

## Open Forum

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# Mapping, Teaching, and Remembering the Holocaust After February 24, 2022

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**Abstract:** This text is related to the issue of the culture of Holocaust remembrance and the transformations that are taking place in the visual map of Holocaust memorialization in frontline Kharkiv and the changes that are taking place in student audiences about the Holocaust and Holocaust memory against the backdrop of Russia's current war against Ukraine.

**Keywords:** destruction; monument; culture of memory; teaching; parallels; Holocaust

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, raised many questions for the entire world that we are not yet able to answer, as the war continues creating new challenges and trials. This article will focus on the changes in the landscape of Holocaust monuments in Kharkiv, as well as on the thoughts of Ukrainian scholars and educators on teaching about the Second World War and the Holocaust. The professors noticed a shift in the way these events have been discussed among students and in the public space for the past year and a half of war. The method of documenting and interviewing was used to conduct a series of interviews for my project "Mapping the Memory of Ukraine" about the diversity of memories of Ukraine's history.

In this text, I will focus on the following questions: *How are Russian attacks destroying the memory of the Holocaust in Kharkiv today? What changes have happened in the teaching of the Holocaust in Ukrainian universities since February 24, 2022? Can the contemporary memory of the current war affect the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust? How do teachers and students talk about their experiences following February 24, 2022, or how do they compare them with the testimonies of Holocaust survivors?*

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It seems appropriate to start with the consequences of one of many attacks by Russian troops on Kharkiv in March 2022, and the current state of the monument to the murdered Jews in Drobytsky Yar illustrated by a photograph I took on August 20, 2023. The city of Kharkiv is a frontline city, which is no more than 40 km from the border of the Russian Federation, where the shelling is constant and has not ceased since the war started. During this time, many monuments and memorials in the city have been damaged, including the Glory Memorial Complex, the central place of remembrance of the Second World War in Kharkiv, the Memorial to the Victims of Totalitarianism, where Polish and Ukrainian soldiers are buried, and the Drobytsky Yar Memorial, where more than 16,000 Jews were killed during the occupation of the city. After another missile attack on the city, a shell damaged the Tree of Life memorial sign that crowns the beginning of the memorial ensemble, the menorah (a seven-cornered candlestick, an ancient symbol of Judaism), and the sign's pedestal. When this happened, I immediately recalled a 2019 interview I had recorded as part of the Babyn Yar Memorial Foundation's "Voices" project with Leonid Leonidov, head of the Drobytsky Yar organization, who was forced to move to Israel because of the war, who persistently and faithfully preserves and perpetuates the memory of the Holocaust in Kharkiv.<sup>1</sup>

In interviews, Mr. Leonidov every time emphasized, "The Jews were always trying to get one thing done: to write on the site of the mass shootings that Jews were shot here, not civilians, Soviet people. The Jews never agreed with this, that it was a mass grave."<sup>2</sup> In independent Ukraine, monuments to Holocaust victims have been erected throughout the country, primarily on the initiative of non-governmental organizations. In Kharkiv, the most significant "places of remembrance" of the Holocaust, Drobytsky Yar and the site of the Jewish ghetto, were marked in the early 1990s. Leonidov was telling a story related to the fundraising because of the huge inflation due to the collapse of a bank, where there were one million two hundred thousand rubles, which would have been enough to build the Memorial, but it had disappeared with the bank's bankruptcy. He spoke about the numerous myths that arose from this collection, because in order to get money from various sponsors, the organizers of the collection said that Drobytsky Yar had been the place of extermination of various peoples, not only Jews, but also Ukrainians and Armenians, "And we came up with this legend, based on the fact that it was a multi-layered grave, that not only Jews were shot there, like in Babyn Yar."<sup>3</sup> However, the narrator emphasizes the importance and significance of the existence of the Memorial at the site of the tragedy. Today, we can only assume the feelings of Mr. Leonidov, who made such an

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1 The "Voices" Project of the Babyn Yar Memorial Foundation. Archival collection of interviews.

2 The "Voices" Project of the Babyn Yar Memorial Foundation. Archival collection of interviews.

3 The "Voices" Project of the Babyn Yar Memorial Foundation. Archival collection of interviews.

effort to have this memorial erected in December 2002, as it is now burnt and in ruins.

This summer, I was able to discuss important issues that concern many researchers today, myself included, about the future of remembrance culture with historian and director of the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies, Anatoliy Podolsky. In Podolsky's words, "The enemy hates us, but we are fighting for our freedom and we have strength, and inspiration, and respect. We honor the memory of the victims of this war, and this will help us to resist the enemy today. You see, that's why I didn't see any shift. And so, I think we will overcome this challenge and will be able to somehow combine, not supplant, but combine the memory of the victims of the Second World War with the memory of our victims."<sup>4</sup> Mr. Podolsky's thoughts are presented in a broader discussion about the memory of the Holocaust and the Second World War, in which the researcher links those to Russia's actions after February 24. The Russian actions are aimed at murder and destruction, as opposed to the actions of Ukraine, which cherishes and preserves memory, trying to protect monuments and cultural heritage. At the same time, when the interviewer asks about the risks involved in remembering the Holocaust, the interviewee says that, on the contrary, there is no threat or displacement of the memory of the modern war from the memory of the Second World War, "Look, I don't see any threats. I see that we will reach an even more powerful level of true memory of the Second World War, and this will help us."<sup>5</sup> Having done both, collecting testimonies of Holocaust survivors and documenting the brutal war waged by Russia today, I fully share Mr. Podolsky's thoughts.

Experiencing the war today, of course, we cannot abstract from it; comparisons, parallels emerge in our thoughts, ideas, even in the public space, in visualization. However, current events provide new knowledge and experience to understand actions, emotions, and deeds of people in the past. It gives us a better understanding of ourselves, helps us to listen to each other, be more empathetic and preserve memory.

During the interview, the historian and my colleague, Artem Kharchenko, also talks about the parallels between the events of the Holocaust and the present, and he emphasizes broader issues, such as the presentation of the Holocaust in courses about genocides. Karchenko says, "Obviously, after the Second World War humanity has, unfortunately, learnt what genocide is. Therefore, my students, too, understood

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4 Interview materials from 04.08.2023. Archival collection of the project "Mapping memories of Ukraine".

5 Interview materials from 04.08.2023. Archival collection of the project "Mapping memories of Ukraine".

genocide from the context of the Holocaust. Until now, however, they were only listening to the history of the Holocaust. Psychologically it did not have an impact on them up until the attack on Ukraine, when the parallel hit us all like a hammer.”<sup>6</sup> Mr. Kharchenko says that the students themselves encouraged him to talk about the genocide, especially after the April events, and began to talk about their own experiences, “And what was new, was that for the students who spoke, their current experience became part of our discussion. I mean, I have my own teaching style, students have a reader before each class, and then we have a discussion. And, for example, the students, speaking about the experiences of deportees, or people who were in camps, or people who were refugees, were forced to flee. They added their own background, they talked about how they fled and that now they understood what it is like when bombs fall. They understand what it means to leave your home, what it means to lose your property, what it means to lose your friends or relatives. That is, the teaching has not changed, but the history of the current war itself, it suddenly became part of the discussions, so we could not avoid talking about the current war during every class.”<sup>7</sup> I have found similar thoughts and observations in other interviews with representatives of the Ukrainian academic circle and similar themes repeatedly emerge during my teaching. Ukrainian students today are active participants in the discussion about human experiences and dimensions of war, they listen more attentively to the experience of others, and they express more interest in learning about history. Researchers of memory culture have to work with an even wider spectrum of memory, not to shift, not to compare, not to impose one phenomenon onto another, not to transfer events from the past to the present, but to develop their own tools for remembering the current war, to develop their own mechanism, terms, elaborations, including working with trauma in order to create conditions for more context and critical analysis.

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6 Interview materials from 01.07.2023. Archival collection of the project “Mapping memories of Ukraine”.

7 Interview materials from 01.07.2023. Archival collection of the project “Mapping memories of Ukraine”.