Vsetecka on Hnatiuk, 'Courage and Fear'

Review published on Monday, April 27, 2020


Reviewed by John Vsetecka (Michigan State University) Published on H-Empire (April, 2020)


Originally published in Polish in 2015 (*Odwaga i strach*), Ola Hnatiuk’s book *Courage and Fear* is now available in English translation thanks to Academic Studies Press. The text, which is translated by Hnatiuk’s sister, Ewa Siwak, is an exemplary history of the city of Lviv and its intellectual milieu during World War II. The book is not a typical history of war and destruction in the standard sense; rather, Hnatiuk chooses to construct a narrative built from carefully examined sources that provide the reader with intimate insight into the personal lives of academics, scientists, painters, musicians, and nationalist sympathizers as they navigate their lives during the war. The book is divided into seven chapters, and the list of protagonists grows with each. The author’s carefully organized text allows her to introduce new faces in each chapter to the ever-growing circle of Lviv’s intellectual society. The characters represent the diverse populations that inhabited the city during the war, but the author pays acute attention to the role of Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews. Hnatiuk is careful to avoid reducing these personal relationships to ones based solely on nationalist leanings and ethnic hatreds, and she rightfully points to several examples of interethnic cooperation among the individuals and families who occupy her monograph. The purpose of the book is to overcome simple definitions of people and places, and it is Hnatiuk’s goal “to cross-examine historical verdicts so often mandated by ethnic loyalties” (p. x). In doing so, she demonstrates that Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians often crossed personal, professional, and state-dictated boundaries as a way to survive and help each other during the war years.

During World War II, the multilingual and multinational city of Lviv, also known as Lwów, Lvov, and Lemberg, among others, faced a constant rotation of Soviet and German occupations. Depending on who the occupier was on a specific day meant the difference between life and death. Hnatiuk states that “for some, that day meant a flight ridden with obstacles; for others, a no less difficult return; for many, death; for a few, liberation” (p. 25). The constant threat from occupying forces changed life trajectories for many. For example, in Hnatiuk’s second chapter, “Haven at the Clinic,” readers are introduced to Fryderyka Lille (also known as Irena) who worked as Lviv’s only female hematologist. She was also Jewish. After establishing herself as a successful scientist and academic, rising antisemitism in the city forced her to give up her noted academic career and move her medical practice into a private location. Only with help from her mentor and former boss, Franciszek Groër, was Lille able to continue with her work. This all changed when the Germans arrived in Lviv on June 30, 1941, and Lille and her family were forced to evacuate their apartment out of fear. Hnatiuk writes, “ Barely two weeks later Lille and her mother-in-law found shelter in the home of a mixed Polish-Ukrainian couple” (p. 71). The courage of neighbors and other ethnic groups allowed some,
Like Lille, a chance at survival. Like many of their contemporaries, the Lille family became adept at navigating their established networks in Lviv.

Perhaps of most significance to the Soviets were the universities. Hnatiuk dedicates ninety pages to her chapter “Academic Snapshots,” which speaks to the importance of education and propaganda in Soviet ideology during the war. Academics and the institutions in which they worked were targeted as spaces in which professors could teach their students how to fit in to the new Soviet order. The author contends that “the Soviets restructured the university and quickly politicized the campus, turning it into an ideological instrument” (p. 221). The Soviets relied on local party functionaries, such as Mykhailo Marchenko, to implement these new policies. Marchenko was a historian and member of the Communist Party of Ukraine, and he prepared special reports about the seizure of western Ukraine for first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, Nikita Khrushchev. The dedicated work of Marchenko made him a trusted man, and he was rewarded with the position of university president at the State University in Lviv. A major function of Marchenko’s position was to admit more Ukrainian students and to shift the language of instruction from Polish to Ukrainian. The Soviets knew that they would need the help of local populations to carry out their orders, so they turned their attention to stirring up ethnic rivalries in the media. This is where Hnatiuk’s scrupulous reading of sources unveils a much more complex story. Using various newspaper articles from the early war years, especially from Pravda and Izvestiia, the author finds that “the media repeatedly emphasized how Poland had economically handicapped the Ukrainian and Jewish populations, stirring up hatred for the oppressors as well as hope for a change of fortunes” (p. 135). This is how the Soviets justified their existence in Lviv. These rivalries were played upon further in the university setting where Ukrainians were privileged in admissions and native tongue, at least theoretically.

To make matters worse for their Polish and Jewish colleagues, Ukrainians were once again granted higher status under the Germans. During the German occupation, nationality served as a marker of status. The Germans used their own identity markers (Kennkarte) to distinguish between nationalities and to maintain control of the various populations under their occupation. Hnatiuk asserts, “The General Government imposed a hierarchy of nationalities, according to which a Kennkarte with the letter ‘U’ (which certified documented Ukrainian origin) entitled its carrier to more than a card with a ‘P’ (that is, of Polish ethnicity), while the Jewish population was completely stripped of all rights” (pp. 369-370). However, as the author reminds us, it is important to note that these simple categorizations of peoples reflected Nazi policy and not those of Ukrainians, Poles, or Jews. Both the Soviets and the Germans were responsible for creating hierarchies among Lviv’s diverse population as a way to control, manipulate, and influence. These actions did not always reflect the ideas and beliefs of those who were subjected to them, but the legacy of national and ethnic tensions created by the occupying forces continue to haunt Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews to this day.

Following the lives of other intellectuals in Lviv, Hnatiuk highlights Maksym and Iaroslava Muzyka in her chapter titled “Artists from Café de la Paix.” Maksym was a microbiologist, doctor, and dean of the Ukrainian Underground University. His wife, Iaroslava, was a painter and chairman of the Association of Independent Ukrainian Artists (ANUM). In 1944, the Soviets launched an operation called “Shchos” (Something) to locate members of the Ukrainian underground resistance movement. Iaroslava was tapped to become an intermediary between the Soviets and the Ukrainian underground, and she regularly relayed messages between the two groups. The Soviets leveraged
their connection to the Muzykas to infiltrate their wider circle of friends, which the Soviets believed to be spies, traitors, and members of the resistance movement. Hnatiuk states that “the NKVD [People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs] began working the artist and her closest circle. They named the operation ‘Muzykanty,’ and targeted the artist along with her husband and friends from ANUM” (p. 444). Iaroslava was later arrested on trumped-up charges of owning a personal library and working for the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). She was imprisoned in Kyiv but later released. She continued painting for a time before devoting her energy to the Shistdesiatnyky (the 1960s generation) where she published poems outside of official circulation. Her artistic endeavors were once again targeted by the Soviet secret police in 1972, and she eventually passed away in 1973. Iaroslava and her husband Maksym were just two members of a much larger network of artists, doctors, professors, and lawyers who befriended each other and created a human chain of support during times of occupation. These men and women were the graticules on the intellectual map of Lviv, and while these connections helped them locate each other in times of need, they also ironically led authorities to find them when their very existence was meant to prevent them from doing so.

To write a book that privileges the experiences of individuals rather than states requires a master historian. Hnatiuk is this and much more. She is a tactician of sources, moving seamlessly between Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, and English. Anyone who researches in central and eastern Europe will understand that knowledge of multiple languages is required to work in even one country. To sort through documents in a variety of tongues allows one to access the most personal details of past lives. Hnatiuk uses an array of sources, including memoirs, testimonies, newspapers, ego-documents, and security files. She ambitiously wades through nine Ukrainian archives and libraries, six Polish ones, and several others in the UK and the US. This is in addition to the twenty-seven newspapers and periodicals from which she draws. Hnatiuk should also be praised for her ability to make sense of such a large amount of material. She is at her best, I think, when she reveals to the reader the nuances of overlooked sources like song lyrics and magazine articles. In one instance, Hnatiuk dissects Pavel Grigeoriev’s lyrics in “Only in Lviv.” The song was rewritten to fit new political standards, and Hnatiuk cleverly reveals the hidden meaning in the new version: “This simple metaphor for the Soviet order was meant to convince the listeners of the city’s sunny atmosphere and hospitality. The Russian version ended with an invitation to Lviv” (p. 280). In another case, the author reads between the lines of a magazine article written by Mykhailo Dmytrenko in Literatura i mystetstvo. She concludes her reading of this source by noting that “an eye accustomed to reading between the lines will immediately catch the intimation. Conversely, a person who grew up without censorship will not even register the difference between propagandist stencils and Dmytrenko’s cautious attempt to break through them” (p. 416). In essence, Hnatiuk sees what many others cannot.

Overall, Courage and Fear is an excellent assessment of intellectual society in Lviv during World War II. While scientists, doctors, artists, and professors rightfully receive Hnatiuk’s full attention in this book, one might be left wondering about the lives of those who did not belong to Lviv’s intellectual class. And at the same time, one might also wonder why the author did not substantially include religious figures in her intellectual circle. Such a focus on Lviv also left me wondering what the intellectual milieus in other prominent cities, such as Kyiv, might have looked like in comparison to the one presented here. Aside from these remaining questions, Hnatiuk has written a wonderful history of Lviv through the eyes of some of the city’s most prominent people. Unlike other works of history, this book avoids jargon, and Hnatiuk commits to telling the stories of individuals with an
abundance of evidence and passion. The index of names in the back of the book is most helpful, and even the most seasoned historian will find themselves turning to it to maintain some order of the characters that the author presents. The book will be mandatory reading for those interested in central and east European history, intellectual circles, and urban studies. For those wishing to read a book that creatively and intelligently untangles the entanglements of personal motivations and actions, this is simply one of the best.


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