



## BABI YAR. CONTEXT

Script writer/Director: **Sergei Loznitsa**

Editors: **Sergei Loznitsa, Danielius Kokanauskis, Tomasz Wolski**

Sound: **Vladimir Golovnitski**

Image restoration: **Jonas Zagorskas**

Producers: **Sergei Loznitsa, Maria Choustova**

Associate Producers: **Ilya Khrzhanovskiy, Max Yakover**

Production: **ATOMS & VOID for BABYN YAR HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL CENTER**

2021, documentary, 121 min, The Netherlands, Ukraine

[contact@atomsvoid.com](mailto:contact@atomsvoid.com)

**Logline:** *After genocide comes chronocide*

### Synopsis:

*On September 29-30, 1941, Sonderkommando 4a of the Einsatzgruppe C, assisted by two battalions of the Police Regiment South and Ukrainian Auxiliary Police, and without any resistance from the local population, shot dead in the Babi Yar ravine in the north-west of Kiev 33 771 Jews. The film reconstructs the historical context of this tragedy through archive footage documenting the German occupation of Ukraine and the subsequent decade. When memory turns into oblivion, when the past overshadows the future, it is the voice of cinema that articulates the truth.*

### Director's notes:

***How did I learn about Babi Yar?** When I was little, we lived in the Nyvky district of Kiev. There is a forest between Nyvky and the Syretz district, where Babi Yar is located. From the age of 10, several times a week, I used to take a bus from my house to the «Vanguard» swimming pool in Syretz, and come back on foot, through the wooded area and the ravine, occasionally stumbling across the stones with faded inscriptions in a strange language. In fact, I was walking through the remains of the*

*old Jewish cemetery, abandoned at the time, or to be precise, not yet completely raised to the ground by the local authorities. One day, when on my usual route back home, I came across a new stone. This stone had a fresh inscription in Russian, which stated that there would be a monument inaugurated on this very spot. Having read the inscription, I went home to my parents and asked them what had happened in Babi Yar and why was it necessary to put a monument there. I never received a direct answer. Adults tried to avoid the subject, and their answers seemed vague. As far as I know, this was a taboo subject in Kiev in the 70-s. Even in the 50-s, immediately after the war, the tragedy of Babi Yar was covered in a shroud of silence.*



© ATOMS & VOID

**Today, they say that Soviet ideology was to blame for this silence, but I think that the problem lies deeper. It's about human nature in general. Talking about this tragedy makes one feel uncomfortable. The memory of it is shameful and scary. In Vasily Grossman's «Life and fate» there is a passage – a letter written by a Jewish mother to her son. She wrote it just before being taken to the ghetto. This text has a documentary reference: Grossman quotes the letter from his own mother, who died in the Berdichev ghetto. She wrote that as soon as the Jews were declared «outlaws», her neighbours in the communal apartment threw her out of her room, and she found her possessions piled up in the cellar. It was neither the communist party, nor the Soviet authorities, it was her neighbours who threw her out of the flat. They simply told her that she no longer had the right to live there. The Jews were «against the law». Later on, when she was leaving for the ghetto, there was only one man who**

*helped her carry her things and loaned her some money. This was a singular and an unexpected act of kindness. All those, whom she expected to help and support her – her friends, colleagues, and pupils – turned away from her. She heard the neighbours fighting about her remaining furniture before she even left the courtyard. In my opinion, this has little to do with ideology and everything to do with human nature. It seems to me that this battle over somebody else's furniture is still going on today. And, of course, it is not easy for anyone to admit to this fact. Even to oneself.*



© ATOMS & VOID

**When I put together the story of Babi Yar, I tried to reconstruct the historical context of life in German occupied Kiev. A lot of German officers and soldiers had brought with them amateur film cameras and filmed daily life in the city. This footage wasn't suitable for propaganda newsreels, but I find this material the most interesting and fascinating of all. You get to see some fragments of daily life in Kiev in 1941 – 1943. I believe that it is crucially important to connect the tragedy of the extermination of the entire Jewish population of Kiev with the realities of life under German occupation.**

*The footage comes from a number of public and private archives in Russia, Germany and Ukraine. We have been researching this material quite extensively: our researchers worked at the Russian State Archive in Krasnogorsk (RGAKFD), at the Bundesarchiv and at a number of regional archives in Germany, and also we managed to access some private collections. The quality of the footage differed greatly. Some material was in a reasonably good condition, while some other reels were seriously damaged. The restoration work lasted for several months.*



*Some of the footage I work with has been buried in the archives for decades – nobody has ever seen it. Not even historians, specialising in the Holocaust in the USSR. One such episode is the explosions of Kreschatik in September 1941. Kiev's central street was mined with remote controlled explosives by the NKVD (Soviet secret service) before the Red army had retreated from Kiev. The detonations of the explosives were carried out a few days after the Germans took the city. There were civilian casualties, and thousands were left homeless. The Soviets, who planted the bombs, did not consider human casualties and mass destruction as a significant factor in their military planning.*

*Another rare piece of footage, which I use in the film, is the footage of the last public execution in Kiev in January 1946. Twelve Nazi criminals were hanged in the city's central square, which was then known as Kalinin square. 200 000 residents of Kiev gathered in the square to watch the execution. The whole scene has a very medieval feel to it. Or, perhaps, biblical - "an eye for an eye" ...*



© ATOMS & VOID

**I study dehumanisation, the loss of humanity by a human being.** *This is why it is important to begin the documentary about Babi Yar with the German invasion. There was a regime change, and prior to that – a short period of chaos, of lawlessness. It is during this moment, when the true nature of a human is revealed. Without control and pressure from the authorities, in an atmosphere of chaos, it seems that anything is allowed, any action can go unpunished.*

*I have every reason to believe that back in September 1941, many residents of Kiev had suspected that Jews were going to be killed and not "relocated to the south". But no one protested. Of course, it is impossible to judge people, who had found themselves in the most extreme and difficult circumstances, but it is possible to reflect*

*upon this whole situation. In fact, it is necessary to think about it. No doubt there were the righteous among them – those who hid the Jews in their houses, who helped them survive. But they were few and far between. This is what scares me. Certain individuals committed heroic acts and risked their lives by helping the Jews, while thousands of others remained indifferent to the fate of the Jews, preoccupied with their own “housing issues” and dividing the remaining Jewish property. Neighbours reported on their neighbours, concierges acted as informants – they used the same lists of residents, which they had previously supplied NKVD with, to report the Jews to the Germans. After the massacre, a few remaining invalids and elderly Jews in the Podol district of Kiev, who were too frail to walk to Babi Yar, were hunted by the local residents, dragged out of their apartments and stoned to death. The locals did it on their own initiative, without any German involvement. I saw the archive documents, describing these atrocities, with my own eyes.*

*I believe we must learn the truth. The knowledge of history is the best-known defence against **chronocide**. It is also the only way out of the soviet/post-soviet swamp, where the countries, heirs to the former USSR, find themselves today.*



© ATOMS & VOID

**SERGEI LOZNITSA** – director/script writer/producer, was born on 5 September 1964 in Baranovici (USSR). He grew up in Kiev, and in 1987 graduated from the Kiev Polytechnic with a degree in applied mathematics. Sergei Loznitsa went on to study feature film making at the Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow. He has directed 22 internationally acclaimed documentary films and 4 feature films, all of which premiered in the Official Selection of Cannes Film Festival.

*Sergei continues to work both in documentary and feature genres.*

*In 2013, Sergei Loznitsa launched a film production company ATOMS & VOID.*

*Selected filmography: BLOCKADE (2006), MY JOY (2010), IN THE FOG (2012), MAIDAN (2014), THE EVENT (2015), AUSTERLITZ (2016), A GENTLE CREATURE (2017), DONBASS (2018), THE TRIAL (2018), STATE FUNERAL (2019)*

***ATOMS & VOID (The Netherlands)** is a film production company run by Sergei Loznitsa and Maria Choustova. Since its creation in 2013, the company has produced 8 documentary films by Sergei Loznitsa. ATOMS & VOID also participates as associate producer in the production of feature films by Sergei Loznitsa.*

*Selected filmography: LETTER (2013, European Film Academy nomination for Best Short Film), THE OLD JEWISH CEMETERY (2014, Special Screening Rotterdam IFF), MAIDAN (2014, Special Screening Cannes IFF), THE EVENT (2015, Out of Competition Venice IFF), THE TRIAL (2018, Out of Competition Venice IFF), STATE FUNERAL (2019, Out of Competition Venice IFF)*

***BABYN YAR HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL CENTER (Ukraine)** is a non-governmental organization, established in 2016, in order to acquire, study and disseminate knowledge about the tragedy. The organization is currently building the first modern Holocaust museum in Eastern Europe, establishing a center for the study of the tragedy, in which large-scale scientific and educational activities will be carried out.*