Leo Brown, Williams College

The Russian Land in Ievtushenko’s *Babii Iar*: Questioning an Anti-Semitic National Identity

In his 1961 poem *Babii Iar*, Ievgenii Ievtushenko speaks out against Soviet indifference to atrocities of the Holocaust.\(^1\) Exercising the newfound artistic liberty allowed during Khrushchev’s Thaw, Ievtushenko accuses the Soviet government of anti-Semitism while deconstructing a definition of Russian identity as necessarily anti-Semitic. By depicting Jewish characters in dark, enclosed, suffocating environments, Ievtushenko draws from a body of Russian literature that reflects anti-Semitic stereotypes of the day as well as the real living conditions of the shtetl.\(^2\) In these works, Jews are isolated from the physical Russian land – a paramount cultural construct pivotal to national identity – and deprived of space, air, and opportunity. This same body of literature extols the relationship between the land and the Russian soul, a sacred bond from which Jews are excluded. While Jews are cramped in ghettos of the Pale of Settlement, Russian literary heroes thrive and revel in the forests, fresh air, and open space of their homeland. *Babii Iar* offers a stark contrast to this division, wherein the Russian land does not exclude the Jewish people, but instead looks upon their fate mournfully. In this ground-breaking work, the anthropomorphized land no longer represents anti-Semitism and


\(^2\) Shtetls were, until their widespread destruction during the Holocaust, small villages with large Jewish populations located in the Pale of Settlement, the region of Imperial Russia in which Jews were permitted to live. These depictions of setting do not suggest an anti-Semitic bias, for they reflect real conditions in the Pale of Settlement. However, Bernard Choseed notes that Russian authors before and after the Revolution consistently perpetuated anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews as inferior, with exotic caricatures that were simultaneously grotesque, malicious, and pathetic. See “The Soviet Jew in Literature,” *Jewish Social Studies* 11.3 (July 1949): 259–282.
conventional nationalism, but rather judgment, wisdom, and compassion. Casting the land as sympathetic to the Jewish plight, Ievtushenko challenges the traditional, simplistic portrayal of Jewish and Russian identities as antithetical.

Ievtushenko disrupts the well-established idea of mutually exclusive Jewish and Russian identities by using various voices throughout the poem. The narrator amorphously shifts from Jewish and Russian to Biblical, historical, and contemporary figures. From the outset of the poem, the narrator assumes the role of an Israelite and moves through history, oppressed at the hands of Egyptians, Romans, Frenchmen, Philistines, Belgians, Russians, and Germans—in short, the international community of the ages. The narrator experiences this oppression while proclaiming his identity as a Russian: “Oh, my Russian people!” (106). This establishes a stark paradox; he contradicts the view that anti-Semitism is simply an inherent expression of Russian identity and pride. His suffering as a Russian rather is the result of the rampant anti-Semitism which stains his country’s integrity: “but often with unclean hands, such creatures besmirch your own clean name” (106–107).

Literary representations of Russian identity derived from the physical land are firmly

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3 “О, русский мой народ!”
5 “Но часто те, чьи руки нечисты, твоим чистейшим именем бряцали.”
rooted in a unique national history. For centuries, Russia was primarily an agrarian economy; the peasants (though not the Jews) were inextricably tied to the land – the provider of food, home, and livelihood. In addition to the land’s importance as a sustainer of life, the tremendous expansiveness of territory, especially during the Soviet era, contributed to the Russian cultural and spiritual imagination. Reflecting this sense of place and national identity, Russian patriots have written proudly of their country's enormity since the early 19th century. The title of Christopher Ely’s *This Meager Nature* (2002) is drawn from one such work, “Èti bednye selen’ia” (“These Poor Villages”), a poem written by Fyodor Tiutchev in 1859:

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Long-suffering native land,  
Land of the Russian people!  
Proud foreign eyes  
Will not notice nor grasp  
The light that shines through  
Your humble barrenness…
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Further glorifying the land, Aleksandr Pushkin credited the “immune étendue” of Rus’,” its infinite grandeur providing military immunity and protection by absorbing the Mongol threat and

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6 Christopher Ely provides a comprehensive overview of artistic portrayals of the Russian land in *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002). This text chronicles an evolution from a negative view of the Russian land as muddy and unattractive, dominant at the beginning of the nineteenth century, into a genuine nationalistic fervor for its expansive, sublime beauty as a reflection of the authentic Russian soul.

7 Dominic Lieven writes of the significance of the Russian peasantry to the development of Russian nationalism throughout the nineteenth century. Notably, this notion was primarily constructed by various elite, academic circles, and went unnoticed by the illiterate peasants themselves. The aristocratic Slavophile movement of the 1840s and the socialists of the 1860s and 1870s (as well as their twentieth-century successors) made extensive use of this identity in their rhetoric. See Dominic Lieven, “Russian, Imperial and Soviet Identities,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6 no. 8 (1998): 253–269.


9 “Край родной долготерпенья,/ Край ты русского народа!/ Не поймет и не заметит/
Гордый взор иноплеменный,/ Что сквозит и тайно светит/ В наготе твоей смиренной.....” Ely, *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia*, 139.
allegedly saving Christian civilization. Nikolai Berdiaev, a Russian philosopher who was expelled from the Soviet Union by the Bolshevik government, expounded upon Pushkin’s notion of the Russian land as a spiritual savior. In his book *Russkaia ideia (The Russian Idea)*, originally published in 1946, he wrote, “in the soul of the Russian people there is the same boundlessness, limitlessness, and aspiration to infinity as there is in the Russian plain.”10 This perceived relationship between the Russian soul and Russian land contributes to the power of allusions in literature to the nourishing, sustaining influence of the land. In this context, the imprisonment of Jews in dark, cramped spaces, both in writing and in reality, amounted to their exclusion from Russian identity.

In the decades leading up to World War II, Soviet Socialist Realist film, literature, and propaganda sustained this image of the wholesome Russian in harmony with nature. This construct was ubiquitous and inescapable in the consciousness of a mid-twentieth century Soviet reader. For example, in Boris Polevoi’s popular patriotic novel *Povest’ o nastroiashchem cheloveke (A Story of a Real Man)* originally published in 1949, the hero Alexei is guided by the land and the Russian peasantry to safety in the face of immense danger. Stranded in the wilderness after crashing his warplane, Alexei is drawn eastward by an intangible but powerful force towards Russia, his homeland. This mystical plot element conjures the notion that Alexei’s connection to his land is as instinctive as a migratory pattern or mating ritual; rather than simply wishing to be home, Alexei feels the land drawing him closer. Fading in and out of consciousness but relying on his instincts and surviving by eating berries and ants, Alexei was “suddenly overcome with such mad joy” when he hears the Russian language in the distance.

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Once the villagers confirm that Alexei is, in fact, Russian, they nurse him back to health, sacrificing valuable resources for his benefit even after Germans terrorized their village:

As carefully as if he were handling a new-born babe he laid Alexei on the sleigh, tied him down with a rope, thought for a moment, took off his coat, rolled it up and put it under Alexei’s head. Then, going in front of the sleigh, he harnessed himself to a small horse collar made of sackcloth, and handing a trace to each of the boys, he said: “God be with us!” And the three of them hauled the sleigh over the thawing snow… (41–42)

Both in the national consciousness and in reality, Jews could not access this elemental power of the Russian land. The relationship of Jews to the Russian land in literature is grounded in the experience of the shtetl and ghettos of Russia during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the literature of the shtetl, writers describe the claustrophobic, oppressive atmosphere of these isolated communities, and explicitly juxtapose this squalid life with the Russian nationalistic ideal. Writers such as Mendele Moicher Sforim (Shalom Y. Abramowicz), Sholem Aleichem (Shalom N. Rabinowicz), Yehuda Leib Peretz, and Sholem Asch described the

12 “Осторожно, как, новорожденного ребенка, опустил он Алексея на салазки, прикрутил к ним веревочной вожжой, подумал, стащил с себя армяк, свернул и подмостил ему под голову. Потом вышел вперед, впряженя в маленький хомут, сделанный из мешковины, дал по веревке мальцам, сказал: "Ну, с богом!" – и втроем они потянули салазки по талому снегу…” Polevoi, Povest’ o nastoiashchem cheloveke, 66.
13 A nominal exception to this principle illustrates the significance of the land to Jewish cultural identity under the Soviet regime. In 1934, Joseph Stalin initiated a relocation of Jews to the Jewish Autonomous Oblast in the Far East as part of a broader effort to physically segregate the various nationalities of the Soviet Union. According to Weinberg, Stalin intended to empower the Jewish people by granting them a plot of land, thereby affirming their legitimacy as a nation after centuries of containment in city and shtetl. The relocation was partially successful; some Jews emigrated and enjoyed a degree of religious freedom, but they never constituted a majority of the population. Moreover, the gift of a piece of land thousands of miles from home in barren, inhospitable Siberia could well be considered simply another attempt to ghettoize the Jews (albeit couched in positive terms). See Weinberg, Stalin’s Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland.
conditions of Jewish enclaves in Eastern Europe, criticizing the “degrading poverty, religious fanaticism, and authoritarian oligarchies” that were characteristic of life in the shtetl. In “A Fiddle,” Aleichem captures the dismay of a trapped young Jew, Sholom, who yearns for a life of freedom that his Russian peers enjoy. Sholom wishes to escape the yoke of his authoritarian father and community by playing the fiddle and expressing the music in his soul. Tchetchek, a non-Jewish fiddler and teacher who takes Sholom under his tutelage, lives “far off beyond the town in a small white cottage…surrounded by a garden full of bright, yellow, sunflowers that carried themselves as proudly as lilies or roses.” As Sholom revels in the open space and freedom of this environment, the narrative voice shifts from Sholom’s first-person to an ambiguous third-person to express explicitly the cultural context of this space:

…here was space and freedom, here it was bright and fresh, warm and cheerful. I felt like running, leaping, yelling, singing, or like throwing myself on the ground with my face deep in the fragrant grass. But that is not for you, Jewish children. Yellow sunflowers, green grass, fresh air, the clean earth, the clear sky, these are not for you…

Flowers, grass, and sunshine, so dear to Sholom, were forbidden to the Jews of the shtetl, and ultimately to Sholom as well, whose secret lessons are discovered and forbidden by his family at the story’s conclusion.

The dismal circumstances of Russian Jews worsened during the late Imperial period and the Soviet regime. Concurrent with the rise of European nationalism, the Russian intelligentsia hastened to form a coherent Russian national identity. The government instituted policies of
“Russification” under Alexander III, instituting “counterreforms” meant to maintain the status quo of bureaucracy and class structure in Russian society amidst the radical ideology and social turmoil of the mid-nineteenth century.\(^\text{18}\) Under stricter and better-enforced regulation, Jews were confined to the “Pale of Jewish Settlement” in Western Russia. While they had been, for the most part, living in this area to begin with, the Jews were further required to reside “only in towns and smaller settlements inhabited by merchants and craftsmen, but not in the countryside,”\(^\text{19}\) a policy that was reinforced as Jewish communities became increasingly insular for fear of pogroms. This policy institutionalized the isolation of Jews from the land, enclosing them in cramped communities without freedom of movement or opportunity for social advancement.

Isaak Babel’, in his *Konarmiia (Red Cavalry)* stories, presents another view of Jewish life in Russian society. In “Gedali,” Babel’ paints a scene of a deadened, sorrowful town in which an old shopkeeper, Gedali, presides over a shop of curiosities. Gedali remains in the bazaar alone, for all other shopkeepers and patrons have departed as the Sabbath approaches. The atmosphere of the shtetl is oppressive: “tender blood pouring from an overturned bottle – and a gentle aroma of decay envelops” (228).\(^\text{20}\) The scene is characterized by dull, lifeless imagery of an old, empty community that exists in “the dense sorrow of memory” (227).\(^\text{21}\) Out of this stuffy haze, however, Gedali passionately discusses the approaching revolution with the narrator, a Pole, than local allegiance, for an ambitious freed serf could seek work not only in his hometown but also anywhere across the vast Russian Empire. See Rancour-Laferriere, *Russian Nationalism from an Interdisciplinary Perspective*.


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 185.


\(^{21}\) “густая печаль воспоминанний,” ibid., 131.
emphasizing the importance of full inclusion of all peoples. The narrator listens, and as stars begin to appear in the evening sky, signifying the beginning of the Sabbath, Gedali falls silent and departs for the synagogue, “tiny, lonely, dreamy, with his black top hat, and a large prayer book under his arm” (228). Gedali’s political inclinations are firmly subordinate to his religious identity and obligations, both in his own mind and in the mind of the sympathetic Pole. He cannot move outside of the shtetl, physically or culturally. Though Gedali is inspired by revolutionary conversation, and pleads with the Pole to bring the revolution to the shtetl, his dream is impossible, for the Jews cannot truly be part of the revolution. Gedali is nothing more than “the founder of an unattainable International” that could never exist in an anti-Semitic Russia (227–228).

Tropes of ancient origin and authenticity, both in accordance with Russian nationalistic narratives as well as Jewish identity and legacy of suffering, are invoked by Ievtushenko in Babii Jar. The work ultimately resists, however, the myth of identity inherited by blood and ethnicity, instead challenging such narratives and advancing an alternative concept of Russian authenticity. Indeed, the long history of the Jewish people, replete with suffering, is a crucial element of Jewish identity; likewise, a Russian can certainly be proud of his or her national heritage and history. Although the narrator is not ethnically or religiously Jewish—“no Jewish blood runs through my veins”—his own cultural identity and ethnic heritage does not preclude him from experiencing human solidarity with persecuted Jews (108–109). The narrator rather asserts that he is a “genuine Russian,” and decries the pompous, murderous anti-Semites who falsely claim

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22 “…обмахал себя петушиными перьями, поплескал водицы на мягкие ладони и удалился—крохотный, одинокий, мечтательный, в черном цилиндре и с большим молитвенником под мышкой,” ibid., 134.
23 “основатель несбыточного Интернационала,” ibid., 131–134. This is a reference to the Third International communist organization, initiated in Moscow following the Revolution.
24 “Еврейской крови нет в крови моей...”
Russian authenticity (108–109). This claim constitutes the revolutionary sentiment of Babii Iar: contradictory to centuries of Russian cultural norms and official policy, a “genuine Russian” would not stake his or her identity upon anti-Semitism and notions of ethnic superiority.

Reinforcing this revolutionary sentiment, the Russian land itself plays an important role in Ievtushenko’s poem as an arbiter of authenticity and a silent, mournful witness to the tragedy of Babii Iar. The strong presence of the land in Babii Iar is critically important to the poem’s condemnation of anti-Semitism, for it creates an intractable contradiction between these two pillars—anti-Semitism and the land—of Russian national identity. The Jewish people cannot truly be of the land; ethnic and religious differences, further exoticized by isolation in the Pale of Settlement and a deeply anti-Semitic culture, preclude this possibility. The narrator exists “behind bars” and is “forbidden the leaves, forbidden the sky as well” (104, 106). He is trapped in a dark room, hiding from approaching oppressors and physically separated from the magnificence of the oncoming spring. The Jew is cast in a pathetic, confined shadow of an authentic Russian’s vibrant, healthy existence.

Ievtushenko then undermines the notion that the Russian land is off-limits to the Jew by anthropomorphizing the trees and the grass and suggesting their disapproval of anti-Semitism and the atrocities of Babii Iar. Whereas so often in Russian literature, particularly in Socialist Realist works, the land functions as a strong symbol of national home, comfort, and sustenance (as in Polevoi’s A Story About a Real Man), Ievtushenko’s Russian land is beholden to none, save for a sense of righteousness and human dignity. Ievtushenko manipulates this familiar trope upon the poem’s recapitulation “over Babii Iar” as “only rustling wild grasses move. / The trees

25 “Я настоящий русский!”
26 “за решеткой…нельзя нам листьев, и нельзя нам неба.”
watch sternly, like judges arrayed. (106–107)” 27 The land does not celebrate the actions of the Russian anti-Semites, for in this text Russian authenticity is not grounded in nationalistic and ethnic pride, but rather in human compassion and goodness. Ievtushenko’s use of the land to reinforce this claim functions as a powerful reversal of an enduring Russian and Soviet literary trope.

As the Soviet citizenry grappled with the realities of the Holocaust during the Khrushchev-era Thaw, questions of national identity and ethnic pride demanded the attention of the literary community. Traditional constructs failed to adequately address the events of the Second World War and, for that matter, centuries of anti-Semitism in Russia. By inverting the role of the Russian land and invoking its cultural significance to question the legitimacy of a national identity based on ethnic supremacy, Ievtushenko constructs a new model by which one might identify a “genuine Russian.”

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27 “над Бабьим Яром…шелест диких трав. / Деревья смотрят грозно, по–судейски.”
Works Cited


