

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William Jay Risch. *The Ukrainian West: Culture and the Fate of Empire in Soviet Lviv*. Harvard Historical Studies Series. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 374 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05001-3.

Reviewed by Joshua First (The University of Mississippi)

Published on H-Urban (September, 2013)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari



Soviet Lviv: An Awkward Microcosm of Postwar Soviet Life

In *The Ukrainian West: Culture and the Fate of Empire in Soviet Lviv*, William Jay Risch seeks to explain how this West Ukrainian city inhabited both a unique and quintessentially Soviet space within the postwar Soviet Union. The multiple names for this historic capital of Galicia—L’viv in Ukrainian, L’vov in Russian, Lwów in Polish, and Lemberg in German—indicate the complicated identity that it possessed. Risch answers the question of why Lviv was more “Western” than other Soviet cities rather simply at first. On page 1, he writes, “The city’s Renaissance and early modern architecture, narrow winding streets, and cultural and intellectual traditions tied Lvivians more to Prague, Warsaw, Paris, or Florence than to Moscow and Kyiv.” More recently, residents of the city continued their opposition to Moscow and Kyiv in 1990 by electing the first non-Communist city council in Ukraine. As many historians have shown, throughout Lviv’s modern history, many Ukrainian nationalists and dissidents, along with nonconformist artists and writers called the Galician city home.[1] Moreover, anyone who has traveled in the former Soviet Union would be able to contrast Lviv’s intimate public spaces with their narrow winding streets and crowded outdoor coffee shops with the homogeneity of urban life in the Soviet heartland. Thus, it might seem self-evident that Lviv was, and is, different.

Nonetheless, Risch complicates this narrative of difference by showing how Lviv also represented a successful story of Sovietization. Local officials willingly car-

ried out orders from Moscow and Kyiv, and ordinary residents internalized socialist values to such a degree that even dissent was couched in the familiar language of the Communist Party. Risch tells of students during the 1970s who adopted Bolshevik aliases when distributing pamphlets that called for the dissolution of Soviet power and the creation of an independent Ukraine.

Conversely, the methods of Sovietization in Lviv served to “produce the local as a permanent category” (p. 4). Risch discusses several stories of officials and loyal Communist Party administrators who felt entitled to block efforts at Russification in Lviv. As much recent scholarship on Soviet nationalities policy makes evident, officials in Moscow and in the capitals of the Soviet Union republics colluded to reify national difference, and at least in the case of Lviv, gave voice to efforts at maintaining the distinctly Ukrainian character of the city. As Lviv was the site of significant resistance to Soviet power during the 1940s, Moscow officials “proceeded cautiously” in their efforts to eradicate dissent in the city. In this way, the Soviet state could count on a significant degree of “co-optation, if not support, from the locals” (p. 5).

According to Risch, compromise from both officials and Ukrainian nationalists characterized postwar Lviv. One example of such a compromise was the efforts of writers and artists to rehabilitate Western Ukrainians who were merely on the wrong side of history. In this

way, even Ukrainian nationalists who fought against the Bolsheviks during the civil war or the Soviet Union during and after World War II could be cautiously celebrated as heroes, if their heroism were couched in the ideals of Soviet socialism. Yet the Glasnost era indicated that such a compromise was at best fragile, for, when Lvivians acquired the freedom to ignore (if not act against) Soviet power, they almost immediately took the opportunity to do so.

But even Lviv's identity as a Ukrainian city involved Soviet-style transformation, as it had been a predominantly Polish and Jewish city. Whereas the latter were largely eradicated during the Holocaust or moved to their "homeland" in the People's Republic of Poland after 1944, Soviet population transfers brought a slew of new Lvivians in the form of Eastern Ukrainians and Galician peasants after the war, transforming a Habsburg and Polish town into the largest city of Western Ukraine. Risch argues that much of this transformation of Lviv from a multiethnic town on the Habsburg/Polish periphery into a modern Soviet, but distinctly Ukrainian, city had to do with its civilizing mission. Soviet officials believed that they could control an animal that they created more so than one born out of a myriad of historical processes in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, Ukrainian identity was more intimately bound up with the construction of the Russian nation than was a Polish national identity. Thus, a Ukrainian nation was safer for Soviet policymakers. Here, Risch attempts to connect his work to recent scholarship in Soviet studies on empire and imperialism.[2]

The Ukrainian West emerges within a recent flurry of biographies of Soviet cities, each of which explores not only the local dimensions of Soviet power, but also, and more precisely, how something so complex and conflicted as a twentieth-century city experienced and reacted to the transformations of the Soviet modernization project.[3] The origin of this line of inquiry in Soviet historiography is Stephen Kotkin's seminal study, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (1997), which shows how the Soviet project was imagined as a tabula rasa in the newly constructed city of Magnitogorsk. In practice, authorities in Moscow had to reconcile themselves to uneven development and the persistence of peasant mentalities in Soviet urban space, both emblemized by the sprawling tent city on the barren steppe outside of Magnitogorsk. The aforementioned studies situate this picture of compromise between the state and urban citizens through the lens of ethnic conflict and "the West" as alternative forms of modernity. The result, as Risch posits,

was that Soviet cities resisted stable identities and undermined the modernization project that gave rise to them in the first place.

While *The Ukrainian West* as a whole offers a valuable, if occasionally sprawling, contribution to each of these fields of historiography, chapters 2-4 offer the most compelling material for scholars of urban history. Here, Risch examines the historical, social, and political forces that produced a multinational Soviet identity, a unified Ukrainian identity, and a specific local identity in Lviv. He writes that the "uneasy conjuncture of the local, the national, and the Soviet caused future tensions between the [postwar] residents [of Lviv] and their wider world" (p. 65). As Risch tells it, conflicts developed after the war not only between Ukrainians and Russians, but also between new residents from Eastern Ukraine and those native to the city. This conflict emerged due to very different historical conceptions of Ukrainian nationhood that went with being within the Habsburg Empire as opposed to the Russian Empire. There were also conflicts between native Lvivians and the droves of Galician peasants who moved to the city to find work after the war. These peasants were derogatorily called *rahuly* by the natives, to highlight their uncultured, and hence very "anti-Lvivian" attitudes.[4] At the same time, conflicts were muted to a certain degree because ethnic, linguistic, and social groups were segregated in different neighborhoods, schools, and even jobs, to such a degree that they rarely crossed paths. From his interviews with city residents, Risch deduces that Russians and native Lvivians inhabited completely different worlds.

And yet the cultural Thaw of the Khrushchev era brought artists, writers, and other intellectuals together under a series of hopes and dreams for a more humanistic form of socialism. Therefore, the cultural politics of the 1950s and 1960s unfolded in some remarkably similar ways in Lviv, Kyiv, and Moscow. Nonetheless, a uniquely Ukrainian Thaw materialized in Lviv, which, as Risch writes, "eventually turned them away from Moscow" (p. 195). In chapter 4, he examines the ways that Lvivians performed being "Western." Lviv was ideally placed to exploit connections with Poland, in particular, with their looser restrictions on press freedom and greater access to Western products. Tourists among the Ukrainian diaspora frequently came to the city, which provided locals with a connection between national identity and a Western identity.

The final chapter, "Mass Culture and Counterculture," while one of the most interesting chapters in its own

right, has only a tenuous and somewhat muddled connection to the book as a whole. In looking at sports fans, pop music, and hippies in Lviv, Risch somewhat deviates from the objective of *The Ukrainian West*, even though he presents a compelling argument about broader Soviet issues of mass culture during the 1970s-80s. As he reiterates in the conclusion, “Lviv was interesting not just because it was anti-Soviet, or more Ukrainian, or more Western, but because it was different from places like Dnipropetrovsk and Kyiv” (p. 255). Certainly, there were sports fans and hippies in both of those places, so why tell us about these things within the context of Lviv’s essential difference? Perhaps because, as historian Iaroslav Hrytsak wrote in Lviv newspaper *Postup* in 2002 (quoted in Risch), the Lviv region “‘was and, unfortunately, remains a place on a continent that stretches from Vladivostok all the way to Brighton Beach’” (pp. 259-260), pointing to the homogeneity of Soviet life that touched even the unique and exceptional place of Lviv.

Much of Risch’s story is one of how national and cultural identities get formed and maintained, and how these identities came into conflict with each other in postwar Lviv. The evidence of identity as such was revealed in both the practices of everyday life (telling jokes, reading, walking, drinking coffee, gathering at cemeteries and public monuments)—where Risch draws on Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau—alongside the official and semiofficial spaces of the Lviv branch of the Writers’ Union, the Komsomol, the Club of Creative Youth, and the History Department at Lviv State University—the latter examination being more familiar territory in Soviet studies. His agents of identity formation include professional writers and historians, along with hippies, punks, and other participants in youth subcultures. To give voice to this diverse array of Lviv residents, Risch conducted an amazing number of interviews over the course of more than a decade. He discovered in Lviv through these interviews, not necessarily a hotbed of anti-Soviet dissent, but a more ambivalent series of attitudes toward Soviet power, and toward its colonizers.

The best parts of *The Ukrainian West* investigate the spaces and practices of identity formation and identity reproduction, but this becomes overshadowed sometimes by the trivialities of academic and literary disputes, many of which are in no way unique or even emblematic of Lviv. Perhaps certain Lviv historians’ attempts to partially rehabilitate the defunct Communist Party of Western Ukraine (KPZU) in the 1950s represented an issue of local importance, but the themes present in this academic debate mirrored those in Moscow during the Burdzhalov

Affair of the same time. In fact, I found that Risch could have situated many of these cultural and political debates, featured in part 2 of the book, in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv with only minor changes in the details. While he never denies the importance of Kyiv, the reader might wonder how the detailed elaboration of these debates advance his argument about Lviv, or why we should care about Lviv in particular in this respect. I appreciate that he is trying to complicate a narrative of “nationalist Lviv,” the subject of his 2001 doctoral thesis, but the most coherent argument of *The Ukrainian West* remains precisely this—that despite Soviet efforts to build a Ukrainian city in its own socialist image, what they got was the self-fulfilling prophesy of a “bourgeois nationalist” other.

These minor quibbles aside, *The Ukrainian West* represents an amazingly well-researched piece of historical scholarship that captures the uniquely Lvivian and yet typically Soviet attitudes of this often romanticized city. Risch has performed an invaluable service in collecting the stories of urbanites from Western Ukraine, and the tapes from his interviews, now archived at both the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute and at the Institute for Urban History of East Central Europe in Lviv, will undoubtedly provoke further research on twentieth-century Lviv and Western Ukraine more broadly.

Notes

[1]. Markian Prokopovych, *Habsburg Lemberg: Architecture, Public Space and Politics in the Galician Capital, 1772-1914* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2008); Paul R. Magocsi, *The Roots of Ukrainian Nationalism: Galicia as Ukraine’s Piedmont* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); John-Paul Himka, *Religion and Nationality in Western Ukraine: The Greek Catholic Church and Ruthenian National Movement in Galicia, 1867-1900* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999); Heorhii Kas’ianov, *Nezhodni: Ukrains’ka intelihentsiia v rusi oporu 1960-80-kh rokiv* (Kyiv: Lybid, 1995); Jan Kozik, *The Ukrainian National Movement in Galicia, 1815-1849*, trans. Andrew Gorski and Lawrence D. Orton (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1986); John A. Armstrong, *Ukrainian Nationalism, 1939-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955); and John S. Reshetar, *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917-1920: A Study in Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952).

[2]. Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Serhy Yekelchuk, *Stalin’s Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relations in the*

Soviet Historical Imagination (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Ronald Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Terry Martin, *The Affirmation Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[3]. Paul Stronski, *Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City, 1930-1966* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010); Katerina Clark, *Moscow, The Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

2011); and Sergei Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dniepropetrovsk, 1960-1985* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2010).

[4]. According to Risch's sources, *rahul* (pl. *rahuly*) is derived from a Polish word meaning "the horns of a bull." In using it to describe the Galician peasants who had recently moved to Lviv after the war, the term pointed to their supposedly aggressive and uncivilized behavior. Risch also suggests that the term functioned to deride the peasants for their feeble attempts to look urban by speaking Russian (pp. 66-67).

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Citation: Joshua First. Review of Risch, William Jay, *The Ukrainian West: Culture and the Fate of Empire in Soviet Lviv*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.

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