

Isaac Babel's "My First Goose"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/isaac-babels-my-first-geese>.

Introduction

The Russian Jewish fiction writer Isaac Babel (1894-1940) is best known for his carefully crafted short stories written in the 1920s. "My First Goose" is one of the most famous stories from Babel's *Red Cavalry* cycle (1923-1926), a fictionalized account of the Soviet-Polish War based on Babel's experience as a reporter and propagandist in General Budyonny's First Cavalry Army in the summer and fall of 1920. Babel—who was born and raised in the cosmopolitan port city of Odessa—witnessed first-hand, and wrote about, the changes the war and Revolution wrought on Jewish and non-Jewish East European life.

"My First Goose" takes place in a Europe transformed by World War I and by the Revolution. The Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and German empires had fallen, giving rise to independent states in Eastern and Central Europe, and Budyonny's Army was fighting resurgent Poland, attempting to push the Soviet border west. The narrator, Kiril Lyutov, is a Russian Jewish leftist intellectual struggling to reconcile his socialist ideals with the violence of the war and to fit in with the physically impressive but brutal Cossacks in his regiment. Ultimately, a mock act of violence earns Lyutov a place among the rank-and-file, and the story ends with him interpreting Lenin's speech for his illiterate comrades. The story invites many interpretations. Some see the ending as a metaphorical sexual conquest by the narrator, through a combined use of force and storytelling. Some scholars have read the slaughter of the goose as a rejection of kosher-butchery. Lyutov's violence against an old woman has been read as a form of self-violation—after all, she wears glasses just like him. This kit offers resources that provide context for this complex story and that will help students consider its many possible interpretations.

(Many thanks to Gregory Freidin for his assistance on this guide.)

Cover image: Photograph of Isaac Babel, circa 1920s.

Subjects

Anti-Semitism, Eastern Europe, Fiction, Soviet Union, Translation

Reading and Background

- Gregory Freidin's [chronology of Isaac Babel's life in historical context](#) can be found in the definitive *Isaac Babel's Selected Writings* edited by Freidin (Norton Critical Edition, 2010). This edition also contains, along with selected correspondence, memoirs, and Babel's diary from his days in the Red Army, four classic essays on Babel by Victor Shklovsky, Lionel Trilling, Ephraim Sicher, and Gregory Freidin.
- Gregory Freidin's thorough and highly accessible article on Isaac Babel's life and career is available [here](#). A shorter version for the online *Encyclopedia Britannica* can be found [here](#).
- Elif Batuman's gripping account of reading Babel as a student and working on an Isaac Babel academic conference, "Babel in California," can be found in Elif Batuman, *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them* (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2010). A short excerpt of this account can be read [here](#).
- Val Vinokur, who translated seventy-two stories in *Isaac Babel, The Essential Fictions* (Northwestern University Press, 2017), reassesses Babel's motivations for writing prose in a blog post on [The Best American Poetry site](#).
- David Novack's award-winning 2015 documentary film, *Finding Babel*, follows Babel's grandson, Andrei Malaev-Babel, on his journey through Ukraine, Moscow, and Paris to learn about Babel's life and death.
- For a sense of what the Cossack soldiers in "My First Goose" would have looked like, check out Sergei Vasiliev and Georgi



Vasiliev's hit 1934 Soviet film *Chapaev*. This film gives a good sense of the contrast between the soldiers—mostly peasants and Cossacks—that fought in the Red Army and the intellectuals who were working to educate the masses in revolutionary ideology.

Resources

1: Oil painting, Marc Chagall's "The Revolution," 1937.

Marc Chagall (1887-1985) was born and began painting near Vitebsk, now in Belarus. He portrayed a changing landscape of the Jewish Pale of Settlement using modernist techniques similar to those Isaac Babel used in his short fiction.

Suggested Activity: Present this image to students as an example of visual modernism. Ask students to describe the colors they see. Then ask them to discuss the emotions portrayed in the painting and to give justification for their responses. Ask students to identify the colors in "My First Goose," the images of exaggerated movements (acrobatics, etc.), and the conflicting images of happiness and sadness. Point out the images of Revolutionary celebration (e.g., red flags, man doing a handstand who looks like Lenin, musical instruments). Follow this by asking them to point out the images of violence (e.g., rifles, smoky air, injured people). Finally, ask them to identify images of sadness and mourning (e.g., man holding a Torah with his head in his hands, gravestones, boy sitting shiva). Ask them how this modernist portrayal of revolution might convey the spirit of the times in ways that a photograph could not. Discuss how Isaac Babel is working in similar ways with his *Red Cavalry* stories: he is "painting a portrait" of combined emotions about war and revolution.

Sources: Marc Chagall, "The Revolution," 1937. Collection Centre Pompidou, <https://www.marcchagall.net/the-revolution.jsp>

2: Oil painting, Ilya Repin's "Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to Sultan Mehmed IV of the Ottoman Empire," 1878-1891.

In the story collection *Red Cavalry*, Babel's narrator Lyutov (like the author) finds himself in the army in the role of a reporter and propagandist whose function is to explain the Bolsheviks' Marxist ideology to the illiterate soldiers in his unit. Historically, these soldiers were mercenaries—rebels hired as soldiers—related to the famous Zaporozhian Cossacks, Ukrainian warriors who lived south of the Dnieper River in what is now central Ukraine beginning around the fourteenth century. Periodically throughout history, the Cossacks would rise up against the dominant Polish overlords. The most famous Cossack uprising took place under Bohdan Khmelnytsky in 1648-1649. During this uprising, the Cossacks claimed new territory and rights, but killed thousands of Jews, who were seen as connected to the Polish lords. In "My First Goose," Babel highlights the contrast between Lyutov and the others in his regiment by referring to the others as "Cossacks." The troubled history of Cossacks and Jews in the Ukrainian territories adds comedy and danger to Babel's story about Lyutov and his comrades.

Russian realist painter, Ilya Repin, offers a classic image of Zaporozhian Cossacks, depicting their rejection of the Ottomans' early seventeenth century suggestion that the Cossacks unite with the Ottoman Empire.

Suggested Activity: To provide further background on Cossack history, present the image of Repin's oil painting to students, and ask them to describe the Cossacks as Repin portrayed them in the late nineteenth century. Call their attention to the expressions on the Cossacks' faces. Explain the pride Cossacks historically took in rebellion. Call their attention to the flask at the waist of the topless Cossack seated at the table. The star of David decorating the flask suggests that this item may have been looted from East European Jews. Ask the students to form pairs and discuss which of the Cossacks reminds them the most of Savitsky, Commander of the Sixth Division in "My First Goose." Ask them each to imagine that they have been assigned to ride around with Repin's Cossacks and write about them. What would they do to try to make friends with this group?

Source: Ilya Repin, "Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to Sultan Mehmed IV of the Ottoman Empire," 1878-1891, Oil on canvas, 203 cm x 358 cm, State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zaporozhian_Cossacks#/media/File:Ilja_Jefimowitsch_Repin_-_Reply_of_the_Zaporozhian_Cossacks_-_Yorck.jpg.

3: Map of Western Russian Empire, circa 1900, showing significant literary sites.

In 1791, the Jewish Pale of Settlement was formed within the Russian Empire. The Pale was a geographical region in which Jews

were allowed to settle, and beyond which they were primarily not allowed to settle. It was formed soon after Catherine the Great had claimed large territories formerly belonging to Poland and the Ottoman Empire for Russia. Although the annexation of these lands brought Russia new power and resources, the tsarist government worried that the diverse population it now governed would threaten Russia's security and cultural traditions.

Most of Russia's Jews (about five million) lived in shtetls within the Pale, the borders of which changed several times. They were, for the most part, not allowed to move to Russia proper nor to the major cities of the Empire; there were some exceptions to this rule, including for Jews who had served in the army, and members of the elite classes. Odessa, where Babel grew up, was one of the few large cities open to Jews. The Pale of Settlement ended with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, as the Jews of Eastern Europe were granted new opportunities.

Suggested Activity: Share this map with students, and explain that the events Babel describes in *Red Cavalry* take place largely in the territory of Volhynia, which lies on the western border of the Pale. Ask students, in pairs, to find the following places on the map: St. Petersburg (the Russian capital at the time), Moscow, Odessa (Babel's home city, and home to many urban Jews), Kyiv (the capital of today's Ukraine), Zhytomyr (a large shtetl where many Jews lived), Berdychiv (another large shtetl).

Source: Amelia Glaser, *Jews and Ukrainians in Russia's Literary Borderlands: From the Shtetl Fair to the Petersburg Bookshop* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012). Map created by Beehive mapping.

4: Text excerpts, three translations of one dialogue from Babel's "My First Goose."

"My First Goose" has been translated many times. Here is an excerpt of one of the story's key dialogues in three different translations. Notice how each translator conveys Lyutov's distaste as he slays the goose, the old woman's despair, and the Cossacks' response.

Suggested Activity: Share the translations with students. Ask them to form groups and discuss the different approaches to Lyutov's exchange with the owner of the goose. Which translation do they prefer, and why? What makes the translations different? What do we learn about the original Russian from each one of them?

Sources: Isaac Babel, *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel*, translated by Peter Constantine (New York: Norton, 2001), 232-233.

Isaac Babel, *Essential Fictions: Isaac Babel*, translated by Val Vinokur (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 194.

Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry*, translated by Boris Dralyuk (Pushkin Press, 2015), 53.

5: Oral history excerpt, Andrei Malaev-Babel speaking about his grandfather, Isaac Babel, 2011.

Isaac Babel's grandson, Andrei Malaev-Babel, spoke about his grandfather with the Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project. In this excerpt of his interview, Malaev-Babel discusses what he calls Babel's "mission to tell the truth."

Suggested Activity: Play this excerpt for the students and ask them: What do you think Malaev-Babel means by "truth"? Remind them that *Red Cavalry* was based on Babel's personal experiences. Then ask them to reread "My First Goose" and discuss, in pairs, the following: 1. What uncomfortable "truths" does Babel appear to be revealing about his own society in this story? 2. What personal or social risks might the writer have been taking in order to gather the material used in this story? 3. If they were to write a short story about a current concern (perhaps at their school or in their community), what kind of research would they need to do in order to gather material to reveal "truths"? A follow-up exercise might involve challenging students to do some research by exploring a social situation they don't know intimately, and then asking them to write (either fiction or non-fiction) about it.

Source: Andrei Malaev-Babel, *interview* by David Schlitt (Wexler Oral History Project, July 5, 2012). For the complete interview with Malaev-Babel: <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/interviews/woh-fi-0000123/andrei-malaev-babel-2011>.

6: Two photographs of Isaac Babel, circa 1920s and 1939.

Isaac Babel was executed by the Soviet government in January 1940 at the age of forty-five, a victim of Stalin's purges. The first

image here is Babel's final, police photograph, taken after he was arrested and imprisoned on false charges of terrorism and espionage. Most likely, he was arrested because of his friendships with high-up Communist Party officials whom Stalin deemed threatening to his power. The second photograph appears to be a formal portrait of the writer in his thirties.

Babel was "rehabilitated" (that is, the charges against him were revoked) posthumously in 1954. In a rehabilitation certificate, cited by his daughter Nathalie Babel in [her 1964 article](#), the Supreme Court of the USSR stated: "The sentence of the Military College dated 26 January 1940 concerning Babel, I.E., is revoked on the basis of newly discovered circumstances and the case against him is terminated in the absence of elements of a crime."

Suggested Activity: Show these images to students. Ask them whether the formal portrait of Babel conforms to the image they have of Lyutov in "My First Goose." What is similar and what is different? Then ask: What story do the mugshots of Babel, at the time of his arrest in 1939, tell us? Discuss the difference in Babel's appearance between the formal photograph and the police mugshots. Share with students that Babel was put to death in 1940 under Stalin along with a number of other cultural and political figures. Ask them: What do you think Babel might have gone on to write about had he outlived Stalin, who died in 1952?

Sources: Photos available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Исаак_Эммануилович_Бабель.