Ghostly Landscapes: Soviet Liberators Photograph the Holocaust

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When people in the West think of the iconic site of the Holocaust, they first think of Auschwitz. That death and concentration camp became such a central metonym for the entire experience that its date of liberation by Soviet troops on January 27, 1945, became the official United Nations’ International Holocaust Remembrance Day. We think of Auschwitz because death camps came to define the Holocaust, and because those who survived Auschwitz were the most vocal (and most numerous) survivors. Without Elie Wiesel’s or Primo Levi’s stories of surviving Auschwitz, we would have few compelling narratives of the experience of surviving the genocide of European and North African Jewry. Victims’ experiences at Auschwitz became so synonymous with all Holocaust experience that most people forget that the tattoos, which graphically symbolize the Holocaust survivor, were only used at Auschwitz. The French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann’s definitive film Shoah relied exclusively on the voices of the living.
Moreover, images of Auschwitz—especially the iconic gates over the entrance ominously warning those who passed underneath it, “Work will set you free”—would have little meaning without narrative, voice, and stories.

The problem with Auschwitz as a metonym of genocide is that it conceals as much as it reveals. Genocide takes place less often in purpose-built death centers than in mundane sites of daily existence, like “killing fields” in Cambodia or by the sides of roads in Rwanda. So too with the Holocaust. In the Soviet Union, the Holocaust was more mundane, by which I mean it was more integrated into daily life under Nazi occupation. If there is a banality of evil in the Holocaust, it is less Adolf Eichmann’s train schedules, in the eyes of Hannah Arendt, than it is a ravine outside of town in which the city’s entire population of Jews was shot and killed (or, in other cities, mine shafts into which Jews were thrown to their deaths).

In the Soviet Union, it is not Auschwitz that stands for the Holocaust. The name of Kiev’s Babi Yar became infamous throughout the Soviet Union, and much later worldwide, as the icon of the Nazi genocide against Jews and others in the Soviet Union. And like Auschwitz, Babi Yar overshadows the fact that every town, especially in Ukraine, had its ravine (yar), pit (yama), or trench (rov) on its outskirts, to which the Nazis took local Jews to murder them. If in English, in relation to World War II, the word “camp” has become overdetermined, the Russian word yar came to stand for Nazi atrocities, so much so that poets used it to evoke a whole series of associations for the reader. As the Soviet (and Jewish) writer Ilya Ehrenburg poetically wrote about the scarred Soviet landscape, “I used to live in cities, / And happily lived among the living, / Now on empty vacant lands / I must dig up the graves. / Now every ravine is a sign / And every ravine is now my home.”
Visually, the Holocaust in the Soviet Union looks nothing like it looked in France, Germany, Poland, Hungary, or elsewhere. Trains haunt the Western imagination for their connotation of deportations nach Osten, "to the east." The Soviet Union was the East, in fact even farther east than the nightmarish East of Poland that was the Germans' euphemism for death. And there, east of East, it is not the technology of murder that haunts. It is the natural landscape itself. If images of the gates of Auschwitz, taken by Soviet liberator-photographers in January and February 1945, seared the Western imagination, the thousands of photographs of forests, ravines, and trenches taken by those same photographers of liberation sites on Soviet soil lie fallow in archives. No searing, no iconic imagery.

The majority of photographs testifying to Nazi crimes on the eastern front were taken by photographers working for the Soviet Extraordinary Commissions, a body established in November 1942 to investigate crimes that took place in every city that the Red Army liberated. (It was also created to deflect attention from the Soviet Union's own war crimes and to publicize Nazi atrocities as part of the Soviet propaganda campaign.) In most liberated cities, investigators found pits, ravines, or trenches on the outskirts of town where the mass murders had taken place and the victims were sometimes haphazardly buried. Other times, remains of the victims were completely erased from the land.

The Extraordinary Commission teams were made up of military leaders, forensic experts, doctors, journalists, photographers, and interviewers who gathered testimony of survivors. After the team conducted its research it often wrote a report stating its
findings and generally included photographs taken at the investigation site. This kind of forensic photography emerged as a powerful means of visualizing Nazi atrocities and served as some of the earliest Holocaust liberation photography anywhere in the world. It was published in Soviet newspapers, sent around the globe on the wires to document the evils of the enemy, and used as evidence in war crimes trials, including the earliest ones at Krasnodar, in southern Russia, in 1943.

After the victory at Stalingrad in February 1943 and the failed German offensive at Kursk in July 1943, the Soviets drove west, more or less continuously, until the defeat of Germany in May 1945. Along the way, the Red Army liberated Kiev on November 5–6, 1943. Dozens of sources have reconstructed the massive destruction of the city under Nazi occupation, including sabotage attempts by partisans in the city. What Soviet photographers and journalists found was the utter destruction of the city that was once the capital of ancient Rus'. All newspapers covered the liberation of Kiev with great triumph but also with utter disgust as writers and photographers bore witness to Nazi atrocities. It was here, on the outskirts of the city, that Babi Yar was discovered, a pit among other pits throughout the Ukrainian countryside, but one that held the remains of more than 100,000 people. Given its magnitude, Babi Yar would quickly become the symbol of Nazi atrocities.

What had taken place at Babi Yar over the Germans’ two-year occupation was the largest and most violent act of Nazi atrocities that photographers, journalists, and Extraordinary Commission researchers had seen. Ilya Ehrenburg wrote about the site shortly after its liberation and collected eyewitness testimony for what would become
the *Black Book*, a project to document Nazi mass murder of Jews on Soviet soil. On the pages of *Red Star*, the Soviet military newspaper and the leading voice of the wartime Soviet press, the journalists A. Avdeenko and Olender wrote pained descriptions of their own impressions of Kiev and Babi Yar. A leading photojournalist, Arkady Shaykhet, photographed the liberation of Kiev for the *Illustrated Newspaper*.

Images taken by the anonymous Extraordinary Commission photographers—preserved in the Ukrainian State Photo, Film, and Sound Archives and presented here for the first time—show the vast ravine into which about a hundred thousand bodies were dumped and incinerated. Babi Yar became the biggest and most lasting symbol of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, overshadowing even the discovery of the extermination camps, all of which were located on Polish soil.

This essay on Soviet liberation photographs includes three images from a village in southern Ukraine called Bogdanovka (Figs. 6, 7, and 8), and nine from Kiev’s Babi Yar. We begin where the photographer began, arriving at Babi Yar having heard stories of atrocities. The photographer would have seen a place like this many times before in town after town across Ukraine. He (rarely she) would already know how the scene would unfold, but like a good forensic photographer, he began at the beginning—with a “general view [obshchii vid]” (Fig. 1) of the crime scene. In this first photograph, we see a deep, wide ravine. It is a peaceful landscape photograph with some brush in the foreground. But the center of the image, the bottom of the ravine, is an off-white, clearly discolored when compared with the darker color of the
rest of the ravine, perhaps from ground cover. The gray-white in the center could be sand given the sandy topography of much of Ukraine. Visually, the color serves as a visual echo of the shock of white on the left hillside.

After the general view photograph, the photographer took several more landscape photographs (Figs. 2 and 3). Visually, they are virtually indistinguishable. The scenes are barren, empty, almost lunar in their desolation, as if no life has ever lived there. The archival notations on the verso, however, tell us (correctly or not) that these two identical images are in fact radically different crime scenes. Figure 2 reads, “View of the Execution Site of Soviet Citizens at Babi Yar in 1941 (Kiev, 1944).” With that short description, the caption writer has provided a narrative that allows the viewer to conjure scenes in the picture that the camera did not capture in 1944. We see an empty ravine. The caption writer knows what she (likely not he) knows from reports, the media, perhaps notations from the photographer, but one thing is for sure. We know that most of those Soviet citizens being imagined in the picture are Soviet Jewish citizens. To whom that detail matters is another question. The dead, obviously, do not tell their stories. Turning over the photograph, we are asked to close our eyes and picture crowds of Jewish men, women, and children lined up at the top of the empty ravine, perched at the precipice, crying, screaming, wailing as the sound of shots rings out in the picture. Body after body falls into the pit as the mound of the dead piles up in the foreground. But just as quickly, we open our eyes and see what the camera captured—emptiness.

The second landscape, Figure 3, has a very different description, “Territory at Babi Yar Where the Corpses of Soviet Citizens Shot by the Germans Were Incinerated in 1941 (Kiev, 1943–1944).” Perhaps the image is of the same place, but now we are asked to conjure a different moment in the crime, from the murder to its cover-up as the German occupation authorities attempted to destroy evidence of genocide, a word I use anachronistically but which Raphael Lemkin was in fact inventing just as the Germans were destroying the evidence.

Figure 4 brings many of these landscape themes together in “Overview of the Execution Site at Babi Yar in 1941.” Here there is no date of the photograph, but one assumes that it was taken by the same photographer around the same time, shortly after the liberation on November 6, 1943. The photographer has foregrounded life this time, albeit in the form of brush, which obscures the desolation of the ravine itself. Without the qualifying phrase “of Soviet Citizens,” we must rely on the larger photo essay to know that it was human beings being shot at this place.

By Figure 5, the photographer is bringing us closer to the crime scene as he becomes “more forensic”—by which I mean primarily interested in capturing evidence of a crime—with the camera. Here we have a close-up of what appears to be dirt, perhaps dust. Maybe this is a detail of the gray-white valley of the ravine from the first general view. If at first glance we had doubts about what we were observing, the verso caption casts aside any doubt with its voice of authority: “Remains of Ashes in Babi Yar, In Which the Corpses of Those Executed Were Incinerated (Kiev, 1943–1944).” The caption writer does not know when the incineration took place and so omits that detail, even though the earlier photograph suggests, wrongly, that bodies
were incinerated as soon as they were shot in 1941, shortly after the German occupation of Kiev in September of that year.

From Kiev we move, with the photographer—who was likely a different person from the Babi Yar photographer—to the three photographs from Bogdanovka. They are the most forensic in the series. Figure 6, “One of the Graves of Soviet Citizens Tortured by Romanian-German Occupiers During Their Occupation of the Village of Bogdanovka, Domanovsky Area, Odessa Region,” is a close-up of human remains. The identities of the people whose bones these are is absent. That is for the forensic scientists, researchers, and of course the ubiquitous representatives of the National Commissariat of Internal Affairs, the notorious NKVD, to determine through interviews (or interrogations) of local townspeople, who may have borne witness to (or participated in) the crime.

From the Babi Yar series we already know that these remains testify to at least two crimes: the murders themselves and their cover-up. Figure 7 is similarly forensic: “Remains of Peaceful Soviet Citizens Tortured [zamuchennyi] by Romanian-German Occupiers in Bogdanovka (from October 1941 to February 1944),” the date when the Red Army arrived at the village. The caption writer aimed for accuracy by referring to the Odessa region’s occupiers as both Romanian and German, unlike Kiev, which was solely under German occupation. The image, however, is of bones alone, and it only suggests that the “torture” to which the victims were subjected led to their deaths and, presumably, the incineration of the corpses. To be sure, the Russian is more suggestive than the English translation, since zamuchennyi suggests an act done to completion.

The final photograph from Bogdanovka, Figure 8, reveals something that no other photograph had yet revealed—the presence of the living in the form of two almost disembodied hands. Surely the hands that display the two skulls are not the point of the image. The caption tells us as much: “The Skull of a Child Executed by Romanian-German Occupiers During the Temporary Occupation of the Village of Bogdanovka, Domanovsky Area, Odessa Region (Bogdanova, 1944).” The caption writer could have said, “Soviet soldiers display . . . ,” but the presence of the living is eliminated for forensic effect. The point is not the fact that the Soviets had liberated Bogdanovka and were now conducting intensive research. The point is the crime, left as undisturbed as possible. The skull shot through with a bullet at close range is gruesome to the general viewer. But the forensic scientist might relish the quality of the photograph and use this image to measure the hole to determine the gauge of the bullet and at what range the child was shot.

From hands to fully embodied witnesses, the final two photographs take us further along in the forensic process as living people emerge. At last, the ghosts come out of the ground, the truth is revealed. The German attempt to hide the crime has failed as exhumations reveal a long, grim trench filled with bodies. If the photographer had backed up to give us another “general view,” we would see this exhumation at the bottom of that first trench as we come full circle in unmasking genocide.

Figure 9 describes what the photographer is documenting: “Exhumations of Graves in Babi Yar, Where Soviet Citizens Were Executed (Kiev, 1944).” Again, the caption removes human action from the story. Who is doing the exhuming of bodies? In fact, the photographer is bearing witness not to the exhumation itself, but to the
Fig. 6: “One of the Graves of Soviet Citizens Tortured by Romanian-German Occupiers During Their Occupation of the Village of Bogdanovka, Domanevsky Area, Odessa Region,” Yad Vashem, Series 4147, No. 10
Fig. 7: “Remains of Peaceful Soviet Citizens Tortured by Romanian-German Occupiers in Bogdanovka (from October 1941 to February 1944),” Yad Vashem, Series 4147, No. 25

Fig. 8: “The Skull of a Child Executed by Temporary Occupation of the Village of Bogdanovka, Domanevsky Area, Odessa Region (Bogdanovka, 1944),” Yad Vashem, Series 4147, No. 26
Extraordinary Commission team bearing witness to the now revealed crime scene. Other photographs from similar sites show teams of locals digging in the ground. They are the ones actually exhuming the bodies. Figure 10, whose caption is identical to 9, brings us right up close to the action, as we bear witness to those scientists, researchers, military officers, and others staring at the unbelievable. Of course, the scene before the camera isn’t unbelievable since the Extraordinary Commission photographers had been taking photographs like this for eight months and found these sites in nearly every liberated city and town. Like forensic researchers who study murder scenes day in and day out, these photographers too captioned their photographs in a hauntingly dry, descriptive manner.

Nearly all of the files of the Extraordinary Commission contain a photograph with researchers posing over the bodies, proof that the crimes we viewers bear witness to are German, not Soviet, crimes, or at least that is what we are supposed to think. A photograph of exhumed corpses without context only reveals corpses, not how they got there. We need the all-powerful caption writer to present the interpretive frame for genocide. The caption gives the photograph meaning.

As the critic Luc Sante describes in his study of crime scene police photographs from the turn of the twentieth century, “The uninhabited pictures are pregnant with implication . . . And there are incidental factors that . . . may or may not be germane to the deed associated with the site: shadows, stains, footprints in the snow . . . Empty
photographs have no reason to be except to show that which cannot be shown,” in the case of these photographs, the mass murder of “Soviet citizens” at Babi Yar.6

The empty ravine photographs leave everything to the imagination. The goal of such photographs was to document a crime scene, and in crime scene photography a photographer invites the viewer to conjure what was once in the scene. It is a moment when the camera fails as a tool of documentation. Its indexicality becomes an invitation for imagination, not the final word of evidence.

Janina Struk argues that Soviet Holocaust liberation photography, in particular of Majdanek, liberated by Soviet troops in July 1944, is less compelling than the photographs taken by American and British photographers at the liberation of Dachau and Buchenwald in April 1945. In her words, “In comparison to the emotive images of human suffering which would be used to represent the camps liberated by the Western allies, those which were released to represent Majdanek showed the industrial scale of the camp . . . [and] the kind of detailed photographic evidence that police photographers might take in the course of a criminal investigation.” Seeing Soviet liberation photography as crime scene photography helps explain why it feels less compelling than material coming from American liberation photographers. Struk is correct in pointing out Soviet photographers’ interest in how the killing occurred. In very few Soviet liberation photographs do we ever see close-ups of living human faces. One is more likely to see a close-up of the dead than of the living.
This makes Soviet liberation photography more reflective of the experience of genocide than the human drama of survival captured in American and British photography. Ultimately, there is an epistemological problem with understanding genocide through the images and voices of the survivors. If genocide is defined by the mass murder of a group of people, then those who survive genocide have a minority experience. The vast majority of those who experience a genocide—whether it be the Holocaust, Rwanda, or Cambodia—die. That is the point of genocide. And yet the dead cannot bear witness to their own experience of death. In these mundane, haunting, and sublime images, Soviet photographers have unwittingly captured that which tells the story of genocide—ghostly landscapes haunted by the dead, not by the living.

NOTES

1. The Extraordinary Commission files document more precise locations of the Nazi shootings and almost always include a pit near town. In Lugansk, then called Voroshilovgrad, mass burial pits were found at Ivanishchev Ravine; in Artemovsk at Chasov Ravine; etc.


4. Files of the Extraordinary Commissions can be found primarily in two places: the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), fol. 7021, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), RG 22.002, both of which have been consulted for this research.
