

Book Review

Babyn Yar: Ukrainian Poets Respond. Edited by Ostap Kin. Translated by John Hennessy and Ostap Kin. Ukrainian Research Institute/Harvard University, 2023.

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On the eve of the Second World War, according to the 1939 census, the total population of Kyiv was 846,724, with Jews counting 224,236 residents or 26.5 % of the population. The Soviet army withdrew from Kyiv on September 17, 1941. Two days later Nazi troops entered the city and would occupy it until the Red Army recaptured it two years later, on November 6, 1943. Ten days after the occupation, on September 29, local Jews, having been ordered the day before to gather on the intersection of two streets, were marched off to a ravine called Babyn Yar on the outskirts of the city and machine-gunned. Over the course of two days at the end of that September, some 33,771 Jews were systematically massacred. During Kyiv's Nazi occupation, between 100,000 and 150,000 people perished in Babyn Yar, mostly Jews but also patients from psychiatric institutions, Soviet prisoners of war, Ukrainian partisans, Communists, Romanies and others. Initiatives by the Soviet Government between 1945 and the independence of Ukraine in 1991 to commemorate the massacres at Babyn Yar were mostly unrealized, and Jews as specific victims were largely elided under the category of "Kyivans" or "Soviet citizens." A granite stone monument was finally erected in 1966, followed by a bronze sculpture in 1976. It was only in 1991, however, that Babyn Yar was characterized in Ukraine as a predominantly Jewish massacre, culminating in 2020 with the announcement of the Foundation and Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center (whose inauguration is currently planned for 2025–2026). It is against this historical background that Ostap Kin presents his bilingual anthology (with English-language translations by John Hennessy and Kin himself) of Jewish and non-Jewish Ukrainian-language poetry on Babyn Yar written from 1941 to 2018, the first anthology of its kind entirely devoted to this aspect of what has become known as the "Holocaust by bullets." Of the 24 poets included in the anthology, each author presented by alphabetical order accompanied by a brief bio bibliographical sketch, most are represented by one or two poems, while others have three, four or more poems included, totaling 41 poems altogether encompassing a wide range of formal and thematic concerns, as well as different historical and geographical locations. The anthology offers annotations with bibliographical information on the original publications of the poems reproduced, a glossary of Kyiv's spatial locations for

the uninitiated, a timeline for the redaction of the poems in the volume, prior publications in English translation, illustration credits (drawings), a complete bibliography of the poetry and secondary sources referenced, and two useful indices. The most significant part of the anthology's critical apparatus, however, is Kin's introduction which takes particular care to contextualize the poetry chosen. Kin, for whom poetry would be "an extremely reactive form of art" capable of presenting "an emotional and immediate response to an event, often before any deliberation or reworking to fit political narratives," and measuring "people's reactions and emotions – compassion, lack of empathy, or even an unwillingness to tell the truth" (p. 5), highlights three periods of composition crucial for interpreting each individual poet's response to the massacres of Babyn Yar: (1) 1941–1946, (2) 1960–1991, and (3) 1989–2018. The first period, spanning the Nazi occupation of Kyiv and the period after the recapture of the city by the Soviet army, has three subdivisions: (a) poems by Jewish and non-Jewish first-hand witnesses living in Kyiv during the occupation; (b) 1942 responses by Soviet Ukrainian poets who had escaped, including influential poets such as Pavlo Tychyna, Maksyme Rylskyi and Volodymyr Sosiura; and (c) poets who returned to or visited Kyiv after its recapture by the Red Army in 1943, such as Mykola Bazhan, Vasyl Shvets, Oleksa Iushchenko, and again Volodymyr Sosiura. The second period covers mainly "official" poets, largely constrained by Soviet censors, some expressing nevertheless an affiliation with modernist poetry (Leonid Pervomaiskyi), and others representing what Kin characterizes as a "second wave of Ukrainian Soviet modernism" (Ivan Drach, Moisei Fishbein), but also "non-modernist" poets, towing a more "official, conformist, censor-approved" line (p. 7). The last period dates from the collapse of the Soviet Union through the Independence of Ukraine in 1991–2018, when poets were freed from the state and its censors. They were, therefore, free to introduce new stylistic approaches to the poetic representation of the massacres of Jews perpetrated at Babyn Yar (such as Hyrhorii Falkovych, Abram Katsnelson, Arkadii Anin, Denys Holubytskyi), culminating in Marianna Kiyanovska's 2017 volume *Babyn Yar: Holosamy (The Voices of Babyn Yar)* and her poetry of "performative witnessing," and Valeriia Bohuslavska's 2018 poem in response to Kiyanovska's volume celebrating its importance. While Kin gives particular emphasis to poets such as Mykola Bazhan, Ivan Drach, and Marianna Kiyanovska, he also attempts to identify what he calls four key overall tropes in the poetry: the *sites* of Babyn Yar itself and Kyiv (the district of Podil, for example, or Melnyk Street); *vengeance* (understandably much stronger in the earlier poems, while later morphing into an appeal for justice and retribution on behalf of the victims); the *mourning for the Jewish dead*, even given the constraints of Soviet censorship; and *language* (though I would take issue with identifying language as a trope in and of itself), going through the prescribed Soviet style of writing about a catastrophe through the post-Soviet period in which

language-use (and thus its instrumentalization as an ideological vehicle) is much freer. Still, thematic readings of the poetry should not be confined by Kin's comments. On the contrary, his alphabetical organization encourages readers to come to their own interpretive and emotive conclusions to the texts presented. Readers with some knowledge of Ukrainian will inevitably appreciate the original versification and astonishing rhythms and rhymes not always apparent in the English translations. This is certainly not a criticism of the anthology, which I cannot but recommend. Indeed, while poetry of the Shoah written in Polish, German, English, Hebrew, Yiddish and to some extent French, has become canonical in literary "Holocaust studies" over the last forty years, the Ukrainian-language poetry on the Shoah, and here specifically on Babyn Yar, has largely passed under the radar. The present publication is a major rectification of this omission. A brief personal note to conclude. Initially reading the anthology in September 2023, it was already apparent to me that when Kin writes (in 2021, no doubt) in his introduction that "Today, Ukrainians – shaped and tested by a variety of political and historical events – are still looking for ways to understand the tragedy of the Holocaust in Ukraine" (p. 4), such an affirmation had already been compounded from February 2022 onward by Vladimir Putin's accusations of Ukrainian "Nazification" and Russia's invasion of sovereign Ukrainian territory. The subsequent massacre of Jewish and non-Jewish citizens and non-citizens by the terrorist organization of Hamas on October 7, 2023 in sovereign Israeli territory on the borders of Hamas-controlled Gaza, left me not only with the difficulty of rereading the anthology with a view to reviewing it, but also bereft of the words to express something that would not be interpreted as a displaced amalgam. And yet this is it: the mass slaughter of Jews at Babyn Yar between 1941 and 1943 *took place*. The massacre, rape, and mutilation of mostly Jewish civilians in Israel on October 7, 2023 *took place*. These heinous events are in no way comparable. But they both share the same root of the pure unadulterated political or religious ideology of the hatred of Jews. The poems in Ostap Kin's anthology bear eloquent testimony to the results of Nazi genocidal ideology and highlight once more the necessity both of critical thinking in the fight against antisemitism in all its current globalized forms and of the commemoration of the victims of antisemitism's deadly consequences.