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Shades of Red: Relative Truth and the Breakdown of the Black-and-White War in Isaac Babel’s Red Cavalry

Historians searching for authoritative sources on the Polish-Soviet War find Isaac Babel’s short story collection *Red Cavalry* riddled with historical inaccuracies.¹ The most flagrant of these occurs in the book’s first paragraph: the narrator, Lyutov, a correspondent for the *Red Cavalryman* newspaper, alleges that the vanguard of the Red Cavalry captured Novograd-Volynsk by crossing the Zbrucz River on the highway that runs from Brest to Warsaw. In reality, the river is located more than 80 miles southwest of the route that Lyutov purports the Red Cavalry took.² The historian Norman Davies considers the historicity of *Red Cavalry* an “intriguing puzzle”: Babel uses historical details as an “essential element in the fabric of his work,” yet he “frequently treats historical facts with gratuitous vandalism” by diverging from the historical record.³ This apparent contradiction can be explained by reading Babel as a historian of feelings who believed that in striving to understand traumatic events, relative truth (the convictions and feelings of the various participants) should trump objective truth (historical facts, figures, and the official party line). Babel’s narrator purposefully misrepresents events from the Polish-Soviet War, sacrificing historical accuracy to portray the perspective of the individual’s memory. Throughout *Red Cavalry*, Babel uses overt distortions of history and literary devices that accentuate characters’ own voices to challenge the conventional binary interpretation of war and emphasize the relative truth found in personal accounts of conflict.

¹ This paper references the first book edition of the collected stories of *Red Cavalry* (published in 1926), translated by Boris Dralyuk.
² Davies, 849.
³ Ibid., 848.
In the cycle’s first story, “Crossing the Zbrucz,” Lyutov’s distortion of geography and time sets the stage for the book’s focus on relative truths and exemplifies one of Babel’s dominant narrative techniques. In the narrator’s account of the Red Cavalry’s movements, Lyutov implies that the troops crossed the Zbrucz River, travelling westward on their way to capturing Novograd-Volynsk—a town that, in reality, lies east of the Zbrucz on the Sluch River. Furthermore, the narrator reports that, having captured Novograd-Volynsk, the troops then march westward into Poland along a highway that runs from Brest to Warsaw. In fact, Novograd-Volynsk is southeast of Brest, making this impossible. Compounding the confusion, Lyutov dates this report July 1920, but the cavalry did not reach Brest until mid-August during the week preceding the Battle of Warsaw. Distortion of historical fact continues throughout the cycle.

Babel’s muddling of dates and locations does not reflect a disregard for the sanctity of history, however, as even the famed cavalryman Semyon Budyonny claimed. On the contrary, this misrepresentation of historical facts speaks to a larger narrative technique. Rejecting the notion that history is a strict chronology, Babel conceives of the past as a series of events refracted through an individual’s memory. Returning to the July 1920 report, although the crossing of the Zbrucz, the capture of Novograd-Volynsk, and the march from Brest toward Warsaw are separate events, they are connected in Lyutov’s mind. For the young, initially ideologically-driven narrator, the march, capture, and crossing all signify major Soviet successes. Thus, in the opening paragraph of the cycle, the narrator reconstructs a relative timeline in which the prominence of the events is linked not to concrete temporal points, but rather to the emotional weight they carry. Similarly, the river crossing dominates the vignette because it

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 849.
6 Stanton, 48.
represents the culmination of the Red Army’s efforts thus far, marking the Soviet entry into Poland and the reversal of the Polish invasion of Ukraine.\(^\text{7}\)

Through its historical distortions, “Crossing the Zbrucz” provides a clear example of Babel’s distinction between relative and objective truth—a dichotomy that is crucial to understanding the larger work. Responding to critics who questioned the work’s validity, Maksim Gorky asserted that the stories are true in the “internal sense,” plainly articulating Babel’s focus on faithfully capturing emotions and events through the eyes of the witnesses.\(^\text{8}\) In contrast to this emotional, relative truth, I consider two types of objective truth: historical truth, denoting the hard facts, such as the date and location of an event, and Soviet truth, the official or institutional ideologically-motivated accounts that the regime perpetuates. As the example in “Crossing the Zbrucz” illustrates, the narrator certainly forgoes the historical version of objective truth. Disregarding his role as a journalist for a Soviet newspaper, Lyutov also rejects the ideologically correct version of history.\(^\text{9}\) In a letter, Vasily Kurdyukov describes this newspaper as one that “every frontline fighter here wants to read all the way through, because then they get the heroic spirit and hack the damn Polacks to pieces.”\(^\text{10}\) As this description suggests, journalistic truth in the Soviet sense does not involve communicating the war’s proceedings objectively, but rather with clear political motives—a prescription that the narrator seems to abandon.

The distortion of historical events in the narration of Babel’s cycle facilitates the presentation of relative truths. Spurning both Soviet and historical objective truths, Babel’s narrator collects relative truths from a diverse set of individuals, each of whom presents the narrator with a new perspective usually informed by his or her national, religious, or

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\(^\text{7}\) Sicher, “The Road to a Red Cavalry,” 545.  
\(^\text{8}\) Davies, 856.  
\(^\text{9}\) Sicher, “The Road to a Red Cavalry,” 543.  
\(^\text{10}\) Babel, 22.
occupational identity. In these encounters, Babel employs secondary “skaz” narrators who convey their relative truths through dialogue or in letters, allowing their inner monologue to remain unobstructed by the primary narrator’s views. In other words, Lyutov’s reporting prioritizes his subjects’ own words and lets them speak directly to readers, foregrounding the characters’ authentic voices to heighten the contrast between relative truth and official truth.

For example, in “Salt,” Lyutov’s decision to include the episode in Nikita Balmashov’s own words rather than reproduce the anecdote through an “objective” or official lens provides a deeper understanding of each character’s perspective. In the story, the Cossack soldier Balmashov discovers that the woman he let onto the military train has lied; her nursing child is actually a bag of salt. Balmashov tosses her off the train, beating her with a rifle. He later relates this story to the Soviet press to show that their platoon “deal[s] mercilessly with all the traitors.” This line demonstrates Balmashov’s belief that the woman is a traitor who deserves to be punished. The account does not question the accuracy of his conviction or whether an alternative portrayal of this woman, perhaps as a starving peasant driven to lie from desperation, would have been more suitable or historically correct. From the perspective of relative truth, these are irrelevant speculations. Balmashov’s confidence that the woman has deceived his unit and, by extension, the Soviet cause, motivates his actions. Lyutov chooses not to re-narrate Balmashov’s letter to the “Comrade editor,” instead including it in full without any comments. By employing skaz narration, Babel examines the chain of events from the character’s perspective and allows the reader to better understand the character himself.

More surprisingly, examining “Salt” through Balmashov’s personal and therefore biased account sheds light on the woman’s own relative truth. After the Cossacks reject her pleas for

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11 Grøngaard, 37.
12 Babel, 112.
forgiveness, she adopts a different tone, asserting that the troops “don’t care a thing about Russia” and are just “saving those Yids, Lenin and Trotsky.”  

Balmashov’s report and other stories in the cycle lead readers to believe that this statement cannot be entirely true. Nikita, at least on the surface, seems genuinely devoted to the cause, and other soldiers such as Ilya care about the country and its citizens. However, readers recognize that this characterization of the Red Army is what feels true to the woman and thus dictates her actions. Here, Babel again chooses to include the woman’s own words rather than paraphrase her insults. Instead of viewing the encounter through the lens of historical truth (e.g., a woman suffering from the revolution and an abusive Soviet soldier) or ideological truth (e.g., a traitor to the revolution gets her due), skaz narration promotes greater emotional understanding by recording multiple relative truths: a Soviet soldier committed to the revolution boots off the train a suffering woman who believes the Red Army has destroyed her country. In portraying both characters’ relative truths in their own words, the account avoids passing moral judgment on either individual. Both are simply acting in accordance with what feels right or true to them.

As this analysis of “Salt” shows, the cycle’s focus on relative truth demonstrates the fragility of objective truth and, by extension, the binary of good and evil in war. Lyutov’s conversations with Gedali further dispute this oversimplified dichotomy. A Hasidic Jew suffering at the hands of the Poles, Soviet soldiers, and the White Army, Gedali challenges the narrator’s faith in Soviet truth. In this episode, Babel relies on dialogue to juxtapose Gedali’s voice and the narrator’s parroting of Soviet ideology. Responding to Gedali’s protests against the violence, Lyutov tries to explain that the Red Army “can’t help shooting … because she’s the

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13 Ibid., 110.
revolution.” Gedali deconstructs this argument, appropriating the narrator’s revolutionary discourse to illuminate the fallacies of Soviet logic. “The Pole shot, my dear Pan, because he’s the counterrevolution,” Gedali begins. “You shoot because you’re the revolution. But the revolution is happiness. And happiness doesn’t like orphans in the house.” Here, Gedali seizes on the contradiction between “objective” truth and relative truth: the Soviet side claims to promote the welfare of all citizens, yet in Gedali’s experience, the Red Army, just like the Polish forces, actively undermines the Jews. Babel’s use of dialogue is instrumental in the breakdown of official truth, as Gedali mimics Lyutov’s use of Soviet rhetoric, infusing it with commentary on the antisemitism of both the Soviets and the Poles. In this exchange, the war binary of good and evil crumbles; regardless of which side emerges victorious, the Jews will lose the war.

A later story, “The Rebbe,” clearly illustrates Lyutov’s eventual disillusionment with objective truth and the war binary. The narrator, a secular Jew, joins Gedali and Rebbe Motale for a Sabbath dinner, where attendees lament the seemingly endless suffering of the Jewish people. “Hasidism’s … eyes have been gouged from their sockets, but Hasidism still stands at the crossroads of the furious winds of history.” Even in the face of great upheaval and uncertainty, Hasidism remains upright, a testament to the enduring truth of religion. Against all odds, Judaism has stood the test of time, while the “objective” truth seems to change with the seasons. After the Jews depart for the Sabbath service, Lyutov boards an agitprop train, which he will ride to the printing press in order to publish a piece for the Red Cavalryman. In writing for the newspaper, Lyutov must forgo his preference for authentic voice and dialogue, capturing instead his war experiences in a singular ideological form. He is unable to finish the article,

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14 Ibid., 48.
15 Sicher, Babel’ in Context, 204.
16 Babel, 48.
17 Ibid., 55.
which proves symbolic: Lyutov recognizes that the Jewish truth and the Jewish people, as they describe themselves, do not fit into the Red Army’s limiting editorial schema—an indication that relative truth is both stronger and more truthful than “objective” Soviet truth.

In his recollection of the itinerant artist Pan Apolek, the narrator captures a similar disintegration of official truth. Apolek, famous for painting the faces of the often poor or lame locals into his icons, rejects the Catholic Church’s monopoly on interpreting Christianity. Including “Janek, the lame convert” in his image of the apostle Paul and “the Jewish girl Elka, daughter of unknown parents” in his depiction of Mary Magdalene, Apolek’s work echoes one of the eight Beatitudes: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5).  By the Church’s standards, Apolek’s icons are heretical because they defame holy figures. However, to Apolek and members of the community, these icons capture the humbling spirit of Christianity—an aspect of the religion more applicable to their lives than rigid Catholicism. When the “all-mighty body of the Catholic Church,” a stand-in for objective or official truth, confronts Apolek, an emblem of relative or interpretative truth, the lowly Polish painter triumphs over the institution. “The most baffling … warrior that the Church of Rome had faced,” Apolek scores a victory for relative truth when his replacement artist refuses to paint over the Holy Fool’s work.  A local cemetery watchman, Witold, captures this confrontation and the Church’s emphasis on doctrinal truth, asking “who’s to say where the all-merciful Lord God sees the truth?”  Here he, like Apolek, asserts that the interpretative nature of any religion cannot be understood through the lens of objectivity. In recording Witold’s comment, Lyutov again uses dialogue to highlight

18 Ibid., 35.
19 Ibid., 36.
20 Ibid., 37.
relative truth, this time in a religious context. However, Witold’s remark can be more broadly interpreted to challenge any act or mission beholden to a rigid doctrine or institution.

In addition to eroding the Church’s monopoly on Christian truth and the Red Army’s absolutist portrayal of the war’s impact on Jews, relative truth dismantles objective truth for the Soviet troops themselves. Told largely through a reprinted letter, “The Story of a Horse” uses skaz narration to present a challenge to institutional Soviet truth. Commander of the First Squadron Khlebnikov desires the return of his white stallion, which Division Commander Savitsky borrowed. After Army headquarters authorizes the return, Khlebnikov tracks down Savitsky, who threatens Khlebnikov and refuses to give back his prized steed. The Communist Party, which Khlebnikov fervently supports, is unable to assist, leading the frustrated commander to renounce his membership. For Khlebnikov, the Party’s inability to requisition his horse represents a breakdown of the legitimacy of the revolution and its values. His letter captures this collision between official truth (the Party supports equal treatment for all its members) and relative truth the (Party benefited the division commander at Khlebnikov’s expense). The Communist Party “was founded, I believe, for happiness and strict justice without limit, and it should also look after the little guy.”

Khlebnikov’s experiences—his relative truth, captured in his own words—drive his actions, and the collapse of objective truth leads the commander to temporarily lose his sanity. Faced with the breakdown of party truth, Khlebnikov is unable to cope with his shattered beliefs. His first instinct is to flee. He soon realizes, however, that relative truth knows no geographic boundaries; running away will not cure his disillusionment. He turns on himself, tearing his chest. This self-inflicted violence implies that

\[21\] Ibid., 95.
the only way to dismantle this emotional truth is to destroy oneself—another testament to relative truth’s endurance.

From the Soviet language in Balmashov’s letter to the disillusionment in Khlebnikov’s note, the use of skaz narrators increases the novel’s tonal diversity and portrays relative truths to challenge the dominance of official narratives.22 The work’s structure also strengthens Lyutov’s ability to explore relative truth. As a literary form, the short story cycle is typically concerned with demonstrating a process. In the case of Red Cavalry, a cycle of 34 short stories in the original 1926 book edition, the individual pieces each capture various individuals’ experiences with the war. Taken as a whole, the stories demonstrate the breakdown of absolute truth and the Soviet war binary. The elements that are consistent throughout the short stories—the Cavalry itself, the Soviet-Polish War, and violence—serve as the thematic fodder that the various pieces probe.

As Lyutov’s reporting demonstrates, when characters try to reconcile objective and relative truths, the binary nature of the institution—in Apolek’s case the Church, and in Gedali’s and Khlebnikov’s cases the revolution—breaks down. War, which is supposed to harden an individual’s belief in “right” and “wrong,” often has the opposite effect, leading men like Lyutov to question the validity of such distinctions. Similarly, Babel’s journal catalogues his own disillusionment. At the outset of fighting, the intellectual passionately believed in the cause, the liberation of workers and peasants.23 By September, the war had reduced Babel to desperation; he could barely afford to eat.24 In Red Cavalry, Lyutov never fully admits his doubts about the

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22 Grøngaard, 52.
23 Davies, 854.
24 Ibid., 855.
war, leading critics to attack the book for its lack of a satisfying resolution. However, the cycle’s end, or lack thereof, actually mirrors the author’s own struggle. Although the Polish-Soviet War destroyed Babel’s own initially binary way of thinking, the conflicted author never entirely let go of his belief in its ideals.

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Works Cited


