

Babel' in Context

A Study in Cultural Identity

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EFRAIM SICHER

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Note on References and Translations

Throughout this study I have referred to the following editions of Babel's works: *Detstvo i drugie rasskazy*, ed. Efraim Sicher (Jerusalem: Biblioteka Aliya, 1979) (*Детство*); *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, ed. I. N. Sukhikh (Moscow: Vremia, 2006) (*Собрание сочинений*). English translations from Babel' are my own, except those taken from *Collected Stories*, ed. Efraim Sicher and trans. David McDuff, reissued as *Red Cavalry and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 2005) (*Red Cavalry and Other Stories*); and from *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, ed. Nathalie Babel and trans. Peter Constantine (New York: Norton, 2001) (*Complete Works*). I have in some places revised the translations of the texts in the *Complete Works* (which is, incidentally, far from complete and based on texts published in the thirties which remain excised in places and differ in a number of respects from the earlier versions I am using). All translations of other sources are my own, except where otherwise indicated. Since not all of Babel's correspondence has appeared in the Russian original, I have occasionally been able only to quote the English translation. In matters of transliteration, I have preferred inconsistency to unreadability.

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INTRODUCTION

*Не надо даром зубрить сабель,
меня интересует Бабель,
наш знаменитый одессит.
Он долго ль фэбулу вынашивал,
писал ли он сначала начерно
иль, может, сразу шпарил набело,
в чем, черт возьми, загадка Бабеля?..*

— С. Кирсанов

*Don't get into a lather rattling your saber,
It's Babel' I'm after,
our famous Odessite.
Did he chew the story over for ages,
or write everything in drafts,
or maybe he shot it straight out,
what is, damn it, the enigma of Babel'?*

— S. Kirsanov¹

*Who was Babel'? Where did he come from? He was
an accident. We are all such accidents. We do not
make up history and culture. We simply appear, not
by our own choice. We make what we can of our
condition with the means available. We must accept
the mixture as we find it—the impurity of it, the
tragedy of it, the hope of it.*

— Saul Bellow²

The Odessa File

Moscow, 1994. The gods of communism had fallen, along with “law and order.” A crippled child holding up an icon and clutching a begging bowl beneath the icon of the new ideological system, Macdonald’s, seemed to sum up the drastic changes that had been set in motion by the collapse of communism. I was invited,

as an Israeli scholar who had published two volumes of Babel's stories in Russian, to a conference marking Babel's centenary at Moscow's Russian Humanities University. The event was held "under the cloak" of a Zoshchenko conference. It seemed that the time was not yet ripe for Babel' to come out fully as a major author of the Soviet period. Why was this so? Why had Babel' not emerged yet from the gray zone of cautious and partial publication under *perestroika*? If Russian literary history was now ready to admit all writers, including dissidents and émigrés, what was the place to be inscribed under Babel's name in the annals of Russian culture?

It transpired that there were (at least) two Babel's—the Jewish and the Russian writer. Over seventy years had passed since a symbiosis had existed in a hyphenated Russo-Jewish identity. Little was remembered of the flowering of that nascent writing by Russian Jews, less still of the great renaissance of Hebrew and Yiddish literature in Russia's major cities (most famously in Odessa, Babel's native town), all vestiges of which were repressed during the Stalinist "Black Years" and afterwards. Under the title of "Soviet author," Babel' was held in respect as an experimental prose writer who became a "master of silence" before being swallowed up by Stalinism,³ yet, after the fall of communism, he was also denigrated as the "Marquis de Sade" of the Bolshevik Revolution.⁴ In the reawakened Russian national consciousness, Babel' was at best marginal, at worst alien and hostile. Of course, in a post-revolutionary context, a Soviet Russian Babel' did not exclude an iconoclastic, highly individual Babel', who owed allegiance to no Party or ideology, who passionately loved Yiddish, and might equally fit in with Russian prose of the twenties and the modernism of the revived Hebrew literature and its Yiddish rivals. By the twenty-first century, Babel' had become part of the cultural identity of a Russian-speaking, Jewish readership in Russia and Israel; indeed, he had become one of the iconic symbols of that cultural identity, bolstering the return to Jewish traditions or secular Jewish identity. A Jewish culture festival was held in Odessa in 2004 featuring Babel' and the Odessa past, and a monument to the writer was unveiled at a Babel' festival in 2011 (starring, among other celebrities, the stand-up

comic Mikhail Zhvanetskii). In Moscow, Babel' was slated to enter the pantheon of Jewish cultural heroes in the projected House of Tolerance (the Moscow Jewish community's museum and cultural center).

Isaak Babel' was born in the Moldavanka, a squalid working-class district of Odessa, on 13 July (30 June, O.S.) 1894, to Emmanuel and Faige (Fenia). The family's original name appears to have been Bobel (בבל in Hebrew is "Babylon").⁵ In 1895 the Babels moved to Nikolaev, where Emmanuel was employed in the Birnbaum company that traded in agricultural machinery and where Isaak studied at the S. Witte Commercial School. In 1905, they sent young Isaak ahead of them to Odessa to lodge on Tiraspol'skaia Street with Aunt Katia (Gitl), before settling around the corner in Dal'nitskaia Street. They then moved to Richelieu Street, in the fashionable center of town. The family seemed not to have been affected by the 1905 pogroms.⁶ In 1906, Babel' enrolled in the Nicholas II Commercial School, which was open to Jews without restriction, and was tutored at home in Bible and Hebrew, like so many sons of the Odessa Jewish middle classes. The anti-Jewish quota, however, was to keep Babel' out of Odessa University, and he studied business management at the Kiev Institute of Financial and Business Studies. Business management offered a natural choice of career under the Tsars, when many professions were closed to Jews. During his studies in Kiev, Babel' mixed with the local assimilated Jewish intelligentsia, including the family of a business associate of his father, Boris (Dov-Ber) Gronfein, whose daughter Evgenia (Zhenia), a budding artist, he would marry in 1919.

The entry of a Jewish intellectual into Russian letters under the Tsars often cost some degradation in order to reside in St. Petersburg or Moscow; sometimes the price was apostasy. Leonid Pasternak, the Jewish painter from Odessa and father of the famous poet, was something of an exception in this respect when he settled in Moscow in the 1890s. Babel' was fortunate, and lodged both legally and not uncomfortably with the family of an engineer, Lev Il'ich Slonim, while studying law at the Neuro-Psychological Institute, a liberal arts college well known for the revolutionary activity among its students. Nevertheless, in his "Autobiography"

("Автобиография"), Babel' bragged that he lacked the residence permit required of Jews and lived in a cellar with a drunken waiter while on the run from the police.

These simple biographical facts, however, do not help us penetrate the enigma of Babel', a short, stocky man with glasses and glistening, curious eyes; compulsively elusive even before the Stalinist years, when incautious words could condemn and betray; obsessively secretive well before loud conformism was the rule; naturally mischievous, with a tendency to play pranks on his closest friends;⁷ and devious in his dealings with editors at a time when the regime demanded a steady output of ideologically correct material. His evasiveness and long disappearances did not begin with the desperate need to hide from creditors and everyone else in order to write in peace, or with the tactical silences of the thirties, when he would have his daughter Lydia answer the phone with "Papa's not at home," to which she could not help adding (being her father's daughter), "he's gone out in his new galoshes."⁸ Early on he developed a tendency to disappear for lengthy periods of time and would write to his friends asking them to undertake various commissions for him. He wrote to his friends the Slonims in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) in December 1918, after one such disappearance, "I found myself in a situation where I was ashamed to appear in public, then I was ashamed of not appearing.... In my character there are irrepressible traits of endurance and an impractical relationship with reality... From this derive my voluntary and involuntary transgressions."⁹ He had children by three women, yet essentially remained the Jewish family man, caring for his family abroad and being disastrously overgenerous with his Odessa relatives. He craved freedom, but could not breathe freely outside Russia, for all its poverty and the stifling repression of Moscow's literary world. Babel' returned to Stalin's Russia because this was where his writing material was: the historic upheavals of revolution and Civil War, the transformation of a backward country into a modern industrial state, a country where the grotesque contradictions of human nature fascinated him, and where the moral obligation to record the terrible human price of building socialism dictated his painstaking craftsmanship.

Who was Isaak Babel? The American Jewish novelist Saul Bellow, puzzling over why a writer so characteristically Jewish as Babel, who knew Yiddish well enough to write in it, chose to write in the language of the *pogromshchiki*, answered this question by saying that we are all accidents of history.¹⁰ I would agree that we are born in a time and place, and into a language and culture, not of our choosing, but out of that time and place each of us makes something that is uniquely ours.

Babel was born in a time and place that were to be a crossroads of history and was himself to die as the victim of circumstances which he saw only too clearly, perhaps earlier than most. Cultural identity may be shaped by the individual, but it grows out of a literary, ethnic, and linguistic context. As David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz have observed in their introduction to a study of the metaphysical and philosophical meanings of Jewish identity, identity is as much a cultural and social formation as a product of personal circumstance, and it is always in process.¹¹ However, in order to properly understand the individual writer within the interactive intersections between self and the cultural milieu, this book will follow three parameters: text, context, and intertext.

Babel's formative years coincided with the renaissance of Jewish national consciousness and cultural revival in the aftermath of the Kishinev pogroms. As Kenneth Moss has shown, the liberation of the Jews in February 1917 from centuries of Tsarist restrictions and segregation triggered a multitude of diverse and conflicting plans for a Jewish culture, whether in Hebrew, Yiddish, or Russian, from the Bundist to the Zionist. These various plans conceptualized a future Jewish identity evolving out of culture, rather than politics. Nevertheless, many Jews were caught up in the furor and excitement of revolutionary Russia, and saw politics as a means to achieve both cultural and ideological ideals, but were overtaken by events when the Bolsheviks suppressed existing Jewish communal organizations and gradually took control of cultural production.¹² The communist takeover did enable many Jews to advance up the echelon of new administrative institutions (including the secret police) and white-collar professions (including publishing and literature); the tragedy

was that it spelt economic disaster for the already war-ravaged Jewish community in the *shtetl*.

Babel' grew up among a remarkable mix of speakers of Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, and Ukrainian speakers, in the vibrant Jewish cultural center of Odessa,¹³ and could, after the turmoil of the Bolshevik coup and Civil War, blend into Russian literature of the 1920s, when ethnic distinctions mattered far less than class origins. Babel' managed to publish before the collapse of Tsarism a manifesto which called for a literary messiah from Odessa, a Russian Maupassant. In "Odessa" (1916), he prophesied that this cosmopolitan port on the Black Sea could bring the sun to Russian literature. Russia's much-needed literary messiah might come from Odessa, he claimed, and break St. Petersburg's icy grip on Russian literature so as to breathe life into a stifling prose full of turgid stories of boring provincial towns in the north. Babel' casts his poetic identity in the mould of Maupassant, his muse and acknowledged literary master, but writes in "Notes from Odessa" ("Листки об Одессе", 1918) as a Jew from cosmopolitan Odessa, which, in the first half of the nineteenth century, welcomed foreigners, including its French governor and a number of Jews from Galicia.¹⁴ In fact, as John Klier has demonstrated, Odessa's "port Jews" benefited from the distinctive situation of the city and developed modern forms of Jewish culture.¹⁵

It was in Odessa that the coexistence of different cultures—despite ethnic tensions, for example between Greeks and Jews—made possible the natural development of a "minor modernism" in this periphery of the Russian empire. By the end of the nineteenth century, a third of the city's population was Jewish, concentrated in certain areas of the city; with the influx of refugees during the First World War the proportion swelled and, despite emigration and the disruptions of revolution and Civil War, attracted further migration from *shtetls* and outlying areas, reaching 41.1% of the total population in 1923.¹⁶ The cultural contacts between Jews, Russians, and Ukrainians in the period of burgeoning modernism in the early twentieth century have not been fully investigated, despite the fact that Jewish culture centered in Odessa, as well as Warsaw, Vilna, and a few smaller provincial towns, was to be formative in modern

Jewish cultural identity and, later on, Israeli literature. Odessa was one of the freer cities in the Russian Empire and it was open to Western influences in its architecture, politics, art, music, and cultural life, not to mention its more “Levantine” or Mediterranean lifestyle. The influence of the West and of Maupassant in particular, as we will see in a later chapter, was to shape Babel’s aesthetics in unique ways.

Odessa’s cultural memory evokes nostalgia for an imagined carnivalesque liberty and Jewish *joie de vivre*, but also bourgeois affluence. This was a vibrant center of Jewish culture, erased from the memory map of history by emigration to America, seventy years of communism, and Nazi genocide. To reinvent that vanished world is to read through the distorting lens of former *maskilim* and émigrés, the retrospective memoirs and fiction of Jabotinsky, and the stories of Babel himself.¹⁷ The postmemory of “Old Odessa” has been further mythicized in books, folksongs, anthologies, and films which celebrate a folklore of “Jewish” criminality, characterized by Yiddish humor. Odessa’s own Russian dialect, but also thieves’ cant, later lent a coded euphemism to Jewish ethnicity, when Jewish cultural identity had become taboo or officially erased from Soviet official discourse. In fact, the Odessite has become a comic character, the wily conman of the NEP period, such as Il’f and Petrov’s Ostap Bender who knows how to negotiate and subvert the Soviet system (though he is never identified as Jewish or an Odessite). The Odessa myth shifted from the classical topos of Russian cultural identity, centered on dreams of imperialist expansion to the Black Sea and domination of the Balkans and Asia Minor, to a construction by mid-nineteenth-century *maskilim* of commerce combined with cosmopolitanism that rapidly became an ethos of Jewish diversity and a Jewish city of vice and sin. That fiction of Jewish criminality easily lent itself after the October Revolution to the more subversive legends celebrating opportunity and carousing, when banditry and financial speculation had been outlawed by the Bolshevik regime, the synagogues and cafés turned into workers’ clubs.¹⁸ In 1926, the city was officially Ukrainianized, after most vestiges of independent Ukrainian nationalism had been wiped out, but a memory of Odessa’s unique blend of Russian,

Yiddish, and Hebrew culture lived on for a while, even after the last Jewish cultural institutions had been taken over and the Zionists driven underground. The further destruction of the remaining memory of Odessa Jewish life in the Holocaust, when Odessa was occupied by the Rumanians and the city's Jews were murdered, may explain a belated post-Soviet impetus for elderly Odessites and émigrés in Ashdod and Brighton Beach to celebrate the mythicized past and share collective loss, documented in Michale Boganim's film *Odessa, Odessa* (2005). One could say that Odessa's cultural memory has acquired a life of its own.¹⁹ Even today, Odessisms and Odessa lore have left their mark on popular Russian song,²⁰ and Odessa has achieved something of an afterlife in post-Soviet fiction, for example, Irina Ratushinskaia's *The Odessans* (*Одесситы*, 1998) or Rada Polischuk's "Odessa Tales, or the Incoherent Alphabet of Memory" ("Одесские рассказы, или путаная азбука памяти", 2005).

Odessa lore, literature, and language offer a further dimension to the intercultural identity of Babel's Russian prose, for this meeting-point of Jewish and Russian cultures, mixed with heavy French, Italian, and other foreign influences, gave birth to a putative "South-Western School" of Russian literature that includes Babel, Eduard Bagritsky, Yurii Olesha, Vera Inber, Konstantin Paustovsky, Lev Slavin, and Valentin Kataev, as well as Il'ia Fainzil'berg, better known as the Jewish member of that comic duo, Il'f and Petrov. From the early twenties, these young talents breathed some warm Odessa sunshine into Moscow literary circles. In fact, most of them made their name in Russia's capital in the twenties, where they were part of a wave of regional and exotic voices, in a celebration of the underworld and the peripheral. Such claims to independent literary groupings were controversial and risky under Stalin. The formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky soon had to retract his formulation of a "South-Western School" of writers under ideological pressure to conform to a centralized scheme of literature under Party control that became increasingly intolerant of individualism and separatism, not to mention romantic fellow-travelers, as most of the Odessites were.²¹ Nevertheless, Yuri Shcheglov states that it is an "established fact" that the "South-Western School" contributed a West European

prose style to the Russian realist tradition, and opened up the borders of Russian literature through intertextuality.²² And perhaps only an Odessa Jew could combine Pushkin and Sholom Aleichem, or have the audacity to propose an Odessa Maupassant as Russia's literary messiah. Rebecca Stanton puts it more precisely when she writes that it was more a case of reclaiming and then appropriating the Russian literary tradition associated with Pushkin, who was forever associated with Odessa since writing *Evgeny Onegin* there.²³ In her book-length essay, the Odessa journalist Elena Karakina makes some sweeping claims for the existence from the twenties of a putative Odessa school as a counterpart to the Russian cultural tradition based in St. Petersburg (Petrograd/Leningrad) and Moscow.²⁴ Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that Semyon Yushkevich and O. L. Korenman ("Karmen") were writing about local Odessa life well before Babel' made Benia Krik king of the gangsters. Besides Osip Rabinovich's *Morits Sefardi* (Морис Сефарди) and *Kaleidoscope* (Калейдоскоп), Yushkevich's novel *Leon Drei* (Леон Дрей) covered this ground in 1913-15, and his 1908 play, *The King* (Король), described a revolt of a philistine magnate's sons like that of Mendel's sons in *Sunset* (Закат, 1928). The Odessa underworld had also been explored by Kuprin, in "Gambrinus" ("Тамбринус", 1906) and "Offense" ("Обида", 1906), about Odessa gangsters who disassociated themselves from the *pogromshchiki*. And yet Odessa is more often than not "remembered" through Babel's Odessa tales.

The Enigma of Babel'

Babel's Russian prose was considered to be exemplary. The critic and editor of the Soviet journal *Krasnaya nov'* (Red Virgin Soil), Aleksandr Voronsky, writing in 1925 (before Babel' had published a single book), declared that Babel's prose showed firmness, maturity, self-assurance, and craftsmanship, which is testimony to culture, intelligence, and hard work ("твердость, зрелость, уверенность, нечто отстоявшее, есть выработка, которая дается не только талантом, но и упорной, усидчивой работой"), superior to much Soviet fiction, and it reflected a turn away from experimentalism, toward realist classicism.²⁵ He had, wrote Voronsky, created a *sui*

generis epic style, and was close to the revolutionary spirit, but there was something almost pagan and un-Christian in his preoccupation with the flesh. Babel' ranks along with Platonov, Olesha (a fellow Odessite), Bulgakov, Pil'niak, and Zamiatin's Serapion Brothers as a leading Russian modernist. Zamiatin, in "On Literature, Revolution, and Entropy," thought of the writer as a heretic who viewed the world at 45 degrees from the deck of a ship in a storm,²⁶ and commented that Babel's brilliant mastery of *skaz* in "The Sin of Jesus" ("Иисусов грех") did not let him forget he had a brain, as often happened in ornamentalist prose: "this tiny tale is raised above prosaic everyday life and is illuminated with serious thought."²⁷ Shklovsky famously summed up Babel's style by saying that he spoke in the same tones of the stars and gonorrhea.²⁸ But perhaps it is precisely this innovative style that marks Babel' as an outsider who sees Russia with an eye for the grotesque, the absurd, and the tragic in what is essentially human.

Part of the puzzle of cultural identity may lie in the intertextuality that characterizes modernism, which renewed traditional forms in art and literature, such as folk motifs and myths. This was true for both Russian modernism and the Jewish renaissance of 1912-1925. Intertextuality underlies Jewish writing through the ages and its use of linguistic play helped to evade censors, inquisitors, and hostile regimes in Spain and in Russia. Moreover, the fact that Babel' and other Russian Jews were often multilingual allowed them to create variant subtextual meanings for Jewish readers, as will be seen in the following chapters. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian were not separate spheres of cultural activity; that is to say, not only did Russian Jews write in more than one language, but when they began to move freely in Russian society, they could address different audiences, sometimes simultaneously. When David Shneer declares that Babel' did not work in Yiddish, and therefore could not claim the role of a cultural translator,²⁹ implying he must be excluded from a history of Soviet Jewish culture, Shneer is ignoring Babel's translations from Yiddish, his immersion in Yiddish classics, and his use of Yiddish in his Russian prose. Similarly, Kenneth Moss's claim, in view of the fierce competition between a Hebrew cultural project

(later realized in the Land of Israel) and Yiddish (which established a major secular and socialist cultural center in the Soviet Union in the twenties), that Russian did not play a significant role in the formation of a post-revolutionary Soviet Jewish intelligentsia³⁰ discounts the role of Jewish artists and writers who moved freely in both Russian and Jewish circles. Indeed, Soviet Jewish Communists who struggled to establish Yiddish as *the* Soviet Jewish culture were fighting a losing battle with Russian which was a powerful assimilatory and socially mobilizing force. Harriet Murav has demonstrated that Russian Jewish literature shared the heritage and themes of Yiddish modernism, as well as collective memory of pogroms, noting that Babel' was "looking over his shoulder at Yiddish."³¹ I will argue that Babel' lived in the secular Yiddish tradition and not only enjoyed the mutual admiration of leading Yiddish cultural figures, but, like them, looked to a socialist future while mourning the loss of the Jewish cultural past. His stories appeared in Yiddish translation, and his own translations of classic and contemporary Yiddish writers and his film work attest to his immersion in Yiddish; not only that, but, as I shall show, the Yiddish language breathes in the coded subtexts of his Russian prose.

If Jews had previously been unwanted guests in Russian culture, after the Bolshevik takeover they rushed to fill the vacuum left by the Russian intelligentsia. Russia was, when all was said and done, their native land, and for this generation Russian was their native language, even if this was contentious in the 1908 debates between Kornei Chukovsky, Jabotinsky, and others and at the Czer-nowitz conference. But acculturation had a price. In a letter to Gor'ky in 1922, Lev Lunts, a leading member of the Serapion Brothers, spoke of an inner conflict, an "ethical contradiction," between his pronounced and strong sense of Jewish identity and his allegiance to Russia and Russian literature: "I'm a Jew, staunch, loyal, and glad to be one. And I'm a Russian writer. But I'm also a Russian Jew, and Russia is my homeland, which I love more than any other country. How does one reconcile these?"³² Alice Nakhimovsky, in her study of Russian Jewish writers, points to Babel's writing as the "densest picture in all of Russian literature of the Jew between two worlds."³³

Jews soon learned to be hypersensitive to accusations of “nationalism,” especially if they had a Bundist or Zionist past to conceal. Now they tried to achieve a new transparency in order to differentiate themselves from the old (“bad”) Jew and to claim status as a new (“good”) Jew who had cut himself off from his own past and had learned the lesson of pogrom experience, according to Party propaganda a phenomenon of the feudal Tsarist system, which taught that national difference was a symptom of the class struggle and that anti-Semitism would disappear along with the capitalist bourgeoisie. Opting for Russian became a statement of ideological identity, since Yiddish and Hebrew reverberated with old ways and the continuity of Jewish national existence. Alternatively, Russian could be coded with the covert language of the Other for those Jewish readers who were bilingually proficient, and who were painfully aware that the large representation of Jewish names in the Communist Party or in Soviet cultural institutions and the popular association of the Jew with the entrepreneur in the temporary retreat to limited capitalism during NEP meant no end to “Jewish troubles.” On a grain requisition expedition on the Volga in “SS Cow-Wheat” (“Иван-да-Марья”) in 1918, Babel’s narrator is reminded that he is a Jew who will always be a foreigner in his native Russia.

The distance traveled from the Jewish past by the Soviet Jew writing in Russian is measured in the politically correct declaration of class allegiance and the willingness to condemn the Jewish religion and bourgeoisie. In the Komsomol poet Mikhail Svetlov’s “Verses about the Rebbe” (“Стихи о ребе”, 1923), the narrator guards the future and when he turns to the East, towards Jerusalem, the traditional orientation of Jewish prayer, it is only to see if his Komsomol comrade is coming. The rebbe and the priest alike are doomed to die with the old world. They are both branded with the stereotyped accusation of financial speculation, that is to say, economic sabotage and anti-Communist, disloyal behavior. The sunset splashes the *shtetl* and its dark, empty synagogue with the red of the Red Flag and the faded Talmud is rejected. In “Bread” (“Хлеб”, 1929) a new kinship is discovered between the pogrom-scarred Jew Samuel Liberzon and the Russian former *pogromshchik* Ignatius Mozhaev, the class solidarity of fathers who have lost sons

fighting for the new regime. Svetlov at least remembered the Jewish past with some melancholy and pain, and described the Jewish revolutionary martyr as a new Moses on a Soviet Sinai, a proud descendant of the Maccabees.

Eduard Bagritsky, a poet from Odessa, went so far as to curse his Jewish parentage in "Origins" ("Происхождение", 1930) and made the typical break with Jewish rituals which had lost any meaning for the revolutionary Jewish youth. There is little that is specifically Jewish in Bagritsky's favorite themes of hunting and fishing.³⁴ When it came to defining a collective memory for the next generation, Bagritsky referred in his "Conversation with My Son" ("Разговор с сыном", 1931) to the archetypal image of feathers flying in a pogrom, but the hope which he bequeathed to the next generation was of an internationalist universe where such things did not happen. The dream of universal social justice remained far off. Meanwhile, Bagritsky, a professing atheist caught up in the romanticism of the communist revolution, remained nostalgic for his native shore. In "Return" ("Возвращение", 1924), and, in a posthumously published long poem "February" ("Февраль", 1933-1934), he marveled at how a sickly Jewish boy like himself had become a poet with a love for nature and for women. He does not hide his circumcision and does not jibe, like the Yiddish poet Itsik Feffer, "so what if I'm circumcised?" More obliquely, Bagritsky's translation of 1927 from Itsik Feffer's long poem *Dnieper* (*Днепр*) does not evoke the poet's native Ukrainian landscape without recording the children thrown into the river during the Civil War. Babel', Bagritsky's friend and fellow Odessite, eulogized him after his death from tuberculosis in 1934 as combining the spirit of the Komsomol and "Ben Akiva" (*Собрание сочинений*, III, 373).³⁵

The examples of Svetlov and Bagritsky (as well as Iosif Utkin, as will be seen) illustrate the paradox of the Soviet Jewish Communist, who had to prove his loyalty to international communism and the Soviet state by demonstrating negation of anything remotely "nationalistic"; that is to say, Jewish. But to sever oneself from one's own memory of past and family did not solve the problem of identity. Jews who changed their names to "neutral" Russian or

demonstratively Russian revolutionary names still had to prove their hatred for their ethnic past more than their non-Jewish comrades (which did not help them when, during Stalin's postwar "anti-cosmopolitan" campaign, many writers and critics were "exposed" in the press by having their original names published in the attacks on them). The Evseksiia, the Jewish section of the Soviet Communist Party, showed particular zeal in persecuting all forms of religion and was instrumental in repressing Jewish cultural institutions before being liquidated itself.³⁶ In recent years, Jews have been singled out by anti-Semitic detractors who held them guilty for the damage done to Russian churches, as well as for the famine in the Ukraine caused by enforced collectivization, since so many Party leaders and activists were identified as Jews. However, in the first decade after the October Revolution it was easier for Jews to deal with anti-Semitic stereotypes in Russian literature, since discrimination had been officially eliminated with the old order, but it was harder to deal with continued prejudice among the masses. A short novel, for example, by an otherwise conformist writer, Mikhail Kozakov, *The Man Who Prostrated Himself* (Человек, падающий ниц, 1928), records the painful experience of anti-Semitism that persisted despite official Party policy and propaganda.

Double Book-Keeping

In an anthology of Spanish Jewish poetry, *Spanish and Portuguese Poets: Victims of the Inquisition* (Испанские и португальские поэты, жертвы инквизиции, 1934), the Soviet Jewish poet and critic Valentin Parnakh wrote of Jewish poets in Russia as Marranos, referring to Jews who outwardly converted to Christianity under the Inquisition but secretly practiced Jewish rites. This was an analogy made famous by Moisei Maimon in his painting *The Marranos* (Марраны, 1893), which alluded to the persecution of Moscow Jews by the Tsarist police. Aware of their Marrano status, writers like Babel' could code their Russian with the covert language of the Other for those Jewish readers who were bilingually proficient in the "hidden language" of the Jews³⁷—a kind of "double book-keeping." "Double book-keeping" ensured an ideologically safe cover, while a clandestine

subtext spoke to a different cultural and linguistic knowledge and a different understanding of historical events from the perspective of centuries of Jewish suffering. By contrast, Mandelstam and Pasternak espoused cultural forms of Russianness and Christianity, while that eternal chameleon Ehrenburg changed his skin with regimes and party policies, like some people changed shoes when they no longer fit.³⁸ The poets Bagritsky, Utkin, and Svetlov, each in his own way, turned their backs on the Jewish past and used Yiddish and Jewish references to identify themselves in relation to what was being abandoned rather than shared.³⁹ By contrast, in Aleksei Svirsky's *Story of My Life* (*История моей жизни*), the hero David reverts to Yiddish after a pogrom experience makes him wish to leave Russia.⁴⁰ In the post-revolutionary years, nevertheless, Yiddish could merge with dialect, regionalism and slang in spoken Russian and in literature, but for Jews it remained a sign of identification of cultural and ethnic origin, as well as marking artistic and ideological transition, for example in Lissitzky's use of calligraphy and Hebrew texts in his illustration of Ehrenburg's "The Steamship Ticket" ("Шифс-карта") or of the Haggadah.⁴¹ And, of course, Yiddish was an obvious element in the Odessisms and criminal slang in the early stories of Il'ia Il'f (Fainzil'berg), as well as the double-edged satire of Il'f and Petrov's *Twelve Chairs* (*Двенадцать стульев*, 1928), which is reminiscent of Sholom Aleichem's Menachem Mendel stories.⁴² Still, of all the Jews who wrote in Russian after the October Revolution, none was more skilled in Jewish subtexts than Babel', and for none of them were Jewish identity and Yiddish as natural and inbred as they were for Babel'.

This book argues that Babel''s cultural identity is complex and presents it as a case study of an acclaimed Soviet Jewish writer who made Russian culture his own, yet was able to introduce into Russian literature Jewish characters who were strong and independent, confident in their identity.⁴³ As a writer entirely at home in both Russian and Jewish cultures, Babel' caught the cruel ironies of the situation of the Jew who lived in both worlds and understood the irony that the new socialist order was destroying the Jewish past. Yet Babel' himself never seems to have lost hope that socialism would bring a better future. At the same time, however, to think of Babel'

is to think of other Jewish writers in eastern and central Europe who grappled with the confrontation of modernity that brought both a strange new world of revolution and technology and anti-Semitic violence but who also served as mediators of European modernism.

The first chapter explores the fate of Babel' as a writer who refused to compromise his literary integrity, in an age when very few survived who did not compromise. Through an account of Babel's literary career based on archival sources, newly discovered correspondence, and memoirs, we will see the contradictions and conflicts behind the enigma of Babel'. This is a story of literary politics in Stalinist Russia, as well as a personal tragedy ending in the loss of a great writer in his prime who could never write "to order."

The second chapter of this book opens with a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings and historical background of the intertextual relationship between Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish culture, with an analysis of subtexts in Babel's stories. The instances I look at in particular, playful puns and double meanings in Yiddish, tell us a lot about the workings of referentiality in creating subtexts within a literary polysystem.

In Odessa, Babel' knew Bialik and Mendele, among the great figures of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, and in the *Red Cavalry* stories there are surprising resonances of Bialik's verse, which most Jewish readers would have known by heart in the original or in Russian translation. A close reading of passages from *Red Cavalry* (*Конармия*) unearths these intertextual clues to Babel's "double book-keeping." Liutov's encounter with his alter ego, Il'ia Bratslavsky, is not a fantasized invention of a Hebrew Communist, but uncovers a forgotten episode in Soviet Jewish history and Hebrew literature, in which Babel' was involved through his contribution of a selection of his stories to a Hebrew communist journal.

The Hebrew Communists were deluded idealists, who wished to translate the vision of the prophets into the construction of a socialist society. But Babel' never lost his sense of irony in his insight into history. A radical perspective of history is afforded by Babel's "midrashic" reading of myth. We will see that a "midrashic"

approach not only produces surprising and unlikely juxtapositions, but shows history to be cyclical, rather than dialectical, as in its orthodox Marxist interpretation. Moreover, there appear to be alternate perspectives of history, the Jewish and the Russian, each with their literary and cultural referents.

Babel's love of Maupassant was to result in more than a straight literary influence, and chapter five looks at Babel's imaginative reworking of the French author's stories into a debate over the price the artist has to pay for genius and fame. This is also a debate over the ethics of art which pits Tolstoy against the combined intertextual voices of Maupassant and Chekhov in two of Babel's stories, "Guy de Maupassant" ("Гюи де Мопассан") and "The Kiss" ("Поцелуй"). What emerges from Babel's stories and his own translations of Maupassant is a meditation on art and the artist that questions the personal and moral cost of artistic success, but without giving up on an Odessa Jew's *joie de vivre*, even if, like Gogol' and Chekhov before him, or his contemporary Zoshchenko, he sees trite vulgarity (*poshlost'*) all around him.⁴⁴

A comparison in the following chapter of the Red Cavalry stories with other epics of the Russian Civil War, such as Furmanov's *Chapaev* (Чапаяв) or Fadeev's *The Rout* (Разгром; also translated as *The Nineteen*) asks how much Babel' differs from his contemporaries and how much the ideological struggle over the representation of the October Revolution affects his writing. I will show Babel' to be a child of his time and at the same time an original voice in Soviet prose of the 1920s. Nevertheless, Babel' bears resemblance with the extraordinary aesthetic quality of the everyday experience of modernity, which we find in Conrad, Joyce, and Woolf. In particular, the diary Babel' wrote during Budenny's campaign in Poland in 1920 and the drafts of the Red Cavalry stories reveal a deeply anguished mind, torn over moral dilemmas and split between the ideals of the revolution and his own Jewish roots as he witnessed the violence of war and the suffering of his fellow Jews. Babel's distinctly modernist portrayal of war and the disturbing lyricism of a violent landscape deserve comparison with other modernists in Hebrew and Yiddish, including one on the other side of the Russo-Polish front, the Yiddish novelist Israel Rabon, whose shocking

account of the same war reverberates with some of the imagery and perspectives of *Red Cavalry*.

The final chapter takes us to another, more terrifying scene of combat, the collectivization campaign. However, here there was little room for equivocation. Babel' was witness to Stalin's forced collectivization of villages in the Ukraine in 1929-30 and was horrified by the monstrosity of the mass expulsion, deportation, and destruction of traditional ways of life: millions were exiled or died in the name of Stalinism. Yet the detachment of the narrator of *Red Cavalry* is taken to a further unnerving level of morally shocking observation. The book Babel' never completed about collectivization, *Velikaia Krinitsa*, stands out in its powerful self-restraint when compared with Sholokhov's *Virgin Soil Upturned* (*Поднятая целина*) or the turgid conformist prose of the 1930s.

By reading Babel' comparatively, I aim to reread Babel' as a complex figure who was not aligned with any literary group, yet whose iconoclastic art was very much in tune with the modernism of his times. At the same time as he negotiated his own personal dilemma between women, countries, and families and struggled as a Soviet author to survive in an age of ideological demands and purges, he remained a deeply Jewish writer in his outlook and literary traditions, and this may be his most original contribution to Russian literature.

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ISAAK BABEL': A BRIEF LIFE

Beginnings

Neither Babel's "Autobiography," written in 1924 to gain ideological credentials as a "Soviet" writer, nor the so-called autobiographical stories, which Babel' intended to collect under the title *Story of My Dovecote* (*История моей голубятни*) strictly relate to the facts, but they are illuminating for the construction of the writer's identity as someone who hid his highly individual personality behind the mask of a Soviet writer who had broken with his bourgeois Jewish past. Babel's father, for example, was not an impoverished shopkeeper, but a dealer in agricultural machinery, though not a particularly successful businessman. Emmanuel Itskovich, born in Belaia Tserkov', was a typical merchant who had worked his way up and set up his own business.¹ Babel's mother, Fenia (née Shvekhvel'), as Nathalie Babel has testified, was quite unlike the Rachel of the Childhood stories. About his book of Childhood stories, *Story of My Dovecote*, Babel' wrote his family: "The subjects of the stories are all taken from my childhood, but, of course, there is much that has been made up and changed. When the book is finished, it will be clear why I had to do all that."² But then the fantasies of the untruthful boy in the story "In the Basement" ("В подвале") do inject a kind of poetic truth into the real lives of his crazy grandfather, a disgraced rabbi from Belaia Tserkov', and his drunken uncle Simon-Wolf.

Despite the necessary post-revolutionary revision of biography carried out by many writers, nothing could be more natural than Hebrew, the Bible, and Talmud being taught at home by a *melamed*, or part-time tutor. Babel', however, writes in his "Autobiography"

as if this was purely at his father's insistence, as part of the pressure on the boy to learn a multitude of subjects from morning to night (*Детство*, 7). The Russian-Jewish journalist and future leader of the Zionist Revisionists, Vladimir (Zeev) Jabotinsky uses a similar expression in his biography, so it must have been pretty common for middle-class Odessa parents to try to instill some rudiments of Judaism and Hebrew in their sons, who did not always appreciate their parents' pressure to excel in their studies and enter the professions or become wealthy businessmen. Jabotinsky and Babel' found themselves among other Russian-speaking ethnic minorities at public school and could feel pride in their Jewish origins, yet at the same time identified with Russian culture, which was for many assimilated Jews the key to "culture" and social success. And yet with the reaction after 1881, the May Laws and pogroms, then increasing social unrest and violence in the early twentieth century, the choices facing Jews became starker, between revolutionary socialism and Zionism. The wealthy assimilated Jews described by Jabotinsky in *The Five* (*Пятеро*, 1936), which Charles King celebrates as the great Odessa novel,³ were "Russian in most senses except the one that came to matter most: the ability to negotiate their path through a society increasingly divided along national lines."⁴ Of course, Babel' matured after the 1905 Revolution and pogroms, when Jabotinsky (fourteen years his senior) was no longer living in Odessa and the world he describes was already in decline.⁵

The Five tells the story of a remarkable family, the Milgroms, whom the narrator befriends, and whom he observes during the 1905 Revolution. Jabotinsky's satire of the Jewish bourgeoisie, among whom he too moved as both a socialite and intellectual, records the decadence of the assimilated Jewish nouveaux-riches and their moral and spiritual deterioration as the revolutionary movements began to threaten law and order, spreading its ideas among the young generation who seem to be driven by an amoral determination to find an outlet for their energies, whether in adventures in promiscuity and crime or clandestine political and terrorist cells.⁶ What is remarkable in Jabotinsky's fictional account and in his autobiography, written from the ideological slant of emigration and commitment to revisionist Zionism, is the conscious

self-identification as Jews, of proud ethnic rivalry, however Russified middle-class Jews were and despite their distance from Jewish tradition; yet they were also a world apart from the Jewish masses of Moldavanka and Peresyp'. This middle-class milieu (both Jewish and Russian), as Rochelle Sylvester has concluded from her study of the Odessa press in the 1910s, was fairly middle-brow and savored sensational reports of crime and prostitution, or melodramas and comedies about Jewish parents struggling with their wayward children's choice of marriage partner; they were not attracted to the literary clubs of the intellectual elite.⁷ Their children, by contrast, were often drawn to revolutionary and other socialist movements, as well as to Zionism, which had strong support (Babel' at one time belonged to a Zionist youth group).⁸

Babel' was forced to take up the violin, not too successfully, but perhaps not too unwillingly, with P. S. Stoliarsky (1871-1944)—the prototype of Zagursky in "Awakening" ("Пробуждение"),—though his parents hardly needed to "gamble" on his fortunes as a musician to drag themselves from poverty, like the brokers and shopkeepers in Babel's story. Babel' had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge: he had to "know everything" in the words of his fictional grandmother in "Childhood. At Grandmother's" ("Детство. У бабушки"). The young Babel' would hide with his books under the dining-room table, where he would read for hours on end by the light of a candle, concealed by the long tablecloth. As for "resting" in school, which (according to the "Autobiography") was populated by an undisciplined crowd of overgrown billiard players, a classmate remembers Babel' outshining the history teacher in his answers, having at the age of thirteen or fourteen read all eleven volumes of Karamzin's *History of the Russian State* (*История государства российскою*). The French teacher, a monsieur Vadon, whom Babel' singles out for mention in the "Autobiography," did get a number of pupils interested in French literature. In fact, Babel' would surreptitiously write his French assignments during the German lessons, occasionally letting out some unchecked exclamation which drew the shortsighted Herr Osetzky's attention and resulted in one of two rebukes: "Babyl [sic!], none of your stupid jokes" ("Babyl [sic], machen Sie keine faule Witzen!"), or