

# GUNNED DOWN: THE STORY OF UKRAINE'S JEWRY

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The German attack of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 was also a caesura in the history of the Holocaust. It set in motion the transition from social exclusion and expropriation of Jews towards the “final solution of the Jewish question” by direct mass murder on a large scale. This started in the German-occupied territories of the Soviet Union in the second half of 1941 and extended, beginning in 1942, to most of German-occupied or dominated Europe.

While the Germans murdered most of the Jews from other parts of Europe in the extermination sites in the occupied territories of Poland, most notably in Auschwitz, in the occupied Soviet territories most Jews were murdered in mass executions close to where they lived. On the eve of the German attack about 2.7 million Jews lived on the territories of today's Ukraine. Four years later, when Soviet troops had recaptured Ukraine, 1.6 million of them had been murdered.

During the first weeks of the war mostly male Jews were shot. This was based on the widespread antisemitic view of Jews as a core group of Soviet rules that strongly influenced the German mass murder in the occupied Soviet territories. But since August 1941 the Germans started to include also women and children in the mass killing.

During August and September 1941, a further escalation took place leading to the largest single massacre in the occupied Soviet territories, that of the Jews of Kyiv on 29 and 30 September 1941 at Babyn Yar. According to a report of the Einsatzgruppe 33,771 Jews were shot here within two days. As the largest single massacre, Babyn Yar became the symbol of the mass murder of Jews on the occupied Soviet territories. Nevertheless, enormous massacres with ten thousand or more victims took place also near several other larger cities. Mass executions were also conducted in hundreds of smaller cities and towns.

However, in the western Ukrainian region of Galicia nearly half of the victims were not murdered in mass executions, but they were deported to the mass extermination site in Belzec. Most of the Transcarpathian Jews were deported to Auschwitz in spring 1944 as part of the mass murder of Hungarian Jews. In the Romanian-occupied territories of Northern Bukovyna, Bessarabia, and so-called Transnistria many Jews were murdered during the second half of 1941. Many died also later in the ghettos of Transnistria, but, in contrast to the German-occupied territories, no attempt of a comprehensive mass murder of all Jews was implemented here in 1942 or later.

During the post-war decades Soviet memory politics did not allow for a representation of the specific fate of the Jews. When the mass killings of Jews were mentioned in Soviet times, the victims were mostly referred to as “peaceful Soviet

citizens". This official concealment was opposed by surviving Jews who wanted to commemorate their murdered relatives or friends and, more generally, the fate of the Soviet Jews under German occupation.

This conflict appeared most strongly with respect to Babyn Yar. Babyn Yar became emblematic both for the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet territories and for the Soviet refusal to commemorate the Jewish victims. Yevgeni Yevtushenko's famous poem of 1961, of which the first line says, "No monument stands over Babyn Yar", contributed enormously to this. It was only in 1976 that finally a monument was built. However, its inscription mentioned only "Soviet citizens" and prisoners of war as victims.

In the western world and the international public, during the post-war decades Auschwitz and gas chambers became the quintessential symbols of the Holocaust as "industrial mass murder". Thereby, the fact that the systematic mass murder of Jews had not started here, but with mass executions in the occupied Soviet territories as well as the fact that probably up to one-third of the victims perished in mass executions in different parts of Eastern Europe tended to be overlooked. Nevertheless, since the 1990s, and more strongly since the turn of the century also the "Holocaust by bullets", as Patrick Desbois has described the mass executions, has received increasing attention as a major part of the Holocaust.