

The Preservation of Holocaust Memory during the War in Ukraine

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Abstract

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation illegally invaded the free and democratic nation of Ukraine. Amidst the devastating destruction and bloodshed, Ukrainian civilians and officials have been fighting hard to preserve their nation's culture and history from the invaders who wish to erase all trace of Ukraine's unique identity. This fight includes the preservation of Holocaust memory in Ukraine. After a missile strike severely damaged the Drobytsky Yar Holocaust monument in Kharkiv in March 2022, the question has been raised of how to effectively preserve Holocaust memory during times of modern warfare. To attempt to answer this unprecedented question, it is necessary to refer back to the history of the Holocaust in Ukraine, the decades long fight for proper Holocaust memorialization, and what is currently being done by Ukrainians as they fight to protect their homeland, their history, and their cultural identity.

³³⁷ To the many individuals in Ukraine fighting to keep Holocaust memory alive, and to the courageous people of Ukraine who fight to protect their homeland, and the world, against a tyrannical terrorist state. Слава Україна.

Ukraine has a complex history regarding the memorialisation of the Holocaust. While discussions of the Holocaust were censored during the Soviet era, significant efforts have been made since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 to properly memorialise the Jewish individuals killed on Ukrainian soil.³³⁸ Unfortunately, this work is in jeopardy due to the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces that occurred on 24 February 2022. The question of how to properly protect and preserve Holocaust memory during times of modern warfare was sparked after an artillery strike damaged the Babyn Yar Memorial Park on 1 of March 2022, followed only a few days later by the destruction of the Drobytsky Yar Menorah Monument.³³⁹ The strikes on these monuments have been perceived as attacks on the historical memory of the Holocaust in Ukraine.³⁴⁰ The Ukrainian people and their allies have been fighting to protect their Holocaust artefacts, monuments, and history so that they are not destroyed by the conflict. Considering that the war in Ukraine is a constantly-evolving event, it is challenging to find a definitive answer of how to preserve Ukrainian Holocaust memory in times of modern warfare. In order for the profound significance of this question to be fully realised, it is necessary to look back on the history of the Holocaust in Ukraine, as well as the history of Holocaust memorialisation in Ukraine. Two specific events during the Second World War are of particular relevance to the question of preserving Ukrainian Holocaust memory in times of modern warfare: the massacres of Babyn Yar and Drobytsky Yar.

When German forces invaded Ukraine in 1941, the Germans were initially greeted as liberators due to the tyranny that Ukrainian civilians had experienced under Soviet rule.³⁴¹ The opinion of the Ukrainian people quickly shifted when they realized that one occupier had replaced another. On 29 September 1941, only ten days after the occupation of Kyiv, the Holocaust by Bullets began for the Jews of Ukraine.³⁴² Ukrainian Jews in Kyiv were told to report with their personal documents and valuables to the intersection of Melnikova and Dehtiarivska, before they were led to the Babyn Yar ravine, where German soldiers had dug pits.³⁴³ Approximately 34,000 Ukrainian Jews were shot and killed at Babyn Yar over the course of two days before the city of Kyiv was declared to be *Judenfrei* (free of Jews) by the Nazis.³⁴⁴ Just a few months later, on 27 December 1941, another 12,000 Jewish adults and children were killed at Drobytsky Yar outside of Kharkiv.³⁴⁵

Although the massacre at Babyn Yar remains “the biggest single mass execution of the Holocaust,” Ukraine only began to directly memorialise the Holocaust at the end of the twentieth century.³⁴⁶ During the country’s time under the dominion of the Soviet Union, any reference to the Holocaust was strictly prohibited and the only memorials permitted in Ukraine identified the people killed

³³⁸ Masha Gessen, “The Holocaust Memorial Undone by Another War,” *New Yorker*, April 18, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/04/18/the-holocaust-memorial-undone-by-another-war> (accessed 14 November 2022).

³³⁹ Tiffany Wertheimer, “Babyn Yar: Anger as Kyiv’s Holocaust Memorial is Damaged,” *BBC News*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60588885> (accessed 14 November 2022).

³⁴⁰ Roman Rukomeda, “Only Fascists Can Destroy World War II and Holocaust Memorials,” *Euractiv*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/opinion/only-fascists-can-destroy-world-war-ii-and-holocaust-memorials/> (accessed 14 November 2022).

³⁴¹ Peter Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2017), 227.

³⁴² Aleksandr Burakovskiy, “Holocaust Remembrance in Ukraine: Memorialization of the Jewish Tragedy at Babi Yar,” *Nationalities Papers* 39, no.3 (May 2011): 373. <http://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2011.565316>.

³⁴³ Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015), 175-176; Gessen, “The Holocaust Memorial.”

³⁴⁴ Burakovskiy, “Holocaust Remembrance,” 373; Hayes, *Why?*, 89.

³⁴⁵ Paul-Robert Magocsi and Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *Jews and Ukrainians: A Millennium of Co-Existence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 72; Snyder, *Black Earth*, 184; Ukrainian Institute, “Drobytsky Yar,” *Ukrainian Institute*, <https://ui.org.ua/en/postcard/drobytsky-yar-en/> (accessed 20 November 20).

³⁴⁶ Gessen, “The Holocaust Memorial.”

during the Second World War as “citizens of the Soviet Union”.³⁴⁷ There was no mention of the persecution of Jewish individuals on Ukrainian soil, no mention of Babyn Yar, nor the tens of thousands of Jews who were massacred there. The Babyn Yar ravine was made to be unrecognisable after being filled in by the Soviets and obscured by years of industrial construction.³⁴⁸

The silence surrounding the massacre at Babyn Yar after the war was eventually broken in 1961 with the publication of the poem ‘Babi Yar’ by Evgenii Evtushenko.³⁴⁹ The publication of this poem represented the beginning of the efforts for the memorialisation of the Babyn Yar massacre, with a symphony of the same name premiering in Moscow in 1962, and an eye-witness account being published in 1966.³⁵⁰ As the poem and symphony had caused a stir abroad, Soviet officials were forced to finally acknowledge the tragedy and arrange for the development of a monument.³⁵¹ Two separate competitions found winning designs for the new monument, yet Soviet Party officials rejected both winners, instead commissioning the blueprints for their own monument in 1972.³⁵² The monument was successfully fabricated and unveiled in 1976, but the plaque read “here, in 1941-1943, German fascist occupiers executed more than a hundred thousand citizens of Kiev and prisoners of war,” with no direct mention of their Jewish identities or the Holocaust itself.³⁵³

It was only after the dissolution of the Soviet Union that real effort was made towards memorialising the Jews who were murdered in Ukraine. With the 50th anniversary of the Babyn Yar massacre approaching, calls for a new design competition began in the spring of 1991; yet, while a winning design was chosen in the subsequent competition, the intended memorial was again not built.³⁵⁴ Instead, a small bronze menorah was unveiled on 29 September 1991, but markers denoting the other groups of victims who were killed at Babyn Yar were gradually deposited next to it, thus undermining the monument’s intended purpose of drawing attention to the Jews murdered there.³⁵⁵ The error has since been rectified with the establishment of several monuments in Ukraine’s largest cities, such as Kyiv, Odesa, Lviv, and Kharkiv, with the sole intention of memorialising the Ukrainian Jews who were killed during the Holocaust.³⁵⁶

Many decades of work have gone towards the memorialisation of the Holocaust in Ukraine. Thus, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has sparked concern regarding the survival of these memorials, artefacts, and museums as destruction rains indiscriminately upon Ukrainian soil. It has become clear in countless instances that the Russian forces are set upon destroying all pieces of culture and history unique to Ukraine, and to have the historical memory of the Holocaust in Ukraine be compromised by invaders who refused to even acknowledge the tragedy would be a further devastation.³⁵⁷ The question then arises as to how Holocaust scholars, museum employees, and the general public can preserve Holocaust memory in times of unprecedented modern warfare. The Russian Federation’s aggression towards Ukraine is not a new development, and has increased drastically in the years following the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, has intentionally promoted propaganda which claims Ukraine is a nation populated by Nazis and is rife with antisemitism, despite the fact that Ukraine has a large Jewish population and a significant Jewish-Ukrainian history dating back centuries.³⁵⁸ His baseless claims continued even after the election of President Volodymyr Zelensky, a Jewish Ukrainian whose

³⁴⁷ Gessen, “The Holocaust Memorial.”

³⁴⁸ Burakovskiy, “Holocaust Remembrance” 374; Gessen, “The Holocaust Memorial.”

³⁴⁹ Burakovskiy, “Holocaust Remembrance,” 372.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 375.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 376.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 376, 377.

³⁵³ Gessen, “The Holocaust Memorial.”; Burakovskiy, “Holocaust Remembrance,” 372.

³⁵⁴ Burakovskiy, “Holocaust Remembrance,” 378.

³⁵⁵ Gessen, “The Holocaust Memorial.”; Burakovskiy, “Holocaust Remembrance,” 378-379.

³⁵⁶ Magocsi and Petrovsky-Shtern, *Jews and Ukrainians*, 268.

³⁵⁷ Rukomeda, “Only Fascists.”; Ukrainian Institute, “Drobytsky Yar.”

³⁵⁸ Wertheimer, “Babyn Yar.”; Magocsi and Petrovsky-Shtern, *Jews and Ukrainians*, 277.

family suffered tremendously during the Nazi occupation.³⁵⁹ Tensions reached a boiling point when Russian troops invaded Ukrainian territory on 24 February 2022. Less than a week later, on 1 March, a Russian missile hit a sports complex in Kyiv, killing five civilians and damaging the nearby Babyn Yar Memorial Park.³⁶⁰ While the many memorial structures throughout the 140-acre park were unscathed, an unused museum building caught fire, and significant damage was noted across the grounds.³⁶¹ Monuments such as the Mirror Field, a masterpiece of remembrance made of light and sound, continue to be at risk of being destroyed by further artillery strikes.³⁶² Only a few weeks after the strike upon the Babyn Yar Memorial Park, the 20-meter tall Drobytsky Yar Menorah Monument located at the entrance of the memorial complex was severely damaged during shelling.³⁶³ Whether intentional or not, the Russian forces were destroying monuments to the progress that Ukraine had fought to achieve over the past eighty years in regards to national Holocaust memorialisation. A Twitter post by the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center declared that Russian forces were attacking “not only the civilian population of Ukraine, but also the places of remembrance.”³⁶⁴ By doing this, political analyst Roman Rukomeda argues that Russia is also simultaneously attempting to destroy Ukraine’s historical memory of the Second World War.³⁶⁵

The preservation of Holocaust artefacts within museums has also been a topic of concern, sparked by the destruction of the Ivankiv Museum during the early days of the Russian invasion.³⁶⁶ The museum housed archaeological and folk art items, including approximately twenty-five pieces of artwork by the famous Ukrainian artist, Maria Prymachenko, all of which were lost in the blaze.³⁶⁷ Hoping to avoid this same fate, The National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv began an emergency evacuation of their collection of approximately 400,000 objects, with their more valuable artefacts being hidden away for preservation in museum storage or sent to neighboring countries.³⁶⁸ Among these evacuated artefacts is an integral piece of Ukrainian Holocaust memory: a piano which was used by a family in Mariupol to shelter a young Jewish boy named Veniamin Boryskovsky.³⁶⁹ The evacuation of these objects was a difficult and arduous task, as the evacuation process in Ukraine was based on outdated documents and protocols that were created during the Soviet era.³⁷⁰ Despite this, the museum employees have succeeded in safeguarding these collections thus far.

Amidst a near-constant barrage of heavy bombings, the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War has been conducting business as usual and remains open to the public.

³⁵⁹ Wertheimer, “Babyn Yar.”

³⁶⁰ Gessen, “The Holocaust Memorial.”; Wertheimer, “Babyn Yar.”

³⁶¹ Wertheimer, “Babyn Yar.”

³⁶² Gessen, “The Holocaust Memorial.”

³⁶³ Rukomeda, “Only Fascists.”; Ukrainian Institute, “Drobytsky Yar.”

³⁶⁴ Cassandra Vinograd, “Russian Forces Damage Holocaust Memorial Site, Ukraine Says,” *NBC News*, March 26, 2022,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russian-forces-damage-holocaust-memorial-site-ukraine-says-rcna21676> (accessed 14 November 2022).

³⁶⁵ Rukomeda, “Only Fascists.”

³⁶⁶ Irene Galea, “Museums in Ukraine Scrambling to Protect Historical Artifacts during Russian Invasion,” *Globe and Mail*, March 4, 2022,

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/article-museums-in-ukraine-scrambling-to-protect-historical-artifacts-amid/> (accessed 20 November 2022).

³⁶⁷ Galea, “Museums in Ukraine.”

³⁶⁸ European Holocaust Research Infrastructure, “Ukraine’s War Museum during the Russian Aggression,” *European Holocaust Research Infrastructure*, September 28, 2022,

<https://www.ehri-project.eu/ukraines-war-museum-during-russian-aggression> (accessed 20 November 2022); Galea, “Museums in Ukraine.”

³⁶⁹ National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, “Holocaust,” National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, https://warmuseum.kyiv.ua/_eng/expositions/current_exhibitions/ (accessed 20 November 2022).

³⁷⁰ Galea, “Museums in Ukraine.”

On its website, visitors are advised against bringing firearms or explosive materials into the museum, and are assured that, in the case of a sudden artillery bombardment, there are shelter accommodations, as well as firefighting equipment.³⁷¹ The museum's Holocaust exhibit, which was dedicated "to the 80th anniversary of the mass shootings of the Jews by the Nazis on the territory of Ukraine and the 80th anniversary of the Babyn Yar tragedy," remains available for viewing, both in person and online, sending a clear message that not even war can diminish the museum's dedication to Holocaust memory.³⁷²

Staff at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War have also been putting their own lives at risk by collecting evidence of Russian atrocities and war crimes from recently liberated or attacked areas of Ukraine.³⁷³ These pieces of evidence have already been put to use in new exhibits that the museum has created since the war broke out, such as the "Ukraine – Crucifixion" exhibition, containing more than 1,776 items collected over the course of a month.³⁷⁴ The staff of the Babyn Yar Memorial Center have also been gathering evidence; interviewing witnesses and survivors of Russian war crimes; and relocating vulnerable Ukrainians civilians, including Holocaust survivors.³⁷⁵ Similar efforts have been made by individuals across the globe, such as Julia Entin in Los Angeles, the granddaughter of a Ukrainian Holocaust survivor, who has been coordinating the safe passage of Holocaust survivors out of Ukraine.³⁷⁶ While it is difficult enough to sort out transport for able-bodied civilians, getting Holocaust survivors out of Ukraine is made all the more complicated due to their advanced age and health issues, which has some survivors refusing to leave, as they're afraid they may die along the way.³⁷⁷

The loss of Holocaust artifacts, monuments, and survivors' stories will irrevocably change the way that the Holocaust is perceived and remembered in Ukraine. While there is no foolproof way to ensure the preservation of Holocaust memory within war zones, it is clear that Ukrainians and others have been working tirelessly to protect Holocaust memory so that it may leave a lasting legacy and continue to educate future generations. Through the evacuation of Holocaust survivors and artefacts to safety, dedication to public education, and ongoing efforts to document the impacts of the conflict, Ukrainians and their allies are attempting to preserve Holocaust memory in the midst of modern warfare.

³⁷¹ National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, "Holocaust."

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ European Holocaust Research Infrastructure, "Ukraine's War Museum."

³⁷⁴ National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, "Holocaust."

³⁷⁵ Gessen, "The Holocaust Memorial."

³⁷⁶ Deepa Bharath, "Grassroots Groups Help Rescue Holocaust Survivors in Ukraine," *Globe and Mail*, March 19, 2022,

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-grassroots-groups-help-rescue-holocaust-survivors-in-ukraine-2/> (accessed 14 November 2022)..

³⁷⁷ Bharath, "Grassroots Groups."

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