

The New York Review of Books

Centers on the Margins, R.J.W. Evans

The dark history of Buczacz, an ordinary town in western Ukraine, exemplifies the fate of Jews in the vast marginal territories of East-Central Europe.

December 19, 2024 issue



The town of Buczacz in the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia, 1916; today it is in western Ukraine

Tales from the Borderlands: Making and Unmaking the Galician Past

by Omer Bartov

Yale University Press, 376 pp., \$30.00

Who could find Buczacz—also written Butschatsch, or Buchach in transliteration from Cyrillic—on a map?

The nondescript town in what is today western Ukraine has never boasted more than 16,000 inhabitants. Omer Bartov in *Tales from the Borderlands* writes of its “hideous mishmash of structures piled together in a beautiful valley.” Worse than hideous have been the annals of Buczacz in the comparatively recent past. Bartov has devoted a quarter-century of research to the place and written a pair of books about its history, which present a pair of interlocking themes, different facets of the same developments. After *Anatomy of a Genocide*, which concentrated on actual events, *Tales from the Borderlands* presents the “tales” in which perceptions (or the absence of them) can create a commentary on reality, or alternative claims to reality.

The “borderlands” of Bartov’s title indicate Buczacz’s location and status. Founded in the mists of the Middle Ages on rolling plains and gentle hills, it straddled a tributary of the Dniester River on the fringe of what became the eastern marches of the vast Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Fortified to defend against the rising Ottoman threat, it hosted the signing of a major treaty in 1672 during the prolonged wars between the Turks and their neighbors on the edges of Christian Europe.

Always multiethnic and multicultural, Buczacz became a meeting place of different groups of Slavs and a growing number of Jews, who in time constituted a majority of the urban population. That caused recurrent tensions and occasional outbursts of elemental violence, most notably the great revolt led in the mid-seventeenth century by a warlord from lands just east of Buczacz, Bohdan Khmelnytsky. Whereas animosities within Gentile society were generated primarily by social and confessional differences—Polish landowners versus Ukrainian (then called Ruthenian) peasants, hegemonic Catholicism versus marginalized Orthodoxy—episodes of abomination of Jews could involve racial stereotyping alongside resentment of their activities as moneylenders, bailiffs, and suspected insider traders.

Following the partitions of Poland-Lithuania by Austria, Prussia, and Russia, which began just a hundred years after that treaty with the Turks, Buczacz found itself attached to the Habsburg monarchy in the newly constituted outlying province of Galicia, where it remained for another century and a half—again on the margin of a margin. Austrian Galicia, ruled from distant Vienna, was something of an experiment in state-directed development of a multifarious region viewed as backward. After a shaky start it made economic and cultural progress, which succeeded in moderating social and ethnic struggles, at least for a time. But the outbreak of World War I uncoiled a spiral of violence: not just repeated Russian invasions and subsequent retaliation, but internecine strife that reached a grotesque and anarchic climax as Poles and Ukrainians fought each other to the death, and both took their bloody and horrific toll on the Jews.

After the war the resurrected (Second) Polish Republic had the military muscle to incorporate Galicia (and abolish it as an administrative entity: after 1920 the Buczacz area fell officially into the voivodeship of Tarnopol). But it was an overextended and fragile state, its vulnerability aggravated by dissident Ukrainian and discontented Jewish minorities. In 1939, under external onslaught from Hitler and Stalin, it collapsed. The Tarnopol region fell first into Soviet then German hands. These conquerors, initially as allies, then as bitterest enemies, oversaw a reign of terror that included ruthless infighting between local Poles and Ukrainians. The chief victims were the Jews, who in a climate of dread were suspect to some as Communists, to others as Polonophiles, to yet others as an alien presence, perhaps even as still Germanic in their ultimate allegiance. Only a few hundred of them in and around Buczacz survived the Holocaust. After 1945 a pulverized and ethnically cleansed Buczacz was rebuilt and became part of Ukraine, for decades within the USSR, now an independent state under siege.

In *Tales from the Borderlands* Bartov does not tell that story directly beyond 1935, the year his mother, then a child of ten, left Buczacz as his grandparents made the Zionist decision to immigrate with their family to Palestine. He deftly interweaves that family story—which led to the author's birth decades later on a kibbutz in Israel, another state newly constituted in the aftermath of World War II—with the larger historical reality. There is the allure of a deeply personal account, a kind of progressive revelation for the writer (Bartov is included as an entry in his own index), illustrated mainly by photographs from a family album of silent witnesses.

In his youth, Bartov knew next to nothing about Buczacz. He belonged to a generation of “new Jews” who looked forward, not backward, in a militant and military Israel and who repugned what they viewed as the weakness, accommodation, and assimilation of the Jewish diaspora. He served as an officer in the Israeli army for a time. But then he trained, in the UK, as a historian whose professional expertise—as if he were already in pursuit of some semiconscious private agenda—lay in the study of Nazism. His first powerful scholarly

contribution was to show how that ideology pervaded not only the state apparatus of the Third Reich but also Hitler's armies, previously often regarded as merely obeying his orders.

Bartov gradually became aware of how those German soldiers must have intervened in the lives of his own relatives, and how they could have prevented him from even being born. In the mid-1990s, just before her death, he set his mother, Yehudit Szimer, in front of a microphone in the kitchen of her high-rise Tel Aviv apartment in order to record her memories of Buczacz. Her hesitant, sometimes disjointed, homely, matter-of-fact responses to his questions are precious, intimate testimony to two separate worlds. There's Palestine, later Israel, which gave her a secure upbringing and the career of her choice as a child psychologist. And there's the Jewish Galicia of her early years, on the eve of its destruction. Witness to both were her parents, who lost status in return for their survival, scratching out a living as manual laborers—a bargain they never talked about. Bartov's grandmother had to work long and exhausting hours as an orange picker on the outskirts of Tel Aviv; back in Poland she hadn't worked at all.

Yehudit's youth in Galicia cannot appear other than as charmed and careless. By the time of Omer's interviews she simply couldn't remember what her father had done, although he apparently worked in some kind of agricultural production or distribution. It was a multilingual environment: the family spoke Yiddish and Polish; the younger generation also learned Ukrainian. There were Gentile playmates and little sign of hostility. Evidently she received a solid education at a state school, not a Jewish one: the family seems to have been observant but not markedly so. After their departure for Palestine she was occasionally reminded of Buczacz through visits of relatives or snippets of news about the war. But the fate of her hometown and of her network of friends and family there was manifestly relegated to the back of her mind, suppressed in the struggle to succeed in her new homeland. All this is tenderly recreated by Bartov from scraps of memory, eked out by the explanatory power of those photographs, which are pored over for niceties of meaning as if they were sacred relics.

Bartov deploys the same technique of selective recall and exemplary episodes on the collective level to present his story of Buczacz as a series of tales and their tellers. The town's castle and fine public buildings memorialize the centuries of rule by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a bastion of civilization, tolerance, and Catholic mission, according to the patriotic narratives, often by priests, that he cites. That Republic, or *Rzeczpospolita*, as it was technically known, though actually a weak form of monarchical government, was dominated throughout by its privileged nobles, and in the east by aristocrats like the Potockis, who ruled around Buczacz; they were often unruly and overbearing but generous, evenhanded, and cultured.

In their accounts, Poles erred toward the nostalgic and sentimental, blaming the downfall of their independent state on its enemies both external and domestic. They evinced scant regard for the Ruthenians, and there's already a strongly antisemitic vein in their nineteenth-century accounts of Buczacz and its environs. Thus they revealed, and themselves fomented, the ethnic strife that destroyed the society they described. Still, we should bear in mind that perhaps the most lasting European remembrance of Galicia concerns an internecine Polish massacre: the slaughter of Polish lords by their own Polish peasants around Kraków in 1846.

Ukrainian remembrancers evoked a troubled past in which they had struggled to assert themselves against their adversaries. They dwelled on the Khmelnytsky rebellion of the mid-

seventeenth century and the romanticized heritage of the freebooting brigands of the Dnieper River basin known as Cossacks. Antisemitism became such an ingrained part of Ukrainian value systems that Nikolai Gogol—who came from a Cossack background—could peddle it semiconsciously in his writings. (Bartov tells us that as a youthful reader of Gogol he didn't notice it himself.) The later Ukrainian writer Ivan Franko (from the city of Drohobych close to Buczacz) used his Jewish characters to foreshadow the eventual fate of the area's Jews, for which he bears some responsibility as a result of the influence he came to exert as a national literary figure. Growing ethnic awareness among the peasantry around places like Buczacz went with the deliberate exclusion of local Jewry as a foreign body.

Urban and communal mores, the ethos of the shtetl, lay at the heart of the Jews' perception of Buczacz's past. Legends retailed by S.Y. Agnon (later a Nobel Prize winner) of their early settlement in his hometown presented it as ultimately only a resting place en route to the promised land, but in the meantime as a site of productive cooperation over the centuries, disturbed only by violent incursions from outside. Buczacz also contributed richly to both great creative traditions of Galician Jewry. On one hand it was a fount of Hasidism, the flourishing of mystical currents that assigned a quasi-seigneurial role to its wonder-rabbis, the tzaddiks. On the other hand there are the stories of enlighteners, the maskilim (Bartov introduces his reader to a string of them: Homberg, Perl, Bernstein), who sought to educate communities like that of Buczacz and encouraged them to accept liberal and progressive values and embrace assimilation.

One crucial aspect of that assimilation was recruitment of Jews into the Austrian army from the 1780s onward, which was fiercely resisted at first by many but gave them new career paths and official recognition of their service. Another was reverence for German literature and thought, exemplified in the novelistic creations of Karl Emil Franzos, born a few miles from Buczacz (and not to be confused with Ivan Franko, whose writings also illustrate a range of Jewish attitudes toward Gentile models). Even Bartov's maternal grandmother, who lost her siblings at the hands of the Nazis, features in his book as a late representative of that persistent admiration for Germandom. His paternal grandmother, on the other hand, who had immigrated to Palestine earlier, in 1925, always remained a Polonophile.

German culture as a universal value, mediated by an equitable Austrian state, helped promote the retrospective idealization of Galicia as a form of Habsburg nostalgia, especially among Jews. This reached its largest audience through the semiautobiographical fiction of Joseph Roth from the 1920s and 1930s. By then conditions back in the shtetls he depicts had deteriorated markedly. Not for nothing did the noted Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, another emigrant from the Ukrainian borderlands, now republish contemporary chronicles of the earlier butchery of Jews by Khmelnytsky's hordes as a call to resistance on the part of his compatriots.

However, discontent had already proved increasingly difficult to contain before the Great War. Places like Buczacz were incubators of both Polish and Ukrainian nationalism, and eventually of its Jewish form too, as Zionism. Agnon, born Shmuel Yosef Halevi Czaczkes, left Buczacz for Palestine as a young man in 1908. Early Zionists enjoyed little local support either within the Jewish community or outside it. Franko portrayed them with characteristically slight sympathy at the time, though he applauded their plans to emigrate. Bartov accords them little attention here.

Instead, he presents a gallery of Jewish emigrants from small-town Galicia to other destinations. He tells in particular of the Nacht brothers, Siegfried and Max, sons of a

Buczacz physician who had embraced socialism. They were radical anarchists who lived errant lives across Europe and the US; both ultimately settled in New York City under assumed names. Bartov is even able to reconstruct Max's dysfunctional family and descendants, a very personal dossier to illustrate the cosmopolitan experiences of his characters. Most traveled of all these emigrants was a left-wing agitator, Adolf Langer: a cofounder of the Austrian Communist Party who was then imprisoned in Poland, he escaped to the Soviet Union, which sent him in 1936 to France. (He thus fortuitously avoided Stalin's purge of many fellow activists.) In the process he too acquired a new name, Ostap Dłuski, and forged the credentials that allowed him to serve out his time as a conformist member of the postwar Central Committee in Communist Poland.

"Borderlands," exemplified by the vast marginal territories of East-Central Europe, form the main organizing idea of Bartov's book. By definition borderlands were as remote from the perspective of a given political and cultural hub as they perceived themselves to be from it. They were *ek velt*, the Yiddish expression for a remote corner of the world. By definition as well they abutted somewhere else: in that respect they were *Halb-Asien*—halfway to Asia—a term made famous as the title of Franzos's collection of travelogues from places like Buczacz. Their inhabitants' self-awareness as fringe people, Bartov suggests, meant they carried their exaggerated frontier sensibilities and prejudices with them as they "burst out onto the larger scene," seeking acceptance and recognition in this or that metropolis.

Yet these were centers as well as peripheries. One of the most telling and poignant comments from Bartov's family conversations was a story told by his grandfather Yisrael, as conveyed by his daughter Yehudit. In old age, Yisrael liked to recount legends of dark Ukrainian forests and their denizens. He recalled being teased in Buczacz when he announced he was destined for Palestine: "We have a Palestine right here." Ironically, of course, Palestine itself then shifted from margin to core precisely because of all the refugees like the Szimers who, escaping extermination in Europe, helped the Allied war effort and generated the moral imperative for the victors to create the new state of Israel.

For Jews the historic Polish-Lithuanian lands had been the hub of the world: some three quarters of their total population lived there. The shtetls provided lasting cultural and spiritual resources even for those who then, as we've seen, capitalized on them in far-flung Gentile metropolises. Another was David Heinrich Müller, the paradigm for Bartov of a Jew who left Buczacz as a budding scholar: he became an eminent Orientalist and was eventually ennobled for his work in Vienna. Even Sigmund Freud, Müller's contemporary in the Austrian capital, had family links to Buczacz—part of the Jewish heritage that he largely forswore but predictably proved unable to suppress fully. The phenomenon is clearest of all in the nearby town of Brody, birthplace of Joseph Roth and a classic Galician shtetl, with proportionately more Jews than anywhere else (more than 80 percent of its citizens at one point). In its heyday Brody clearly functioned also as an epicenter, in both its economic and its cultural power and influence. Revealingly its chief commercial thoroughfare was called the Goldgasse (Ulica Złota; Vulytsya Zolota).

For many Poles too the eastern homelands—what they came to call the *Kresy*—were a continuing locus for the dreams of benevolent hegemony in the region, which after 1918 underpinned the unsustainable claims of the Second Republic. In fact, maintenance of the fabric of Polish transborder noble society during and after the eighteenth-century partitions of the country had something in common with the inherited Jewish networks highlighted in Bartov's book. Many of the leading figures of Polish literary life—for example, Henryk

Sienkiewicz—immortalized the *Kresy* in their writing. They comprised an essential part of the national narrative.

For Ukrainians the margin is actually their eponym, since the word “Ukraine” was used in earlier historical sources mainly to describe a borderland. That explains the traditional English usage of the definite article as a qualifier (“the Ukraine”). The identification with liminality allowed the concept of Ukraine to absorb the connotations of freedom and self-reliance that were, rightly or wrongly, associated with the Cossack way of life. Yet “Ukraine,” whose root *krai* usually conveyed the sense of “region” or “province,” was also an ancient heartland. Ukrainian patriots laid claim to the legacy of ancient Rus’, the foundation state for East Slavs as a whole. And this was always a plausible claim, since Kiev had demonstrably been its metropole. A notional midpoint of the lands of Kievan Rus’ would not lie all that far from Buczacz.

There’s a still-broader theme about how cores become fringes and vice versa, which this thought-provoking book calls to mind but does not develop. That’s what happened over the centuries not just with Kiev but with Vienna, Berlin, Kraków, and Buda and Pest (before they were conjoined), to name only some cities in the region. Real or imagined hubs of civilization were relegated to the sidelines or lost altogether, yet often they bequeathed an emotional charge to societies that still identified with them. Germans have nowadays largely come to terms with their faded Prussian heritage. Hungarians are still doing so in relation to Transylvania. Serbs have hardly started with the legacy of Kosovo.

In the west of the continent an archetypal instance is the interstitial lands on the edges of what became France and Germany: once the homeland of the Franks, later the briefly flamboyant duchy of Burgundy, but mostly a contested border region, an apparently indispensable resource to both sides, yet also a power vacuum. Above all the overlap of mental maps in Alsace and Lorraine long proved fateful for peacekeeping in modern Europe. Nowadays, with Strasbourg as the seat of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, multiculturalism thrives there, and tales about its past are subjected to rigorous historiographical analysis.

None of that has happened in Buczacz. Few perpetrators of the Holocaust there were ever brought to justice. Ironically another son of the town was Simon Wiesenthal, a survivor of multiple concentration camps who spent the rest of a long life trying to track down those responsible for the annihilation of his fellow Jews. (Wiesenthal, a great storyteller, doesn’t appear in Bartov’s book, perhaps because his stories were not always accurate and brought him at times into serious disrepute.) That scandal of unavenged suffering has since been compounded, because the keepers of heritage in today’s Ukraine seek to recall next to nothing of the rich multiethnic history of places like Buczacz. One facet of that common past, the Ukrainian-national one, has been superimposed, with ubiquitous statues of often questionable heroes. (Two towns in the region were even renamed Khmelnytsky and Ivano-Frankivsk.) The rest was simply “erased”—the all-too-expressive word that Bartov used to entitle his powerful account of a journey through formerly Jewish Galicia, including Buczacz.

In an ecumenical spirit, Bartov suggests that Buczacz’s “acute case of collective amnesia” is “not unlike the malady that had taken hold of my own Israel-born generation.” But whereas the latter was explicable by deep emotional-psychological denial, Ukraine’s is the fruit of chauvinism. At least the facts about material remains of multicultural Galicia are now becoming widely available through devoted labor on websites like Jewish Heritage Europe.

It's appropriate to finish where Bartov started, with Buczac's great survivor, its ancient small-leaved linden tree, which allegedly occupies the site where the treaty between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Turks was signed in 1672. For many Slavs the linden was the tree of liberty. It's also the tree of memory: its blossoms flavored the tisane into which Proust dipped his madeleine. Witness to a blossoming of nations amid unspeakable bestiality, the rootedness of Buczac's linden stands as a pointed contrast and a silent reproach to the fickleness and prejudice of those who guard the collective memories of the borderlands.

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