

## **Hellfire and Revolution: The Jews of Odessa and the Works of Isaac Babel**

### Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, on the western shores of Russia's Black Sea coast, there lay a city unlike any other Russian city. It was said that seven miles of hellfire surrounded the port, separating the city's enterprising and often rambunctious Jewish inhabitants from the quiet life of the Pale of Settlement's traditional shtetls. This city was Odessa, established in the closing years of the eighteenth century as the regional seat of Catherine the Great's "New Russia," that had grown into a cosmopolitan center of commerce and culture for Russian Jews and gentiles alike.

The "hellfire" that shrouded Odessa was a popular metaphor for the liberal (read: non-traditional) mores of the city's inhabitants. The city's lively harbor ensured a steady influx of foreign capital, and for shrewd entrepreneurs fortunes could be made (and lost) overnight. The warm climate of the Black Sea coast made the city a hub of tourism, and its distinctly European city center remained a cultural destination of socialites regardless of their creed. In many ways, the "hellfire" stood out as more of a beacon on the horizon for Jews of the Pale, with the constant allure of fame and fortune radiating out of the city's opulent theaters and bustling Exchange.

However, these flames also demarcated the reach of Odessa's darker underbelly, where crafty Jewish rogues and swindlers could become gangster "kings" running protection rackets, conducting illicit trade, and taking part in life's more basic pleasures. In addition to the day to day pursuits of Odessa's Russian and Jewish inhabitants, sailors on shore leave from all corners of the world mingled and brought fresh coin and new ideas into the city, creating a cosmopolitan atmosphere relatively unheard of in Europe's most conservative great power.

This hellfire then might be characterized as the burning pyre of modernity, of modern lifestyle characterized by shifting social borders and rapid cultural change. Odessa churned out some of Russia's most prominent modern thinkers, from Lev Trotsky (formerly Bronshtein), one of the Bolshevik revolution's most prominent leaders (and eventually most scorned exile) to Vladimir Jabotinsky, who would become one of the leading Russian proponents of the Zionist project in Palestine.

It was from among this milieu that arose one of Odessa's most famous native sons. Isaac Babel was born in the old Moldavanka neighborhood of the city to relatively well-off Jewish parents on July 12, 1894 (the centennial anniversary of the city's founding). Though Babel's family would move several times during his childhood, a good portion of his teenage years were spent roaming Odessa's streets, absorbing its sights, smells, and the quirks and moods of its diverse inhabitants. As a young writer Babel had shown much promise, and after moving to Petrograd (St. Petersburg) after graduating from the lyceum, his fortunes were made when the literary voice of the radical left, Maxim Gorky, took the aspiring *intelligent* under his wing. Babel kept writing through the Bolshevik upheaval in 1917, and became the preeminent literary spokesman of Jewish supporters for Lenin's revolution. Though arguably best known through the Soviet period for his *Red Cavalry Stories*, Babel's serial publications that romanticize the Jewish underground also played a major role in cementing Odessa in the popular Russian memory as a city of vice.

In many ways, this work will be an attempt to construct two separate but intimately linked portraits: the first of Odessa itself, the other of Babel's art. By centering Odessa as a space of cultural production, this study will explore the relationship between Babel and his erstwhile home. I argue that the unique experience of the Odessa of his youth irrevocably shaped the

revolutionary advocate Babel would later become. In order to explore this relationship, this work will blend a synthesis of several influential urban histories of the Black Sea port with a literary analysis of a selection of Babel's short stories. In doing so, I hope to show not only how Odessa shaped Babel's art, but how Babel's art also shaped our historical understanding of Odessa.

To establish just what was so distinct about the experience of *fin-de-siècle* Odessa, I will begin with a brief historical analysis of the city and its inhabitants to establish the unique urban character of the city. I will then attempt to integrate Babel's early writings that focus on the city itself in an attempt to examine what could be considered as an exemplary and illuminating take on the worldview of Odessa's Jewry (or at least that of a significant portion of its more radical, Russian-assimilated inhabitants). Finally, I will examine Babel's connection to the revolution and the significance of Jewish participation in the Bolshevik project.

#### Odessa: City of Dreams, Rogues, and *Shnorrers*

The same mythic aura of Odessa that drew so many Jews across the steppe to the sea seems to have had a similar effect on contemporary scholarship. The city is the subject for number of works that aim to capture its colorful history, and over the years different authors have examined the subject through a myriad number of lenses. This section will attempt to weave some of that scholarship together to present a rounded (if much condensed) history of Odessa.

The city's origins stretch back to the ancient empires of the Aegean, as the port of Odesos existed as a trading post as far back as the times of Herodotus in the fifth century BCE. A minor yet important stop on many trade routes connecting the Black and Mediterranean Seas, the small outpost continued to exist even as wars of conquest raged back and forth around it, from the

Romans to the Mongols, and would even garner significant attention from the Venetians. Eventually the port was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire (and renamed Khadjibey) at the highpoint of the Turkish advance north, but was ultimately captured by Catherine the Great in the Russo-Turkish wars of late-eighteenth century. This particular conquest would prove decisive in the city's storied history, in that Catherine II hoped to transform the port into the seat of Russian power in the newly captured lands that would constitute her "enlightened" *Novorossia* (New Russia).

This is where Charles King begins his narrative in his fairly recent contribution to the literature, *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams* (2011).<sup>1</sup> King provides one of the most chronologically comprehensive works on the city, and his highly narrative style is clearly intended for a broader reading public. However, his methodology does emphasize a rather important historical theme. King paints Odessa as an amalgam, a city whose diverse influences continue to build on one another over time. While the city began as a deliberately constructed urban space designed to reflect Russian imperial power (and would remain the subject of subsequent state projects for the course of the next century), the character of the city was shaped just as much by its inhabitants, who often subverted and repurposed these efforts to fit their own purposes. With this noted, one can easily begin to see just how these influences built upon one another over time.

Ground for the new city was only officially broken in 1794, well into the period of what King calls Catherine's "experiment in imperial implantation."<sup>2</sup> Catherine initially handed over the planning of the region, as well as its new capital, to one of her personal attendants (and also lover, possibly even secret husband), Prince Grigory Aleksanderovich Potemkin. Potemkin

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<sup>1</sup> Charles King, *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> King, *Odessa*, 40.

selected the Neapolitan Jose de Ribas, a soldier of fortune who had also made a name for himself fighting with the Russian navy in the continuing border flare ups against the Ottomans. De Ribas further increased his standing in court by being one of the first to suggest the potential for a fully realized modern port on the Black Sea (not subject to the winter freezes that stalled shipping in the North). Selecting Khadjibey as his foundation, complete with a nearby captured Turkish fort to serve as the locus of municipal power, de Ribas set about planning the first Russian metropolis on the Black Sea.

These two elements, that of Catherine's "enlightened" imperial project and of de Ribas's economic objectives for the city, proved integral to the city's development. The heart of Odessa was laid out in the modern European style, with wide, tree-lined boulevards and streets arranged in a grid at the crest of the hill overlooking the port. Even beyond the city's infrastructure, the European proclivities of the Odessa's planners were readily apparent. De Ribas was joined by another displaced European noble, the Frenchman Armand du Plessis, duc de Richelieu, who advocated with the crown for the founding of magnificent cultural projects in the city center. To this day, grandiose theaters, museums, and the local lyceum all bear de Richelieu's name. The port, on the other hand, also continued to grow in importance, after Napoleon's conquest of Europe and pressure on the Ottomans lead to the opening of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straights, making the Black Sea "the common domain of the Nations of Europe."<sup>3</sup> Trade continued to increase as ships from ports across both Europe and Asia came to harbor beneath Odessa.

The port itself, particularly because of its affiliation with Russia's wheat exports, became intrinsically linked with the city's character, King argues, with the fate and ultimately the very character of the city. The duc de Richelieu is famously credited with remarking that "when grain

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 56.

is in demand, things go well.”<sup>4</sup> For the better half of the nineteenth century, Odessa served as the breadbasket of Europe and beyond. In King’s work, the rise and fall of the grain trade through successive crises of war and famine do tend to mark the patterns of boom and bust of the local economy, though locals found other ways of sustaining Odessa’s economy in the meantime (more on this in a bit).

The economic prospects afforded by the port and the grain trade, along with Richelieu’s push to transform the city into a hub of culture and learning, made Odessa a beacon of opportunity amid the constricting atmosphere of the Pale. As noted by Steven J. Zipperstein in his landmark study, *The Jews of Odessa* (1985), the *Haskalah* movement had created a class of Jews willing to transcend the constraints of tradition in favor of secular education and the social mobility that came with it.<sup>5</sup> *Haskalah* Jews established a strong Jewish community in the city in the first half of the century, establishing the first synagogues and schools (often with a Russianized, secular curriculum), but migrants continued to flock to the haven city in droves through 1880.<sup>6</sup> While not all of Odessa’s new residents would enjoy the fruits of the grain trade and education system, Jewish immigrants “looked upon Odessa, with its wide streets and limestone buildings, as a world apart from the ancient settlements to which they were accustomed, and Odessa came to represent to Jews elsewhere [...] the option of a fresh start, offering a change in climate, economic possibilities, and perimeters of acceptable religious behavior.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>5</sup> Steven J. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794-1881*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> For a breakdown of Jewish demographic trends within the city, see Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa*, 32. The census data is incomplete, especially in the earlier half of the century, but the Jewish community in the city tripled over the span of a few short decades from roughly 11,000 in 1844 to nearly 37,000 in 1892 (of Odessa’s 404,000 inhabitants at the time, constituting the largest non-Russian minority in the city).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 32-33.

Secularization in particular remained a hallmark of Odessan Jewish culture, as the projects started by the city's first *Haskalah* migrants permeated and grew through their descendants. Unlike any other city in the Pale at this time, Jews were not constrained to a specific neighborhood or quarter, but, as King notes, "class and wealth, rather than religion or ethnicity, were the determinants of neighborliness" in Odessa.<sup>8</sup> Jewish community was, to some degrees, propagated through the city's burgeoning Russian-language Jewish press, which flourished in the city in the 1860s-70s.<sup>9</sup> Also unprecedentedly unique to Odessa life with regard to the rest of the Pale was the ability of Jews to enter into municipal politics. While many Odessan Jews were never afforded these opportunities, nonetheless Zipperstein argues that the city produced a "middle-class urban paradigm" unparalleled by their other contemporary coreligionists in the Russian Empire.

For those Jews not fortunate enough to enter Odessa's gymnasiums, or for former peasants who had come to the city seeking quick wealth but lacked the skills or connections to enter the merchant class, the streets of Odessa were an entirely different world. Unlike many other European cities, Odessa lacked any sort of extensive industry in place to employ large numbers of working poor (there were several factories that did operate, producing foodstuffs such as macaroni, rope, and bricks, but by and large the city relied on the commerce brought in by the port to drive its local economy).<sup>10</sup> Many Jewish immigrants, already disenchanted with traditional value structures that governed shtetl life, turned to other, more devious means to seek their fortunes.

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<sup>8</sup> King, *Odessa*, 98.

<sup>9</sup> For a more in-depth discussion on the impact of the Jewish press, see Orbach, Alexander, *The Russian Jewish Press of Odessa 1860-71: Towards the Secularization of Jewish Culture in Tsarist Russia*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975. Scholar of the Jewish Yiddish Press Sarah Stein also notes the impact of Odessa's earlier press culture on the growth of the Petersburg and Warsaw based dailies of the *fin-de-siècle* Russian empire (see Stein, Sarah Abrevaya, *Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.).

<sup>10</sup> King, *Odessa*, 114.

With his 2011 work, Jarrod Tanny has famously christened Odessa as “the city of rogues and *shnorrers*” (a *shnorrer* being the Yiddish term for a beggar, vagrant, or tramp).<sup>11</sup> Unlike Zipperstein’s work that focuses on Odessa’s middle class Jews, Tanny follows the creation and propagation of Odessa’s underworld, the subject of so many of Babel’s works. His work is unique in the historiography in that it centers the myth of Odessa as a city “both gilded and wicked, simultaneously paradise and hell, as a veritable Garden of Eden with Gomorrah lurking in the shadows.” He argues that, like many other frontier port cities (for instance, San Francisco), Odessa’s street culture was shaped as much by the perceptions migrants brought with them as any structural factor. King marks this phenomenon in his work as well, noting that “Odessa’s reputation was self-reinforcing.” However, King places more weight on Odessa’s myth as a place of roguery to the infamous exile of Alexander Pushkin to the city in the 1830s, where the young poet had quite the devilish impact on Odessa high society, fighting duels and seducing wives of powerful officials. Tanny dates things back even further, as letters written by Jews back to their families back home in the shtetl, the myth of Odessa as a city of both wealth and sin began to grow as early as the 1810-20s. This myth of “Old Odessa” is the key to Tanny’s work, which discusses how the contributed to and was reproduced by Soviet mythologies of the city.

While the city’s laid-back coastal lifestyle produced its fair share of impoverished *shnorrers* content to meander the city’s shady boulevards in their eternal quest for their daily bread, as wealth continued to flow into the port, money-making schemes became more and more organized. King argues that it was actually state regulation that first opened the black market in Odessa. Because of the constant exchange of goods and bodies through bustling port, outbreaks of plague were a rather regular disruption of city life. Quarantines were established to try to stop

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<sup>11</sup> Jarrod Tanny, *City of Rogues and Shnorrers: Russia’s Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 2011.

the spread of diseases, making many basic goods hard to come by. Smuggling therefore became an incredibly lucrative enterprise that many Jews proved very successful at. As these networks grew, so did their social power within their respective communities.<sup>12</sup> Of course, Jews did not solely monopolize organized crime in the city. Jewish syndicates coexisted alongside all kinds of skullduggery, and there were plenty of rascallions of all nations that steadily came through the port.<sup>13</sup>

The city's cosmopolitan foundations were reflected in its multiethnic inhabitants, and this transnational character of the city was duly noted by observers. As King puts it, "if you were a well-to-do merchant, your barber was likely to be an Armenian, your gardener a Bulgarian, your plasterer a Pole, your carriage driver a Russian, and your nursemaid a Ukranian."<sup>14</sup> As one visitor wrote (disapprovingly) of the city, "there is nothing national about Odessa."<sup>15</sup> However, in this space without clear social borders, cultural flexibility was the natural result. Vladimir Jabotinsky once recalled that "Odessa did not have any tradition, but it was therefore not afraid of new forms of living and activity. It developed in us more temperament and less passion, more cynicism, but less bitterness."<sup>16</sup> As we shall soon see, Jabotinsky's analysis of the city's Jewish inhabitants could easily be applied to Babel as well.

As Zipperstein notes with his chronology, life in the city underwent a remarkable change following the pogroms of 1881. Violence in the city increased, both between and among Jews and gentiles alike. This wave of violence also irreparably changed the way Jews understood their relationship with the state, and talk of revolutionary change became increasingly common both in the city's press and in smoke-filled backroom hideouts. This was the city in which a young

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<sup>12</sup> King, *Odessa*, 140-43.

<sup>13</sup> Tanny, *City of Rogues and Schnorrers*, 34.

<sup>14</sup> King, *Odessa*, 108.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Isaac Babel entered the world. In Babel we can see a blend of Odessa's two distinct worlds; his parents were relatively well-to-do, and Babel's childhood would have been like many other children who were born to families in Zipperstein's middle-class paradigm, and he thrived within the city's secularized education system where he would have absorbed the works of Pushkin and other markers of Russian high culture along with the basics of math and science. However, the back-alleys of Moldavanka also clearly left their imprint on his astute young mind. As we shall see, these two trends blended within Babel as he found his artistic voice on the eve of Russia's greatest revolution.

### Isaac Babel: The Prophet of Odessan Jewish Modernity

Over the course of his career, Babel turned back to Odessa again and again as a subject for exploration. Babel once wrote that Odessa was “the most charming city of the Russian Empire. If you think about it, it is a town in which you can live free and easy. Half the population is made up of Jews, and Jews are a people who have learned a few simple truths long the way. [...] You might not be able to budge them, but there's a whole lot you can learn from them.”<sup>17</sup> This section is centered around this claim, looking at how Odessa and its Jews were portrayed in Babel's stories in order to better understand what the author thought these archetypal characters could tell his readers.

Babel first began publishing as a young man in St. Petersburg (the first, “Old Shloyme”—which was an attack on officially sanctioned anti-Semitism—appeared in print in 1913) and many of his early short stories were homages back to the city of his birth. The passage from above was pulled from a short story simply titled “Odessa,” that was equal parts

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<sup>17</sup> Isaac Babel, “Odessa,” in *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, edited by Nathalie Babel, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 75.

denouncement and celebration of Odessa's originality. The story opens with a rather tongue-in-cheek declaration, that "Odessa is a horrible town. It's common knowledge."<sup>18</sup> However, Babel's description of the city reflects his own nostalgia for the city's laid back atmosphere compared to the stuffy climate of Petersburg society. The town is horrible then, in its contradictions—he mocks the elegant, farcical lifestyle of the city's bourgeoisie while pointing to the plight of thousands of Jewish laborers (his political leanings were already firmly entrenched left of center at this point, and Gorky, his future mentor, is directly alluded to here). However, "Odessa" is a ultimately a hopeful tale, that while the upper crust of the elite Babel sees as stagnant, Odessa was a distinct space in the empire where vital political trends were gaining momentum. The cosmopolitanism of the port, the secularization of the city's Jews, the increasing mistrust of an increasingly anti-Semitic state: Babel saw Odessa as a place of promising cultural production. It is an undeniably modern construction, and Babel's gaze seems firmly fixed on the future.

While "Odessa" was more of an abstract overview, Babel's next story, "The Aroma of Odessa," was a more intimate series of vignettes, told in the first person describing the sights, sounds, and smells of a Greek café not far from the port. The story showcases the incredible variety of everyday life in the city. The first character introduced is S., a "female impersonator," who sits alongside retired Russian Cavalry officers content to gamble with Jewish youths, the fat wives of theater owners, and thin cash register girls.<sup>19</sup> Some of their stories intertwine, others remain separate, but all these people from all conceivable walks of life are all ultimately bound together by place. Babel showcases Odessa as a melting pot, where difference and stigma might be washed away, which of course stands out in particularly stark contrast to the state-backed separation of peoples as the tide of liberal reform once again was creeping backward. The

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Babel, "The Aroma of Odessa," in *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, 80.

“aroma” of Odessa is a strange one; to those unaccustomed it might seem ripe and unpleasant, but for those who experience it daily it is practically unnoticeable. Again, Babel paints the city as a distinctly modern space of cosmopolitan progress.

Babel’s early works also help illuminate his unique view of Odessa in light of his only two other homes up to now, St. Petersburg and the rural Pale (Babel lived in Nikolayev, a small community about 80 miles from Odessa for a few years of his childhood, this is where his family was living during the upheaval of 1905—more on this later). In “Inspiration,” Babel tells of a late night spent with a friend, a fellow writer, as he pitches his latest project. The story itself is unremarkable, our narrator explains, but his companion is more in the thrall of the idea that this will be the work that will land him in Petersburg, following in the footsteps of the Russian greats like Dostoevsky. “We’ll get there, damn it! [...] Everyone makes it big in Petrograd!”<sup>20</sup> Despite its charms, Babel notes, for many Odessa remains a provincial city, outside the realm of where great things happen. (Babel himself seems derisive of such a notion, possibly reflecting his own frustration with Petersburg at the point from which the story was penned.) The other insight Babel gives us is to the countryside. In “Shabos-Nakhamu,” an Odessan Jew travelling the countryside finds himself unable to pay for his food at a roadside inn, but is able to con the innkeepers wife (and later her husband) into a *gratis* feast by pretending to be a messenger of God. The rural scenes of the story are tropes common to romanticized literature of peasant life—the feast itself is described in particularly colorful detail—but the farmers that inhabit the Pale are portrayed as classical *muzhiks* (the Russian word for peasant, but more often derogatorily used similarly to “bumpkin”). Thus the Jews of Odessa exist in a strange ephemeral space, still far from the reaches of imperial power, but yet leagues ahead of their shtetl-based coreligionists.

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<sup>20</sup> Babel, “Inspiration,” in *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, 85.

While the idealistic and angry young author undoubtedly welcomed the Bolsheviks revolution in 1917, during its early stages he simply continued to write, probably in close conversation with his mentor Gorky. Through two Odessa-based Russian periodicals, *Moryak* and *Na Pomoshch*, in 1921 Babel began to publish what would become known as his *Odessa Tales* which again focused on the city of his youth, or rather, on the unique brand of Jews that lived there.<sup>21</sup> Babel seems fascinated by Odessan culture at the turn of the century, which at the particular cultural and political moment can perhaps shed light on how the author understood the violence and upheaval proceeding unabated around him.

Most of *The Odessa Tales* center on (or at least make some allusion to) a Jewish gangster boss named Benya Kirk, a.k.a. “the King” of Moldovanka. Though it isn’t revealed until later, Benya starts his criminal career as a patricide, helping his younger brother take over their father’s (failing) cart service. Over the course of several tales, Benya wears a number of different hats in the Moldovanka community: he sometimes serves as the arbiter in disputes and seedy deals between neighbors, while at other times he appears as a cold, calculating murderer. He throws elegant dinners in his courtyard for his associates and drives about town in a flashy red automobile, whose horn plays a stanza from an Italian opera, but still meets contacts for shady deals in the old Jewish cemetery. Though we get to know Benya from afar (and mostly through hearsay), his presence ties the various yarns of *The Odessa Tales* together.

The reader is never unsure of the King’s fate. The narrator, who is telling these stories in retrospect, regularly provides the reader with snippets of the future, bending and overlapping the the chronology of individual episodes in what makes an interesting literary experience that plays with themes memory and legend. Regardless, Benya’s death is well telegraphed, his demise always looming just over the horizon. In doing so, Babel is highlighting the fleeting nature of

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<sup>21</sup> Babel, N., ed., *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, 129.

back-alley power in Odessa—fortunes come, fortunes go. Lives lived fast end equally quickly. However, there are again certain romantic qualities to Babel’s depiction—Benya is a Jew who lived free from all social, national, or confessional constrictions, was just in his violence, and by becoming a “king” had enjoyed unparalleled freedom in Tsarist Russia.

Another remarkable character from *The Odessa Tales* is Lyubka “the Cossack.” Lyubka runs a brothel south of the city that makes a few appearances in various stories. Lyubka is a Jew, but her stout figure and belligerent nature (not to mention her skill on horseback) garnered her the nickname comparing her to the steppe mercenaries that have long served as the Tsar’s enforcers. She is first introduced returning from the port with a group of sailors fresh on leave, ready to spend their coin with Lyubka’s girls (again, the economic stimulus of the port at work). In Lyubka we see a continuation of an earlier theme that Babel first played with in “Aroma”: the deliberate erasure of social borders. Lyubka’s not only crosses the traditional roles of gender, but, to a degree, nationality as well. Characters like Lyubka give the sense that Odessa is a place where it is possible to transcend such identities.

The Odessa Stories are well noted by both King and Tanny in their discussions of Odessa’s underground culture. While Babel’s stories are clearly given to dramatic flair, both of these scholars recognize the value of these tales of misadventure in crafting a historical narrative; for King, they provide additional flourish to his already colorful portrayal of the Odessan underground (which, considering his appeal to a popular audience, perhaps predictable), but for Tanny Babel’s publications mark a significant moment in the codification of the myth of Old Odessa, particularly in the specific Soviet imagining. It seems in recent scholarship, both literary and historical, Babel’s works have become increasingly popular subjects of exploration.

While Babel's stories firmly cemented the seven miles of hellfire around Odessa in popular memory, they were but the precursor to his next major project: the famous Red Calvary Stories. As Babel came closer and closer to the revolutionary project, the characters that appeared in his writing were a sharp departure from Benya Kirk and his associates. However, many of the same themes would resurface, just in more Bolshevik forms. The following section will both examine how the Jews of Odessa experienced the revolutions of the early twentieth century and explore how Babel interpreted this experience in his later works.

### The Path of Revolution: From the Streets to the Frontline s

The turn of the century was a tumultuous time in Russian politics. Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, and the event polarized reformers, revolutionaries, and reactionaries alike. Even before this watershed event, however, tensions in Odessa were on the rise. This section will attempt to trace the rise of radical politics within the city the role it played in the revolutions of the early twentieth century, as well as how Babel interpreted these events as he became further entrenched in the Bolshevik literary project.

As mentioned above, the pogroms of 1880-81 marked a watershed moment in Odessa's history. Two opposing ideologies given new voice by the expansion of the Russian Jewish press in the previous era—the Jewish Labor Bund and the Zionist movement—were further radicalized by the events and began to attract significant followings. For the Bundists, who helped form community self-defense units in many Jewish neighborhoods, new violence was always a potentially imminent threat. Jews continued to make their way Odessa, but the urban middle-class paradigm of Zipperstiein seemed a far off prospect for the poor unskilled laborers pouring in from the Shtetl. Marxist agitators found traction among many of Odessa's workers, many of

them Jews. In his 1993 work, *The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa: Blood on the Steps*, Robert Weinberg devotes considerable energy to trace the growth and activities of the city's radical parties during this time, from the populists to the social democrats, as well as the Jewish Bundists. He notes that while it is impossible to judge the precise impact of revolutionary ideologies, most workers in the city would have been increasingly attuned to these discussions and that calls for radical action would have become somewhat normalized in the buildup to the turmoil of 1905.<sup>22</sup>

In his 1995 study *Jews and Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, Erich Haberer argues that these trends were by no means contained to Odessa. However, even in the midst of the upheavals of institutional reform, conservative reaction, and increasing industrialization, Haberer argues that in late-imperial Russia "Jews were by far the most visible and vulnerable element caught up in this process of modernization."<sup>23</sup> Urbanization, secularization, and the draw of unskilled Jewish labor to new industrial jobs meant that cities across the empire were breeding grounds for radical ideologies within Jewish communities (Haberer compares the Jews of Odessa, Kiev, and Moscow and finds similar trends prevalent in each city).

However, Odessa remained a particularly precarious situation. Global economic trends in the late-nineteenth led to a general decrease of Russian exports through the Black Sea port, and the decline in the local economy further exacerbated tensions. As King notes, the grain trade had been in steady decline as Russian exports struggled against new grain coming from the Kansas and Nebraska territories increasingly made its way into European markets. While the majority of Jews in Odessa at this time were poor workers, successful Jewish firms and shops provided

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Weinberg, *The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa: Blood on the Steps*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 81.

<sup>23</sup> Erich Harberer, *Jews and Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 57.

disaffected Russians in the city with a convenient target for looting and property destruction during pogroms. The city's constabulary, as with in other parts of the Pale at this time, were lax if not complacent in these spats of violence, and new imperial legislation, namely the infamous May Laws of 1882 (which restricted Jewish access to legal recourse for anti-Semitic discrimination), made the situation all the more precarious.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the Bundists—who opposed the Zionists call for immigration away from Russia—became increasingly well organized. In many neighborhoods, service on a self-defense committee was a source of pride and even social standing.<sup>25</sup>

The unrest in the city in the previous era was only a precursor to the violence unleashed by the waves of revolution that ushered in the twentieth century. In 1905, Russia's poor showing in its war with Japan had raised revolutionary tensions in the capital. The period of unrest began with the massacre of protestors on January 22, 1905, (which came to be known as “Bloody Sunday”), but it would be several more months before the revolutionary upheaval would find its way to Odessa. Agitation among laborers had been rising steadily in wake of news from Moscow and St. Petersburg, and in May workers from various factories struck in solidarity. However, as Weinberg notes, Odessa's workers were primarily pushing for concessions that would increase their own standards of living and respect from municipal lawmakers as a legitimate political force in the city.<sup>26</sup> As Weinberg sees it, “the timing of the strikes and their connection to both local circumstances and the crisis enveloping autocratic authority in Odessa as well as the Empire ensured that labor unrest would have serious implications for cultural and political

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<sup>24</sup> King, *Odessa*, 154.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 155-56.

<sup>26</sup> Weinberg, *The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa*, 141.

stability.”<sup>27</sup> This crisis was further exacerbated when the renegade steamship *Potemkin* entered Odessa’s port, its revolutionary crew ready to lend their support to the strikers.

The events surrounding the *Potemkin* have been forever mythologized by Sergei Eisenstein’s 1925 cinematic masterpiece, *The Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potemkin*), and have been well treated by historians both old and new, so I will not dwell on them here. King discusses the separation between myth and fact in his analysis, markedly noting that the *Potemkin*’s attempts to influence the city’s politics really only amounted to a few poorly placed shellings before it left the port for Romania (and eventual surrender).<sup>28</sup> Instead, King stresses the disorder on the streets, as the battleship’s arrival did lead to an increase in street violence—emboldened anarchists lobbed bombs into police formations and headquarters, and the city’s embattled constabulary increasingly met resistance with force. These “June days” marked the bloodiest fighting in the revolutionary period, though strikes and street confrontations continued for the remainder of the year.

The war with Japan had further cut in to one of the port’s main grain markets, and the local economy once again contracted accordingly. Pogroms once again shook the city in the wake of the 1905 fighting, and Jews were targeted again, this time for purportedly being the chief revolutionary agitators in the city, as well as capitalist exploiters. Babel revisits these pogroms in his 1925 opus *The Story of My Dovecoat*, which was dedicated to his mentor Gorky. The story is told from Babel’s own perspective (though the account was almost entirely fictional) and captures the confusion and innocence lost in the midst of incomprehensible cruelty.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> King, *Odessa*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> *The Story of My Dovecoat* is one of Babel’s most popular stories, and it deserves plenty of analysis in its own right. However, since the events depicted supposedly took place in Nikolayev rather than Odessa, I have decided to only mention it in passing. For a more in-depth breakdown of the themes of the story, see Milton Ehre’s “Disorder and Early Sorrow: *The Story of My Dovecoat*,” in *Isaac Babel*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), Patricia Blake, “Researching Babel’s Biography: Adventures and Misadventures,” in *The Enigma of Isaac Babel*, ed. Gregory

Though Babel makes no implicit connections, we can assume that the emotional experience depicted here would have been a very real struggle for other Jews of his generation, both in Odessa and in the Pale at large. Eventually, however, the violence in the city subsided, and it was in the midst of this tense truce that the likes of Benya Kirk were able to thrive. However, the next wave of revolution, the revolution of Lev Bronshtien/Trotsky and Lenin in 1917, would irrevocably determine the city's fate.

In the face of the Bolshevik's revolution, Jews had two primary choices—to either embrace the new world order or to flee for foreign shores. While many Jews like Babel chose to stay, many chose the latter option. King notes that during the years of civil war, Odessa was a place of departure.<sup>30</sup> The Pale itself became a battleground, and many of those displaced made either for Palestine or the Americas. For others though, the homeland and the battleground would become one and the same, as Jews of all different walks of life would take up arms to fight for the “Common Cause” in the Polish/Ukraine borderlands.<sup>31</sup>

Babel's *Red Cavalry* stories (published in various newspapers from 1923-26) blend a number of literary devices to create a powerful narrative of the Soviet campaign against Poland. Babel's almost lyrical prose can capture the beauty of the Polish/Ukraine borderlands' rolling forests and rivers amid stories of graphic violence and revolutionary machismo. While the stories were often set around real places and real events, the tales themselves, as Babel himself repeatedly stressed, were complete fiction. As his daughter and editor of his compiled works would note, “literary effect was more important to Babel than historical fact.”<sup>32</sup> The characters in

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Freidin, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), or Efraim Sicher, *Babel' in Context: A Study in Cultural Identity* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>31</sup> This is a term that is used repeatedly in Babel's works, sometimes even cynically—property is appropriated, executions are carried out, and the fine points of politics are all lumped in to the sweeping notion of the Common Cause—the phrase essentially serves as shorthand for the revolutionary project as a whole.

<sup>32</sup> Nathalie Babel, ed. *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, 200.

Babel's stories were undoubtedly meant to represent an idealized, if not romanticized (certainly dramatized) type of revolutionary fighter.

While Babel had clearly established violence as a theme in *The Odessa Tales*, the transition to the revolutionary context is by no means immediate. Many authors see Babel himself in the oft utilized narrator Lyutov,<sup>33</sup> who is a young Jewish intellectual serving as a field reporter from the front, traveling with a troupe of Cossacks fighting under the red banner. In one particularly impactful story, Lyutov's compatriots make fun of him for his glasses and weak mannerisms. When tasked with finding food for the company's mess while quartered in a small shtetl, a frustrated Lyutov kills a goose by pinning it to the ground and crushing its head under his boot. This act of violence that is portrayed as both a moment of learning and an overcoming of the self for the greater good, and the young Jew indeed wins a modicum of approval from his comrades.<sup>34</sup> By his later appearances, Lyutov has become a hardened, merciless revolutionary, just like the Red Cossacks he rides with.

While Lyutov has to learn to be a killer in service of the Common Cause, as the narrative of the campaign progresses, we are introduced to more and more hardened revolutionaries. Perhaps the best example of the swashbuckling Jewish *Krasnyi Kavalerist* (Red Cavalryman) this would be the half-blind Afonka Bida, a peasant elected *ataman* of a Cossack battalion. Babel paints Bida as the ideal Jewish revolutionary, "in battle, he showed circumspect and coolheaded courage that reflected the absentmindedness of a dreamer."<sup>35</sup> Bida is fierce in battle, leading his cavalry in a charge against a Polish infantry brigade caught far from their defensive trenches and reveling in literally beating his defeated foes. When his company is surrounded and forced to

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<sup>33</sup> "Lyutov" was the pseudonym Babel used as a correspondent during the Civil War.. See Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 190.

<sup>34</sup> Babel, "My First Goose," in *The Collected Works of Isaac Babel*, 232-33.

<sup>35</sup> Babel, "Afonka Bida," in *The Collected Works of Isaac Babel*, 281.

retreat, Bida's horse is downed by a rifle shot to its neck. Like a good Cossack, Bida mourns his fallen steed there on the battlefield, staying with it until the poor animal breathed its last. The next day Bida goes on a tear, vandalizing a local church and shooting out the windows of a nearby castle. He then finds himself a new horse (a handsome charger, of course), and is at once ready to rejoin the fight.

The violence in the *Red Cavalry* stories can be shocking and abrupt, in many ways resembling Babel's utilization of violent themes in *The Odessa Tales*, but in the revolutionary context it is more savage and much more visceral. Like in the world of Benya Kirk, death lurks just around every corner. In *Red Cavalry*, Babel retained his fascination with Jewish cemeteries. They pop up as settings and even the subjects of stories multiple times—"The Cemetery in Kozin" is a simple account of "the cemetery in a shtetl" where "four generations lie in this sepulcher, as poor as the hovel of a water carrier."<sup>36</sup> The continued focus on spaces of death and burial suggest for Babel a true connection to Russia as a homeland, where blood is literally mixed with the soil. Even though the new Russia will be inherently different from that which came before, it is still a place worth fighting to hold on to.

In Yuri Slezkine's thought-provoking work, *The Jewish Century*, Babel is given an enormous import in illustrating why so many of Russia's Jews were drawn to the Bolshevik's cause. Slezkine points to the adoption by Jews of Russia as a national homeland was crucial to their participation in the revolution, even with its global component. He points in particular to a particular story, *My First Love* (set in the aftermath of *The Story of My Dovecoat*), in which a young Babel confesses his boyish affection for their family's kind Russian neighbor, Galina Apollovna (who for Slezkine embodies the whole of the Russian nation).<sup>37</sup> Slezkine paints this

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<sup>36</sup> Babel, "The Cemetery in Kozin," in *The Collected Works of Isaac Babel*, 259.

<sup>37</sup> Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

love as a universal process for secularized Jews that had been exposed to Russian high culture. Through this literary approach, cultural markers like the poetry of Pushkin—himself a onetime troublemaker in Odessa—become indicative of the wider emotional history that Jews in Russia would have been facing at this time, Babel and his coreligionists in Odessa chief among them.

While it is up to the individual reader of Slezkine to analyze the validity of his bold treatise on Jewish modernity as a whole, it must be admitted that Babel does fit into the revolutionary mold he has laid out. Babel's works do seem to show a clear tie to both the Russian land and its people, and that the injustices he struggled to overcome in his childhood were therefore the fault of the imperial state. This optimism that the changes brought about by the Bolsheviks could improve the lot of not only Russia's Jews, but of the entire country, possibly even the entire world, helped form his ideal of the cavalier Jewish Red Cavalryman bearing revolution on his saber.

### Conclusion

While his works enjoyed widespread popularity in the revolutionary moment, the gritty realism of his works would land him in trouble following Stalin's cultural turn toward Socialist Realism. In addition, many of his fictional accounts of real figures, such as the General Budyonny (who would rise to the rank of Marshal of the Soviet Union, serving as a top military advisor to Stalin) were inadvertently damning, if not libelous. Babel was increasingly excluded and embattled within the new cutthroat world of the Congress of Soviet Writers, and turned to developing screenplays and other works rather than continue to write under the stifling new restrictions on artistic creativity. Like so many others who had helped bring the Bolsheviks to power, Babel swept up in Stalin's great purges of the late-1930s. Though he had kept his head

down, he was eventually arrested in 1939. As his biographer Milton Ehre notes, “the question that perhaps should be asked is not why Babel was arrested in 1939, but how he survived until then.”<sup>38</sup> Though he remained stubbornly resolute through his show-trial, he could not escape his predetermined fate. Though the exact circumstances of his death are disputable, in 1941 Isaac Babel was consumed by the revolution to which he had dedicated his life’s work.<sup>39</sup>

Babel has enjoyed a marked resurgence in recent scholarship, particularly the nature of his literary contributions as a forerunner of Jewish modernism in the twentieth century. While this study has tried to center Babel’s works in a more historicized context, any readers who wish for a more in-depth analysis of the mechanics and themes of Babel’s prose should have no hard time finding it.

To a degree, this essay resembled Babel’s own stories, where typical chronologies were sometimes skewed and folded in on one another. I do not believe this detracts from the argument I have presented, but rather illustrates the complex nature of the trends and events that gave rise to Babel’s revolutionary ideals. I have posited here that to understand Babel, we must understand the Odessa of his youth as a key factor in his intellectual and artistic development. He absorbed the city’s people, its moods, and its values as a core part of his being. To understand Odessa, we must understand it as a truly unparalleled urban space in the imperial context, which I have strived to convey above.

In turn, however, it is also important to note, that Babel shaped Odessa. His fiction captured the spirit of the city and elevated it to the point of myth in popular memory, particularly

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<sup>38</sup> Ehre, *Isaac Babel*, 30. The author speculates that the fact that Babel was not arrested until 1939, after the main wave of purges had already begun to subside, is that he still enjoyed special protection as a close associate of Gorky’s.

<sup>39</sup> Slezkine notes that this fate would befall many of “Hodl’s Children” who had embraced the revolutionary project. Stalin’s purges would test the faith of those who survived at just whether the choice they made (or perhaps that their parents made) in 1917 was the correct one.

in the early Soviet period. The characters in his stories, from the rebellious Benya Kirk to the hardened Afonka Bida, exemplify a new type of Jewishness, or, perhaps more accurately, a means of transcending the Jewish mode of living imposed by the *ancien regime*. As King notes, “Babel was a man of the borderlands who spent his early life moving between worlds: Jewish and Russian, tsarist and Bolshevik, army and artistic.”<sup>40</sup> He projected this experience through his characters that were themselves border crossers, not just straddling cultural barriers but breaking them down altogether.

Babel himself may not have been among those riding high in the saddle bearing down on the armies of the White Generals or the Polish “Masters,” but his works were nonetheless instrumental to the revolutionary project in defining a new cultural paragon for Jewish and gentile proponents of the Bolshevik takeover alike. For Babel, this new revolutionary ideal was born inside a seven-mile ring of hellfire. It was born on the cosmopolitan, irreligious, and often violent limestone streets of Odessa, just as he was.

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<sup>40</sup> King, *Odessa*, 186.