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## An Inconvenient Place

Jonathan Littell and Antoine D'Agata, trans. Charlotte Mandell, 2024

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*An Inconvenient Place* by Jonathan Littell and Antoine D'Agata is the result of a failed project. Littell reluctantly sets out to write a narrative of Babyn Yar, the site of a 1941 massacre of Kiev's Jewish population. He completes the manuscript; then, on the 24th of February 2022 Russia invades Ukraine. This renders his original draft inadequate. 'To speak about Babyn Yar no doubt still has meaning, but no longer the same one', Littell explains. Together with D'Agata they restart the project. The new narrative endeavours to find that meaning, to explore what the massacre at Babyn Yar means in the context of the Russian invasion.

As well as being a text, the book is also a photographic narrative. The images take up whole pages, sometimes two. They're black and white, depicting nature, objects, roads and also people. While the text is fragmented, split into numbered paragraphs, the images are whole, complete in themselves. At times they reflect the text directly, depicting a person in a tree, other times they're more indirect, suggesting another way of engaging with place. The two individuals' perspectives speak to each other, enriching the narrative. As Littell concludes, 'When in dismay and confusion, it's always better to have company' (p.12).

The writer and photographer decide to visit another place of massacre, Bucha and its surrounding areas. On their arrival Littell is struck by the resemblances to Babyn Yar, one atrocity echoing another. 'One month later, everything was already underground, hidden, on the way to erasure. Folded back under a normality that could nonetheless not be any such thing' (p.82). The imagery of folding reappears throughout the book, allowing Littell to explore the variety of ways in which memory is layered in public spaces, analysing its simultaneous presence and absence. The many memorials at Babyn Yar suggest commemoration, yet simultaneously miss the point. As Littell asks, 'is it in this jumble of monuments that the memory of Babyn Yar survives? Or do they on the contrary also contribute to making it a 'space of non-memory' (p.27).

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Littell meets people in Bucha who left, who returned, who saw what happened and who endured. This is perhaps one of the more difficult parts of the book to read, partly due our recent memory of the events covered, and partly due to Littell's meticulous documentation of the atrocities committed that the Russian state denies. The torture and murder of civilians are handled delicately. Littell has a unique ability - and this can be said for the book as a whole - of reporting what he sees with care and sensitivity, and never falling into sentimentality or cliché. Much like Svetlana Alexievich, he listens, he reports, he asks the questions we're wondering about, he reveals the uncomfortable truths, and then he leaves it with us.

The most potent aspect of the book is the unearthing of complex Ukrainian history, the entangled histories of occupation, collaboration, and Soviet repression. This is the history that the Russian propagandists uses to justify the war. It is this inconvenient and uncomfortable memory that gives real depth to the book. Littell walks a carefully balanced path of revealing the past without assigning blame or judgement. Much of it is shared by his interlocutors. Having lived through these cycles, they've seen the failure of the state and people to reckon with their past that keeps emerging in unintended ways. A manifestation of Freud's 'return of the repressed'<sup>1</sup> if you like. Ultimately, Littell's narrative brings to the fore the imperative to remember, but specifically to remember well.

*An Inconvenient Place* does what the best narratives dealing with history, memory and trauma do. It insists on nuance, it is sensitive to the past and present, and it is beautifully written and deftly illustrated. The inconvenience of a place is at the centre of the narrative. This concept that is best captured by Littell's observation at the start of the book: 'Two things can be said about Babyn Yar: it's not just an idea, but it's also not entirely a place' (p.13).

## Bibliography

Freud, Sigmund, *Moses and Monotheism* (Hogarth Press, 1939)

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (Hogarth Press, 1939), pp.197-200.