



## **Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel**

*Anatoly Kuznetsov , David Floyd (Translator)*

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**Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel** Anatoly Kuznetsov , David Floyd (Translator)

Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel is an internationally acclaimed documentary novel by Anatoly Kuznetsov about the Babi Yar massacre. The two-day murder of 33,771 Jewish civilians on September 29-30, 1941 in the Kiev ravine was one of the largest single mass killings of the Holocaust.

The novel begins as follows: "Everything in this book is true. When I recounted episodes of this story to different people, they all said I had to write the book. The word 'document' in the subtitle of this novel means that I have provided only actual facts and documents without the slightest literary conjecture as to how things could or must have happened."

## Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel Details

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Author : Anatoly Kuznetsov , David Floyd (Translator)

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# From Reader Review Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel for online ebook

**Tanuj Solanki says**

One of the greatest crimes in History made into an eternal document through masterful technique, blending personal experience, reportage, survivor testimonies, and so on. May such books never have to be written.

\*

Holodomor (a poem)

1.

The paleness of the starved  
reached incandescence.  
In a cauldron, a ten year old hand.  
In Moscow the wife kills herself  
and the sky is painted in bands of red.  
He does think, he does,  
whether an idea can be pyrhic.  
'What does this country need, comrades?  
'Comrades this country needs sacrifice.'

2.

Images in search results:  
pale starvation, incandescence.  
Kuznetsov talked of a cauldron  
with a ten year old hand inside.  
We know the wife had killed herself.  
We can picture the sky painted in bands of red.  
We don't know if he ever ceased to do,  
ever paused, ever thought about it all.  
Today Žižek likes talking about his style,  
his habit of taking both sides of a catechism:  
'What does this country need, comrades?  
'Comrades this country needs \_\_\_\_\_'  
Also his pleasure in forcing  
credulity in the incredible,  
like the story of the dozen partridges  
who wouldn't move till the dictator  
could return after picking his forgotten bullets.

3.

Kuznetsov talked of a cauldron with a ten year old hand. It could have been a twelve year old hand. When Kuznetsov talked of a cauldron with a ten year old hand, he was paraphrasing his Bolshevik father's

experience as an enforcer and witness. Kuznetsov talked of a cauldron with a ten year old hand in his book 'Babi Yar.' Babi Yar is a ravine near the city of Kiev. Babi Yar is a ravine near the city of Kiev where thirty three thousand seven hundred and seventy one people were shot dead in two days by the Nazis. The cauldron with the ten year old hand, the Holodomor, came before Babi Yar. More than five million perished in Holodomor. There is something in the names of catastrophes.

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## **Chris Herdt says**

If I could change one thing about this book, I would wish it to be fiction.

I read D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* in college, in which an execution is described based on the true tale of Babi Yar. When I saw a tattered paperback of *Babi Yar* at a secondhand shop, I picked it up and it sat on my shelf for years.

It tells the story of the Nazi occupation of Kiev from the point of view of the author, who does his best to recapture his 12-year-old innocence (hiding with his cat in the bomb shelter, the joy he takes in joining in the looting, or collecting spent artillery shells with his friends) and how that innocence is lost over the following 778 days. It is a very human story of an inhuman struggle.

The horrors of Babi Yar I do not wish to even attempt to describe; Kuznetsov's description should be sufficient for a lifetime. This would be a good companion to John Hersey's *Hiroshima* both as historical documents of how WWII affected civilians and reminders of the atrocities that humans inflict upon one another.

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## **Meaghan says**

This book is brilliant -- by far a top-tier Holocaust book and World War II book in general. The author was a boy of twelve when the Nazi occupation of Kiev began, and began recording his experiences then; these jottings were part of the basis for this book, which is both a memoir and a documentary nonfiction.

Although the story centers around the September 1941 mass murder of some 33,000 Jews at Babi Yar, a ravine outside Kiev, that's not all this story is. Kuznetsov's writing encompasses far more than that, and you really get a feel of what life must be like in a war-ravaged city. His description of the destruction of the Kreshchatik (the oldest and most beautiful section of Kiev) made me think of how New York City must have been like after 9-11 -- except the Kreshchatik bombings were a lot worse. In his list of "the number of times I should have been shot," Kuznetsov shows that all the inhabitants of Kiev (not just the Jews or soldiers or political activists or partisans, but EVERYONE) had to risk their lives every day, and how many lost their lives simply by being there. He includes printings of actual primary source documents such as memos, reports, handbills etc., from this time period as well as his own writings.

Most intriguingly: *Babi Yar* was initially published in Russia during the 1960s. I'm surprised it was published at all, as it was very critical of the Soviet regime. In any case the Soviet censors redacted large parts of it. When Kuznetsov defected to England, he took the original manuscript with him on microfilm, and added parts to it before publishing it in full in the West. The original Soviet text is in regular type, the parts the Soviet censors cut out are in boldface, and the parts Kuznetsov added after his arrival in England are in

brackets. It's interesting to see what was taken out and what was allowed -- they made some surprising choices.

I really cannot recommend this book highly enough, for Holocaust scholars and World War II scholars alike.

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## Julia says

I've never liked nonfiction books. I always liked reading about things that could only happen in a dream or in my imagination. That might be why I love this book so much; it sounds like something that happened in a nightmare.

I chose to read this book for some insight on my research project on Babi Yar. I didn't have time to read the whole thing so I read thoroughly the first half and then skimmed the second half in one day. I have never abused a reading of a book like "Babi Yar" before. Even as I skimmed it, it came to life and I could understand what all the characters were feeling about the war at the time. I only gave the story four stars because I haven't completely read it. I'll go back and read it thoroughly when I have time and re-evaluate it as I see fit.

The writing is exceptional. It's easy to understand but not watery. It's full of information- not surprising considering Anatoly Kuznetsov took 25 years to write it.

My only disappointment is that it's not sold in stores. I had to order my copy on Amazon. It was only \$1.50 which is appalling. It's worth so much more.

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## Snejina says

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This is not an easy book to read. The extent of the torture and murder of so many Jews and non-Jews in the area that it will turn your stomach time and time again as the shock hits you of how much worse it was than "just" the massacre of so many innocent people. The author writes, "I cannot for the life of me understand why, on this beautiful, blessed earth---among people equipped with brains and the capacity to think, who are

not just animal with instincts, among thinking, understanding beings -- it is possible for people to indulge in such absolute madness as war, dictatorship, police terror, to kill each other and to humiliate each other sadistically."

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### **Eva D. says**

"Suddenly we realized we were walking on human ashes." Always a good sentence to read. The book gets very dark, very quickly. Definitely a page turner. I'd recommend it highly, just...make yourself a cup of tea or something afterwards.

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### **liana says**

Wow, this book is insane. Very well written. I am surprised it hasn't been reprinted since the 1970s. It's about the Nazi invasion into Kiev and their 2 year takeover of the city. Babi Yar was a ravine near the city where 70,000 Jews were murdered and 100s of thousands other people as well. The Nazis tried to cover it up by burning everything then the Soviet Union tried to cover it up by building a dam over it. The author is a 12 year old boy when the Nazis invade. The writing is very thorough and easy to follow. It was first published in the Soviet union in 1966 but they censored half of the book, when Kuznetsov came to the US the book was reprinted in 1969 with the things the Soviets took out in bold and adding his additions to the book in brackets. I think this is a little distracting and it would be nice to reprint the book now, especially since it is out of print. I am surprised it is not better known. This is a must read for everyone. Kuznetsov says he wrote the book to try to understand Babi Yar but came no closer to understanding the Nazis after he finished the book, at least we can (hopefully) learn something from history.

[http://www.berdichev.org/babi\\_yar.htm](http://www.berdichev.org/babi_yar.htm)

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### **Shea says**

Found this while snooping around in my dad's closet when I was about thirteen. Could have come upon something worse, I guess. Something less appropriate for a girl of my age. I read it and returned it and my dad was none the wiser. I, on the other hand, was a changed person.

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### **Lidia says**

This book is a very stark portrayal of just how horrible the 20th century was. It's hard to understand just how so many sadists managed to take over so much of the world, between Stalin and Hitler and the millions who supported their twisted regimes. The truth about how Khreshchatyk was blown up in WWII (ny the NKVD, of course), as well as the Lavra, and how all this sabotage killed way more civilians than German forces, and how this diabolically organized sabotage turned the Germans against the locals is very vividly portrayed. Kuznetsov adds later what the communists did to delete Babi Yar from history, including building high rise apartment buildings on the site (I knew people who lived there, tho I don't know how they could bear to be living on bones), and a muddy water flooding that ended up in a catastrophe that killed hundreds of Kyivites

(the numbers being suppressed to this day, a bit like the White Sea flooding, only these were not even prisoners, just people going to work on a busy morning or hanging around their homes. Not much in his tale does anything to improve one's faith in humanity...

The book is presented somewhat awkwardly, with bolding for the bits that the censors originally cut out (usually gory details, and sometimes, but not always, bits that made the Stalin regime look bad). Sometimes what was cut was actually good editing imo. Then additional text that the author added in the 1960s is in brackets. So it's all a bit distracting when reading. I think Kuznetsov should have just put together the book he wanted and allowed an editor to clean up some of the bits that were simply not great writing, and not be so hung up about the past versions. Just my opinion.

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### **Elaine says**

"No monument stands over Babi Yar/a drop sheer as a crude gravestone, I am afraid." These lines were written by the great Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko in 1961, 40 years after the Nazis -- over a period of two days in September 29-30, 1941 -- murdered 30,000 Jews in Kiev. They were ordered to report to a street corner with their IDs and warm clothing after the German Army occupied the city. They were then taken to Babi Yar, and systematically shot and shoved, dead or alive, into a huge ravine. During the two-year German occupation of Kiev, an estimated 200,000 people were killed there -- Gypsies, partisans, Communists, and thousands of people randomly rounded up on the street to punish the populace whenever an act of sabotage was committed.

If Yevtushenko's poem was the first remembrance, then Anatoli Kuznetsov's novel, originally published serially in a Soviet magazine in 1966, is just as powerful. Written from the point of view (his own) of a young boy -- aged 12-14 over the course of the story -- Kuznetsov succeeds with plain, but achingly elegant prose, what it was like to try to survive in the occupied city. The author -- like Steinbeck in *Grapes of Wrath* -- interrupts the narrative at the beginning of some chapters to remind the reader that though this is a novel, everything in the book is true and provide warnings about war and fascism. He also uses firsthand accounts of those who survived Babi Yar (one woman's harrowing days of crawling out from under piles of dead bodies) and imprisonment (another survivor who was forced to dig for the bodies and burn them in advance of the Red Army). From huge, unimaginable horrors, Kuznetsov also describes his day-to-day life -- his irascible grandfather, fights and boyhood adventures with his friends, stealing potatoes and chestnuts, searching for his cat after a bombing raid.

I recently learned that I had a great-uncle who was killed at Babi Yar and so sought out this book (published in the U.S. in 1967). I wish that I had found it before. It's hard to find now, but well worth the search.

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### **Dasha M says**

"Babi Yar" is a monumental book. For those who have never heard the name before, it refers to a natural landmark ravine in the Ukraine, which in World War Two was the location of a brutal execution site. In the most notorious of its purges, during just two days in 1941, over 33,000 Jews were killed by the occupying Nazi forces and local police collaborators. For nearby towns, the sound of gunfire became a daily soundtrack.

The author of this documentary work was a boy at the time of the executions, one of the impoverished villagers living close by. He escaped death many times - sometimes, as he points out, through sheer luck. One of the most incredible things about "Babi Yar" that makes it so significant in the genre of historical



writing is that Kuznetsov, escaping the Soviet Union in the 60s, indicates which sections of his formerly published text had been previously redacted. The supposedly critical anti-Stalinist, anti-Russian elements that were censored at the time give a disturbing (and at times incredibly surreal) insight into a political system that denied so much of the agony and trauma that had occurred. The site where hundreds of thousands of people were murdered was later paved over - literally.

There are many remarkable moments in the book, but one in particular which struck me was one point where Kuznetsov breaks the barrier and speaks to the reader:

"A reminder. Well, so you are reading these stories. In some cases, perhaps you have just skimmed through unmoved... I must keep on reminding you... IT ALL HAPPENED." And it made me go back, and do justice to the places where my attention had waned, where atrocity after atrocity had begun to grow familiar.

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## Matt says

I read this book as research as it is the one of the only pieces of evidence that aktion 1005's sondercommandos attempted to erase the mass graves at babi yar. the sections of the book that cover that topic are as hard a thing to read as you could find. There are two small sections of the book that specifically deal with these mass killings- the first is the re-telling of the only known survivor of the mass executions, and no summary can do it justice. The second section deals with aktion 1005 and the prisoners who were forced to dig up the more than 30,000 corpses piles up in the ravine, burn them, and the sift through their ashes for gold fillings. While this section is just as upsetting as the murders themselves, the story of 15 prisoners planning an escape on the night before they too were to be killed manages to lift your spirits slightly.

The sadism and inhumanity represented in these stories is almost too much to stomach, even in print form. Still, if you have any desire to gain a little bit more understanding of exactly how horrific the Holocaust really was, I recommend this book.

The rest of the book is an autobiography about the author's life as a child in Kiev before, during, and after the German occupation. I found his story compelling, given the fact that I had read the book for a very specific purpose. What happened in Kiev between 1941 and 1943 is unimaginable and a must read.

On a side note, the author uses three different forms of text in this book. The first is normal text, which is how it was presented when first published in Russia. The second is **bold text, which is what was originally written but was censored by the Russian government and thus not included in the original publication.** The third is bracketed, which is new text that was added by the author after the initial publication. It is interesting, not only to see what the Russian government took out, but also what they left in.

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## Vitaliy Kovalev says

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## Kateryna Martynenko says

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