

Olzhas Auyezov

Ukraine Holocaust massacre presaged modern genocide



Reuters © Enlarge photo

By the time they were close enough to hear gunshots there was no time to turn back. SS soldiers split them into small groups, took away their belongings and pushed them towards the edge of a ravine that would become their mass grave -- Babiy Yar.

The mass shootings, mainly by automatic gunfire, on the edge of the Ukrainian capital Kiev amounted one of the biggest single massacres of the Holocaust. A total of 33,771 Jewish men, women and children were killed in a single operation.

It was a precursor of country-wide Nazi ethnic purges and, in the words of researchers, became a grim "model" for modern-day mass killings.

Fewer than 30 people are known to have survived the Babiy Yar massacre that took place September 29-30, 1941, after German forces rolled into Kiev.

Only a handful are still alive.

Raisa Maistrenko had turned three just a few weeks before the Nazis passed leaflets around the city ordering "all Yids of Kiev" to show up at a street crossing near Babiy Yar with documents, money and valuables as well as warm clothes.

Tricked into thinking they would simply be resettled, tens of thousands of Kiev's Jews complied.

"Not going was not an option, a failure to show up was punishable by death," says Maistrenko, a lively 73-year-old pensioner who now runs a dancing school for children, recounting what she had learned from her grandparents years after the war.

"(Apartment block) janitors were required to report all Jews, otherwise they faced death themselves."

Her grandmother -- who was not Jewish -- decided to see off Raisa, her Jewish mother and in-laws as they joined the stream of people heading towards Babiy Yar -- towards what they thought was a train journey to a resettlement camp.

HIDING AMONG THE DEAD

Though she was only a toddler at the time, Raisa says she recalls one particular image.

"I saw old men in their underwear being escorted down the road, beaten up and bloodied. A woman ran up to one of them and hugged him and everyone started telling her off because she could anger the guards," Maistrenko said.

"My grandmother appealed to the crowd, saying 'This might be the last time they see each other'... As I learned later, those old men were the rabbis of Kiev."

Shortly after, Maistrenko's family reached a checkpoint where Nazi soldiers and Ukrainian collaborators stripped people of their belongings and then separated men from women.

"We could hear machine gun shots from where we were, it was terrible, people were screaming. My grandmother was waving her passport and shouting 'She is Russian!'," referring to her tiny grand-daughter, Maistrenko said.

"A polizei (Soviet name for collaborators) approached us, and swung the stock of his gun to smash my head but my grandmother covered me with her shoulder."

The blow knocked the woman to the ground but then a German soldier grabbed her and pushed her towards the crowd prompting her to scream in terror "I'm Russian!." People around her stepped aside and she saw an opening where she ran.

"A girl aged 11 or 12 followed us," Maistrenko said. "We were being shot at but the guards chose not to follow us, presumably because they were afraid that others would scatter."

The three hid in the bushes at a nearby cemetery and returned to the city under the cover of darkness. "I remember grandmother saying 'Quiet, quiet' as she hugged us," Maistrenko said.

"PROTOTYPE"

The Babiy Yar massacre marked the start of Ukraine's Holocaust in which a pre-war Jewish population of about 1.5 million was virtually wiped out to fulfil Adolf Hitler's ambition of a Jew-free Europe. Gypsies, Russians and Ukrainians were later executed in the ravine as well.

Similar mass killings took place across Ukraine, Belarus and other neighbouring countries such as Romania.

"What happened here (in Ukraine) served as a prototype of contemporary genocide," said Patrick Desbois, a Catholic priest who visited Ukraine this month with a grim exhibition called 'Holocaust by Bullets'.

"There are no (Auschwitz-style) camps. Here, it is mobile killers, not the victims, who moved -- and rapidly," he told Reuters in an interview.

In fact, the executioners often left before all of their victims had died. According to Desbois, who has gathered testimony from about 2,000 non-Jewish witnesses in Ukraine, many saw signs of people being buried, badly wounded but still alive, in mass graves.

"They made gestures moving their hands (up and) down rhythmically," he said. "The ground 'moved for three days' from people dying or bleeding under the earth."

When German forces retreated from Kiev before the Red Army advance at the end of the war, the Nazis tried to conceal the Babiy Yar executions, forcing prisoners to exhume the corpses, burn them and scatter the ashes.

Even after 1945, though the number of Jews killed emerged quickly from Nazi records, the full details of the Babiy Yar story remained untold for at least two decades.

The Soviet Union never stressed the ethnic nature of the killings, referring to their victims as "Soviet civilians." A curtain of Soviet silence fell across the region's history.

"It was a taboo subject in the Soviet Union," says Desbois.

One of the reasons was the collaboration of the local population. When Nazi death squads found the psychological pressure of systematic killing difficult to handle, they would instruct Ukrainian guards to take over.

"Nobody talks about the fact that Ukrainians took part in the killings, just like the French, Poles and Belarussians," said Ukrainian parliament deputy Oleksander Feldman.

"But Ukrainians, the French, Poles and Belarussians also saved (Jewish) people."

The first monument to "Soviet citizens and soldiers" was erected at Babiy Yar only in 1976, 15 years after prominent Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko devoted a poem to it which began with the line "There are no monuments at Babiy Yar."

The first Jewish monument was erected at the site only after the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.

The ravine no longer exists and the area is now covered by several apartment blocks and a park, where almost a dozen small monuments have been erected in different spots in the past 20 years.

Raisa, a small and talkative woman who walks with a dancer's grace, is cheerless as she approaches a menorah-shaped monument, regretting that the full depth of the tragedy has yet to be marked.

She points to birch trees planted by Jewish activists 20 years ago and said there were supposed to be nameplates next to each tree devoted to Ukrainians who had saved Jews.

"Unfortunately, this has never been done," she says.

There are signs attitudes are changing, however. A group of Ukrainian Jewish organisations have announced plans to build a memorial museum in the park, with the first stone to be symbolically laid early next month.

(Additional reporting by Richard Balmforth; Editing by Sonya Hepinstall)