

Omer Bartov. *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018. 416 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4516-8453-7.

Reviewed by Joanna Sliwa (Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany - Claims Conference)

Published on H-Poland (May, 2019)

Commissioned by Anna Muller (University of Michigan - Dearborn)

What started as a conversation that Omer Bartov, a historian of modern Europe and the Holocaust, had with his mother in Israel in 1995 about her life in Eastern Europe culminated in a riveting historical study. *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* focuses on a seemingly inconspicuous town in today's western Ukraine. A local history at its best, *Anatomy of a Genocide* spans several centuries, focuses on the diverse experiences of people who inhabited the town and the region, contextualizes the town's history with broader phenomena, and skillfully integrates a spectrum of multilingual sources. The book, in Bartov's words, "attempts to reconstruct the life of Buczacz in all its complexity and depict how the Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish inhabitants of the town lived side by side for several centuries—weaving their separate tales of the past, articulating their distinctive understanding of the present, and making widely diverging plans for the future" (p. 4). In so doing, Bartov dissects the factors that made genocide in Buczacz "a communal event, both cruel and intimate, filled with gratuitous violence and betrayal as well as flashes of altruism and kindness" (p. 5).

Composed of seven chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue, *Anatomy of a Genocide* reveals in a chronological way the rise and demise of Buczacz under Polish, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Ger-

man, Ukrainian, and Soviet rule. This is a story of how the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth expanded its territory colonizing areas in the East (the nostalgia-ridden *kresy*, frontiers) and how Polish aristocratic families subjugated and exploited the local populations, thereby sowing the seeds for ethnic tensions and outbursts of violence. Bartov quickly and decisively dispels still popular myths about peaceful coexistence in the borderlands. Through meticulous research deriving from Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish sources, as well as materials written by foreign visitors to the town, Bartov uncovers the Polish and Ukrainian populations' animosities against the Jews fueled by accusations, stereotypes, greed, conspiracy theories, anti-Judaism, antisemitism, and those populations' own failures. Bartov challenges, too, Jewish legends of idealized shtetl life in the Polish-Ukrainian frontier. While physical integration rather than isolation defined Jews' lives in Buczacz, on an emotional level, the situation was different.

Inequalities combined with resentment and flaring nationalism exacerbated the situation of minorities in Buczacz in the aftermath of World War I. While, as Bartov concludes, it was difficult to draw distinctions between Poles and Ukrainians, particularly because of the relatively common intermarriage, the situation was different with Jews. As the ultimate pariah, accused of disloyalty

by the proponents of the Polish state and the Ukrainian national cause, Jews were systematically pushed into the margins. Neither the Poles nor the Ukrainians believed that Jews could become part of either national community. Thus, some Jews embraced Zionism, left for Palestine, or, driven by the additional factor of poverty, immigrated to the United States, where, in turn, they formed philanthropic networks to support their brethren back in Buczac. Those Jews who remained faced aggressive efforts of Polonization in schools. But no matter how well Jews spoke Polish, displayed their patriotism, integrated into the life of Buczac, and identified themselves in national terms, they continued to be seen as a foreign element. Poles felt stabbed in the back by minorities, Jews and Ukrainians. This mindset had dire consequences for Jews both when the Second Polish Republic was forming against the resistance of Ukrainian nationalists and later when Poland ceased to exist.

Buczacz under German rule during World War II and the Holocaust understandably occupies considerable space in the book. Not surprisingly for those familiar with Bartov's earlier scholarship on Nazi Germany, the focus of the most substantial chapter deals primarily with German perpetrators but also with their willing Ukrainian collaborators and doomed Jewish helpers. Polish complicity appears in the context of denunciation of Jews in hiding and looting Jews' property. Bartov paints an engrossing picture of German officers, soldiers, and civilians, both men and women, who experienced "the best time in their lives" in Buczac (p. 185). He shows how webs of connections between the perpetrators and witnesses and their victims, exploitation of Jews underpinned by Nazi racial ideology, and casual and indifferent attitude of the local population toward mass murder contributed to the routinization of violence. This conclusion challenges the common perception that dehumanization of Jews explains engagement in mass murder. Ukrainian policemen who participated in actions against Jews also knew their victims—they

were neighbors. But Bartov does not shy away from discussing the role of Jewish policemen and Jewish community leaders in facilitating the Nazi-inspired genocide. Nor does he avoid mentioning intra-Jewish conflicts about survival strategies. However, he abstains from analyzing these Jews' motivations and choiceless choices but rather leaves it to the reader to process that information as narrated by Jewish witnesses themselves.

The personal stories of Jewish victims present a harrowing view of daily life of ordinary people during the Holocaust. Shreds of social norms, human solidarity, and communal ties evaporated, save for individual cases of rescue of Jews by Poles and Ukrainians. Still, the notion of, what Bartov terms, "ambivalence of goodness" framed such occurrences (p. 247). Individual behavior was unpredictable. Willing aid givers turned into abusers and hopeful profiteers changed into protectors; killers, too, on occasion exhibited humanity. Yet the overarching story is that of oppression, suffering, and death. Here, too, Bartov corrects the common—yet changing—understanding of the Holocaust to show that rape of Jewish women by Germans was not an isolated mode of persecution. Survivor testimonies illuminate the extent of violence unleashed against the Jews and the prevailing indifference of their former non-Jewish neighbors.

As Bartov astutely observes, Germany's war against Jews was only one of parallel fights that swept through Buczac and affected its populations. The Wehrmacht fought against the Red Army. But the most important for the Ukrainian and Polish populations, Bartov claims, was a civil war waged between the two. Bartov, however, does not explain why he chose to designate the Ukrainian-Polish conflict with the strong term "civil war" (p. 268). The Polish tragedy, as Bartov shows, had little to do with German policy. Rather, the destruction of Polish existence in the city and the region was an outcome of the Ukrainian nationalists' campaign of ethnic cleansing to create

an independent Ukraine. The massacres of Poles perpetrated by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists-Ukrainian Insurgent Army (OUN-UPA) in Volhynia in 1944 further deepened rifts between the two groups. With the Soviet entry into Buczac, some Poles joined NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) ranks and participated in programs aimed against Ukrainians. Only the Soviet agreement signed with the temporary Polish authorities in September 1944 ended, what Bartov calls, the "fraternal conflict" (p. 273). In the next few years, many Poles either fled or were deported from Eastern Galicia to the newly established Poland. By then, Buczac and its environs had been nearly devoid of Jews. The consequences of genocide, as well as postwar population transfers and border changes, contributed to the emergence of an ethnically uniform region. Soviet leadership, then in charge of Ukraine, endorsed the logic of nationalists to try to stifle interethnic conflict.

Immediate postwar efforts by Soviet authorities to document Nazi atrocities yielded a historical narrative focused on "Soviet victims" that has dominated the memory and representation of World War II and the Holocaust. Soviet-instituted repression of the past, combined with continued animosities, ill-grounded accusations, and various other frustrations, has led to selective recollection of wartime events. The Ukrainians and the Poles each see themselves as the main target and greatest victim of the war. With these groups' competition for suffering, as Bartov shows, the Jews as victims are not only misunderstood but also largely nonexistent. From the Polish perspective, Jewish victimization was tied to Jews' involvement in Soviet victimization of Poles. And for the Ukrainians, their goal to liberate themselves from Polish influence justified the means, even if it included genocide. Remarks by locals cited by Bartov demonstrate the prevalent lack of understanding of the implications of Nazi anti-Jewish policy.

Although Bartov does not explicitly state it, *Anatomy of a Genocide* is also a story about how emotions shape group relations and history itself. While it is understandable why a historian is disinclined to factor in "the irrational," historians increasingly, if cautiously, are turning to the study of emotions to ask new questions and to attempt to explain what seems to be otherwise inexplicable. Such an approach is fitting for a study of relations among the three primary groups—Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews—but also among members of yet another one that occupies an important place in this book, Germans.

Bartov has written an exquisite book. It is addressed to a range of audiences. Its content will appeal to scholars of Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish, as well as of Holocaust, history. But its reach extends to scholars in genocide and ethnic studies. Advanced undergraduate and graduate students will benefit from the historical insights and discussion topics that the book raises. Written in an accessible and compelling way, this book also is directed to an educated general audience. The author's choice to leave out references to scholarship on topics highlighted in the book may require greater background knowledge from the reader. Yet sufficient context and superb writing allow readers for whom this is a new topic to stay engaged.

A powerful exploration of a history spanning many centuries, *Anatomy of a Genocide* counts among the most influential studies on modern East European history. This is a foundational text for a granular understanding of the complexities of Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish cohabitation in the borderlands. It is a microhistory told through the lens of human experiences in one town. Buczac is at the front and center of this study. But, ultimately, the story is about people and individual choices in times of rising nationalism and extreme violence. In *Anatomy of a Genocide* Bartov examines historical events and a range of topics that continue to bear relevance.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-poland>

Citation: Joanna Sliwa. Review of Bartov, Omer. *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz*. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. May, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=52452>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.