

Omer Bartov, *Tales from the Borderlands: Making and Unmaking the Galician Past* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 376.

by Hana Kubátová

Omer Bartov's *Tales from the Borderlands: Making and Unmaking the Galician Past* (2022) is an intricately woven narrative about the past and present of Galicia, a region that played a crucial role in the formation of multiple national identities. It is not a story you might traditionally tell at a family gathering, but in some ways, it feels like one. Intimate in tone, as if recounted by the author to his own children—who, in fact, are introduced later in the book—Bartov crafts a deeply personal account of history. Returning to Buczacz, the town that lies at the heart of both his family history and previous scholarly works, Bartov embarks on a journey through the complex ethnic, cultural, and political life that shaped the borderland.¹ His storytelling blurs the lines between the academic and the personal, inviting readers into a conversation rather than a lecture.

Galicia, once the poorest and most populous province of the Austrian Empire, served as both a frontier and buffer zone, seemingly positioned to protect the empire from the “uncivilized” Cossacks and Tatars in the east and the Ottoman Empire to the south. This region was marked by cultural and political complexity, simultaneously the birthplace of modern Ukrainian nationalism, a stronghold of Polish nationalism, and home to the empire's largest Jewish community. In *Tales from the Borderlands*, Bartov examines the aspirations, dreams, and disillusionments of the people who inhabited this contested region. He structures the history of the area around three pivotal questions: Where did we come from? What did we become? Where did we go?

By posing these questions, Bartov wants readers to reflect not only on grand historical transformations but also on the intimate, family experiences of those

¹ Omer Bartov, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Omer Bartov, ed., *Voices on War and Genocide: Three Accounts of the World Wars in a Galician Town* (New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2020).

who lived through them. He explores how identities were shaped and reshaped by the turbulent forces of nationalism, imperialism, and destruction. The “we” in Bartov’s questions is both national and universal, encompassing Jews, their Christian neighbors, men and women, individuals, and groups.

Bartov’s writing is characterized by “thick description,” akin to an ethnographic study, where historical facts are entangled with stories, rumors, and personal anecdotes.² Author’s own description is often paired with the words of Nobel Prize-winning author Shmuel Yosef (Shai) Agnon, a native of Buczacz, reviving a multi-layered past that existed here. The narrative also constantly shifts back and forth in time. As the reader is drawn into the intimate details of life in Galicia particularly between the revolutions of 1848 and the outbreak of World War I, they are also consistently reminded of the bloodshed and destruction of the Holocaust. This cyclical movement between past and present makes the story feel alive yet tinged with an inescapable sense of loss.

Bartov begins his historical account in 1672, with the Peace Treaty of Buczacz between the Polish king and the Ottoman sultan. He charts how this borderland became central to Polish and Roman Catholic imaginations, while Jewish presence in the region can be traced back as early as 1500. Bartov shows how Buczacz evolved into a commercial and cultural hub, with Jews living alongside, but not necessarily integrated with, their Christian neighbors. Spiritual movements like Hasidism, as well as the messianic movements of Sabbatai Zvi and Jacob Frank, clashed with the region’s Christian authorities, particularly under Austrian rule. Bartov also highlights the latter reforms introduced by Maria Theresa and Joseph II, which ushered in an “age of improvement” with opportunities for the Jewish population. However, these opportunities were increasingly articulated within new national and ideological frameworks.

The case of David (Zvi) Heinrich Müller, a Jewish intellectual who succeeded in academia without converting to Christianity, is a telling example. Despite his success, Müller was viewed as an interloper by Christian scholars, a traitor by Zionists, and a sellout by nationalists—exemplifying the challenges Jews faced in balancing modernity and ethnic pride. What is more, as Bartov also demonstrates, the radical politics that facilitated Jewish self-transformation were later recast by

² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

nationalists as part of a Jewish conspiracy. The notion of Judeo-Bolshevism, or *żydokomuna*, became a persistent trope, fueling antisemitic sentiments that persist to this day.

In the context of professional revolutionaries born out of the borderlands, Bartov introduces figures like Ostap Dłuski, originally Adolf Langer, a loyal communist from Buczacz who became entangled in the complex ethnonational crises within the Communist Party of eastern Galicia. Dłuski tried to mediate these crises, which were exacerbated by the annexation of the region by the newly independent Poland, with the majority Ukrainian population here being fiercely anti-Polish. Arrested by Polish authorities and forced to leave for the Soviet Union in 1929, Dłuski spent much of World War II in France. Surprisingly numb to the fate of the Jews, but certainly driven by ideological dogma, Dłuski justified Stalin's takeover of Eastern Europe. He was buried in 1964 as a model communist, yet Bartov notes with sharp irony that "he had impeccable timing; four years later he would have likely been 'unmasked' as the crypto-Jew Adolf Langer and expelled from Poland as a 'fifth column' Zionist" (p. 228).

Particularly moving is Bartov's shift later in the book to the story of his own family's migration from Galicia to Palestine, recounted through the voice of his mother. You can almost hear the rhythmic chopping of carrots by his mother as she recounts her growing up in Europe, the soft click of the tape recorder capturing every word, and the distant sounds of the author's children playing in the background. This moment adds a rich, sensory layer to the historical account.

In *Tales from the Borderlands*, Bartov strikes a masterful balance between the scholarly and the personal, delivering a multifaceted exploration of a region marked by both hope and violence. It is a tale of how the past is remembered and imagined, offering "a fragment of memory, transmitted from one generation to the next, of those long centuries lived, for better or for worse, in that *ek velt*, that corner of the world, like the fading echoes of a lost yet never entirely forgotten childhood" (p. 328).

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