

Arkadi Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory: Holocaust Monuments in the Soviet Union*, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2018. 386 p. ISBN 978-9-6530-8573-2

In recent years, the theme of the Holocaust monuments, memorials and memorial museum complexes has attracted immense attention. At first glance, one might think that this monograph by Arkadi Zeltser, a leading research fellow at the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem, *Unwelcome Memory: Holocaust Monuments in the Soviet Union*, is another trend in the research field. However, on a closer inspection of the concept conveyed in the book and the explanatory insights, there is no doubt that we have an exceptional study of Holocaust memory symbols.

The subject of analysis is what makes Zeltser's monograph stand out from the general range of works on this theme: Holocaust monuments (memorials) are analysed here not only as 'material' artefacts of a specific memory culture, but also as an expression of the efforts by the community of Jews who lived in the Soviet Union (or, as the author himself states, Soviet Jews) to maintain (or create anew) the foundations of a national-religious consciousness (pp. 27–28, 56). Thus, it can be said that the monograph follows an analytical leitmotif, which highlights the fact that the memorialisation of Holocaust sites was important for most Soviet Jews, not only to symbolically remember the victims (which in effect contradicted the principle of making all 'victims of Nazism' equal in terms of their suffering, applied by ideologues of the Soviet regime), but also as an opportunity to almost 'legally' uphold their national-religious identity in the form of ideological fables and aesthetic monumentalism, which was more or less acceptable to the Soviet system.

It is necessary to stress that the monograph is to a large extent the result of many years of systematic work. Several conditions prompt this statement. First, the basis of Arkadi Zeltser's research is the project 'Untold Stories: The Murder Sites of the Jews in the Occupied Territories of the Former USSR' implemented by Yad Vashem, which systematised information about the geography (topography) of Jewish mass murder sites, the number of people killed, and the details behind the circumstances

of these massacres<sup>1</sup> (incidentally, the photographic material collected as part of this project is much used in this monograph as well). The main focus of the project was a reconstruction of the memorialisation process of Holocaust sites in the postwar period in the Soviet Union. Second, Zeltser was one of the most active participants in the project realised in Russia 'The Babi Yars of Russia: Memorials for Victims of the Holocaust', during which information about 400 monuments erected in memory of the Jewish victims of mass murders in Russia and other areas of the former Soviet Union was collected and summarised. It is important to note that the first virtual museum in Russia devoted to the memory of Holocaust victims was established on the basis of this project.<sup>2</sup> The number of such objects in Zeltser's monograph is much larger: the book analyses no less than 700 Holocaust memorials in post-Soviet countries.

The range of sources used in Zeltser's book is rather broad, and is unusual for this kind of study: archive documents, the periodical press, ego documents (memoirs, journals), regional historical works ('field research' and information from respondents, participants and witnesses of the Holocaust), and visual material collected not only from official memory institutions (state archives and museums), but also from private collections. The author effectively operates with the content he has at hand from fundamentally different resource groups, which is what distinguishes this monograph from other studies in the same field (such as the research by Harold Marcuse, James Young, Ilja Altman, Marek Kucia, and other authors).<sup>3</sup> The chronological boundaries

<sup>1</sup> For more about the project, see: 'Untold Stories: The Murder Sites of the Jews in the Occupied Territories of the Former USSR', <https://www.yadvashem.org/untold-stories/database/homepage.asp> (accessed 17 August 2020).

<sup>2</sup> For more details, see: Babi Yars of Russia: Memorials for the Victims of the Holocaust, <http://www.holomemory.ru/> (accessed 17 August 2020).

<sup>3</sup> H. Marcuse, 'Holocaust Memorials: The Emergence of Genre', in: *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 115, No 1 (2020), pp. 53–89; J.E. Young, *The Texture of Memory. Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (London, 1993); I. Altman, 'Memorializatsiia Holokosta v Rossii: istoriia, sovremennost, perspektivy', in: *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, Nos 2–3 (40–41) (2005), pp. 252–263; I. Altman, 'Memorializatsiia Holokosta v Rossiiskoi Federatsii: sostoiianie, problemy, tendentsii', *Evroaziatskii evreiskii ezhegodnik. 2007–2008 god* (Moskva, 2008), pp. 148–163; M. Kucia, 'Holocaust Memorials in Central and Eastern Europe: Communist Legacies, Transnational Influences and National Developments', *Remember and Solidarity* (Studies in 20th Century European History, No 5), eds. D. Michman, M. Weber (Warszawa, 2016), pp. 159–184. It is important to note that in 1995 and 1996, two volumes from the compendium by Ulrike Puvogel and other authors *Die Gedenkstätten für die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus: eine Dokumentation* (Bonn, 1995, 1996) were published in which information about 3,000 monuments in

of the research are rather strict: the period from 1943 until the end of the Soviet Union in late 1991, because, as the author correctly notes numerous times, the first initiatives to memorialise Jewish mass murder sites in certain regions of the Soviet Union were evident while the war was still under way (soon after the Wehrmacht was driven out), while the situation of Holocaust memorial objects in regions of the former Soviet Union after the collapse of the Soviet system is covered in other studies that actualise the issue of the memorialisation of the Holocaust in post-Soviet countries.

The methodological instruments the author applies are worthy of attention: Zeltser looks at identifying the genesis of initiatives for the memorialisation of separate Holocaust sites (who decided to create a monument or memorial, and why, and by what means did they try to do this?), and at revealing the resulting formation of memorials as a continuous process. We should note that in his book, Zeltser also touches on the reflection of memorials devoted to Jewish massacre victims in the Soviet media (not only in the press, but in film chronicles as well). This approach allows him to show that various forms of media, as means of semantic influence, were used to form the desired perceptions of 'Nazi crime sites', and the respective explanatory meanings. On the other hand, it should also be noted that analytical preferences in this monograph are focused primarily on the aspect of the interaction of the Soviet Union's Jewish communities with massacre sites, and the attempts made (or not) towards their memorialisation, leaving other groups in society (who were also involved in the management of and symbolic meaning given to such sites) as secondary actors in this regard.

Zeltser's monograph consists of six chapters. In the first (Theoretical Premises), the author conceptualises the theoretical framework of the research, paying particular attention to accentuating the Soviet Jewish identity, and special features of their historical memory (pp. 45–86). In the author's opinion, the genesis of the Holocaust memorialisation culture, along with the need to build monuments in memory of the victims of the war, was directly related to features of the Soviet Jewish

memory of victims of the Nazi regime was systematised. This publication can be considered a pioneering work on the Holocaust monument theme. In 1997, a similar work appeared in Lithuania: Josif Levinson's *Skausmo knyga* (Book of Sorrow), in which information about no fewer than 200 Holocaust memorial sites in Lithuania was presented. In 2011, *Holokausto Lietuvoje atlasas/Holocaust Atlas of Lithuania*, compiled by Milda Jakulytės-Vasil was published, presenting information about 227 mass graves.

identity. Due to the anti-religious nature of the Soviet system, it was a person's connection with family and place of birth (the former *shtetl*) that played the most important role in the structure of the Soviet Jewish collective identity, and this meant that a significant number of monuments to Holocaust victims put up after the war were indeed erected as symbols for remembering close family members killed during the Nazi occupation.

The second chapter (Soviet Memory Policy) analyses characteristics of the interaction between the Soviet regime's official memorialisation culture with the memory of the Jewish genocide and massacre sites (pp. 87–103). In his discussion of the Soviet regime's suppression of the memory of the Jewish genocide, Zeltser focuses mostly on an analysis of the dynamics of the memorialisation process of Jewish massacre sites in particularly unfavourable conditions. According to the author, this position taken by the Soviet regime regarding Jewish massacre sites should not be viewed unilaterally. For example, in his opinion, indications of the Stalinist regime's anti-Semitic campaign, such as the 'freezing' of the Baby Yar and Piskarevskaya cemetery restoration projects (pp. 93–94), and the destruction of already-erected monuments (such as Paneriai/Ponary, 1949–1952) should not be treated solely as an uncompromising policy of eradicating memory symbols of the Jewish genocide; rather, other trends were a factor as well. A total of 12 monuments to victims of mass murders were erected in the Soviet Union between 1948 and 1953: ten in the Brest region, and two in the Mogilev district (p. 97). Also, during the period of the rule of Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, a time noted for its intense process of creating monuments, memorial complexes and museums honouring the 'authors of victory' (Red Army soldiers), more opportunities for maneuverability were similarly available for the initiators of monuments honouring victims of Jewish massacres, albeit while continuing to uphold the euphemisms about the murder of 'unarmed civilians' and 'Soviet citizens' during the Nazi occupation. This kind of policy sometimes prompted paradoxical decisions: for example, in the period discussed, some monuments (for example, in Iampol, Belogorsk and Kornitsa) devoted to Holocaust victims were built based on the importance of such monuments not just as 'the victory over fascism', but also as contributing to an understanding of the history of the October Revolution (pp. 99–102).

Zeltser embraces the most sequential analysis of the genesis of the Holocaust monuments in the Soviet Union in the third chapter of the monograph (The Authorities, the Holocaust, and the Monuments),

keeping to a chronological principle. The research here begins with a discussion of the construction of the first monuments during the war and the early postwar years that were devoted to the memory of Jews killed by the Nazis, and ends with an analysis of the Holocaust memorialisation process during the period of perestroika (pp. 105–214). It is important to note that Zeltser gives a brief summary of this chapter by presenting a periodisation of the process of establishing memorials for victims of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, supplementing it with ‘the case’ of Belarus and other examples (Soviet Ukraine, Moldavia and the Baltic republics) (pp. 207–214) that highlight regional particularities. In the opinion of the author, the first movement for the creation of such monuments (‘memorial activism’, p. 122) dates from 1943–1947, when at the initiative of some Holocaust survivors, monuments were put up at Jewish massacre sites near certain small towns and cities (former *shtetls*). Most of these monuments complied with typical standards of Soviet monumentalism, and were in effect ‘silent’ signifiers of the Jewish genocide. Nonetheless, in Zeltser’s opinion, the monuments erected in 1946 in Minsk (Iama) and in 1948–1949 near Vilnius (Paneriai/Ponary)<sup>4</sup> are an exception, as they were located within the limits of cities or capitals, and featured obvious symbolic references (epitaphs not only in Yiddish [in Minsk], but also in Hebrew [in Vilnius], and the *Megen David* symbol) that made it easy to identify these memory symbols as intended specifically to commemorate murdered Jews. Monuments featuring analogous semantic content were built in 1946 and 1947 in Stanislav (at a Jewish cemetery), Ternopol (at a massacre site), and Kaunas (at the former ghetto cemetery). In this case, Zeltser distinguishes an important detail: the first monuments were erected in the former republics of Poland and Lithuania, which, in his opinion, testifies to the fact that during the period of the centralisation of the local government system, there were more opportunities for Holocaust survivor groups in these areas to realise their commemorative initiatives (evidence of these initiatives is the existence of the only Jewish museum in the Soviet Union, in Vilnius, from 1944 to 1949) (pp. 122–126). The author

<sup>4</sup> It should also be noted that the circumstances behind the installation and destruction of the monument at Paneriai that Zeltser discusses partly correspond with the conclusions of research by Zigmās Vitkus. See: Z. Vitkus, *A memorial in the politics of memory: the case of Paneriai (1944–2016)* = *Memorialas atminimo politikoje: Panerių atvejo tyrimas (1944–2016): summary of doctoral dissertation* (Klaipėda, 2019); Z. Vitkus, ‘Marked, Yet Silent. The Graves of the Holocaust Victims in Vilnius Region and Their Memorialization’, *The Holocaust in the Eastern and Western European States Occupied by the Nazis: Studies and Memory*, ed. V. Vareikis (Kaunas, 2017), pp. 311–322.

distinguishes the second phase of the Holocaust memorialisation process in the Soviet Union as Stalin's period of anti-Semitism (1948–1953), which, in his view, was characterised by its controversy. Even though the anti-Semitic policy vector intensified in the Soviet Union in this period, and inevitably affected many Jewish memory culture institutions (for example, the Jewish Museum in Vilnius was closed down in June 1949, Jewish theatres and educational institutions across the Soviet Union were closed down, and a number of Jewish community leaders were arrested), initiatives for the memorialisation of Jewish massacre victims that had begun were suddenly cut short, and led to the dismantling of some monuments (such as the monument at Paneriai), the expression of 'memorial activism' was nevertheless possible even under these conditions. It was during this period that monuments to honour victims of the massacre of Jews were built in places such as Dzisna, Pervomaisk and Hashchevata (p. 140). In the third period, which in Zeltser's opinion covered the period of the rule of Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, the creation of monuments for Holocaust victims in the Soviet Union became stuck in an ambivalent policy trap: even though the cultural and social activities of Jewish communities were noticeably intense during the 'Thaw', the news of the real victims of these killings continued to be suppressed at most of the massacre sites memorialised in this period (pp. 141–146). The fact that the Holocaust was pushed to the fringes of official memory culture prompted the selection of 'unofficial' tactics for commemoration. One example of this trend, according to the author, was the Rumbula memorial, which, despite Soviet political and ideological controls, became a central gathering place for Holocaust survivors between 1963 and 1969 to properly pay their respects to those who were killed. Zeltser states that the Rumbula memorial became a unique example of a compromise between Soviet memorialisation culture and Holocaust survivor commemoration (in 1964, a monument was erected there, with epitaphs in Latvian, Russian and Yiddish, and survivors who gathered for the almost official memorial events held there were allowed to publicly share their experiences). The Baby Yar site also eventually turned into a similar compromise, even though the official memorialisation culture discourse remained the dominant element (pp. 148–172). In Zeltser's fourth 'stagnation' period, the Soviet system did not pay much attention to the memorialisation of Jewish massacre sites. On one hand, this allowed more freedom for the initiators of such monuments; on the other, however, a number of additional obstacles emerged. The author states that even though most

monuments honouring Holocaust victims were erected specifically in this period (p. 206), the initiators of these monuments knew perfectly well that their efforts would only be successful if the monument complied with the canons of official memorialisation culture. This was reflected both in the 'typical' stylistics of these monuments, and in the 'euphemisms' used in the epitaphs (pp. 172–207).

In the fourth chapter (*Jewish Memorial Activity*), Zeltser focuses on the active expression of Soviet Jewish memory culture: initiatives in the maintenance of cemeteries, and the means of organising these activities (pp. 215–274). In this context, he stresses that the creation of the Holocaust monuments, as well as other expressions of Soviet Jewish memory culture, was stimulated not only by a spiritual (religious) need, but also as a demonstration of the aspirations of the powers with a monopoly over the ideological (and official memorialisation culture) discourse, as an exclusive Nazi genocide victim group. On the other hand, the author notes that probably the only factor unifying the Soviet Jewish community was not just (or as much) religion, of which the influence on collective and individual environments was not the same across the whole of Jewish society, due to the atheist policy propagated by the Soviet regime, but the memorialisation of Holocaust victims, which in Zeltser's view did unite all Jewish communities across the USSR. This reveals the fundamental chain of thought of the research: the premise that the ideological (moral, spiritual and ethical) and practical (in terms of organisation and patronage) basis for the memorialisation process of Holocaust sites in the Soviet Union was at the same time the solidarity of Soviet Jews as a specific memory community.

In the fifth chapter (*Monuments as a Means of Ethnic Identity*), Zeltser analyses the symbolic markers and other semantic indicators used in the memorialisation of the Holocaust, which aimed to designate the 'Jewishness' of these objects (pp. 275–321). In effect, he analyses the symbolic language revealed in Holocaust monuments, and the specific semantic meanings it conveys relating not only to memory culture but also Soviet Jewish identity. The author accurately notes that the marking of Holocaust memorials as specifically 'Jewish' monuments under the conditions of the Soviet Union's ideological control and its political system always demanded a degree of creativity to convey a particular group's own (unsanctioned) identity meanings in forms that would suit the regime (such as the 'noncombatant Soviet citizens' euphemism used by the Soviet regime's ideological overseers to categorise victims of the Nazi genocide on the epitaphs of numerous monuments, often

as a way of avoiding memorial plaques with lists of the names of those who were actually killed). In addition, the author shows convincingly that the determining role in Holocaust monument creation did not always lie with the Soviet regime's political and ideological control mechanisms. The initiators of these monuments often had to navigate through the circumstances surrounding relationships between local supply structures (as is well known, acquiring the materials required for monuments depended on the '*blat*' economic principle of exchange and favours), local government (where the mechanism of 'connections' was important), and local Jewish communities (often opposed to each other due to internal conflicts).

In the last chapter (The Final Episode), Zeltser analyses the significance of regional history movements, which became more active in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, and were organised by the Historical-Ethnographic Commission in Moscow (1982–1986), on the identification of Holocaust sites and their memorialisation process (pp. 323–336). In the author's view, the regional history movement was most active in the Soviet Union in initiating search expeditions for the remains of Red Army soldiers, which drew attention not only to the *shtetls* that had existed before the war, but Jewish massacre sites as well. One such initiative was the Leningrad Group for Researching the Catastrophe (*Leningradskaia Gruppya po izucheniiu Katastrofy*), which was at the peak of its activities in the 1980s. Its activists (such as Aleksandr Frenkel, Daniel Romanovsky, Mikhail [Shmuel] Ryvkin, Leonid Kolton, Vladimir Lembrikov and Gennady Farber) used 'field research' methods (Romanovsky was the first to begin conducting interviews with Holocaust survivors, which proved to be very beneficial when organising search expeditions) to collect factual and photographic material about Jewish massacre sites in the northwest regions of the Soviet Union and on the Belarusian-Russian border<sup>5</sup> (pp. 324–325). This undoubtedly formed the basis for a broader understanding not only of the scale of the Nazi genocide but also the exclusive nature of the 'Jewish factor'. Zeltser states that this understanding spread gradually through the Leningrad Jewish community, and among other social groups in the city. As is known, similar initiative groups operated in other large cities in

<sup>5</sup>It is important to note that the activities of the Leningrad Group for Researching the Catastrophe covered not just the identification of Jewish massacre sites, but also the organisation of memorial events, which gradually created the provisions for Holocaust memorial culture at a local level. The material collected during the group's expeditions was used to create the documentary film *Baby Yar of the Smolensk Land*.

the Soviet Union. On the other hand, it cannot be dismissed that the marking of Jewish massacre sites and memorialisation initiatives could have been perceived within the Soviet regime's ideological institutions as a practical opportunity for spreading the 'victims of the fascist regime' ideologue.

The theses explained in Zeltser's monograph inevitably pose questions about the 'identity' of the Holocaust monuments in memory of Jews murdered by the Nazis that were erected in various regions across the Soviet Union (in various Soviet republics): to what extent were they considered 'Jewish' or Soviet? The question reveals a dilemma: these monuments were created and built either by the Soviet ideological institutions or by Jewish communities whose most active members were figures who engaged closely with the Soviet regime. In Zeltser's opinion, there is no doubt that a considerable number of Soviet Jews were influenced by the idea that after the Second World War, a new type of Soviet society would form that would solve social inequality and national discrimination issues. The institutions of ideological power tried to keep up this attitude by promoting the belief that the Soviet regime was guaranteed to save mankind from Nazism (this was the essential element of the Great Patriotic War mytheme highlighting the Soviet Union as the main 'defender over fascism'). According to the author, this kind of concept was very popular among Soviet Jews, so it should come as no surprise that the monuments that were created at the initiative of Jewish communities in the Soviet Union<sup>6</sup> were not lacking in either Soviet semantics (obelisks, 'typical monuments', red stars), or 'Jewish' semantics (menorahs, Magen David, epitaphs in Yiddish, and, in exceptional cases, Hebrew, with sequences from the Book of Job), which is what allowed these kinds of memory symbols to exist within the ideological Soviet monument system as designated carriers of the 'victims of fascism' meaning in memorials, regardless of the fact that some of them also stood out with their easily recognisable religious (Judaic) semantic features. On the other hand, such symbols in effect reflected attempts by the Soviet Union's Jews to adapt and create their own identity, not just as a specific national-religious group, but also as 'Soviet people' (pp. 314–321). These kinds of intentions, according to Zeltser, were especially characteristic of the Red Army veterans group

<sup>6</sup> According to Zeltser's data, up to 1991, no fewer than 733 monuments to the victims of massacres were put up through the efforts of Jewish communities in the western part of the Soviet Union: A. Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory ...*, p. 26.

of Jews, for whom encounters with testimonials about massacres and execution sites that testified to these mass killings served to strengthen their national and cultural identity (pp. 307–314).<sup>7</sup>

Zeltser's monograph shows that the monuments and memorials put up in the Soviet period in honour of the Jewish victims of mass killings were inevitably affected by Soviet ideology and history policy. In many cases, they adopted Soviet forms of monumentalism and semantic meanings. This determined the transformation of these memory symbols in the post-Soviet period (p. 330), at which efforts started to concentrate on restoring (transforming) them (rewriting epitaphs, changing the symbolism), in order to designate the 'real' Jewish identity.

*Hektoras Vitkus*

Klaipėda University Institute of Baltic Region History and Archaeology

<sup>7</sup>Zeltser also touches on this aspect in one of his publications: A. Zeltser, 'Jews or Soldiers? Identity Challenges Faced by Jewish Soldiers in the Red Army when they Encountered the Holocaust', <https://www.yadvashem.org/research/about/mirilashvili-center/articles/jews-or-soviets.html> (accessed 17 August 2020).