

## HOLOCAUST STUDIES

## Memory disorder

Parts of western Ukraine suffer from an 'extraordinary historical amnesia': A post-Soviet effort to commemorate the casualties of World War II seems to have forgotten the Jews murdered there, and often heroizes the Ukrainian nationalists who helped destroy them

**Erased:**

Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine, by Omer Bartov  
Princeton University Press, 232 pages, \$26.95

By Simon J. Rabinovitch

Many memories of World War II in Eastern Europe – of resistance, collaboration and murder – are still fiercely contested today. In Lithuania, the government is currently investigating former partisans in the Jewish resistance for war crimes, this despite the fact that it has shown virtually no initiative in prosecuting Lithuanian collaborators with the Nazis, or even, for that matter, non-Jewish Soviet partisans. The Polish government is similarly investigating the leaders of the so-called Bielski partisans, a band of over 1,000 Jews who hid and fought in the forests of eastern Poland (today Belarus). The still incomplete investigation by Poland's Institute of National Remembrance into the group began in the wake of the controversy over Polish complicity in the Holocaust stirred up by the books of historian Jan Gross and a recent report by the investigative body suggesting the Bielski partisans may have been present at a massacre of Polish civilians. The pending release of a new Hollywood film celebrating the Bielski partisans as heroes (Edward Zwick's "Defiance," due out in December), is sure to keep the topic alive.

In "Erased," Omer Bartov describes a place – western Ukraine – where no debate or similar battle for memory is taking place. Rather, in the former Polish (and before that Austrian) areas of eastern Galicia that now make up the western regions of Ukraine, memories of Jewish life before the war, of the events of the Holocaust, and in particular of Ukrainian complicity, have been systematically erased, replaced by a uniform narrative of Ukrainian martyrdom and wartime heroism. The impossibility in post-war Soviet Ukraine of memorializing any wartime victims more specifically than as innocents or "Soviet citizens" created a vacuum of memory that post-independence Ukrainians have been eager to fill. And in the cities and towns described by Bartov in this remarkable travelogue, the destruction of Jewish life during the war was so total that few remain to resist Ukrainian nationalist efforts to pave over the reminders and memory of the once substantial Jewish presence.

"Erased" is a byproduct of Bartov's efforts to study the Holocaust's perpetrators and victims together in historical context. In the way that Jan Gross did in 2001 with "Neighbors," a book that investigated the 1941 massacre of the Jewish population of Jedwabne, Poland, Bartov, a professor of history and German studies at Brown

University, intended to demonstrate that the murder of Jews often took place in the most intimate of settings. Yet "Erased" is also a deeply personal project. While visiting the region of his mother's childhood (he is writing a separate book on his mother's hometown of Buczacz), Bartov discovered that in town after town in eastern Galicia where Jews once made up a majority or plurality, the very memory of their existence and elimination is now imperceptible. His travels resulted in this new project, a book that in its mixture of description and emotional commentary seeks to bring to light the sheer success of efforts to expunge the Jewish past from eastern Galicia. It is as if not merely this region of Ukraine, but Ukrainian memory itself, has been ethnically cleansed.

**Denial of Jewish victimhood**

As Bartov recounts, it is not that the residents do not possess a culture of memory and memorialization. On the contrary, memorials to Ukrainian national heroes and victims of the NKVD (the Soviet secret police) have been prominently erected in all of these post-Soviet towns. (As the Germans moved east in 1941, they used the execution of thousands of Ukrainian political prisoners by the NKVD – equated by the Germans with Jews – as a pretext for inciting Ukrainian and Polish revenge against the Jews.)

As Bartov argues, these monuments celebrating Ukrainian national heroism, often erected at or nearby sites relevant to Jewish life and death, seem to actively deny the historical significance (or reality) of Jewish victimhood. Oftentimes, Ukrainian memorials seek to demonstrate equivalence between Nazi and Soviet crimes, especially at sites where the Soviets made some effort to acknowledge the mass murder of civilians (but never Jews as Jews) during the German occupation. More frequently, post-independence memorials to Ukrainian national heroes have been erected in the centers of towns while the mass murder of the war years is simply left unacknowledged and the remnants of Jewish life – synagogues, cemeteries, Jewish hospitals – are paved over, converted to other use, or left to crumble.

Particularly troubling is the fact that many of today's Ukrainian national heroes, memorialized in statues and monuments situated on or nearby important Jewish sites, actively assisted in the destruction of Jewish life. Many such figures commemorated in Ukrainian towns led or fought with the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) or the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Bartov briefly outlines the history of these organizations in a footnote, but probably not in enough detail to provide the necessary context for readers to un-



Faceless victims. Sculpture in Kolomyia at site where 15,000 Jews were murdered.



The Jewish cemetery in Kuty, today.

derstand the cauldron in which Ukrainian nationalism formed. (Interested readers should see Timothy Snyder's "The Reconstruction of Nations" and Kate Brown's "A Biography of No Place.")

The OUN, a violent nationalist group with a vision of a Ukrainian state for Ukrainians only, originated in interwar Poland as a conspiratorial terrorist organization whose favored weapon was assassination. Though before the war relatively few Ukrainians in Poland were interested in Ukrainian nationalism, the OUN's factions took on an outsized role during the war. Initially many Ukrainian nationalists saw Germany as an ally capable of delivering them independence, though this expectation proved naive. In spring 1941, the OUN in fact split into two separate factions, which fought each other and pursued equally unpalatable agendas: The OUN-Bandera, which by late 1943 commanded the UPA, conducted a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Poles, while the OUN-Mel'nyk collaborated with the Germans in creating a Ukrainian division of the *Waffen SS* known as the *SS-Galizien*.

**No mention of the rabbi**

What is galling to Bartov is how Ukrainians have constructed a martyrology of heroism around figures who so plainly should be regarded as victimizers rather than victims. A statue of the OUN leader Stepan Bandera stands prominently in Drohobych's central park – also the location of its wartime Jewish ghetto. A memorial to the execution of OUN members by the Germans in 1942 stands outside the former Great Synagogue in Ivano-Frankiv'sk, while no similar efforts at commemoration have been made at the cemetery outside of town where 10,000 Jews were executed in a single day. In Kosiv, a museum extolling the national heroes of the UPA is located in the building that used to be the house of the town rabbi. No indication is offered, however, of the identity of the house's previous resident, nor is there a hint in the town in general that its population was once half Jewish. In such towns as Chortkiv and Buczacz, post-independence memorials and museums dedicated to UPA fighters and victims of the NKVD proliferate, without mention of the former Jewish presence.

Though no doubt a minority of Ukrainians, thousands served the Germans as policemen (*Hilfspolizei*) over the course

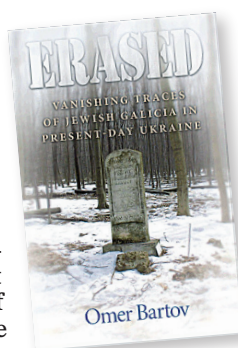
of 1941 and 1942, providing much of the manpower necessary to round up and murder the Jewish population in Galicia and Volhynia. This fact is not in doubt. Furthermore, many of these same people became heroes of the UPA. The vast majority of Ukrainian policemen abandoned service to the Germans to join the nationalist organization in 1943, after which they turned their attention and experience to cleansing western Ukraine of Poles (thus sparking a Ukrainian-Polish civil war).

It should come as no surprise that today's Ukrainians seek to construct a national memory of heroes absent of their role in ethnic cleansing (of either Poles or Jews). It is also preferable for Ukrainians to see their mid-century national struggle as having fallen victim to totalitarian regimes – communism, fascism, then communism again – rather than fratricidal warfare that turned Ukrainians against Jews and Poles, Poles against Ukrainians, and Ukrainian against Ukrainians. The historian Timothy Snyder has suggested that in 1943, it is likely that in its struggle for political and military supremacy, the UPA killed as many Ukrainians as it did Poles.

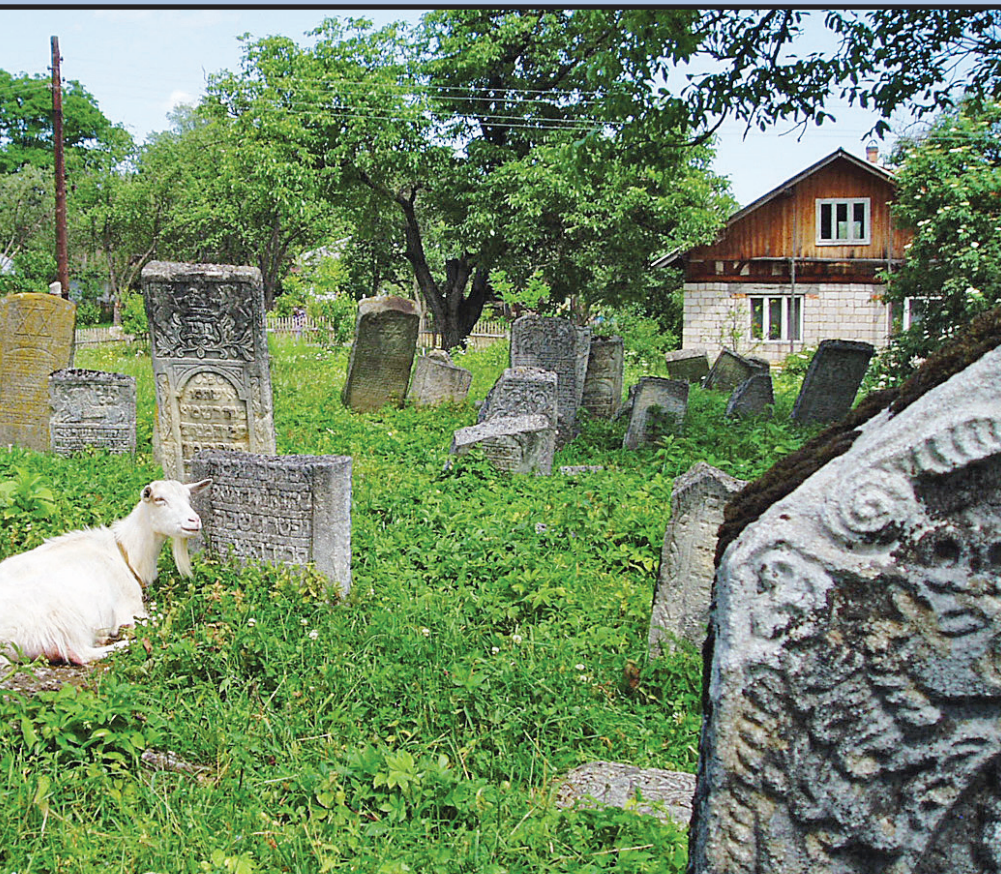
And of course many Ukrainians also cooperated with the same Soviet rule now so reviled – before 1939 in Soviet Ukraine, between 1939 and 1941 under Soviet occupation, and in the enlarged post-war Soviet republic. It is this fact that may explain the abstract nature of many of the post-independence memorials. In Kolomyia, where the memory of its 15,000 Jews has been completely wiped out, stands a semi-abstract sculpture of a faceless woman in traditional Ukrainian garb clutching a baby. We might call this the intentional muddying of history for the purposes of national unity. A faceless woman and child – the prototypical representation of innocent victimhood – can stand in for the competing grievances of Ukrainians against Russians, Germans, Poles, Jews and even other Ukrainians.

**'Everything is Illuminated'**

Bartov is not the first, and will certainly not be the last, to be shocked by what he failed to see in western Ukraine. The region has now become a graveyard of Jewish memories as well as a site of pilgrimage for Jews seeking to reconstruct their family's life and death. In fact, Bartov's travelogue is only one of several relatively recent book projects initiated by a search for fam-







Photos by Omer Bartov, from the book

ily history. In his best-selling book "The Lost" (2006), Daniel Mendelsohn recorded his personal journey to recover the history of his family in Bolechow (also covered by Bartov) from oblivion. And the attempt to recover family memory has not been restricted to non-fiction. Jonathan Safran Foer's "Everything is Illuminated" (2002) – like "Erased" and "The Lost" – began with the author's trip to western Ukraine to recover his family history, and resulted in Foer's creating a new family history in literary form.

In "Everything is Illuminated," Foer's surreal history of his grandfather's shtetl is intertwined with the story of his travels in Ukraine in search of the women who saved his grandfather. Central to Foer's story is his aged Ukrainian driver's own sense of complicity for his actions during the war, and the story becomes as much about the Ukrainian search for atonement as the Jewish search for remnants of a lost world (interestingly, in Liev Schreiber's film adaptation, the Ukrainian driver's guilt is based on his secretly being a Jewish survivor, rather than Ukrainian and secretly complicit).

Such returnees to Galicia as Bartov, Mendelsohn and Foer have felt compelled to recreate the memory of Jewish life in this place. In this respect, all three are markedly different from the thousands of Jews – young and old – who travel to Poland to visit the death camps, or even the much smaller number who visit new or restored Jewish sites in Poland, such as Krakow,

with its Jewish Culture Festival. Those who visit Auschwitz, whether on organized trips such as the March of the Living, or independently, can, ironically, be comforted by their visit to a museum that has become a memorial to and symbol of the machinery of Jewish destruction. They can grieve at a site where they believe Jewish life in Europe died. But in what is today western Ukraine, there is no similar larger-than-life testament to the destruction of Jewish life. The closest approximation in Ukraine is Babi Yar, the ravine in Kiev where tens of thousands of Jews were machine-gunned.

The genocide of the Jews in Ukraine was remarkable for its efficiency and simplicity. Though ghettos and extermination camps were used, most Jews were executed in mass graves in or around the towns in which they lived. Auschwitz satisfies those who seek to remember the destruction of the Jews, but the lack of either commemoration or restoration in the towns of Galicia thoroughly disturbs those who seek to remember Jewish life there.

Bartov rightly cares that Jewish life in western Ukraine be both remembered and properly memorialized, and his and the other books are all in some sense an effort to compensate for the failure of Ukrainians to do so. But the question remains, why do we as Jews care so deeply what the people who now live in this region (or for that matter the other countries of Eastern Europe) remember? Jews have made efforts to commemorate Jewish life in these towns through the compilation of memorial

books and the creation of memorials in the Americas, Australia and Israel, even as the number of Jews who either live in or travel to this area remains very small. And yet as Jews, we still do care that synagogues and cemeteries themselves are preserved and mass murder commemorated through memorials, as a reminder to the current inhabitants about Jewish life there and the circumstances of its destruction.

It is in part out of a sense of justice; we want the inhabitants to feel haunted by the ghosts of their homes' previous owners, and the perpetrators and bystanders to feel guilt for their role. Most importantly,

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however, Jews want proper commemoration because for many the psychic and emotional ties to these lands were never conclusively cut. It is telling that neither Bartov nor Mendelsohn's parents were themselves survivors, their families having left before the war. For their parents or grandparents, the tragedy of the Holocaust was suffered from a distance, through the destruction of their remaining family, but personal memories of childhood in these lands were positive, or at least ambiguous. When the memory of Jewish life in these places has been kept alive by the inhabitants' descendants, disappointment in what remains can be crushing.

The Ukrainians in these towns, for their part, possess many disincentives to properly acknowledging the means by which Jewish life came to an end. In his book "Fear," Jan Gross argues that as witnesses to Polish complicity and potential claimants to expropriated property, Jews became unwelcome in Poland after the war and at the same time were blamed for the imposition of communism. According to Gross, the roots of post-war Polish anti-Semitism are thus to be found in the war itself. A similar dynamic is no doubt at play in Ukraine. Nonetheless, Ukraine's very short history as an independent state further complicates its process of commemorating wartime events. Until very recently, the creation of a (non-Soviet) Ukrainian national narrative was impossible, as was any open discussion of the war.

As alluded to by Bartov, preserving the remnants of Jewish life, memorializing Jewish destruction, and acknowledging Ukrainian complicity in genocide all would challenge the Ukrainian national narrative as constructed after 1991, especially in western Ukraine, where OUN and UPA fighters have been appropriated as national heroes. Bartov calls the latter efforts to forge a new collective memory "extraordinary historical amnesia," but in fact he is closer to the truth when he suggests that Ukrainian memorials represent a willful attempt to fill Jewish space with Ukrainian nationalism.

While both problematic and distressing, it must be said, this is what nations do, especially those in only the earliest stages of true independence (see for example Meron Benvenisti's "Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948" to get an idea how the Zionist movement, with all obvious differences, eliminated traces of the Palestinian-Arab presence in the land after the state's founding). Western Ukrainians see this region as *their* national space, however such ethnic homogeneity might have come to pass. To Ukrainians, the Poles have Poland, the Jews have Israel, and now, finally, the Ukrainians have an independent Ukraine where they can commemorate their own national heroes.

At some point, national narratives are questioned and challenged internally, usually when the security and independence of the state are secure. Agree or disagree with the "new Israeli" historians, Israeli society is stronger for having opened its own national narrative to debate. We can already see signs of change in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies, based in Kiev, has been active since 2002 in educating Ukrainian teachers about the Holocaust. Most notably, in 2005, Sofiia Hrachova, a scholar affiliated with the Ukrainian Academy of Arts and Sciences' Institute of the History of Ukraine, provoked a debate in the liberal Kiev periodical *Krytyka* about Ukrainian memory of the war, stating, "if the memory of the victims is not honored, and if they continue to bow before the perpetrators as heroes, then we all are responsible for this. Therefore 'we all' have to agree – through common discussion, and not common silence – about what our past was like, and what we can say about it, and not say about it, in public." Encouraged by difficult questions posed by Western scholars, we can only hope such self-examination quickens, before even fewer remnants of Jewish existence in western Ukraine remain.

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