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

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 up to 15,000 Lithuanian and ethnic Russian civilians for war crimes, despite the fact that it has shown virtually no initiative in prosecuting their Nazi collaborators. In Ukraine, by contrast, the government has not seen fit to prosecute 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), the 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.

Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine, by Omer Bartov

Princeton University Press, 252 pages, $26.95

University, intended to demonstrate that the murder of Jews often took place in the most intimate settings of family and home. Yet "Erased" is also a deeply personal project, visiting the region of his mother's childhood (he is writing a separate book on his mother's hometown of Buczacz), discovering 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 documentary description and emotional commentary seeks to bring to light the sheer success of efforts to expunge the Jewish past from eastern Europe by destroying 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 deny the existence of 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 launching an offensive against Ukrainian and Polish revenge against the Jews.)

As Bartov argues, these monuments celebrating the OUN (the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) and its battles against the Jews, have been often erected at or nearby sites relevant to Jewish life and death, seen to actively deny the historical significance (or reality) of Jewish victimhood. Of the OUN and its many Ukrainian memorialists seek to demonstrate a genuine and memorialize the mass murder of civilians (but never Jews as Jews) during the German occupation. More frequently, post-independence memorialization of nationalist heroes has been erected in the centers of towns where 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 nationalist heroes, memorialized in statues and monuments 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 OUN (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 understand 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 actions 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-Melnyk 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 martyrlogy 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-Frankivs'k, 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 an 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, Ukrainians 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 as Ukrainians − who cooperated with the same Soviet rule now so reviled − before 1939 in Soviet Ukraine, before the 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-independent memorialization. In Kolomyia, where the memory of its 15,000 Jews has been completely wiped out, stands a semi-language statue of a faceless woman in traditional Ukrainian garb clutching a baby. We might call this the intentional muddling 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 narratives 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 reconnect 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 fa-
Jewish sites in Poland, such as Krakow, to visit the death camps, or even the much to recreate the memory of Jewish life in Mendelsohn and Foer have felt compelled survivor, rather than Ukrainian and secretly adaptation, the Ukrainian driver’s guilt is Jewish search for remnants of a lost world and the story becomes as much about the complicity for his actions during the war, his grandfather. Central to Foer’s story is Ukraine in search of the women who saved intertwined with the story of his travels in literary form. In “Everything is Illuminated,” Foer’s surreal history of his grandfather’s shtetl is 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 “Fear,” Jan Gross argues that as witnesses to expropriated property, Jews become unwell 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.

It’s as if not merely this region of Ukraine, but Ukrainian memory itself has been ethnically cleansed.

As alluded to by Bartov, preserving the remnants of Jewish life, memorializing Jewish destruction, and acknowledging Ukrainian complicity in genocide all would challenge Bartov’s view of 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 estimated to number about 25,000 titles in stock)