



## Topic Area: Babyn Yar – A Dark Chapter of Ukraine’s History and the Second World War

Key enquiry questions and learning from topic study.

- Improving knowledge of the history of Ukrainian Jews
- Learning about one of the major sites of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe
- Learning about the ‘Holocaust by bullets’ as a distinct aspect of the genocide

### Historical Background to the Babyn Yar Massacre

Before the Second World War, Ukraine was home to a large Jewish population for centuries – in particular, the city of Kyiv. Before the German invasion, approximately 160,000 Jewish people resided in Kyiv (around 20% of the city’s population). Operation Barbarossa began in June 1941 when the German military invaded the Soviet Union. At that point, Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, formally known as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Ukrainian SSR). The German army reached the Ukrainian SSR by late June 1941. At this time, around 100,000 Jewish people fled Kyiv or were already involved in the Soviet military. This left around 60,000 Jewish people in Kyiv by the time the Germans occupied the city. Most of these people were unable to leave the city beforehand, including women, children, the elderly, and ill people. In the first stages of the German occupation of Kyiv, two explosions took place near the city centre, destroying German headquarters, and injuring and killing German soldiers and officials. Although the fatal explosions were caused by abandoned mines left by Soviet military officials and soldiers, the Germans used the explosions as a reason to massacre the remaining Jews in Kyiv.

Following these events, in late September 1941, the Einsatzgruppe C conducted one of the largest massacres at a single site during the Holocaust. The shootings took place at a ravine named Babyn Yar (Babi Yar), located outside of Kyiv in Ukraine. The shootings took place between 29–30 September 1941, and over the two days, more than 33,000 Jews were murdered according to Einsatzgruppe reports sent to Berlin.

From 26 September 1941 onwards, notices in Ukrainian, Russian, and German were issued around the streets of Kyiv, ordering the Jewish population of the city to gather at a specified location near the Jewish cemetery on the north-western outskirts of the city. The notice ordered the Jewish people to appear with their belongings, documents, money, and

valuables – failure to do so would be punishable by death. The Jewish people were led to believe that by following these orders, they would be resettled elsewhere in Ukraine for their safety (although most sensed their lives were threatened). Rather, they were marched through Kyiv to the Babyn Yar ravine and murdered.

After the mass executions that took place in late September 1941, the site of Babyn Yar remained in use as an execution site for Roma people, Soviet prisoners of war, as well as more Jewish people for two years. Although the true total number of people who lost their lives at this site remains unknown, Soviet accounts since the Second World War estimate around 70,000–100,000 people lost their lives at Babyn Yar. As the Germans slowly retreated from the Soviet Union in 1943, they launched Aktion [Operation] 1005, a systematic cover-up operation eradicating the material evidence at sites of mass murder in the occupied Soviet Union. At Babyn Yar, prisoners from a nearby labour camp were forced to dig up and burn the bodies; bulldozers and bone-crushing machinery were used. These prisoners were killed once the operation was completed. However, several managed to escape and offered testimonies to Soviet authorities on the crimes that were committed.

Following the end of the Second World War, Babyn Yar was hardly acknowledged by the Soviet Union, and the site remained unmarked. In 1961, following plans to build a sports stadium over the site, protests, encapsulated in the opening line of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem '[Babi Yar](#)', 'No monument stands over Babi Yar', described as 'the first true monument to the Jews of Babi Yar.' By 1976, the state erected a monument to honour the victims; however, it failed to state that the vast majority of them were Jewish. This was only rectified with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukrainian independence, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Babyn Yar massacre in 1991, with the erection of a Menorah-shaped monument; names were included on the monument by the recently independent Ukrainian government. The memorial site at Babyn Yar was accidentally damaged by Russian forces in March 2022 which garnered international condemnation.

## Testimony of Dina Pronicheva about the Annihilation of the Jews in Babi Yar on September 29-30, 1941

*Each time I saw a new group of men and women, elderly people, and children being forced to take off their clothes. All [of them] were being taken to an open pit where submachine-gunners shot them. Then another group was brought... With my own eyes I saw this horror. Although I was not standing close to the pit, terrible cries of panic-stricken people and quiet children's voices calling "Mother, mother..." reached me. (Yad Vashem)*



Description: 80th anniversary of the Babyn Yar tragedy. 6 October 2021  
Source: 80th anniversary of the Babi Yar tragedy.  
[Attribution: President Of Ukraine from Україна, PDM-owner, via Wikimedia Commons](#)



Description: Soviet POWs covering a mass grave after the Babyn Yar massacre, 1 October 1941.  
Photographer: Johannes Hähle (1906–1944). Note that this is one of a sequence of 29 surviving images taken by Hähle. Hähle was a member of the PK 637, a propaganda unit of the German 6<sup>th</sup> Army. The images came into the public domain after they were sold to a journalist in 1954 and are now in the Hamburg Institute for Social Research.

[Link to image.](#)

## Summary of Key Dates and Figures

- 20% of Kyiv's population was Jewish before the Germans occupied the city and the Ukrainian SSR. Following Operation Barbarossa, around 60,000 Jewish people were left in the city, mostly consisting of women, children, the elderly, and the ill as they were mostly not required to be involved in the Soviet military.
- Leading up to 29 – 30 September 1941, notices were issued around Kyiv, ordering the Jewish people to arrive at the ravine with all of their belongings, failure to do so would result in death. The Jewish people were led to believe that by following these orders, they would be resettled to a safer location than Kyiv. However, they were led to one of the single most deadly massacres of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Around 33,000 Jewish people were killed during this massacre.
- Babyn Yar was then used as an execution site for two years following the initial massacres where Soviet prisoners of war, Roma people, and more Jewish people were killed. Approximately 70,000–100,000 people were killed at this site; however, the true figure is unknown.
- With the Soviet army approaching Kyiv in 1943, the Germans were retreating out of Ukraine. They used prisoners from a nearby concentration camp to initiate a cover-up mission at the site. The prisoners who worked on this cover-up mission were ordered to be killed; however, several of these people escaped and testified about these crimes to Soviet authorities in the winter of 1943.
- Despite all of the suffering that took place at the site of Babyn Yar, having the ravine created into a memorial site was a long battle. Protestors and Jewish people urged the Soviet Union to acknowledge the site as a historical landmark, especially after proposals for a sports stadium to be built over the site in 1961. In 1976, a monument was erected at the site of Babyn Yar; however, it did not acknowledge that most of the victims killed at the site were Jewish, nor was it deemed an appropriate commemoration. Following Ukrainian independence in 1991, a Menorah-shaped monument was built, and names of the victims were added to the monuments on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Babyn Yar massacre. The Russian government and military received international condemnation for accidentally damaging the monuments in Babyn Yar in their attacks in March 2022.

## Key Resources for Teacher Subject Knowledge Development

- Karel C. Berkhoff, [“The Corpses in the Ravine Were Women, Men, and Children”](#): Written Testimonies from 1941 on the Babi Yar Massacre, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 2015, Vol. 29, Issue 2, pp. 251–274 – Journal article that includes testimonies, sources, and further reading on the topic of Babyn Yar and its massacres.
- A. Anatoli. [Babi Yar](#). Vintage Classic, 2023. 528 pages. – A book written from the perspective of a 12-year-old boy. Although the book is a work of fiction, the events described resemble the true tragedies that occurred at the site. The language is more accessible than most educational resources making it suitable for both students and teachers. Note that this was published in censored form in the Soviet Union in 1966 and in full in 1970 after the author defected.
- Andrej Kotljarchuk, [Babi Yar and the Nazi Genocide of Roma: Memory Narratives and Memory Practices in Ukraine](#), *Nationalities Papers*, 2022, Vol. 50, Issue 3, pp. 450–470. – Journal article that explores further information on how Babyn Yar was used as an execution site for Roma people.

## Resources for the Classroom

- [Mass Shootings at Babyn Yar \(Babi Yar\). United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#). This website offers a condensed version of the history of the massacre, with key dates and events followed by a more detailed and developed account. The webpage contains links to further information on specific topics as well as references. Additionally, the page includes more eyewitness testimonies and maps to show where the massacre took place and the geography of Ukraine during the Second World War.
- [The Foundation and Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center](#). English version of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, including detailed historical narrative, a project to record individual names and histories of those murdered at Babyn Yar and links to testimonies with summaries in English.
- [Babi Yar. Britannica](#). This website offers information on the events of Babyn Yar, and the events that took place after the initial massacre, with accessible language, images, summaries, and more articles on further information. There is an option to listen to the article rather than read it.
- [The Babi Yar Massacre. Holocaust Memorial Day Trust](#). HMDT resource on the massacre, including summary of the history of Ukrainian Jews prior to and during the Holocaust and of the events surrounding the massacre. Includes link to a life story relating to the events.

- [Babi Yar - A Learning Environment: Teaching about the Holocaust of the Jews of Kiev.](#) Yad Vashem. Part of Yad Vashem's Untold Stories project and including links to relevant testimonies. See also Murder Story of Kiev Jews in Babi Yar and Commemoration of the Victims of Babi Yar
- *Babyn Yar. Context.* Sergei Loznitsa (2021). Documentary by Ukrainian filmmaker Sergei Loznitsa about the massacre that includes rare and unseen archival footage. In Russian and Ukrainian with English subtitles. 2 hours and 1 minute in length.

