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Maksim Goldenshteyn on Ukraine Is Not Dead Yet: A Family Story of Exile and Return by Megan Buskey

On a summer day in 1993, three Ukrainian relatives appear in Megan Buskey’s suburban Cleveland home: her aunt, a cousin, and a great-uncle. The recent collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of an independent Ukraine have made their brief trip abroad possible.

Linguistic and cultural barriers prevent the American-born Buskey, then eleven, from knowing quite what to make of the encounter. “We were divided from them as if by thick glass,” Buskey writes in *Ukraine is Not Dead Yet: A Family Story of Exile and Return* (p. 27). She feels at a similar remove from her Ukrainian-born maternal grandmother, Anna, who came to the United States from Siberia in the mid-1960s but whose language and dress, and ways with food and money, sit at odds with Buskey’s American sensibilities.

After leaving her “incurious” hometown for the University of Chicago and jobs on the East Coast, Buskey begins to find her grandmother’s Ukrainiananness to be “fascinating, unique, and special” (p. 31). A growing interest in learning the Ukrainian language and hearing family stories brings Buskey and her grandmother closer.

Yet there remain topics that she senses she cannot broach over tea when she visits, “certain silences” (p. 47). It’s only after her grandmother’s passing in 2013 that Buskey begins to fill them. In vivid prose, Buskey describes the process of uncovering a difficult truth: a family member’s participation in atrocities committed by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) during the Second World War.

Buskey’s journey begins in the summer of 2003 during a first trip to Lviv, a city in western Ukraine near her grandmother’s ancestral village. As an American, her initial impressions of the city’s “storybook” urban center are soon tempered by a different reality: many apartment blocks are dilapidated; the roads are pocked with potholes; water service is unreliable; people are occasionally left lying in the street without medical attention after car wrecks; pets are led to the ruins of a former synagogue to relieve themselves; Holocaust sites are barely marked.

Buskey returns to Ukraine time and time again. She visits her grandmother’s bucolic Staryava, a village nestled at the foot of the Carpathian Moun-
tains in what had been eastern Galicia, a territory volleyed between neighbors and occupiers for centuries. In the countryside and in nearby towns and cities, where the Ukrainian majority once co-existed with Polish and Jewish neighbors—albeit “in a frozen web of mutual dependence and resentment,” as the journalist Anna Reid has described Polish-Jewish-Ukrainian relations in Ukraine—there remain other kinds of silences.[1]

But there are people who have remained in Staryava and are willing to speak. One informant, an older woman, tells Buskey about the fate of Staryava’s Jewish families. She now resides in one such family’s home, which had belonged to her classmate (the very home in which Buskey finds herself conducting the interview). One day, Buskey and two cousins stroll central Lviv hoping to spot old advertisements written in Polish and Yiddish. Or “ghost signs,” as they are called.

Investigations like Buskey’s are rarely a solo act. Her family members are enlisted. Others, including a librarian with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, help navigate the Kafkaesque bureaucracies that stand between her and the truth. (The librarian recommends that Buskey use all caps in email correspondence to a Polish archive to get the documents she needs. “Makes you seem less savvy, more pitiable,” he advises.)

Buskey deftly weaves her family story into the broader history of Ukrainian life in eastern Galicia. In the interwar period, the Ukrainian population, still reeling from the effects of serfdom, was repressed under the Second Polish Republic. Having failed to establish an independent state after World War I, some Ukrainians began to see violent resistance as the only recourse. These developments fomented the rise of OUN and a vision for “an ethnically pure” Ukrainian state free of Poles and Jews. When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, eastern Galicia—held by the Soviets for a mere twenty-one months—and neighboring territories became the killing grounds for Germans and their local collaborators. OUN initially members believed that the Germans would help them in their bid for statehood, clinging to this hope even after the occupiers repressed and arrested its leaders.

In his 2021 book, *Ukrainian Nationalists and the Holocaust*, also published as part of ibidem Press’s Ukrainian Voices series, John-Paul Himka outlines three discrete phases of OUN’s participation in ethnic cleansing in eastern Galicia and Volhynia, a region to the north.[2] Following the German-led invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, OUN militias aided German units in identifying and arresting Jews. OUN was sometimes involved directly in mass murder. Himka writes that beginning in early 1942, OUN members infiltrated Ukrainian police units organized by the Germans and helped lead roundups for deportations to the Belżec extermination center or for German executions by bullets; Ukrainian units occasionally carried out the latter.

Despite its claims of moderation, the proportion of direct violence perpetrated by OUN and its UPA forces against Poles—the primary target—and Jews escalated in 1943 and 1944 in Volhynia and then eastern Galicia. During this period, UPA found some of the few remaining Jewish survivors, “lured” them from their hiding places, and killed them. The Soviets reconquered eastern Galicia in 1944 and annexed it to Soviet Ukraine.

The work of creating a more ethnically homogenous western Ukraine and combating Ukrainian nationalism was immediately taken up by Joseph Stalin. A process of “repatriation” entailed deporting hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians from Poland to Soviet Ukraine and hundreds of thousands of Poles from Soviet Ukraine to Poland.

The OUN insurgency survived into the 1950s. In
1947, 76,000 people with real or imagined ties to OUN and UPA members were entangled in Operation West, a project designed to undercut what was left of the nationalist movement by sending family members east. For their ties, Buskey’s grandmother and other relatives were among those deported to Siberia, where they were consigned to the brutal life of coal miners.

Here, it should be said—if anyone needs reminding—that the issue of local participation in the Holocaust remains incendiary. The need to “de-Nazify” Ukraine was among the false pretenses under which Vladimir Putin launched his full-scale invasion in February 2022. Putin has regularly referred to Ukrainian soldiers as Banderites, or disciples of OUN leader Stepan Bendara.

Although there have been renewed efforts in some quarters of western and central Ukraine to glorify Nazi collaborators with new monuments and streets names, doing the country’s image no favors abroad, the idea that it has been overrun by Nazis is a gross distortion. But to dismiss them outright without a closer look at the history, as Buskey provides in an accessible way through the prism of her family’s story, is to miss an opportunity to understand why such claims might resonate with Putin’s domestic audiences.

After the Second World War, the Soviet Union sought out “fascist collaborators” and arrested: at least 320,000. According to scholar Tanja Penter, being guilty of “homeland betrayal” was the most serious crime of all, more serious even than “crimes against humanity.”[3] Civilians who had merely lived through the war in borderland Soviet territories occupied by Germany and its allies remained under suspicion for decades. Investigations into alleged collaboration continued into the 1980s. Ukrainians involved in the nationalist insurgency were branded as “German-Ukrainian nationalists.” Worth emphasizing is that vast majority of Ukrainians who fought during the Second World War fought for the Red Army.

As Buskey’s debut and other recent books on the Holocaust in Eastern Europe make clear—Franziska Exeler’s Ghosts of War comes to mind—the effects of war and the difficult choices made therein reverberate for decades, across continents and generations.[4]

When Buskey finally received the files needed to complete her puzzle and reviewed them, “the words war crimes floated through my mind” (p. 172). Curiously, Buskey does not write about her family’s reaction to these revelations. In a recent interview with WBUR, Boston’s NPR affiliate, Buskey says there has been a mix of horror, denial, and shame.[5]

Toward the end of her book, Buskey asks a question about political memory. It can also apply to families. “How could a country know itself unless it knew all the things it had been?” (p. 175).

Buskey’s unflinching book is an important contribution to the study of Ukraine and its complex history. Animating it are the very issues being weaponized by Putin’s Russia to justify its senseless war.

Notes


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