



## “WE ALL DIED AGAIN IN BABYN YAR”

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

**B**abyn 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.” That Ukrainians could identify with the attack on the memorial site as a national tragedy is largely due to a changed 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 Marianna Kiyanovska published her collection *Babyn Yar: Holosamy*. It has now been translated by Oksana Maksymchuk 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 sprout out  
in the middle of the ravine where water had formed a cavity*

– Marianna Kiyanovska, *The Voices of Babyn Yar*, translated from the Ukrainian by Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rozochinsky (2022)

In late September 1941, over the course of two days, tens of thousands of people were murdered by gunfire at the edge of a steep ravine, known as Babyn Ya, on the outskirts of Nazi-occupied Kyiv. Up to 150,000 people were killed there during the two-year Nazi occupation. Most of the victims were Jews, although Crimean Tatars and Roma, as well as Ukrainian and Russian communists, were among the victims.

The tragedy was compounded by

the silence in the years that followed. The few Soviet monuments to Babyn Yar commemorated the “peaceful victims of fascism,” occluding the genocidal nature of the massacre. Despite the official Soviet promotion of national minorities in the interwar period, and the elaborate celebration of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in World War II, collective mourning was viewed as dangerously nationalist, a betrayal of Soviet egalitarianism. Following Ukraine’s independence in 1991, plans emerged to erect a more expansive memorial to the massacre, but these projects were perpetually slowed by controversy over how best to commemorate this episode.

However, unofficial artistic reappraisals of Babyn Yar have called to task the Soviet legacy of collective forgetting, and the competitive victimhood that arose with the post-Soviet national awakenings across Eastern Europe. Kiyanovska’s *Babyn Yar* is an important example of this type of reappraisal. Her poems include

a discussion of the Nazi genocide, Soviet revisionist history and recent conversations about identity and citizenship.

Born in 1973 near Lviv, Kiyanovska has been widely recognised as a significant voice in post-Soviet Ukraine since the 1990s. She has been praised for crossing boundaries – her early work depicted, 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:

*Ivan says to Navah this place resembles  
Babylon except  
what’s getting mixed are not languages but  
silences bones  
even though bodies are kept separate I for one  
hang on  
to my folks from “33”, you – to your  
newcomers 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 (‘movchannia’), which have alliteratively replaced the languages

(‘movy’) of Babylon, are the silences of the dead, but they are echoed in the long absence of commemoration of these tragedies. She is also revealing 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 ‘Ukrainians’. In the years since the Euromaidan uprising and the outbreak of the Donbas war, there has been a gradual shift in the definition of Ukrainian identity. The social psychologist Karina Korostelina 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

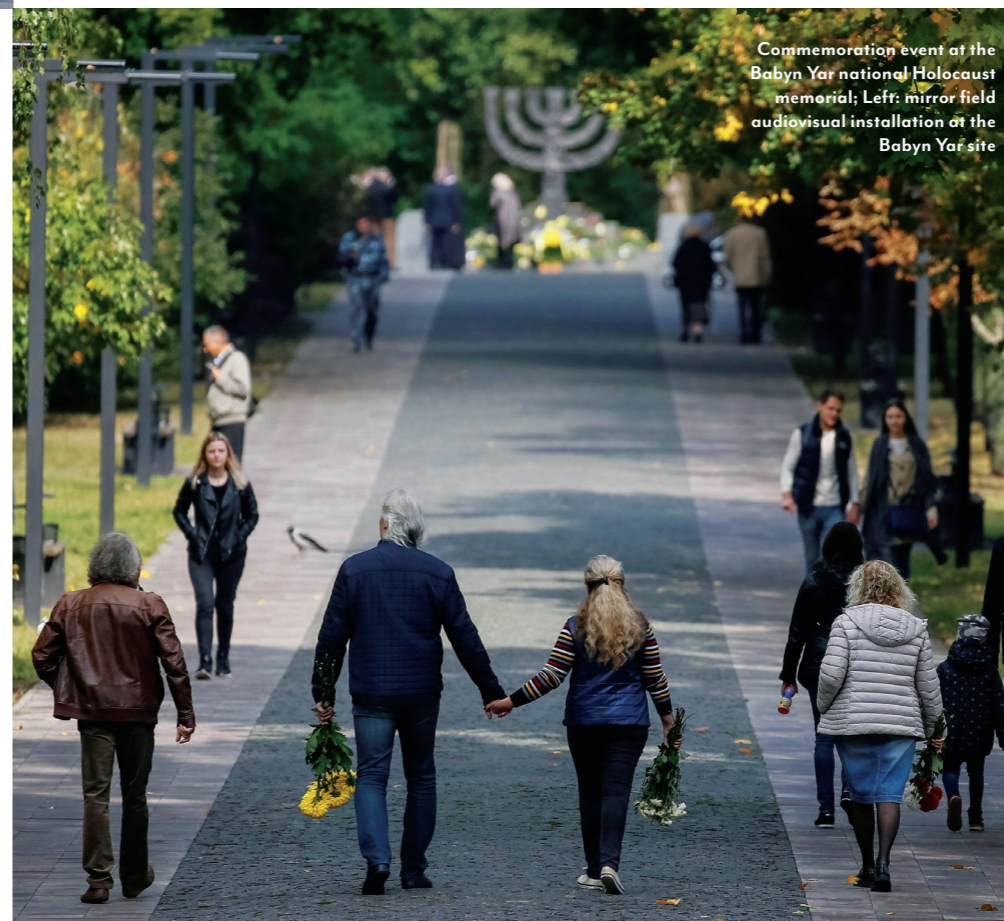
nationalism and even Nazism.

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 Iya Kiva, 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 Serhii Zhadan 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. ■

**Amelia M Glaser** is an associate professor of Russian and comparative literature at University of California, San Diego. Her books include *Jews and Ukrainians in Russia’s Literary Borderlands* (2012). *Babyn Yar: Holosamy* by Marianna Kiyanovska, *Dukh i litera*, 2017; *The Voices of Babyn Yar* by Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rozochinsky, Harvard University Press, 2021.



Commemoration event at the Babyn Yar national Holocaust memorial; Left: mirror field audiovisual installation at the Babyn Yar site

GETTY; ALAMY