

Antonella Salomoni, *Le ceneri di Babij Jar. L'eccidio degli ebrei di Kiev* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2019), pp. 350.

by *Simone Attilio Bellezza*

Over the last decade, academic interest in Babyn Yar has increased dramatically. The name refers to the ravine at the outskirts of Kyiv where 33,771 Jews were murdered on September 29-30, 1941. This episode of the Shoah has become the most representative example of what is now called the “Holocaust by bullets,”¹ even if it is also one the most difficult to explain.

Nonetheless what is left of the area where the massacre took place is one of the most contested “sites of memory” in Europe, the scene of a clash among different actors with contrasting politics of memory. The confrontation has been exacerbated by the outbreak of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2014, which is informed also by opposing interpretations of World War Two. For these reasons, in recent years, historians and other scholars have published many articles, collections of memoirs, and monographs about these issues, often as the result of a fruitful collaboration between Ukrainian and foreign scholars.² Salomoni’s book certainly succeeds in informing the Italian reader about the findings of the most recent research into the various topics connected with Babyn Yar, but the actual scope of the work goes well beyond the mere task of summarizing the international scholarly debate. The book is an attempt to outline the first all-encompassing story of the multiple strategies of memorialization of the Babyn Yar tragedy, not only through the analysis of memoirs and other writings, but also by describing the modification of the landscape, i.e. the material transformations of the site. By bringing together two strands of research that usually evolve independently,

¹ The expression was introduced into the historiographic debate by Patrick Desbois in his *Porteur de mémoires. Sur le traces de la Shoah par balles* (Paris: Michel Lafon, 2007).

² Such as the team of historians working with the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, whose chief historian, Karel Berkhoff, is expected to publish an innovative reconstruction of the massacre; see Vladyslav Hynych and Paul R. Magocsi, eds., *Babyn Yar. Istoriia i pam'iat'* (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2016). Berkhoff recently resigned (April 2020) from his position for disagreements with Il'ja Khrzhanovskij, the newly appointed artistic director of the Babyn Yar memorial complex.

Salomoni has managed to make a history of Babyn Yar that is at the same time political, cultural, social and environmental.

The volume consists of a foreword, an introduction, six chapters, and an epilogue: both foreword and epilogue reproduce more or less famous poems addressing the events and the memory of Babyn Yar. The “Introduction to the Event” is a sixty page section with a reconstruction of the events that occurred in the ravine from the fall of the Ukrainian capital into the hands of the Nazis until the Soviet reconquest. In this section, Salomoni quotes numerous testimonies from victims and witnesses, providing the reader with a wide range of cases that together form a good illustration of the different aspects of the Holocaust as it was implemented in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union. The first chapter describes the first attempts made by Soviet Jews to make sense of the tragedy, with an analysis of the first poems and the efforts to reconstruct the events made by the famous journalist and writer Ilya Ehrenburg. The second chapter, which deals with the resurgence of anti-Semitism in post-WWII Ukraine, describes in depth Ehrenburg’s reconstruction of the Soviet resistance to a full disclosure of the events at Babyn Yar. Salomoni correctly connects the genesis of an anti-Semitic policy in Stalin’s USSR, under the pretext of a campaign against “cosmopolitanism,” to the emerging strong popular anti-Semitism against those Jews who were trying to return to their houses and received no support (if not overt hostility) from Ukrainian political authorities. The third chapter focuses on the Soviet regime’s efforts to produce its own version of the events that occurred in Babyn Yar, in order to hide the fact that Jews were the specific target of the persecutions and to present the massacre as a simple episode of violence against the civil population. The strategy also involved local authorities and their efforts to conceal the site of the killings through a series of urbanistic changes, which eventually resulted in the disappearance of the ravine and almost complete destruction of the Jewish cemetery, transforming the area into a residential neighborhood. On March 13, 1961, these reckless land works caused the collapse of a dam and the following mudslide (known as the Kurenivka mudslide), in which no fewer than 1,500 people died. Partly because of this new tragedy, the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko became interested in the previous events. The fourth chapter describes in detail the three most famous attempts by Soviet intellectuals to revive the memory of

Babyn Yar: Yevtushenko's renowned poem *Babi Yar*, Dmitri Shostakovich's thirteenth symphony that was inspired by it, and the novel-memoir *Babi Yar* by Anatoly Kuznetsov, who witnessed the massacre as a young teenager. The most interesting part of the book, however, are the fifth and sixth chapters, which describe the efforts of the Ukrainian Jewish community to revive the public memory of the Shoah in Kyiv and the fight for the construction of a monument commemorating the victims. Curiously enough, the main organizer and protagonist of these actions was Viktor Nekrasov, an ethnic Russian writer born in Kyiv, who was eventually accused of "Sionism" by Soviet authorities. His key role in drawing into the struggle the democratic faction of the Ukrainian national dissent is well reconstructed and sheds light on the origins of the alliance between the Jewish communities in Ukraine and the Ukrainian national movement, a political affinity with important consequences also in post-Soviet times, as the relevance of Jewish politicians in today's Ukraine illustrates. Defeated by international pressure, the Soviet authorities eventually agreed to the creation of a monument in Babyn Yar, but once again it did not refer to the Jews killed in the Holocaust but was just another rhetorical celebration of a deliberately a-national Soviet heroism.

Only the last few pages of the last chapter are dedicated to a brief description of the creation of a new monument, this time in the form of a menorah, in 1991, when Ukraine had already taken the path toward independence. This is perhaps the only real flaw of this book, which excludes from its analysis the last thirty years of history of this site of memory, years that have proved to be very intense and that have transformed the area into one of only four National memorials within the new Ukrainian state, but one which hosts different projects of memorialization by the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance and other international organizations.

As the long and useful footnotes show, Salomoni's work is the result of a meticulous knowledge of the published sources together with a targeted search of unpublished documents in the post-Soviet archives. Overall, this book represents an original way to study the processes of construction (or destruction) of the memory of the Shoah, through the particular case of Babyn Yar.

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