

Marina Balina\*

# An Autobiography of Childhood: Anatoly Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* as Bildungsroman

<https://doi.org/10.1515/eehs-2022-0021>

Published online May 4, 2023

**Abstract:** This article represents an attempt to read Anatoly Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel* in its complete and uncensored version (published 1970) as a novel of education. Critical interpretation of this text has been dominated by the story of the mass shootings of the Jewish population witnessed by the adolescent Tolya, with the youngster's own story often relegated to the background. But the analytic framework of the Bildungsroman makes it possible to see how, in addition to serving as a testimonial of the "Holocaust by Bullets," the book demonstrates the full extent of the deformation of a child under conditions of war and occupation. The theoretical apparatus of the analysis is largely based on research in narratological theory (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan). Discussion of the structural features of an autobiography of childhood also draws on Kate Douglas's studies on autobiography, trauma, and memory. As a process of socialization, Bildung in *Babi Yar* turns into an anti-Bildung of adolescence: Kuznetsov's novel shows how the experience of war deforms the personality on a variety of perceptual levels—optical, olfactory, haptic, and sonic.

**Keywords:** autobiography of childhood, Bildungsroman, narrating self, experiencing self, childhood trauma

A monument dedicated to Anatoly Kuznetsov, author of the documentary novel *Babi Yar* – which had caused an international sensation upon its publication in 1966<sup>1</sup>—was unveiled at the intersection of Petropavlivska and Kyrilivska Streets in Kyiv, Ukraine on September 29, 2009.<sup>2</sup> The monument's inauguration date was set to coincide with the anniversary of one of the most horrific events in the history of

---

1 The first English translation, by Jacob Gural'sky (see Kuznetsov 1967), appeared a year later.

2 See "Pamiatnik Anatoliu Kuznetsovu" <http://kiev-klab.com.ua/pamyatnik-anatoliyu-kuzneczoivu/> (accessed January 26, 2023).

---

**\*Corresponding author: Marina Balina**, Isaac Funk Professor Emerita of Russian Studies, Illinois Wesleyan University, 1887 Cattle Path, Lexington, KY 40509, USA, E-mail: [mbalina@iwu.edu](mailto:mbalina@iwu.edu).  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1305-8346>

the “Holocaust by Bullets”: the mass shooting of the Jewish population of Kyiv organized by the Nazis on September 29–30, 1941. On those days, 33,771 Jews were shot at Babi Yar (Babyn Yar), a ravine on the city’s outskirts (Evstaf’eva and Nakhmanovich 2004, 1–25). Throughout the Nazi occupation, which lasted from September 19, 1941 until November 6, 1943, Babi Yar remained an execution site, predominantly targeting the Jewish population of Kyiv and surrounding towns, as well as Soviet POWs and captured partisans.<sup>3</sup>

The monument’s unveiling marked another memorable date: it would have been the eightieth birthday of Anatoly Kuznetsov (1929–1979), the author of the first novel published in the postwar USSR to describe the tragedy of the country’s Jewish population—a topic otherwise scrupulously avoided in Soviet media.

*Babi Yar*, a “document in the form of a novel,” as the author defined his book’s genre, is written in the first person. The protagonist/narrator is 12 years old at the outset, the same age Kuznetsov was when Kyiv was seized by German forces in 1941; the novel is not only a document, but also an autobiographical text, including the author’s personal story of the struggle to get the novel published.<sup>4</sup> The child’s aspect of the work is mirrored in the design of the 2009 monument, which conveys the autobiographical nature of the text—a boy standing in front of a wall on which the order of the German occupation authorities is posted. This sculptural installation directly illustrates the novel’s key event (Anatoli 1970, 91): the order for all Jews to assemble with luggage on September 29, 1941. The young Ukrainian sculptor, Volodymyr Zhuravel chose this very episode, emphasizing the importance of the teenager as a witness to history and the focalizer of the novel.<sup>5</sup>

The complex and turbulent history of the novel’s publication and its creator’s complicated life have been described more than once in Western criticism. In its Soviet edition, the novel underwent severe censorship; nevertheless, it was published in 1966 by the literary magazine *Yunist*, and a year later by the publishing house *Molodaia Gvardia* as a standalone (in every sense of the word) volume. In 1969, during a visit to the UK, ostensibly to gather material for a new book about revolutionary history, Kuznetsov formally defected, becoming a *nevozvrashchenets* (a “non-returner”). He managed to take with him the films with the full, uncensored version of the novel. With the author’s additions, under the pseudonym of A. Anatoli, *Babi Yar* was reprinted in 1970 by the émigré publishing house Posev. The same year,

---

<sup>3</sup> For historical background and statistical information, see Evstaf’eva and Nakhmanovich 2004, I: 21–65.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed description of the novel’s publication history, see Matveev 2020; on Kuznetsov’s life and work, see Tishler 2005, 150–154.

<sup>5</sup> The “focalizer” is the character through whose cognition the events are presented; it is the character who “sees,” by contrast to the “voice” who “speaks.” On focalizer and focalization, see Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 74–87. See also Edmiston 1989, 730 and Philpot 2017, 64.

the English translation by David Floyd was published in London and New York. For the new edition, Kuznetsov restored parts of his text that had been removed by the Soviet censors and added explanatory passages with thoughts that had occurred to him after the book's Soviet publication. Thus, he created a special three-part narrative, which was also reflected typographically: the Soviet publication in plain text; the restored censored cuts in bold (in italics in the Russian edition); and the text added later in square brackets. The bold type for the censored passages is preserved in the quotations in this article.

This complex textual arrangement complicates the book's interpretation, as numerous critics have found various narrative features to focus on correspondingly. The American reviewer Zoia Vatnikova-Prizel read Kuznetsov's novel as a new syncretic form of memoir that adds "certain new structural elements to the genre of memoir literature—the documentary nature of living and written testimony and personal authorial expression" (1976, 151). Another American scholar and translator, Richard Sheldon, wrote about Kuznetsov in the context of the Babi Yar as the site of mass shootings and the reflection on that part of history in Soviet literature. His analysis places the novel alongside Ilya Ehrenburg's wartime poetry cycle, articles on atrocities committed against Jews printed in the Yiddish-language newspaper *Eynikayt* (1942–1948), Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem *Babi Yar* (1961), Aleksandr Borshchagovsky's play *Ladies' Tailor* (1980), and Anatoly Rybakov's novel *Heavy Sand* (1979–1980). For Sheldon, Kuznetsov's novel is one of several literary works about the Babi Yar atrocity.<sup>6</sup> He takes note of the authenticity of the author, who is twelve years old at the time, and the polyphonicity created by the narrative using documents and testimonials of survivors (Dina Pronicheva and Vladimir Davydov).<sup>7</sup> However, he dismisses the multilayered nature of the narrative, stating that the "weakest moments occur at those junctures where Kuznetsov interrupts the narrative with his adult exhortations" (Sheldon 1998, 144). James E. Young focuses on Kuznetsov as author-witness, seeing the testimony as the main function of Kuznetsov's book (Young 1988, 60).

---

6 For poetry, prose, and essays on the Shoah by such Soviet writers as Ilya Ehrenburg, Lev Ozerov, Ilya Selvinsky, Pavel Antokolsky, Vasilii Grossman, and Konstantin Simonov, see Shrayder 2018, 367–501. Until 1961, when Yevgenii Yevtushenko's poem "Babi Yar" was published in *Literaturnaiia gazeta*, the topic of the Holocaust on Soviet territory was successfully silenced in literature and history. Ehrenburg's novel *The Storm* (1947), which told of Holocaust events *outside* as well *inside* of the Soviet Union. It was the last Holocaust-related work published until the Thaw (1953–1963); on the history of this publication, see Toker 2013 and Clowes 2005. Edith Clowes' article provides an excellent discussion on the impact of socialist realism on the Holocaust writing in Soviet Russia (see Clowes 2005, 175–177). On the Holocaust on Soviet territory, its history and cultural legacy, see Gitelman 1997. On the poetry about Babi Yar see Clowes 2005.

7 On the impact of witness statements within Kuznetsov's narrative see Clowes 2005, 171.

The French researcher Asia Kovrigina adheres to the same position, characterizing the novel as a “literary testimonial.” As Kovrigina puts it, “The twentieth century gave birth to a new genre of literature (or anti-literature): the literary testimonial—a documentary testimonial that has a literary intent and is written in the form of a literary work” (Kovrigina 2012, 123). She believes that the literary testimonial is a special mode of narrative that is limited in its freedom of fictionalization by the very reality that such a text broadcasts and which it “seeks to convey, to reproduce, but by no means to distort” (Kovrigina 2012, 124; transl. by the author).<sup>8</sup>

However, owing to the concerns of these perspectives—the syncretistic form, the polyphonic composition, and testimony—the perspective of the twelve-year-old focalizer who lived two years of his life in the new reality of the German occupation does not get sufficient attention. During these two years, the protagonist/narrator’s identity was formed and his agency defined. The documentary nature of the novel lies not only in *what* the author sees, which aspects of the war and occupation he reflects on in his narrative, but also in *how* he sees the events taking place. First and foremost, Kuznetsov’s novel gives its reader a quite unusual perspective on the war: the tragedy which is reflected through the experiences of a child’s maturation. In my view, the function of *witnessing* competes for prominence with the story of personality formation amid the destruction of all human values, including that of life itself.

To recover the voice of this young survivor, I will consider Kuznetsov’s novel as a Bildungsroman.<sup>9</sup> The main task of the “novel of education” (Bildungsroman) is tracing a human being’s emergence, her/his essential becoming (Bakhtin 1987, 20); which is one of the main features of Kuznetsov’s text, representing the historical atrocity through a child’s (Tolya’s) cognitive experience. I believe that this perspective can help to keep the text from disintegrating into a complex of unequal and variously connected parts.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Recent commentary on the novel in Russia has likewise focused on the polyphonic nature of the narrative and its testimonial function; see for instance Balditsyn 2018.

<sup>9</sup> On major features of the Bildungsroman in literary history, see Bakhtin 1987; on specific twentieth-century innovations in the genre, see Gohlman 1990, 25–37.

<sup>10</sup> Among recent studies of the Soviet experience of childhood during the Second World War, two theoretical works stand out: Oxane Leingang’s *Sowietische Kindheit im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Generationsentwürfe im Kontext nationaler Erinnerungskultur* (2014), and Olga Kucherenko’s *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941–1945* (2011). Both researchers detail the emergence of the dominant ideological narratives about the “exploits” of child and adolescent heroes and describe a variety of aspects of the war as experienced by children, including as pertains to the Holocaust in Soviet territory (chapter 8 in Leingang’s book: 2014, 240–272). Curiously, neither Leingang nor Kucherenko analyze Kuznetsov’s text, which confirms my hypothesis that critics and historians have eschewed considering it from the perspective of children’s war experiences.

The passive witnessing of Holocaust atrocities is not the only destructive experience for the teenage focalizer. Rather, the text presents the assault on the moral values of his prewar life at all stages of his “inclusion” in the new reality of Nazi occupation, his initiation into this new social order.<sup>11</sup> This is when young Tolya most acutely feels the break with his prewar reality. For him, his mother, and his grandparents, the very idea of a protective home is reduced to a trench dug in the garden where the whole family hides from the bombing. Cold and hunger replace the familiar warmth and the grandmother’s pies. This new reality demands action, for one must survive, so the maturation stage begins much earlier than the teenager is ready. In his break with childhood Tolya is alone, for the adult world surrounding him is distorted and cannot provide him support.

Kuznetsov represents his autobiographical self, re-experiencing stages of initiation which are readjusted with each new round of changes in the occupation’s measures. Each time he begins his adaptation anew. In his survival efforts he sells matches and cigarette paper; after that he cleans boots, makes sausages from horse meat, is mobilized to work in a vegetable garden, but nowhere is there a sense of his place in life, no hint of a future; only the constant desire for food driving his actions. For Tolya, the “educational steps” that might incorporate the individual into society (Meletenskii 1998, 50) lead nowhere: he is as deprived of his future as of his past. An ardent reader, he finds himself without access to books. Twice he is present when books are being burned; first, his mother does so during the Stalinist repressions, before the invasion—she burns pre-revolutionary books; later, they burn Soviet books together, fearing the occupation authorities. The teenager finds himself deprived of the comfort of immersion in another world, the world of literature where he might hide from hunger and fear.

Antoine Berman defines *Bildung* as both a process and a result: “through *Bildung* an individual, a people, a nation, but also a language, a literature, a work of art in general are formed and thus acquire a form. . . . *Bildung* is a process of *self-formation*” (Berman 1992, 43–44). Describing his childhood during the occupation of Kyiv, Kuznetsov paints a picture of an *anti-Bildung*, where the harsh reality of life and the routine of death deprive a teenager of a sense of the future. This is Tolya Kuznetsov’s own special Babi Yar, only visible when the Bildungsroman paradigm is superimposed on his experience.

The focus on the narrator’s witnessing mission is repeatedly emphasized. For example, in describing his writing intentions at the very start of the novel, the author states: “**I am writing [this] as though I were giving evidence under oath in the**

---

11 Richard Coe sees such initiation as typical for autobiographical writings about childhood (1984, 12–16). On the specific structure of childhood traumatic narratives in Russian Literature see Balina 2008.

**very highest court and I am ready to answer for every single word. This book records only the truth — AS IT REALLY HAPPENED**” (Anatoli 1970, 14). Finishing the novel with the postwar destruction of Babi Yar—a dam is built; the ravine is filled by water—the writer prepares his readers for the events of 1961 when the dam broke due to spring rains, and **“a wall of liquid mud thirty feet high poured out of the mouth of Babi Yar ... with the speed of an express train”** (Anatoli 1970, 472). The author did not directly witness these events. He learned about them from accidental eyewitnesses who had survived, since the Soviet authorities, just as with the Holocaust events themselves, strenuously hushed up both the number of victims and the very fact of the flooding. Nevertheless, this episode and the one in 1962, when a road was built over the filled-in ravine, create a special evidentiary framework that combines both of the author’s experiences: the *internal* focus (as a child protagonist and observer in the novel’s events) and the *external* voice (that of the older narrator with a larger vision who knows more than his young protagonist).<sup>12</sup> This temporal “disruption” is characteristic of autobiographical narratives, where the *narrating self* and the *experiencing self* constantly alternate, with the former retaining a certain surplus of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> To understand and portray the full scale of the past emotions, the *narrating* voice must constantly refer to how the *experiencing self* faced this or that event.

The dialogue between the *narrating* and the *experiencing selves* becomes central to the creation of Kuznetsov’s novel as a Bildungsroman. Kate Douglas emphasizes the high degree of dialogicality in children’s autobiographies due to such oscillating discourse. The *narrating self* of the author constantly tries to correct the memory of his *experiencing self* as he sees this experience from a distance. Moreover, a retrospective element is included into the recollection process (Douglas 2010, 21). In Kuznetsov’s autobiographical narrative, his later comments in square brackets written subsequent to the novel’s Soviet publication do not engage with his childhood experience; they contain comments on other matters. The readers’ understanding of the autobiographical self’s maturation, the central element of the novel of education can be traced in its almost linear temporal narrative (from the beginning of the occupation on September 19, 1941 to its end on November 6, 1943) through the combination of the text officially printed in the Soviet Union and the sections that had been previously rejected by the censorship. Kuznetsov records even the slightest

---

<sup>12</sup> The dynamics of the autobiographical narrator’s internal versus external vision is described in Edmiston 1989, 729–744.

<sup>13</sup> I will be employing Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s concepts of *narrating self* and *experiencing self* (2002, 74–75), which is based on her application of Gérard Genette’s theory of focalization.

changes in the mind and character of his *experiencing self*, engaging all categories of his senses from the olfactory and sonic to the haptic and optic.<sup>14</sup>

Early on, in the introductory chapter of the novel (“Ashes”), we witness this attempt to activate every element of human perception connected to the tragedy. The memory of the Babi Yar ravine has clear geographical coordinates (Lukyanovka, Kureniovka, and Syrets). The place has a very specific smell of the “heavy, oily column of smoke” which rose over the ravine during the last three weeks of the occupation, and which, from that point, was imprinted in the boy’s olfactory memory. The place is associated with the sound of machine-gun fire at certain intervals: *ta-ta-ta*, *ta-ta* (Anatoli 1970, 15). However, along with fear, the young focalizer is possessed by an understandable curiosity: “It was hardly surprising that when it was all over, despite our fear of mines, I went along with a friend to see what was left behind” (Anatoli 1970, 15). The boy arrives at the site of the shootings of the Jews, and his optics are already tuned to a particular focus of vision, but he finds himself unprepared for what he must experience. At first, his eyes pick up the ordinary: there are images of an old man crossing the ravine, and three boys who are not only herding goats but also intently searching for gold in the dust of the ravine (Anatoli 1970, 16–17). It takes Tolya, the character-focalizer, time to express his attitude toward what he sees (the focalized). But what transforms this optical experience into a category of horror is the deployment of another perceptual category—haptic or tactile contact with the remains. The reader does not yet know how the rest of the narrative will unfold but a tactile sensation completes the first experience of a place of human tragedy, preparing the reader for what is to come:

The river bed was of good, coarse sand, but now for some reason or other the sand was mixed with little white stones.

I bent down and picked one of them up to look at it more closely. It was a small piece of bone, about as big as a fingernail, and it was charred on one side and white on the other. ... Suddenly we realized we were walking on human ashes. (Anatoli 1970, 16).

This event of touching human ashes and bones becomes the impetus for the story. Thus, the impulse for writing is not what the autobiographical character *sees*, but what he *feels* as he is walking on human ashes and touching human bones. One’s haptic experience—transmitting and understanding information through touch—dominates all other forms of perception in this situation. For a boy who survived fear during the occupation, when he saw death daily, touching the

---

<sup>14</sup> Here I would disagree with Rimmon-Kenan’s reference (2002, 78–81) to perception (sight, hearing, smell, etc.) as having two primary coordinates—space and time. Kuznetsov’s autobiographical self recalls both olfactory and sonic images without any spatiotemporal references; having been imprinted in his memory, they are triggered randomly.

uncanny becomes a more powerful experience than all other forms of the perceptual cognition of tragedy. Thus, the focalized—human bones and ashes—acquires additional dimensions, combining, in one narrative space, the childlike learning about the world through touch, and, literally, touching the oblivion of death.

If haptic experience becomes the impetus for the focalizer's understanding of his new reality, it is still his optical experience, his following of the changing visual images, that shapes the process of the boy's essential emergence as the protagonist of a Bildungsroman. It is mainly the optics through which young Kuznetsov constructs his knowledge of the new world. At first, Tolya views the world through the narrow gap in the trench that he and his grandfather have dug in their yard to hide from the bombs.

We had dug our trench in the garden; it was the usual kind of air-raid shelter — the “slit-trench” — of those days, shaped like a letter T, six to seven feet deep and about two and a half feet across. There were similar trenches in all the courtyards, squares, and streets; the government had appealed over the radio for people to dig them and explained how to do it. (Anatoli 1970, 22).

Being in a trench means, literally and symbolically, a limited horizontal space through which the boy experienced the shock of the withdrawal of the Soviet army and the Germans' arrival. Having been raised by the Soviet school system and Soviet propaganda, the teenager cannot believe his eyes. There are no more illusions about the victorious Soviet army, and his visual memory becomes almost immediately freed from celebratory Soviet images of heroic soldiers. In their place, he sees exhausted men in “faded khaki uniforms, some of them with packs on their backs, **others without even their weapons**” (Anatoli 1970, 21). As the shelling and bombardment ends, and Tolya's family—mother, grandmother, and grandfather—surface from the trench, the boy's spectral vision expands, albeit only horizontally. In the new images, Tolya primarily looks for familiar features associated with his accustomed life. Thus, the first German soldier he sees reminds him of his friend, Bolik Kaminsky. Such a sight protects him from the fear of changed circumstances and from the confusion experienced by everyone except his grandfather, who *should* experience it, but who is rather confident in his admiration of the invaders because he believes he knows Germans, having worked as a farmhand for German settlers in Ukraine before the revolution.

Through pictorial imagery of this new reality—the occupation—another phase of the boy's education begins. Tolya is not merely a beholder, but also an active participant of this new world. An important moment of his initiation is a robbery of local stores in which he quite deliberately takes part.



I found people looting a large footwear shop. The shopwindow had been shattered and there were grown-ups inside it, elbowing each other out of the way and tramping the broken glass underfoot. I dashed in after them just in time to see them get their hands on some boxes of shoes and galoshes — my God, what fabulous goods for those days! (Anatoli 1970, 33).

To his disappointment, being late to the scene of looting, he gets only a kerosene lamp and the weights from a scale. However, the vignette changes the nature of both his *narrating* and *experiencing selves*. Here, they collide, and instead of progressing horizontally to a world of permissiveness, the experiencing self suddenly recalls the tenets of prewar behavior that his God-fearing grandmother taught him: “I was ready to burst into tears. I had never been greedy: I was Grandma’s well-behaved, polite little boy. Yet, all of a sudden, this craze for loot had come over me like a hot avalanche, and I felt a tightness in my throat from greed and excitement” (Anatoli 1970, 34).

The autobiographical self, which combines the *narrating* and *experiencing selves*, leaves the function of observer to the *experiencing self*, giving the role of a commentator to the *narrating self*, whose inner vision begins to move vertically, appealing to emotions, personal memory, and the earlier inculcated moral lessons, albeit limited. The author leaves moral judgments to the *narrating self*, while the *experiencing self* is assigned the registering of external events.<sup>15</sup>

The next key moment in such dynamic occurs when Tolya sees the order of the new German administration requiring local Jews to report at the assembly point on September 29. Rumors of the Jewish deportation begin to circulate. The first attack of bewilderment (does Tolya’s friend, the half-Jewish Shurka Matso, have to leave, too?) is followed by an unexpected outbreak of anti-Semitism that emulates his grandfather’s attitude:

Then suddenly — to my surprise, sort of spontaneously — I began to talk to myself in my grandfather’s words, with that same intonation and malice: So, what? Let ’em go off to their Palestine. They’ve grown fat enough here! This is the Ukraine; look how they’ve multiplied and spread out all over the place like fleas. (Anatoli 1970, 92)

The next morning begins with a desire to see everything with his own eyes. The *narrating self* does not apologize for this behavior: curiosity is natural for a twelve-year-old, and he has no remorse for thinking badly about Shurka Matso the day before. Understanding the horror of what is happening comes optically; the scene that unfolds before his eyes fills the teenager with fear and

---

15 As Mieke Bal puts it: “In a so-called ‘first person narrative’... an external focalizer, usually the ‘I’ grown older, gives its vision of a fabula in which it participated earlier as an actor, from the outside” (Bal 1985, 112).

incomprehension. The narrator does not try to talk about other emotions—empathy, sympathy—they have not yet reached the *experiencing self*.

I could not, of course, miss such a rare spectacle as the deportation of the Jews from Kiev. As soon as it was light, I was out on the street. ... I was struck by how many sick and unfortunate people there are in the world. ... [I]t was just a sea of heads — the Jews of Podol were on the move. (Anatoli 1970, 93–94)

Only when Tolya *sees* the exodus of Kyiv's Jews on their way to Babi Yar, "with their howling children, their old and sick, some of them weeping, others swearing at each other" (Anatoli 1970, 93), is he filled with compassion, and sympathy, **"immediately dropping completely [his] anti-Semitism of the previous day"** (Anatoli 1970, 94). Here again, we see the *narrating self* moving into the vertical space of emotional self-evaluation. As the story progresses and the autobiographical character's experience of war and occupation grows, there is less and less room for such self-judgment.

Tolya does not yet know what awaits the Jews at Babi Yar, but he sees and hears the reactions of the people watching the exodus: "and the closer I got to Podol the more people I found out on the streets. They were standing in the gateways and porches, some of them watching and sighing, **others jeering and hurling insults at the Jews**" (Anatoli 1970, 94).

Here and there in the crowd, the boy hears stories of theft, of old Jews having their suitcases and sacks snatched from their hands, of a carter hired by several families who **"simply whipped up his horse and dashed off down a side-street, and they never saw him again"** (Anatoli 1970, 94). The sympathy and anger of the crowd as well as the remarks and glances of the bystanders, merge into one optic-sonic image so clearly imprinted in Tolya's memory that he easily reproduces it when, towards the end of the occupation in 1943, his Russian and Ukrainian compatriots follow the path of their former Jewish neighbors, going into the unknown:

It was horribly like the procession of Jews in 1941. Masses of people were on the move, with howling children, old people, and invalids. Bundles hastily tied up with strings, broken ply-wood suitcases, shopping bags, and boxes of tools. ... Nobody was seeing anybody off: everybody was leaving. (Anatoli 1970, 406)

The *narrating self* does not merely record the events but adds comparative analysis of pictures pulled from two years of dreadful memories. For two years, the *experiencing self* saw murder, theft, hatred, and a lack of compassion. *Babi Yar* documents the ways in which this world, with its constant violation of human morality, hardens the immature soul of a child.

As noted above, the adults do not try to protect him. His own grandfather deciphers the constant sound of gunshots coming from Babi Yar: "Do you know

what?’ he said with horror in his voice. ‘They’re not deporting ’em. They’re *shooting* ’em’” (Anatoli 1970, 96).

This sonic sign of massacre haunts the autobiographical hero throughout the narrative in exactly the same sequence: “ta-ta-ta, ta-ta” (Anatoli 1970, 15). Thus, the optic and sonic create a unified image of destruction that will be imprinted in both the memory of the *experiencing* and *narrating selves*, rendering Babi Yar sensorily perpetual in Kuznetsov’s adult mind.

New forms of perception accompany each new stage of the boy’s initiation into adulthood. The haptic and olfactory sensations combine in his new experience working for the sausage maker Degtyaryov, described in the chapter “How to Turn a Horse into Sausages” (Anatoli 1970, 337–46). Tolya registers the emotional processes associated with what he sees, while allowing the reader to follow the action itself. The chapter is built on the constant contrast between the ordinary and the extraordinary, almost repulsive experience. Degtyaryov lives in a tidy house: “He had a very pleasant, clean house; white table-napkins and covers on the furniture; spotlessly white linen on the beds” (Anatoli 1970, 337). He gives Tolya good food and is quite generous with his little helper though completely unconcerned about Tolya’s emotional trauma of seeing how horses are methodically killed and butchered. Throughout the episode, Kuznetsov contrasts the cleanliness of the house, and its master’s good spirits—he “was in the best of humours and full of energy” (Anatoli 1970, 340)—with the streams of blood that Tolya has to collect in special tubs for blood sausage. Every detail of the slaughter is conveyed through Tolya’s experience of it. The narrating voice gives a detailed account of his younger self’s participation in the process (he is holding the horse’s bridle), from the binding of the horse’s legs to the ax blow on its skull. The focalizer sees that “Old Gray, who had apparently become accustomed to everything in this life, stood quiet, offering no resistance” (Anatoli 1970, 341). The boy registers the amount of blood on Degtyaryov’s hands and face. At one point, the boy bursts out in a scream, to which Degtyaryov discontentedly responds: “What’s the matter—are you scared? You’ll get used to it; you’ll see much worse than this in your lifetime. A horse is just a pound of smoke. Gimme that board over there” (Anatoli 1970, 342).

Thus, Kuznetsov’s anti-Bildung involves withholding compassion from animals—after all, a horse is a pound of smoke and an opportunity to earn and eat. His tender love for his own cat Titus does not extend to the horse Old Gray. Kuznetsov, the narrator represents death and murder as mundane “work,” where blood is turned into blood sausage. Critics of the novel often note that the author turns the narration of the mass murder of Jews and POWs over to two of Babi Yar’s real-life survivors, Dina Pronicheva (Anatoli 1970, 99–120) and Vladimir Davydov (Anatoli 1970, 296–310). However, this chapter shows the ordinary planned process of destroying life, even if not human; it might be important for understanding the damage that war wreaks on a youth.

Tolya is never hungry in the Degtyaryov's house, but his fingers are constantly bruised. The salt in which he must dip pieces of meat keeps the cuts from healing. Thus, his hands become a constant reminder of the death surrounding him. The teenager is immersed in the smell of blood, old and fresh: "You couldn't breathe; there seemed no end to the sausage skin" (Anatoli 1970, 344). The smell and touch of bloody meat creates an olfactory and tactile hell for the boy who is now 13 years old. Day after day, he relives this hell, which emotionally devastates him. That is the price of his survival.

Discussing the Bildungsroman as a genre, Mikhail Bakhtin noted that it involves a temporal broadening, with the action of the novel extending beyond the biographical timeframe of its main character. The hero of the Bildungsroman "emerges along with the world, and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself" (Bakhtin 1987, 23). It is this cruel world of war and occupation that Kuznetsov recreates in his novel: the accumulation of cruelty forms a personality for which the science of survival becomes the guiding principle of life.

Moreover, Tolya grows up with a greedy and cowardly grandfather: Fyodor Semerik can hardly teach his grandson sympathy for those around him. For Fyodor, both his grandson and his only daughter become obstacles to his own survival. Hunger is an ordeal for everyone, and the grandfather decides to fend for himself alone, abandoning his daughter and grandson. Right before Tolya's eyes, his grandmother, who had been his role model for kindness and compassion and who would be the family's first war victim, is subjected to injustice—an injustice that she is powerless to resist—as relatives' apartment that had been entrusted to her is simply seized by collaborators (Anatoli 1970, 72). After her passing from malnutrition and illness, the family disintegrates, and for Tolya this marks the end of his *biographical* time: he now falls into the *historical* time of the war, the only temporality left for him, which requires physical strength, brutality, and elementary greed. Not surprisingly, this is how the new teenage character is formed, creating his own moral credo geared to survival.

One episode in the novel demonstrates most clearly how such a "school of life" transforms a kindhearted, thoughtful youngster into a hardened survivalist. Again, we can trace this transformation through a range of human perceptions—optic, haptic, and olfactory.<sup>16</sup>

The boy is diagnosed with incipient tuberculosis, and his mother, having given up the last valuable possessions in the house, sends him to the village of Rykin to stay with a woman who remains in the author's memory as Goncharenko. The woman feeds

---

<sup>16</sup> The olfactory images scattered throughout the text are almost invariably negative: the burning of Kyiv's central Kreshchatyk neighborhood; the smell of blood; even the smell of food can seem noxious to Tolya. The exception is the countryside imagery (in chapters like "A Beautiful, Spacious, Blessed Land" or "Potatoes in Flower"), which returns the joy of pleasant aromas to the boy.

Tolya, and honey becomes the main delicacy and medicine, but it is always rationed. Left alone, the teenager led by the smell of honey climbs onto the closet, and as he finds a pot of honey there he begins to eat it with his fingers. Touching honey and licking it off his fingers give him physical pleasure. Theft of forbidden sweets is a frequent topos in children stories, but it takes a new twist in this narrative, forming the foundation of an ideological belief. The *experiencing self* approves of such an act; he also provides an excuse while forming a new life credo. However, the *narrating self* is fully aware of the moral problem of stealing from a person he considers pure and good:

I had to eat honey so as not to have tuberculosis, to take care of myself, **and I wanted to devour as much as I liked. Because in this glorious stone-crusher the only way to save your skin was to seize the moment when things went your way, to grab everything you could lay your hands on, that had been left unlocked, that hadn't been noticed, to slip between people's legs and snatch things out of their hands — so long as you survived! ... I'll take what I can, and I'll survive in spite of everything.** (Anatoli 1970, 273–74).

Kuznetsov is not afraid to show how a dehumanized environment, where stealing and killing are routine, influences an adolescent consciousness; he shows how this new man is formed, with a new kind of ethics, with a resolute desire to survive and a readiness to transgress previous moral dictates. Earlier in the novel, Kuznetsov quotes Tolya's thoughts about reality being all Babi Yar: "I realized that my grandfather, that great admirer of Germans, was a fool. That there is in this world **neither brains, nor goodness, nor good sense, but only brute force. Bloodshed. Starvation. Death. ... The world was just one big Babi Yar**" (Anatoli 1970, 209). This is how individual traumatic experience is processed by the novel.

The paradox, according to the American scholar of autobiography Leigh Gilmore, is that trauma "is largely considered 'unspeakable' or 'unrepresentable'—that language is inadequate to articulate trauma—yet, at the same time, writing and speaking are authorized as the primary modes of healing trauma" (Gilmore 2001, 6). Adolescent Tolya has no listeners to whom he can tell about the fears of his wartime childhood. The adults and other children he is surrounded by are busy doing the same thing as he: surviving. Therefore, the dynamic between *narrating self* and *experiencing self* becomes one of the leading elements of the narrative. We are dealing here with *otobiography*, where *oto*, one's ear—listening to oneself—becomes another element of living through war trauma.<sup>17</sup>

Kuznetsov thus traces with accuracy and candor the transformation of an open, kind child into a war-hardened, precociously matured human being, whose

---

17 This term was coined by Jacques Derrida, who claimed that "the ear is an organ for perceiving difference" (Derrida 1985, 10). The dialogic nature of Kuznetsov's text involves a constant *self-listening* as a narrative device. For a discussion of the nature of "otobiographical" writings, see Ergin 2017.

“education” has taken place in an environment of blood, hardship, and mass death. An upbringing amidst war cannot ennoble the soul, Kuznetsov remarks. The autobiography of the writer’s wartime childhood not only consists of images of atrocity etched into his memory, but also represents a history of personal trauma hidden under the plethora of documents and facts. As a Bildungsroman, *Babi Yar* is an act of *scriptotherapy*, “writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (Henke 1999, 2). “Autobiography,” Henke continues, “has always offered the tantalizing possibility of reinventing the self and reconstructing the subject” (1999, 5). Analyzing Kuznetsov’s text as an autobiographical “novel of education” in no way diminishes its significance as a witness account of the Holocaust; on the contrary, it adds a new dimension to its testimonial function. The novel demonstrates how with the progression of the war a teenager’s view of the world changes, his understanding of good and evil becomes corrupted. The historical events against which Tolya’s life takes place are presented as personal experiences; this is a privatization of history, which involves, conversely, “turn[ing] private lives into public texts” (Paperno 2009, 9). It is this public perception of private experience that makes the autobiographical self of the novel a war witness, whereas he is, in fact, first and foremost a war *victim*, whose voice in the book is practically drowned out by this very history. As Gilmore puts it in her study of trauma and life writing, “Life writing about trauma moves personal experience onto the historical stage, it provides a way to reconceive the relationship between private and public, and it produces a counter-discourse in the historical muting or erasure of the kinds of violence that have been regarded as violating dominant cultural norms and narratives” (2001, 3).

Anatoly Kuznetsov would never be a thought leader—what Russians call a “ruler of minds” (*vlastitel’ umov*)—of his generation. His pre-defection works (the 1958 novella *Prodolzhenie legendy/Sequel to a Legend* and collections of short stories from the 1960s) did not become literary sensations. *Babi Yar* was clearly achieved through great suffering, based not only on the blocked memory (Ricoeur 2004, 13) of “big” History—with a capital “H”—but also the memory of a personal *story* that the writer dared to tell. According to the recollections of contemporaries, Kuznetsov was a complex man with his own difficult life experiences, and his defection and early death (he was only fifty when he died of a heart attack in London) attested to deep personal problems.

The image of a teenager who, albeit surviving, is perpetually hungry and ultimately broken, was nothing like the widely cultivated Soviet images of pioneer heroes of the Great Patriotic War, or the heroes of Konstantin Simonov’s war epics. Perhaps only the “lieutenants’ prose” of his contemporaries, Viktor Nekrasov and Konstantin Vorobyov, comes close in frankness to the unvarnished history of war witnessed by young Tolya.<sup>18</sup> According to Derrida, autobiography “becomes effective

---

18 On the “lieutenants’ prose” and personalizing of war memory see Balina 2011, 156–161.

not at the moment it takes place, but only when the message is received by other ears. The receiving ear may be perceived both as the ear of the other or the ear of the autobiographical subject” (1985, 10). In the constant dialogue between his character/focalizer and *narrating self*, Kuznetsov voices the horrific experience of war, not only for the reader, but also for himself; Tolya’s experience-sharpened vision moves not just horizontally, registering the war in ever more detail, but also vertically, deep into himself, to find the still-uncorrupted moral vitality that the writer seems to have so needed. Thus, *Babi Yar* is transformed, through the autobiographical story of growing up in a daunting period of war, into a testimonial of “big” History.

## References

- Anatoli, A. 1970. *Babi Yar. A Document in the Form of a Novel*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. Translated by David Floyd.
- “Pamiatnik Anatoliiu Kuznetsovu” [A monument to Anatoly Kuznetsov]. <https://kiev-klab.com.ua/pamyatnik-anatoliyu-kuzneczuu/> (accessed January 26, 2023).
- Bakhtin, M. 1987. “The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel).” In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, edited by C. Emerson, and M. Holquist, 10–59. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bal, M. 1985. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Translated by Christine van Boheemen.
- Balditsyn, P. 2018. “Obraz Avtora i Polifoniia v Dokumental’nom Romane Anatoliiia Kuznetsova ‘Babi Yar.’” *Filologija i kul’tura* 3 (53): 140–5.
- Balina, M. 2008. “Wounded Narratives’: Jewish Childhood Recollections in Post-Soviet Autobiographical Discourse.” In *The Poetics of Memory in Post-Totalitarian Narration*, edited by J. Lindblad, 15–27. Lund: Lund University Press.
- Balina, M. 2011. “Prose after Stalin.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, edited by E. Dobrenko and M. Balina, 153–75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Berman, A. 1992. *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Clowes, E. W. 2005. “Constructing the Memory of the Holocaust: The Ambiguous Treatment of *Babii Yar* in Soviet Literature.” *Partial Answers* 3 (2): 153–82.
- Coe, R. 1984. *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Derrida, J. 1985. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, edited by C. McDonald. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. Translated by Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronell.
- Douglas, K. 2010. *Contested Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Edmiston, W. F. 1989. “Focalization and the First-Person Narrator: A Revision of the Theory.” *Poetics Today* 10 (4): 729–44.
- Ergin, M. 2017. “Derrida’s Otobiographies.” *Biography* 40 (2): 342–65.

- Evstaf'eva, T., and V. Nakhmanovich. 2004. *Babi Yar: Chelovek, Vlast', Istoriia (Babi Yar: Man, power, history)*: Vneshtorgizdat Ukrainy.
- Gilmore, L. 2001. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Gitelman, Z., ed. 1997. *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gohman, S. 1990. *Starting Over: The Task of the Protagonist in the Contemporary Bildungsroman*. New York: Garland.
- Henke, S. 1999. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Kovrigina, A. 2012. "Zhanr literaturnogo svidetel'stva i roman-dokument 'Babi Yar' A. Kuznetsova." In *The Holocaust in Soviet Union. Proceedings of the 19th Annual International Conference on Jewish Studies*, edited by I. E. Kuznetsova, 122–31. Moscow: Sefer.
- Kucherenko, O. 2011. *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941–1945*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kuznetsov, A. 1967. *Babi Yar: A Documentary Novel*. New York: Dial Press. Translated by Jacob Guralsky.
- Leingang, O. 2014. *Sowjetische Kindheit im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Generationsentwürfe im Kontext Nationaler Erinnerungskultur*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Matveev, P. 2020. *I ad sledoval za nim. K 50-letiiu publikatsii podlinnogo teksta romana-dokumenta Anatoliia Kuznetsova 'Babi Yar.'* ("And inferno followed him: Towards the fiftieth anniversary of the real text of Anatoly Kuznetsov's document-novel Babi Yar") *Znamia* #11. [znamit.ru/publication.php?id=7780](http://znamit.ru/publication.php?id=7780) (accessed January 26, 2023).
- Meletenskii, E. M. 1998. "Mif i dvadtsatyi vek (Myth and the twentieth century)." In *Izbrannye stat'i. Vospominaniia (Selected articles. Memoirs)*, edited by E. S. Novik, 419–26. Moscow: RGGU.
- Paperno, I. 2009. *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Philpot, D. K. 2017. *Character Focalization in Children's Novels*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ricoeur, P. 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer.
- Rimmon-Kenan, S. 2002. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Routledge.
- Sheldon, R. 1998. "The Transformations of Babi Yar." In *Soviet Society and Culture: Essays in Honor of Vera S. Dunham*, edited by T. L. Thompson, and R. Sheldon, 124–61. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Shrayer, M. D. 2018. *Voices of Jewish-Russian Literature: An Anthology*. Brighton: Academic Studies Press.
- Tishler, J. R. 2005. "Anatolii Kuznetsov (A. Anatoli)." In *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 301: Russian Prose after World War II*, edited by C. Rydel, 150–4. Detroit: Thomson Gale.
- Toker, L. 2013. "On the Eve of the Moratorium: The Representation of the Holocaust in Ilya Ehrenburg's Novel *the Storm*." *Search and Research: Yad Vashem Lectures and Papers*, Vol. 19, 37–56.
- Vatnikova-Prizel, Z. 1976. "*Babii Yar* A. Anatoliia (Kuznetsova) — Novaia Sinkreticheskaia Forma Memuarnoi Literatry." *Russian Language Journal* 30 (#106): 143–52.
- Young, J. E. 1988. "Holocaust Documentary Fiction: The Novelist as Eyewitness." In *Writing and the Holocaust*, edited by B. Lang, 200–15. New York: Holmes & Meier.