

*The Paradox of Ukrainian Lviv:
A Borderland City between
Stalinists, Nazis, and Nationalists*
Tarik Cyril Amar
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BY RONALD MEYER

PARADOX CITY

TARIK CYRIL AMAR'S STUDY OF HISTORY IN UKRAINIAN LVIV

The largest city in western Ukraine and seventh largest overall, Lviv today performs the role of standard bearer and symbol of Ukrainian national identity, despite the fact that as recently as 1939 the city had been known as Lwów, a Polish city and major center of East European Jewish life. Poles represented the majority population, while Ukrainians accounted for approximately one-sixth of inhabitants and ranked as the least politically powerful group. Over the last three centuries alone Lviv had been ruled by the Habsburg Empire (when it was also known as Lemberg), a Russian imperial occupation during World War I, interwar Poland, and the Soviet Union, not to mention the longest German Nazi occupation of any major city in the USSR (as of 1941). In his deeply researched and engaging new study, *The Paradox of Ukrainian Lviv: A Borderland City*

between Stalinists, Nazis, and Nationalists (Cornell University Press, 2015), Tarik Cyril Amar, assistant professor of history at Columbia University, explores the enigma of how under Soviet and German rule a predominantly Polish city became preponderantly Ukrainian both ethnically and in self-perception.

As Amar put it in his book launch at the Harriman Institute (on December 2, 2015), "Lviv's twentieth-century experience represents an important intersection of historical conditions and forces that far transcend the local history of this one city. Here was a major European borderland city, with a long past shared by empires and multiethnic populations, that was transformed by major forces of twentieth-century history: Soviet communism, Soviet nation-shaping, nationalism, and Nazism."

Amar was quick to point out, both in his talk and again in our interview a month later, that the book was written well before 2013 and the violent crisis in relations between Russia and Ukraine that has kept Ukraine in the news as never before. Nor did family or



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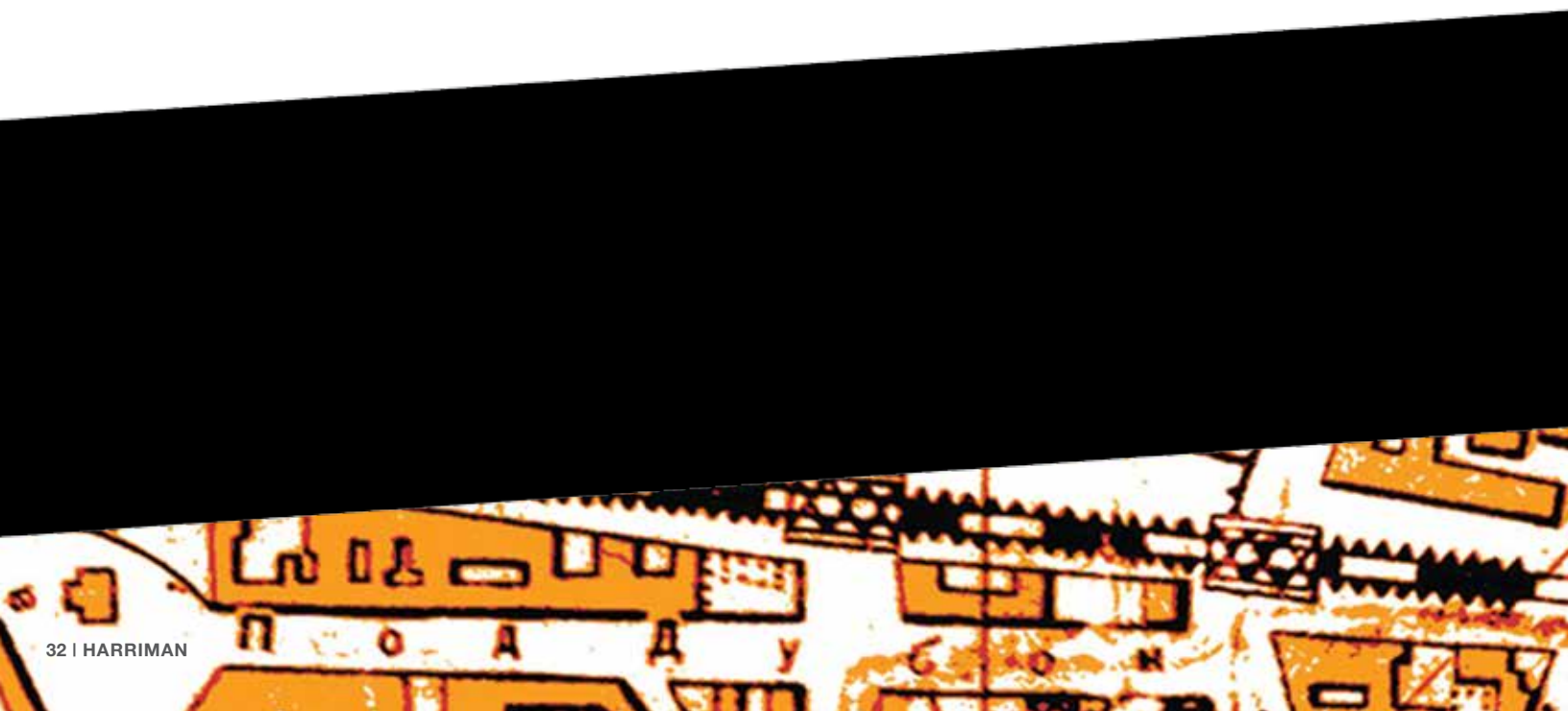
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personal background set him on a trajectory to Ukraine, but rather the topic came from inside Soviet history. As an undergraduate in the nineties at Oxford's Balliol College, he took one Russian history class with Catherine Andreyev on revolutionary history. But this was one very good class among many and did not set him down the Soviet path. After earning his master's degree in international history at the London School of Economics, Amar applied to Princeton University for graduate studies, still not as a Russianist but rather with a project on German foreign policy in the interwar period. That project was abandoned after taking a seminar with Stephen Kotkin, whose *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (1995), a pioneering study of another city, Magnitogorsk, quickly became required reading for everyone in the field of Soviet studies. Inspired by Kotkin's work and cutting-edge seminar, Amar pitched his tent in Soviet history and has not looked back.

After deciding that he wanted his case study to be on the periphery, he set out for Chernivtsi, another former borderland city in western Ukraine, but it quickly became apparent to the young researcher that there were de facto problems with the Party side of the archive, which, although not officially closed, proved to be inaccessible. He moved to Lviv and the situation was the exact opposite. The archivists were welcoming and professional and the archive truly

open. The conditions were excellent, if you could manage to overlook the fact that there was no heating during the harsh winters. As he remarked in our interview, Lviv "represents a nodal point, a crossroads of historical processes." Moreover, while Lviv was literally on the periphery of the Soviet Union, it offers us the opportunity to explore something centrally important: "In the initial phase the Party is quite literally talking to itself, trying to come to terms with the question, 'What does it mean to be Soviet in this place and how is that accomplished?'" Also serving as the academic director of the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe (2007–10), Amar ended up living in Lviv for a total of five years, witnessing a period of dynamic developments as well as persistent problems in post-Soviet Ukraine.

The first step in the demotion of Poles in the Lviv hierarchy took place during the Soviet occupation of 1939–41, following the division of Poland between Germany and the USSR. The Soviets imagined their own presence as the socialist equivalent of a modernizing and civilizing mission, which would bring socialism to a city that had been ruled by Polish lords. In his "Tales about Western Ukraine" (1940), the distinguished Moscow writer Viktor Shklovsky, better known today as a Russian formalist critic than as war correspondent, reports that the region is a "remote corner" and "natural preserve of religion," and equates religion, clergy, and believers with backwardness and ideological enemies, whereas the Red fighter is the quintessential Soviet man and symbol of modernity. The subjugated Polish Lwówians, however, saw only simple people, poorly dressed, whom they considered to be uneducated and unintelligent. The seventeen-year-old Stanislaw Lem, who would grow up to be the well-known Polish science fiction writer, found the



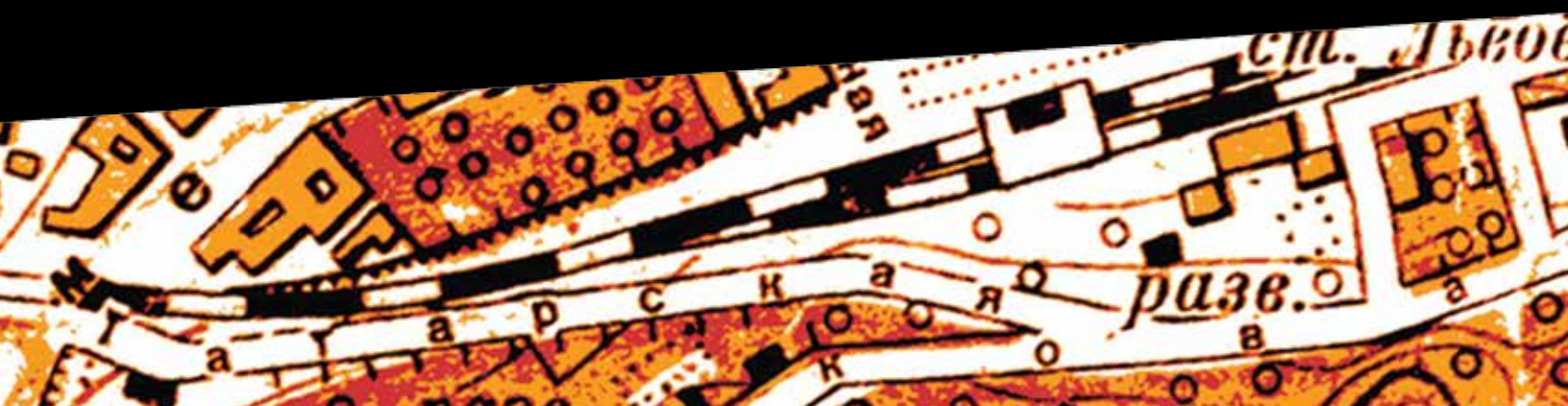
In the initial phase the Party is quite literally talking to itself, trying to come to terms with the question, “What does it mean to be Soviet in this place and how is that accomplished?”

Soviets terrifying and ridiculous, a “terrible, gigantic ape. . . . The Germans evoked only fear, at the Soviets you could also laugh.”

Amar details the strategies for raising the status of Ukrainians during the Soviet occupation of Lviv in 1939–41, which were accompanied by policies marginalizing the Polish population, although the Soviets also announced a policy of internationalism. A good example of the latter is the Monument to the Stalin Constitution, erected in Lviv in 1939, with inscriptions in Polish, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. Nevertheless, Polish was abandoned as a language of instruction in favor of Yiddish in Jewish secondary schools; and Ukrainian was made a mandatory subject for all students. The 1941 anniversary of national Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz presents an interesting example of appropriation by the Soviets. Modeled on the elaborate, large-scale Pushkin anniversary celebrated in the Soviet Union in 1937, the Mickiewicz anniversary, the Soviets claimed, “honored the works of a rival state’s culture more than that state did.” In other words, the Soviet invaders were proud of having saved Mickiewicz from the “Polish lords.”

The German occupation of 1941–44 proved to be “the greatest rupture in the city’s history,” bringing with it new extremes of unprecedented violence and rule by racist ideology. While Nazism and Stalinism followed different logics of brutality, as Amar remarked, “the Germans, like their Soviet counterparts, felt that history with a capital H was on their side, against the dying representatives of doomed epochs.” The Jewish population in Lviv, which before World War II amounted to slightly more than 30 percent, was decimated by the Germans, who set up a large combined labor and mass murder camp within walking distance of Lviv’s center. Moreover, during an initial pogrom in 1941, German propaganda troops filmed this mass spectacle of violence, as we see in a photo reproduced in Amar’s book.

In chapter 4, Amar tracks the end of Lwów and the making of Lviv, from the point when Soviet forces took the city back in July 1944, when the city had 150,000 to 160,000 inhabitants, less than half its prewar population. Some ten years later, the Polish share of Lviv’s 380,500 inhabitants amounted to 2 percent; the vast majority





of the Polish population had left during the compulsory population exchange of 1944–47. Amar again quotes Stanislaw Lem, who describes this end of a world left behind in stages: “After the [first] arrival of the Soviets, then after the arrival of the Germans, and finally—when we had to leave Lwów.”

During the Soviet occupation of 1939–41 there had been no attempt at industrialization, but after the war Lviv was held up as a symbol of modernization in the new Soviet West and became the site of intense industrialization, for example, the Lviv Bus Factory, which was constructed in 1945–50. Together with industrialization came the creation of a large population of workers, including new urbanites from the countryside. But new Lvivians from eastern Ukraine, a group important for its Soviet identity and not to be confused with the locals, made up the majority of the local elite. If locals held high positions, they tended to be in culture and education. The local intelligentsia was forced to endure repression and a painful transformation, turning it into a symbol of the Sovietizing of the self.

By 1991 Lviv was a solidly Ukrainian city. It is the most Ukrainian of all major Ukrainian cities culturally, ethnically, and politically. Moreover, both Ukrainian nationalists and Soviets articulated claims of a primordial Ukrainian Lviv. According to the last Soviet history of Lviv (1984), Lviv’s initial development in the Halych-Volyn Principality in the thirteenth century had created the conditions

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whereby it was able to preserve its “eastern Slavonic” nature even under “the yoke of foreign feudalists.” Thus, Lviv’s Orthodox Ukrainians embodied “an organic continuation” of Kyiv Rus, which both Russians and Ukrainians claim as their birthright. In a national reading, this essentially or inevitably Ukrainian city proved resistant to Soviet recasting and ultimately prevailed. Enlisting the power of Western traditions, this narrative avers that “Soviet rule came too late . . . even Soviet violence and indoctrination could not reform Lviv, which was too much under the influence of Habsburg and other Western cultural institutions.”

Of course, there is much more to Amar's erudite and captivating book than my brief survey of these few points. For example, in the final chapter, "A Soviet Borderland of Time," he renders the geographical category temporal, inviting the reader to rethink the metaphor. Time, of course, was extremely important for the Soviets, since they believed that they had entered a different stage of history. But had they? Amar fleshes out this consideration of time with reflections on the divide between public and private memory, as well as official and counter memories. Amar anchors his exploration of Soviet teleology in a local and borderland setting in a discussion of two competing narratives: the first, about the interwar Communist Party of Western Ukraine (KPZU); and the second, about a Communist underground in German-occupied Lviv (the Ivan Franko People's Guard). Amar summarizes the importance of these two narratives: "Together they constituted a Soviet history of the present, to borrow a phrase but not its meaning, which connected Lviv's past not only to a general Soviet Marxist account of universal history but also to the specific teleology of the postwar Soviet Union, anchored in the key myths of the Great October Revolution and the Great Fatherland War." Rather than summarize Amar's argument, I invite you to read this tour de force in his own words in *The Paradox of Ukrainian Lviv*. ■



Tarik Cyril Amar
Photo by Susan E. Heuman, 2016