to not be decisive enough to give a worthy rebuff to evil. When the eyes of the world are closed, humanity loses. Babyn Yar is a clear proof of the atrocities that regimes led by leaders who rely on intimidation and violence are capable of. They are no different at all times. But the reaction of the world must be different. This is what the world had to learn. We must stand guard over humanity, life and justice. We must protect ourselves from evil. Eternal memory to all victims of the Nazis! Eternal condemnation to everyone who is guilty of the murders in Babyn Yar!.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, for more than 80 years, Babyn Yar in Kyiv became not only a place of crimes, a symbol of the Holocaust and other tragedies of totalitarian regimes, but also a marker of the struggle and farewell to the Soviet empire, the formation of national historical memory, national memorialisation. Today, Babyn Yar serves as a reminder that the life of not only Ukrainians, but also of all humanity depends on the ability of the democratic world to stop the manifestation of barbarism and genocide through joint efforts. ■

28 President of Ukraine, the official page of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, <https://www.facebook.com/zelenskyy.official> (access: 1.10.2024).

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