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The 76th Anniversary of the Tragedy of Babi Yar (cultural aspect)

The article deals with some aspects of the past and present in the context of difficult processes of artistic comprehension of the tragedy of Babi Yar. The role and the place of artist in creation of genuine historical memory.

Key words: Babi Yar, Kyiv, portraits, historical memory.

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76-річчя трагедії Бабиного Яру — культурологічний аспект

У статті розглянуто деякі аспекти минулого і сьогодення в складних процесах художнього осмислення трагедії Бабиного Яру. Досліджено роль і місце художника у створенні справжньої історичної пам'яті.

Ключові слова: Бабин Яр, Київ, портрети, історична пам'ять.

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76-летие трагедии Баьего Яра — культурологический аспект

В статье рассматриваются некоторые аспекты прошлого и настоящего в сложных процессах художественного осмысления трагедии Баьего Яра. Исследуется роль и место художника в создании подлинной исторической памяти.

Ключевые слова: Бабий Яр, Киев, портреты, историческая память.

It has been 76 years since the first massacres at Babi Yar by German occupying forces. This date was widely marked in Ukraine and in the world. The memory of a terrible tragedy has not waned over the years — the new books and researches are published, the evidence of crimes emerge, a variety of conferences, round tables and exhibitions are held. Even in these difficult times for Ukraine, millions of people honor the memory of victims, they take a new look at all those horrors of war and bitter fate of innocent victims of the criminal regimes.

The people of art do not stay on the sidelines either — they continue to concentrate their creative powers around the issue of Babi Yar. Every year artists, musicians, writers, theater figures and many others increase the general treasury of creative reflection of the tragedy happened 76 years ago in Kyiv. This is not only their abstract artistic reconsideration of the past — this is first of all their mission and civic position. It is the creative method that often helps to achieve the most comprehensive emotional image of the tragedy, because today it is not influenced by ideological components.

The people of art quickly reacted to the tragedy of Babi Yar. However, it is important to remember that it was the socialist realism epoch. The ideology played an important role in formation of artistic images, and significantly modified stylistic and

content possibilities. The memory of war remained within state ideology. But people wanted themselves to keep the truth about war for future generations.

Indeed, writers, musicians and artists are the conscience of a nation. Some of the works were masterpieces, and some of them were less successful. In some works, we see the historical truth, while others show the facts mixed with fiction and ideological stamps. Today it is still difficult to judge the motives of some authors, but the general tendency was described by A. Kuznetsov, “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” [4, 14]. However, “the truth” was described partially, the author writes, “The Soviet writer always faces the dilemma: not to publish the works at all or at least to publish the part free of censorship. Many people consider that it is better to bring to the reader at least something than nothing, I thought that too” [4, 7].

The authors always fought for the right to tell the truth. But only few could withstand in this fight. One of the most principal was the composer Dmitri Shostakovich. He was able to withstand the pressure that even the author of the most famous composition about Babi Yar, Yevgeny Yevtushenko has succumbed. This process of pressure was something like, “The articles in newspapers were poor and

hostile. They said that Shostakovich was digging in the garbage bins of our history, summarizing untypical events and denigrating our beautiful life. Later on, they made Yevtushenko change his poems. It was a terrible shock, but the question was like this: Either changes must be made to the text, or further dissemination of the symphony will be prohibited. Shostakovich did not change the text in the score, but the next time ‘The thirteenth symphony’ sounded with some other verses in the part of ‘Babi Yar’” [1, 101].

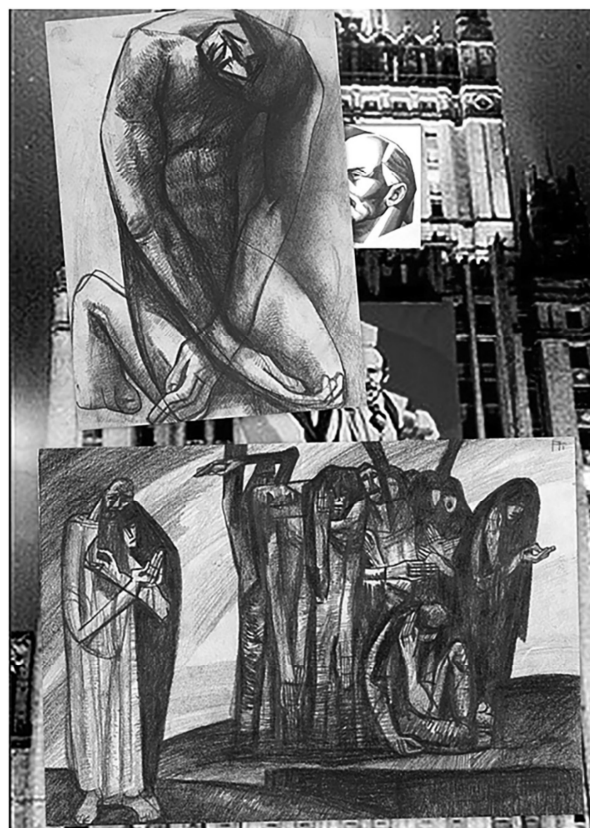
Many believed that the problem of perception of the Babi Yar tragedy was in inability to go beyond the ideological frames. The artists did not have a possibility to expose the paintings related to Babi Yar in public. For example, the artist Alexander Tikhomirov at his time won fame for his portraits of Lenin, but only recently, people could see his works related to Babi Yar. Why have Lenin’s portraits in the size of one third of a football field appeared, and the heartfelt drawings of people’s tragedy during unknown decades have been unnoticed? It is generally believed that thanks to the state order, the artist received the right to have money and a workshop, while the other works creation was a hobby, as the attempts to reflect the tragedy of Babi Yar attracted criticism.

In 1949, the first symphony “Babi Yar” by the Kharkov composer Dmitri Klebanov was strongly criticized. The archive materials show that the Ukrainian poet Andriy Malyshko strongly condemned D. Klebanov and some others, “Rootless cosmopolitans”, he said, “together opposed the Soviet culture in all its forms. The cosmopolitan bastards Stebun, Adelgeim, Sanov and their company have found their supporters in Beregovsky, Heilig, Hinchina and others. Klebanov’s Zionism, appeared in the symphony in the memory of Babi Yar victims is in line with the Zionism of Pervomaiskiy and Golovanivskiy” [5, 195]. It is hard to believe that the author of “The Song about the Towel” has showed such aggression. But those were “the laws of time”, it was necessary to adapt to survival reasons.

Such attacks continued for a long time. The fight for the artistic right, for “the right to remember” continued up to the end of the 80s of the 20th century.

During the Soviet period, none of the mass massacres victims in Babi Yar were forgotten. It was an image of collective sorrow, collective tragedy of Soviet people. Who actually died, how the execution was carried out, and other facts had to pass a serious censorship. Sometimes there were mishaps. A. Kuznetsov describes one of them, “The magazine ‘Yunost’ has been sent abroad. And many countries immediately started to translate it. I received a lot of puzzled letters from translators: they could not understand lots of content.

For example, the chapter named “Profession — arsonists”, was censored so much that there were no arsonists, no remark, there was not even such a word, there were only a few paragraphs about a man reading Pushkin” [4, 9].



Pic. 1. “Holocaust”, “Auschwitz”, “Babi Yar” graphic series by Alexander Tikhomirov

To achieve a better understanding of the Soviet realities features, we can underline a few important aspects. It is important to remember that usually there were relevant authorities that regulated the formation of historical memory and its cultural reflection — they implemented the development of prevailing ideology (“the party line”) and strictly controlled compliance with it (tens of thousands of relevant specialists were involved for this purpose). “...three millions. This is the approximate number of the governing class of nomenclature in the USSR calculated on the basis of statistical materials. This class including children and family members constitutes less than one and half percent of the country’s population. And this one and half percent therefore proclaimed themselves the leading and guiding force of Soviet society, intelligence, honor and conscience of our epoch, chief former and initiator of all Soviet victories. That’s exactly that one and half percent that make noise on the foreground, acting on behalf of 290-million people and even ‘all of progressive humankind’” [2, 154].

The events of Babi Yar were interpreted in accordance with “the party line”, “the Soviet version” was created. Both conceptions of the first monuments and the general tendency of this event’s perception were connected with this version. They did not lay emphasize on truth, but on the interests of “the Soviet people”. Each art project had to pass through the relevant inspection and to comply with the specified model.

Today Babi Yar is a famous place in Kyiv. During warm seasons people comfortably walk and drink beer in groups having fun at the site of the massacres. In winter, children with their parents sledge around the monuments. Ukraine forgets about this wound at the societal level.

Why is this happening? Certainly, it has been a while since the moment of the memorable events. The witnesses disappear, and the ideology of teaching the war history itself has changed significantly. They just give a passing mention to the war, some deliberately encourage to forget the tragedy of the 20th century. One of the supporters of “forgetting” is a famous journalist Oleksandr Nevzorov, “You know, honestly speaking, I don’t care, because I don’t understand at all, when they start making a big fuss over the past. What’s the point of remembering all of this? This equally extends to Panfilov’s men and even those murdered in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, right? And to such events as the Holocaust. I don’t even understand why and for what purpose people shoulder those memories, which can’t help them living today, which help them hate each other or hold grudges against each other. Human is quite an aggressive and thieving creature, and is the leader in the animal world” [6].

This is a significant problem. Such aggressive statements help to increase the level of indifference in society. Memory must be public and personal. The artistic people have some kind of responsibility to save this memory, to increase it and put it into artistic images. A great number of people do not want and can not remain silent.

Oksana Molozhanova, an artist from Haifa, claimed her right and duty to remember, when in 2010, she painted a picture named “The Jewish Madonna”, and dedicated it to the memory of her grandmother’s sister, Tetiana Markus, who took an active part in the underground struggle during occupation of Kyiv in 1941, and who was posthumously awarded a rank of the Hero of Ukraine.

It is worth noting that Madonna is called Jewish for a reason. The picture bears a lot of sense, connected with heroine’s biography and events of the Great Patriotic War, when she tragically died. This is about the tragedy of an entire nation, about the victims of massacres at Babi Yar. About everyone scorched by the fire of war and those who remember.



Pic. 2. “The Jewish Madonna” by Oksana Molozhanova

The artist used an image that often symbolizes world level’s suffering and therefore can be understood by a large part of humankind. A woman and a child on the background of the fire madness, just like the thousands of victims on the background of the war madness.

The prominent feature of Babi Yar tragedy is in long and often violent silence of hundreds of families. The historical memory is based on the stories told in close circles, and then announced to the world. Oksana Molozhanova told about her story, “‘The Jewish Madonna’ — is a tribute to my family memory and the memory of the Second World War started from bombing and artillery attacks of the cities and killing of civilians, particularly mass destruction of the Jews, as it happened in Kyiv in Babi Yar” [3].

This is one of those instances when personal family memory helps to increase the memory development about the events in Babi Yar, a new level of tragedy understanding can be reached. Everyone now builds his own system of understanding history — there is no ideology in it anymore. “Maybe it is the past pains in me, only my past? Or human’s past? And what if we forget? Forget about the past? Impossible! It lives and turns in me, and pressing on me with a big, heavy and black mass, makes me breathless, does not let me live. It is impossible to forget the past, if the past is forgotten, it will come back again” [7, 10].

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