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HIS44

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### The Massacre at Babi Yar

In history of the Holocaust there were many tragic and unspeakable events that took place. One that cannot be ignored or forgotten was the massacre at Babi Yar. Thousands of Jews were humiliated, tortured and killed in one of the bloodiest events in recorded history. During the events leading up to this massacre the world was aware but chose to turn a blind eye and ignore the unimaginable crimes committed against the Jews.

The story began when Adolf Hitler<sup>1</sup> became a Chancellor of Germany on January 30th, 1933. Since that moment Hitler began to pursue an anti-Semitic policy. After the death of President Hindenburg<sup>2</sup>, Hitler undertook the functions of both president and chancellor. This gave "Führer and Reich Chancellor" an opportunity to pass anti-Semitic laws without any control. These laws isolated Jews from political and economic spheres of supreme "Aryan"<sup>3</sup> life. Nazis began to establish concentration camps all over the Germany for all non-willing elements of society who **did not share the same views as Hitler** or were unfit in a new "Aryan" society. The culmination of Hitler's anti-Semitic policy was Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, during November 9-10, 1938, when the first series of physical violence occurred against Jews. On that night, 91 Jews were killed and 30,000 were arrested.

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<sup>1</sup>Adolf Hitler- the leader of the Nazi Party, canceller of the Germany from 1933-1945

<sup>2</sup>Paul von Hindenburg- the second President of Germany from 1925 to 1934.

<sup>3</sup>Aryan - false statement referring to the blond-haired, blue-eyed people as a superior race over the other people

Hitler was actively trying to impose his anti-Jewish ideology in other European countries. On August 23, 1939, Hitler and Joseph Stalin<sup>4</sup> signed the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union. On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, starting World War II, and since that moment the killing of Jewish people became widespread. At the same time, according to German documents, Lavrentiy Beria<sup>5</sup> signed a secret agreement regarding the solution to "Jewish question" in the Soviet Union, showing the support for Hitler's plan. The agreement, signed by Beria and Muller<sup>6</sup>, states, "NKVD<sup>7</sup> takes on the responsibility to eliminate Jewish people from legislative and executive power, cultural spheres and sphere of education." At this point, the Soviet Union began to provide German army with food and clothes supplies, as well as Soviet soldiers.

On June 22, 1941 Germany invaded the USSR, thereby beginning Operation Barbarossa<sup>8</sup>. When Stalin was told that German troops entered his territory, he was shocked. He could not do anything the next few days because he could believe that Hitler attacked him. On September 1, 1941, German army entered the city of Kiev, Ukraine. On the second day of Ukrainian capitulation, Nazis began to recruit Ukrainian volunteers to work as Polizays to help and support German army. This moment can be considered the beginning of the massacre at Babi Yar.

The story about the events at Babi Yar still has a lot of unanswered questions. Many documents are still not open to public inspection. Who exactly was involved in the executions? Where is the evidence proving that Jewish people were responsible for the explosions in the city of Kiev, which killed many German officers and soldiers? Were Jewish people used as a

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<sup>4</sup> Stalin - the leader of the Communist Party, the premier of the Soviet Union from 1941 to 1953

<sup>5</sup> Beria - the chief of the secret police NKVD during World War II

<sup>6</sup> Muller - the chief of the Nazi secret police - Gestapo

<sup>7</sup> NKVD - the public and secret police of the USSR

<sup>8</sup> Barbarossa- German's invasion of the USSR during WWII

convenient scapegoat for the Nazi problems and military casualties in the city? The list of unanswered questions is endless.

During September 20 -24, 1941, there were series of explosions that destroyed a lot of buildings in the center of Kiev, and killed many German officers and soldiers. There is an opinion that the explosions were organized by Russian NKVD, in attempt to bury the tunnel under the city of Kiev, that could serve as an open gate to the USSR.

The explosions slew many German soldiers and Ukrainian civilians. The beautiful center of Kiev, Khreshchatik, along with the museums, theatres and other historical buildings were totally destroyed. The responsibility for the death of hundreds of people and the explosions were put on Jews. Germans tried to instigate civilians to start a pogrom of the Jews, and had Ukrainians do all the "dirty work". One of the witnesses Ms.Gummanaya remembered, "Germans caught a Jewish woman and brought her in front of the crowd of people. They beat the poor woman and yelled that, "Jews are burning houses in the neighbourhood." Then, they shot her." Later it was proved that none of those houses were burnt by Jews. Since that moment, Nazis began extermination of Jews in Kiev.

Sonderkommando4A, a specialized unit, responsible for the killings of Jewish people, along with SS-Standartenführer Paul Blobel, arrived in Kiev on September 25, 1941. There was an order posted all over the town on every house-door, every newsstand and fence in Ukrainian, German and Russian languages, saying:

*"All Zhids of the city of Kiev and its vicinity must appear on Monday, September 29, 1941 by 8:00 a.m. at the corner of Mel'nikova and Doktorivska streets (near the cemetery), must bring documents, money and valuables, as well as warm clothes, linens etc. Those of Zhids who won't*

*follow this order and will be found in other places, will be shot. Those of civilians who enter the dwellings left by Zhids and plunder stuff will be shot."*

The Germans did a lot to misinform people. Local mailmen and landlords fetched and carried the news about resettling of Jewish people. According to the report from *Einsatzgruppe C*, "originally we estimated the arrival of only 5,000-6,000 Jews, but actually about 30,000 Jews presented themselves, believing until the moment of liquidation that they would be resettled, because of the great work of the propaganda section." Innocent Jewish men and women, children and old people naively believed they would be resettled. As one of the witnesses remembered, "There was a railroad station and they all thought that they would be moved to another city or camp, which is why Jews didn't try to escape or hide." There were a lot of mixed marriages. Russian husbands accompanied their Jewish wives and kids. Russian wives accompanied their Jewish husbands, sister- and brother-in-laws.

On September 29, 1941, one of the most sacred days of the Jewish holiday, Yom Kippur, the Jews of Kiev arrived at the place of the destination. Jewish people walked to the ravine, watched by SS soldiers and Ukrainian police. Not far from the ravine, Ukrainian soldiers told the Jews to take off their clothes, put their personal identification and other documents and valuables into separate heaps. (Some of the valuables were sent to Hitler by cases). Then Jews walked in groups of 10 to the edge of the ravine, and on the other side of the ravine there were German soldiers sitting with automatic guns and machine-guns ready to shoot the Jews, while classic music was played all along to silence people's screaming.

According to Hitler's orders, two bullets were to be used per person. As the historian Felix Levitas wrote, "they began to put two people together head by head so that one bullet would kill two people." The children were simply thrown in the ravine alive. After forming two-three rows

of corpses, the Germans covered them with dirt. The amount of bullets was not enough to kill so many people and most of the victims were seriously wounded but still alive.

Dina Pronicheva, a Jewish survivor of the Babi Yar massacre, states, "All around and beneath her she could hear strange muffled sounds, groaning, choking and sobbing; many of the people were not dead yet. The whole mass of bodies kept moving slightly as they settled down and were pressed tighter by the movements of the ones who were still living." Dina fell into the ravine before being shot. She crawled over bodies covered in dirt and blood to escape being murdered. After Pronicheva escaped the ravine, she ran to a house where she encountered a Ukrainian woman who immediately turned her in to German authorities. When Pronicheva was brought to the German base, she was fortunately given the chance by a German soldier to escape once again.

As one of the officer remembered, a lot of German soldiers, who didn't feel well, were remedied right away by vodka. Because of such cruelty, some of the German soldiers fell mad, and were put in psychiatric clinics after the war. As one of the Hungarian soldiers remembers, "two hundred and forty thousands of Jews were executed by the Gestapo ... The Jewish victims were buried on a large ground near Kiev by Germans, some even alive ...the surface was still undulating ..."

People who were not killed yet were locked in the sheds until the next day. On the second day, Germans brought more and more Jewish people to Babi Yar. The massacre continued for five days during which, according to the Operations Situation Report of *EinsatzgruppeC* of October 7, 1941, there were 33,771 Jewish people killed. However, it's possible that Babi Yar buried more than 100, 000 people during those few days.

Babi Yar became a place for murder of communists, gypsies and soviet soldiers untill 1943, when the Red Army approached the Germans. On August 18, 1943, *Sonderkommando 1005* A was ordered to burn the corpses in Babi Yar. Concentration camp inmates were forced to help the Germans. One of the inmates who got a chance to escape, Panasic, states that he felt terrible from the dreadful smell of corpses. He was ordered to dig up the dead bodies with bare hands. Then, the bodies were burnt, and the ashes were sieved in order to inspect and collect gold teeth, gold rings and other jewellery, that people had swallowed before they were killed. After the job was done, all the inmates were shot. Nazis' actions completely wiped out the Jewish population in Kiev.

What happened at Babi Yar was part of Hitler's plan to annihilate the Jewish "race". In Europe, Jews were economically and politically isolated from the rest of the "Aryan " population. In some countries, Germans either segregated Jews into ghettos, or sent them to concentration camps. In the attempt to pursue a certain sense of humanity, Jewish people organized schools and even musical concerts in those camps and ghettos. Some of the sources show that, initially, European civilians were unaware of mass killing, and were misinformed, as European mentality could not allow public killing of other human beings.

The massacre of the Jews on the territory of the USSR had much a more aggressive tone. We see that Jewish people in Kiev were killed publicly. According to statistics, 94 % of Russian Jews were killed on the territory of the "Great" Soviet Union (only 100-120 000 survived from the around 2,6 million on the occupied territory of the USSR).

One of the reasons was the cooperation of Ukrainians with Germans. Until 1941, Ukraine was under the communist regime under which Ukrainians lived in awful conditions and utter

poverty. In 1930, Stalin ordered "Holodomor"<sup>9</sup> which caused the deaths of seven million Ukrainians. As a result, when Germans entered Kiev, Ukrainians applauded them, and greeted German soldiers with open arms. Ukrainians, naively thought Nazis were their "saviour", a "light in the dark tunnel of communism".

Ukrainians created the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalist (OUN), which recruited volunteers to be Polizeys, and work in concentration camps for Germans, during that time. As a result of joint German-Ukrainian forces, a large number of people were killed. Statistics show that there were 10 Ukrainians for each German soldier. Soviet civilians took part in mass killing of Jews at Babi Yar, and are fully responsible for the deaths of the thousands of innocent Jewish people.

However, what happened at Babi Yar was part of Stalin's plan to wipe Jewish people out. Stalin shared Hitler's ideology. The newspapers and other publications were not allowed to print any information about actions against Jews in Europe. The sources show that some pages about Hitler's plans were deleted from the Soviet newspapers such as in one of the leadings newspaper "Izvestiya". So, when Nazis entered Kiev, Soviet Jews couldn't know what would happen to them.

On February 9, 1940 Vienna and Berlin requested the USSR for permission to relocate Jews to the Russian territories. Letter written from Chekmenov, head of the Resettlement Administration under the USSR Council of People's Commissars (SNK), to SNK Chairman V. Molotov, states, "The SNK Resettlement Administration has received two letters from the Berlin and Vienna resettle bureaus concerning the resettlement of Jews from Germany to the USSR -

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<sup>9</sup>Holodomor-genocide which occur in Ukraine

specifically to Birobidzhan and Western Ukraine...Under the evacuation agreement between the USSR Government and Germany, only ethnic Ukrainian , Byelorussian , and Russians are subject to evacuated to soviet territory ." However, the answer was, "We believe that the proposals by the aforementioned resettlement bureaus cannot be accepted." Stalin knew very well about Hitler's plan for Jewish people, but was against the idea to provide shelter for the Jews, and denied the request. Stalin, who, in front of the public eye, promoted "unity" and "friendship", ignored the Jewish problem and didn't care much about the lives of the thousands of fellow Jewish citizens. It was never Stalin's intention to help and save Jewish people. Stalin conveniently used Hitler to do all the "dirty work" on the Soviet land, and saved his own reputation as a future liberal leader. Stalin didn't want his name mentioned in any actions against Jewish people, and showed off his fake solidarity with the Jews. The USSR is responsible for the massacres of Jews at Babi Yar and, later, all over the Soviet territory.

At the end of the war, the Soviets tried to get rid of all the documents, exposing USSR's implication in crimes against the Jews. The Soviet Union didn't want to admit that the soviet people were informants for Germans, and that Stalin supported anti-Semitic policy. The Soviet Union was unwilling to build the memorial for the Jewish victims at Babi Yar. In 1976, the Soviet Union erected the memorial to commemorate the Soviet soldiers in general but overlooked the Jews who were slain at Babi Yar. Only in 1991, after the Soviet Union collapsed, the Jews were given their own memorial which was built quite inadequately.

The massacre at Babi Yar was kept a secret by the USSR. In 1961, Yevtushenko published a book "Babi Yar", which described things that took place at Babi Yar and was translated into 72



languages. However, the author was scrutinized by Nikita Khrushchev<sup>10</sup> and the redactor was fired for allowing this “unwilling” for the USSR information to be published. Another famous author, Anatoly Kuznezov, who witnessed the tragic events, wrote a book “Babi Yar” too. He attempted to publish it unedited but press applied restrictions and deleted parts of the text, almost half of the text, which contained incriminating information against the Soviet regime. In the music sphere, only Shostakovich was willing, and brave enough to write a symphony called “the 13<sup>th</sup> symphony” which based on those horrific events of Babi Yar.

The German propaganda depicted Jews as a base of the communism. Thousands of Jews in Lithuania, Romania and other European countries were killed with extreme violence because of their communistic “sympathies.” As Hitler stated, “The struggle against Bolshevism demands ruthless and energetic measures, above all against Jews.” In reality, those “Great ” communistic Soviet Union left the Jewish people to survive on their own. The Soviet Union didn't even try to save their Jewish citizens even though communism began in USSR. Stalin kept anti-Semitic policy even after WWII. According to Stalin’s plan, he was going to relocate all Jews either to a very cold territory in the north called Siberia, or to barren land in Kazakhstan. Fortunately, he died before he could realize his horrific plans. As a result, thousands of innocent European Jews were killed based upon false connections with communism.

The actions at Babi Yar had detrimental effect on the survivors. Innocent people were humiliated, tortured, and mortified by the neighbors with whom they lived for many years. Frustrated, humiliated, and destroyed Jewish people had no place in the world where they felt

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<sup>10</sup>Khrushchev – First Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR from 1953 to 1964

safe. They were left to survive on their own. Innocent Jewish people were betrayed both by the allies and by the enemy.

For many years to come generations, people will feel the pain suffered by the victims of the Holocaust. People should learn a valuable lesson from the horrific experiences lived through by Jewish people because tomorrow it might happen to any other nation, country or religion. As Albert Einstein states, "the world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it." This tragedy will remain one of the most painful pages in the history of the World War II. People will forever be shamed for what was allowed to happen to Jewish people, people that gave the world names like Albert Einstein, Amedeo Clemente Modigliani, and Felix Mendelssohn.

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