

# The Babi Yar massacre



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**Warning: this resource contains graphic content**

The Babi Yar massacre, starting on 29 September 1941, devastated the Jewish community of Kiev and marked one of the deadliest single operations during the Holocaust.

*'All the Jews decided to go because they thought they would be evacuated by train as the railway station was nearby. Nobody could possibly assume there would be a mass execution.'*

**Raisa Maistrenko, one of 29 known survivors of Babi Yar**

## Pre-war Jewish life in Ukraine

Ukraine had been home to a large Jewish community for centuries tracing back as far as the eighth century. However, life for Ukraine's Jews was rarely comfortable, with waves of discrimination, prejudice and violence targeting the community. Before the Second World War, Kiev was home to the largest Jewish community in Ukraine, with Jews comprising 20 percent of the city's population.

During the Russian Revolution, which led to the founding of Soviet Ukraine, antisemitic violence was rife. Jewish life and culture were suppressed in the immediate aftermath of the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Jewish political parties and Zionist organisations were driven underground as the Communist government sought to abolish all potential opposition. Jewish educational, cultural and religious organisations were outlawed. Many of the victims of Stalin's Great Purge in 1936-1937 were Jews accused of treason and anti-Soviet crimes.

## Ukrainian Jews in the Holocaust

Following the conclusion of Molotov–Ribbentrop pact between Germany and the USSR in 1939, Stalin pledged to the Nazi Foreign Minister that he would rid the USSR of 'Jewish domination' and ordered the purge of Jewish employees in government ministries, universities, the military and other major institutions. This was accompanied by increased violence and discrimination. Attacks upon Jews intensified following Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941, in which the Nazi government, in breach of its pact with the USSR, invaded and occupied Ukraine. By 19 September 1941, the German Army had seized Kiev.

Support from Ukrainian nationalist militias, press and members of the auxiliary police force contributed to rampant antisemitic violence in the early days of the Nazi invasion. A series of explosives launched in Kiev against the occupation by the Soviet secret police between 20 and 28 September were blamed on the city's Jewish population. In retaliation, Nazi leaders decided to exterminate the Jewish community of Kiev.

## **Babi Yar: more than 33,000 Jewish people murdered**

Over the course of two days, beginning on 29 September 1941, more than 33,000 Jewish people were murdered at Babi Yar.

From 26 September onwards, notices written in Russian, German and Ukrainian were posted around the city of Kiev, ordering the city's Jewish population to gather at Babi Yar. Babi Yar is a ravine located on the outskirts of Kiev, once home to one of the city's many Jewish cemeteries. The notice read as follows:

*'On Monday, September 29, you are to appear by 7:00am with your possessions, money, documents, valuables and warm clothing at Dorogozhitshaya Street, next to the Jewish cemetery. Failure to appear is punishable by death.'*

Jewish people were led to believe that, by gathering at the ravine at the ordered time, they would be resettled elsewhere in the country and taken to safety. Instead, they were murdered in one of the single deadliest events of the Holocaust.

Raisa Maistrenko was one of only 29 people known to have survived. When she was three years old, 18 of her relatives were killed at Babi Yar. 'All the Jews decided to go because they thought they would be evacuated by train as the railway station was nearby', she said. 'Nobody could possibly assume there would be a mass execution.'

The killings were led by the Einsatzkommando, a sub-group of the Nazi Einsatzgruppen which was responsible for the systematic murder of Jews, communists, Sinti and Roma in the German invasion of the Soviet Union. The Einsatzkommando were supported by the auxiliary police forces and local supporters of the Nazi regime. **While estimates of the number of Jews killed at Babi Yar vary, according to reports by the Einsatzgruppe to headquarters, 33,771 Jews were massacred in two days.** Over the course of the occupation, it is estimated that between 900,000 and 1.6 million Ukrainian Jews were murdered.

## The Halef family

Mania Halef was one of the more than 33,000 Jews killed in the massacre at Babi Yar. Mania was born in Kiev in 1934 to Josef Halef, born in 1900, and Klara Miropolsky Halef, born in 1905. Mania was just seven years old when she was killed. Very little is known of the Halef family's experiences before and during the massacre, as well as those of the other victims, whose life stories we will never hear.

## One witness' account

Little is known of those who were murdered during the Babi Yar massacre as very few people survived. One witness to the massacres, a truck driver, provided the following account:

*'I watched what happened when the Jews – men, women and children – arrived. The Ukrainians led them past a number of different places where one after another they had to remove their luggage, then their coats, shoes, and overgarments and also underwear... Once undressed, the Jews were led into the ravine which was about 150 meters long and 30 meters wide and a good 15 meters deep...When they reached the bottom of the ravine they were seized by members of the Schultpolizei and made to lie down on top of Jews who had already been shot. That all happened very quickly. The corpses were literally in layers.'*

After the massacre, the site at Babi Yar continued to be used by the Nazis for mass executions of Jews, Soviet officials, prisoners of war and other victims of Nazi persecution. As the Red Army began to make advances through German-occupied territory, the Nazis sought to hide evidence of the massacres by exhuming the bodies, destroying any remaining traces of those who were murdered. The Red Army liberated Kiev on 6 November, 1943.

## Babi Yar today

2021 marks the 80th anniversary of the horrific massacre. To mark this anniversary, a new synagogue was built at the site. After being bulldozed by the Nazis, the site will now house a memorial centre and museum complex which will honour those murdered.



Mania Halef, pictured here as a five-year-old  
Photo credit: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yelena Brusilovsky

# Find out more...

The Einsatzgruppen: [hmd.org.uk/Einsatzgruppen](https://hmd.org.uk/Einsatzgruppen)

Further reading:

- E. Klee, W. Dressen, and V. Riess, *The Good Old Days: The Holocaust As Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders*
- Anatoly Kuznetsov, *Babi Yar: A Documentary Novel*

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