History | *Book Review*

Shatterzone of empire

What a former shtetl in Ukraine tells us about the broader history of Europe

By Kate Brown

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Jewish cemetery in Buchach, Ukraine | © Eddie Gerald/Alamy

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TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

Making and unmaking the Galician past
392pp. Yale University Press. £20 (US $30).
Omer Bartov

What if European history were told not from the usual places, such as Berlin, Vienna or Warsaw, but from an obscure, tiny central European town? In *Tales from the Borderlands* Omer Bartov places Buczacz at the centre of the world. A former shtetl in Galicia, Buczacz spun over four centuries through a wash drum of states - the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Poland, the Soviet Union and, today, Ukraine. Bartov relates every other place in terms of Buczacz. Warsaw (548 kilometres to the northwest) and Vienna (960 kilometres to the southwest) figure in this history, but only as margins to Buczacz (Buchach in Ukrainian). He understands borderlands as the best perspective to view pan-European developments such as the Enlightenment, religious revivalism, nationalism, socialism, fascism and war. In Europe's formerly multi-ethnic borderlands, where empires touched, he argues, conflicts were sharper, passions flamed more brightly and violence grew more extreme. In another book he called such places "the shatterzones of Empires".

Bartov understands "shatterzones" as an emergence from the great contradiction that occurred when Enlightenment principles liberated people from serfdom and religious corporations to become citizens endowed with individual rights. At the same time budding nationalists sought to have their nations bestowed with the right to self-determination. The two aspirations worked at cross purposes. In order to have a nation a state needed nationalized bodies. Nationalists reserved the right to choose who belonged in the nation. In the multi-ethnic borderlands, it was difficult to determine who was this person called Wolodymyr in Ukrainian, Włodzimierz in Polish and Vladimir in Russian.

Trying to understand the borderlands, imperial agents categorized and counted. Gradually people who had lived side by side since the Middle Ages began seeing themselves through the lens of their observers. Those especially who could read or afford to go to the theatre internalized the qualities attributed to them by outsiders. They began to identify their neighbours antagonistically as other and different, just as the census represented them. Intellectuals who stood to benefit professionally from promoting their written language and their own idiom gave speeches, wrote tracts, formed parties, called meetings and broke up political gatherings. Their work hardened the distinctions between neighbours and added a new urgency and militancy to everyday life. A modernizing society with people and media on the move spread the abstract (and constructed) notion of the nation widely.

Jews, Bartov emphasizes, had trouble in this new context. Jews arrived in Galicia in the sixteenth century, invited by Polish magnates to develop their private towns, manage their properties and expand commerce. With the growth of exclusionary Polish and Ukrainian nationalism in the late nineteenth century, Jews came increasingly to be described as a foreign, parasitic element, "sucking the blood" of the indigenous population. They were reluctant to support competing nationalisms for fear of being labelled an enemy by the rival. Left outside everyone else's nation, Jews migrated towards socialist and communist parties. But often they were not welcome in these internationalist groups, either, so they formed their own socialist party, the Bund, or adhered to their own nationalism, Zionism.

Nationalists draw on different, conflicting myths and stories, but nations are made from the same imprint. Galician Zionism resembled Polish and Ukrainian nationalism. All three were ethnic and territorial. But for Jews their territory was far off, in Eretz Israel, a distant region at the time under Ottoman rule. There was no place, in other words, for Jews in nationalizing east and central Europe. Bartov meditates on the contradiction of the

Enlightenment goal of eroding difference, making people equal, alongside nationalists' desire to erode hierarchies and differences between, not individuals, but nations. One ideology promised individual and the other collective emancipation. The two were bound to clash.

Bartov and other historians, myself included, have told this story before. Bartov's focus on Buczacz both personalizes this story and allows him to think in intimate ways about how the past might have gone differently. His fixation on the town in this project is profound. *Tales from the Borderland* is his fourth book in which Buczacz plays a prominent role, following on from *Erased* (2007), *Anatomy of a Genocide* (2018) and *Voices on War and Genocide* (2020). He thinks of these works as "biographies", and of Buczacz as a personality that "led a full and vibrant life". Bartov is a historian of the Holocaust, and he places a tombstone on Buczacz's life with the Nazi extermination of the town's Jewish population in 1941 and 1942. Yet, he writes, he tries to see the town "not as a paved road to horror and death, but to show the many other paths that were open, alternative opportunities, hopes, dreams, and aspirations".

As a consequence large sections of this history are narrated in the subjunctive mood - what might have been. Bartov's book focuses on male writers, intellectuals and activists who grew up in or near Buczacz. They left Galicia, and rarely returned in person, but often came home imaginatively in romantic prose to recreate Galicia in service of a political cause. Perhaps due to the vast number of refugees and migrants who left central Europe, a great deal of the history of the region is coloured in a romantic, nostalgic vein of what was, what was destroyed, what could have been. Romanticism is an intellectual current Bartov does not explore, but he might have, as it is closely associated with the emergence of nationalism.

His roster of writers includes a good number of Zionists who narrated violent actions against Jews over centuries, and linked the events in an

apparent continuum of anti-Jewish violence and Jewish passivity from the eighteenth to the twentieth century in order to make a case for Zionism and Israeli violence against Palestinians. This literature, Bartov notes, populated his education in Israel, where he was born, as a member of the first generation to grow up in the state.

Bartov explores the literary careers of Jewish socialists and anarchists from Buczacz. He also spotlights two writers who were not from Buczacz, Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko. He focuses on how these early founders of Ukrainian literature created caricatures of Jews as devious, usurious and cowardly traitors to the Ukrainian nation. Bartov attributes great power to intellectuals, especially fiction writers. He describes Franko's dark depictions of the death of Jewish "bloodsuckers" as "self- fulfilling prophecies". "He [Franko] played a substantial role in preparing the ground for the violence that was to follow." Above all, the stories of Shmuel Yosef Agnon, a novelist Bartov read hungrily as a teenager growing up in Israel, run through this book. Agnon, the only Hebrew-language winner of the Nobel prize, was born in Buczacz, like Bartov's mother. Agnon, like Bartov, dedicated much of his vast oeuvre to Buczacz as a microcosm of small-town eastern European Jewish life that was "utterly destroyed by the Holocaust". In 1966, returning from Stockholm for his Nobel prize, Agnon stopped in London, where Bartov's father served as Israel's cultural attaché to the Court of St James's. On a visit to their home Bartov's mother welcomed him with the words: "I am too from Buczacz". Agnon cynically shot back: "Now that I have been awarded the Nobel prize, everyone claims to come from Buczacz". That comment hurt his mother's feelings, especially as she was not making it up.

Agnon, like Bartov, left his home in his early twenties. In the novelist's telling of exodus and exile, Buczacz is a way station for Jews on their long trek to the Promised Land. Agnon writes a narrative of irretrievable loss. Bartov follows in a similar fashion: "Old photographs of Buczacz depict a vibrant

and picturesque provincial site; it is now a desolate and tasteless backwater still clinging to a charming natural setting". Romantic literature understands the past to be better, more genuine and pure, while death serves as an ennobling agent. Describing a historic linden (lime) tree in Buczacz, Bartov writes:

> The tree had seen it all; but the people in the banged-up cars driving on the road next to it, or those in their crumbling apartments across the untended lawn, the pedestrians with their meager shopping in small plastic bags, their shoes and pants spattered with mud from the unpaved path, remembered none of it; they gazed down at the ground, never seeing those branches silently curling their way toward a steel-gray heaven.

I wish Bartov had spoken to those tasteless people in mud-spattered clothing. Otherwise, how does he know what they remembered? As I travelled through the former borderlands of Ukraine in the 1990s, I would ask villagers about collectivization, famine and Stalinist deportations, and, repeatedly, villagers would brush away my questions and take me to a grassy knoll, a mass grave from the Holocaust. "I saw a lot of tragedy in my life", one woman told me, "but the worst I saw was when the Germans came. We were rich in Jews in our village and the Germans came and shot them." As we stood near the grave, marked with a small plaque memorializing the Holocaust, a man on a horse-drawn cart rode by. He removed his hat in a slow, mournful bow.

Bartov follows a distinguished line of scholars who have portrayed the founding moments of Ukraine as derived from exclusionary nationalism, antisemitism, ethnic cleansing and the Holocaust, a totalizing narrative that obscures a great deal. In 1959 the census recorded 860,000 Jews in Ukraine, half the number in Israel at the time. Bartov's depiction of a vanished civilization leaves out the survivors who carried on in Buchach (no longer

Buczacz) and other shtetls in eastern Europe until the 1990s triggered a new wave of Jewish immigration. Now that Putin has justified the Russian army's attack on Ukraine by decreeing Ukrainians - even the Jewish, native-Russian-speaking President Zelensky - to be Nazi fascists, it is easier to understand how incendiary are such blanket condemnations of a nation.

Bartov might have gone deeper into this semi-memoir, semi-biography by exploring less his mother's home town than his own contested birthplace. The most vivid passages appear in the last section of *Tales from the Borderland*, in which he dedicates several chapters to an interview with his mother in 1995 about Buczacz. As he asks about her life, he relates the "collective amnesia" of Ukraine to a similar malady among his own Israeli-born generation vis-à-vis the Palestinians. He wonders about the silences surrounding his parents' participation as student volunteers in the war of 1948. "Like many others of their generation, my parents took their memories of brutality and horror closely associated with the birth of the state to their graves." Since Bartov wrote this book, an Israeli film, *Tantura*, about an alleged mass grave of 300 murdered Palestinians, now buried under a beachside car park, has caused a storm of controversy in Israel. Detractors question the testimonies of elderly Israeli eyewitnesses. The Israel Defense Forces' archives could answer questions, but they are closed. As Omer Bartov acknowledges, erasure indeed comes in many forms.

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