with its defective inscription does not provide closure, but instead calls for another mode of remembrance in the future.

These last passages of Rybakov’s novel resonate with the first line of Evtushenko’s famous poem “Babi Yar,” which reads: “Over Babi Yar there are no memorials,”45 as well as Ol’ga Berggolts’s inscription on the memorial in Leningrad, which ends with the line: “Nobody is forgotten, nothing is forgotten,”46 but also with the Torah, overwriting one text with the other. The epilogue also refers the reader to the fact that even this distorted, divergent Russian-Jewish memory does not yet exist and is only a projection into the future. The memorial plate is at once a foreshadowing of a future still to be attained: in 1972, the time of the epilogue, there were very few memorial plates at burial sites and even fewer with inscriptions in Hebrew, and the small number of memorials that existed were initiated by Jewish survivors or their family members and made the news in the Soviet Yiddish press. Rybakov’s depictions of the lack of memorial practices are thus at once a critique of current Soviet practices of remembering the Holocaust, as well as a hint of what they could look like. And finally, this writing style corresponded to socialist realism in that it depicted reality not as it was, but as it should be. The memorial that is portrayed in the book stands in stark contrast to the killing sites that bear no trace of the dead. While the eponymous “heavy sand” is the only spatial remnant at this former killing site, it is not identifiable as such. For those who were witnesses this is a negative space, and for those who came after them this site is just another place, untouched by memorial practices or interventions. It is also an inverse allusion to the popular tombstone inscription “May the earth be light upon you.” At the end of his novel, Rybakov combined all narrative devices—describing the voids, employing foreshadowing, and avoiding closure—in the narrator’s unsuccessful search for his dead parents or at least their graves and the insufficient memorial that nevertheless foreshadows a glimpse of a possible memorial culture.

Conclusion: Remembering and Forgetting the Holocaust in the USSR

As this article has tried to demonstrate, Rybakov’s text symptomatically moves between different modes of writing to inform Soviet readers about the Holo-

caust and inscribe the fate of Soviet Jews into the greater fabric of World War II. Rybakov’s novel, in my opinion, seems like a commentary avant la lettre to Michael Rothberg’s theory of “multidirectional memory,” in which different groups of victims do not necessarily compete for attention, but can enhance the visibility of each other in the public eye. In some ways, this is what Rybakov tries to achieve by making use of the Soviet war narrative and templates of socialist realist writing to further the remembrance of a different type of war story. This is not an easy feat to accomplish, since elements of the war narrative, especially the customary focus on heroism and active fighting, make stories of private, passive suffering, and death almost impossible to narrate. His text thus makes the limits of Rothberg’s concept apparent, since the patterns and rhetoric of the war narrative tend to overshadow the depiction of the Jewish experience. In his capacity as both conformist and dissident writer Rybakov produces not so much a counter-history, but a narrative that challenges and revises parts of the Soviet collective remembrance of World War II, while firmly underlining others.

If one agrees with Roman Jakobson’s statement that literature is about selection and combination, then Rybakov’s novel shows us a somewhat ambivalent picture: the events and characters he chooses point us not solely toward the Holocaust, but toward the Holocaust as a fact of war. Soviet authors like Rybakov found ways to remember the Holocaust through literature that did not and do not conform to a certain Holocaust aesthetic established in the US, Israel, and Western Europe since the 1970s, but it may well have been the only way to tell the story of the genocide of the Jews in the Soviet Union. From a Western point of view, it is exactly the “emotiveness” (pathos) Rybakov strove for that decreases the aesthetic value of the book, whereas, in Rybakov’s opinion, it was very much needed to touch audiences and to convey the gravity of events. Heavy Sand is an attempt to use established patterns, as well as to add new patterns of remembrance and new sites of commemoration that are in agreement with a shared memorial culture while still expanding it. The futility of these efforts infuses Rybakov’s novel with a sense of melancholia that describes mourning without closure. The refusal of finality is especially poignant at the end of the novel. All

47 Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory, 1–33.
48 For a discussion of the concept of counter-history within the frame of Eastern European dissident culture, see the introduction by Peter Hallama and Stephan Stach, “Gegengeschichte—Zweiter Weltkrieg und Holocaust im ostmittteleuropäischen Dissens,” in Gegengeschichte: Zweiter Weltkrieg und Holocaust im ostmittteleuropäischen Dissens, ed. Peter Hallama and Stephan Stach (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2015), 15.
49 Rybakov, Novel of Memoirs, 240.
in all, however, his specific way of “writing around” the Holocaust and his way of fusing conflicting histories within Soviet discourse did reach its Soviet audience and was perceived in a way intended by the author—as a novel of remembrance and as a textual memorial that prefigures the real ones to come.50

If one follows Jan Assmann, there are two distinct forms of memories: communicative memory, which is predominantly transmitted orally, and cultural memory, which is institutionalized.51 Due to its heavily regulated nature, individual Jewish memories of the Holocaust and the war only rarely found their way into official Soviet cultural memory and the official discourse on the war. When it comes to those authors who attempted to write about the Holocaust, one can state that the majority of them were of Jewish descent or were biographically linked to the events.52 The proximity of these authors to the events themselves differ widely: Some were survivors like Rol’nikaitė, who wrote from her own experience, others like Grossman and Ehrenburg, who served in the Red Army as war correspondents, witnessed the atrocities firsthand in the liberated death camps and occupied territories and felt compelled very early on to document and make public the Holocaust on Soviet soil. Still others, like Rybakov, lost relatives, but turned to the Holocaust only later in life. Despite these efforts and the seminal testimonial and fictional texts they produced, as in the historiography of Soviet literary discourses, the Holocaust was not as present as it was in Western Europe. Zvi Gitelman points out that the topic of the Holocaust was not so much suppressed, as it was perceived as part of a “larger phenomenon—the murder of civilians—whether Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Gypsies, or other nationalities.”53 Or, as Harriet Murav notes, Soviet literature did not memorialize its millions of dead Jews in the way that became customary in the West.54 In addition, as readers, we are usually confronted with a certain repertoire of “signs” when dealing with the Holocaust—the

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50 This need is not restricted to the Soviet period. It is clear from Oxane Leingang’s study of life-writing on wartime childhoods that many of the restraints put into place during Soviet times still exist today, though Leingang does not discuss this or puts that thesis forward. Rather it becomes apparent in her analysis of two Jewish children’s memoirs. Oxane Leingang, *Sowjetische Kindheit im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Generationenentwürfe im Kontext nationaler Erinnerungskultur* (Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 2014).


52 Russian literature is no exception here, as this is the case with most European literatures.


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camps, striped prison uniforms, acts of utmost cruelty. This repertoire for referencing Nazi atrocities against Jews has its foundations in survivors’ memoirs and documentary footage from the camps, but most of all in fictional and visual accounts that have emerged since the 1970s. In the Soviet Union, this repertoire did not exist, mostly because the murder of Soviet Jews was carried out using a different method, that of mass shootings, which left almost no survivors. This made survivors’ accounts scarce, and the events surrounding the mass killings were in most cases commemorated by so-called bystanders, such as neighbors or partisans. The fact that the killings took place directly where people lived and not far away in the unknown territories of camps and deportation locations, also meant that survivors, as well as the next of kin and neighbors of the dead, would continue to live in close proximity to the killing sites. Rybakov mentions this fact in his memoir Roman-vospominanie (Novel of Memoirs, 1997), in which he describes the research process for Heavy Sand. He also addresses the way in which the censorship bureau and the editors of the journal Oktiabr’ forced him to cut and re-write certain passages. All this led to the impression that the Holocaust was not really addressed in Soviet literature and or only in narratives heavily distorted by ideology. As has been shown, Rybakov tries to find ways to use the Soviet template to tell the story of the genocide of the Jews on Soviet soil, to write around it. His goal to represent the Holocaust is also achieved by stressing storytelling within the family as a mode of transmission for traumatic histories that were deemed unsayable in public discourse, thus turning to individual, communicative memory as a counterweight to official collective history. The integration of oral histories into his novel presents itself as an ingenious way to address the scarcity of accessible witness accounts in Soviet public discourse.

55 Anatolii Kuznetsov has worked with these circumstances and used them for his novel Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel, trans. David Floyd (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982). His text describes the experiences of a teenage boy in Kyiv under occupation by the Wehrmacht who witnesses the extermination of Kyiv’s Jews in Babyn Yar as a member of Kyiv’s non-Jewish population. In addition to his own wartime notebooks, Kuznetsov used testimonial material from Jewish witnesses such as Dina Pronicheva. See Anatolii Kuznetsov, Babii Yar: Roman-Dokument (Frankfurt am Main: Possev, 1970).

56 Rybakov, Roman-Vospominanie, 240.

Confronting received notions of collective Soviet victimhood with the Jewish tragedy was by no means a small achievement on the part of Rybakov. In fact, it is where he was at his most successful: Like it or not, his victims are Jewish. By staying within a framework of collective remembrance, he fulfilled the task of putting Jewish suffering at the center of our attention. Without idealizing Rybakov’s novel, one can state that *Heavy Sand* eclipses the traditional Soviet understanding of the Jewish fate and Jewish loss during the war. It does so by engaging the reader in a complex search to unearth individual memories and a quest to transform them into enduring collective memories.