WHAT’S NEW

The outcry by Ukrainians over the recent bombing near the Holocaust memorial at Babyn Yar reveals a country that is re-examining its recent history. Amelia Glaser spotlights the poets who are reflecting this fresh scrutiny in their work.

The poetry of Babyn Yar, the site of a horrific massacre during the Holocaust, was among the first targets hit by missiles when Russia invaded Ukraine in February. Following the attack, President Volodymyr Zelensky addressed the nation, saying, “We all died again in Babyn Yar from a missile attack.” Ukrainians could identify with the attack on the memorial site as a national tragedy largely due to a change of discourse, over the past decade, around Ukrainian collective trauma.

In the years following the 2013-14 Maidan revolution, Ukraine’s poets have turned their attention to specifically Jewish trauma on Ukrainian soil. In 2017, the poet Marriana Kiyanovska published her collection Babyn Yar: Holosamy. It has now been translated by Oksana Makymychuk and Max Rozochinsky in a virtuosic English version titled The Voices of Babyn Yar and is forthcoming this spring with Harvard University Press. The poems are written in the voices of the victims of the single largest World War II massacre on Soviet soil and beside me one thousand one hundred and twenty-eight fell as I turned into a stick of dynamite and exploded covering everyone with a layer of soil only to spread out in the middle of the ravine where water had formed a covey.

Babyn Yar is an important example of this revisionist history and recent conversations about identity and citizenship. Born in 1973 near Lviv, Kiyanovska has been widely recognized as a significant voice in post-Soviet Ukraine since the 1990s. She has been praised for crossing boundaries — her early work depurred, for example, female sexuality. But her recent poems have been provocative in more historical ways. The 64 poems in Babyn Yar channel the voices of imagined, primarily Jewish, victims of the massacre:

From her book Babyn Yar: Holosamy

Ivan says to Navah this place resembles Babylon except what’s getting mixed are not languages but silences bones even though neither are kept separate for one hangs on to my folk’s ‘33’ you — to your newcomer from ‘41’

Kiyanovska is, quite explicitly, unearthing competing buried traumas. By remembering the Jewish loss of 1941 – the year of the massacre – alongside 1933 – the height of the 1932-3 Holodomor (the Stalin-imposed famine that killed millions of Ukrainians), she is initiating a conversation about how Ukrainian and Jewish collective memories have developed, in part, in opposition to one another. The silences “(m)othered” in which they have alliteratively replaced the languages ‘(mo’) of Babylon, are the silences of the dead, but they are echoed in the long absence of commemoration of these tragedies. Her poem also raises the question of what is at stake for Ukrainians in including Babyn Yar in a history of Ukrainian tragedies: remembering the multiplicity of losses on Ukrainian soil means broadening an existing narrative of Ukrainian historical trauma. In the past that trauma has centered on the Holodomor.

Kiyanovska’s approach to Babyn Yar is part of a broader phenomenon. From around 2014, many scholars have observed a civic turn in contemporary Ukrainian culture, which involves questioning the logic of an ethno-national identity. Long before writing Babyn Yar, Kiyanovska spoke out about the need to reconsider Ukrainian identity. In a 2014 interview with the journal Chas i podii, she spoke about consciously using the political category, ‘citizens of Ukraine,’ rather than the ethnic, volkish label of ‘Uкраинцы’. In the years since the Euro Maidan uprising and the outbreak of the Donbas war, there has been a gradual shift in the definition of Ukrainian identity. The sociologist Karina Korotelnia observed that among the many national narratives presented by activists on the Maidan, a new identity also emerged. It is one she calls the ‘civic-multicultural narrative’ and represents a shift away from an ethno-national Ukrainian narrative, which was bound up with language, religion, and mono-ethnic Ukrainian history, as well as from the Soviet-influenced narrative, which places Russia at the centre of its collective consciousness. The presentation of Ukrainian history by poets in a multinational light is part of this phenomenon. It stands in direct opposition to the stance taken by the Kremlin, which has accused Ukrainians of dangerous forms of nationalism and even Nazism.

Kiyanovska turned to Jewish history at a moment when this was at once necessary to Ukraine’s post-Maidan civic identity and politically complicated: in the collective Ukrainian imagination there is a strong connection between the Donbas war and past violence against Ukrainians, including the Holodomor. Some readers have responded by assuming she must be Jewish. Others have observed that the book constitutes the appropriation of Jewish voices from the past.

The poet Iva Kva, who has also written about Babyn Yar in poems addressing her own mixed (Ukrainian/Jewish) heritage, has written that ‘Kiyanovska reinforces an important question for art … the right to interpret someone else’s experience. … Are we only prepared to bury ‘our own dead’ and to mourn our own victims?’ The poet Serhi Zhuk has also written of the importance of Kiyanovska’s cycle: “Voices need to be revealed, the poet’s task is to be able to listen. That is, to be able to love.” Understanding Jewish suffering may help other groups to understand their own.

As Ukrainians bravely defend their country, many losing family members and their homes to Russia’s unprovoked attack, the rest of the world has sought ways of showing solidarity from the outside, and ways of listening. The Israeli novelist David Grossman, speaking about the need to support Ukrainian refugees, cited the Talmud, “He who saves a life, saves the entire world.” Kiyanovska’s poetry of empathy may help show readers outside Ukraine how to do this. •

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