

## Four European cities in change. Chişinău, Černivci, L'viv, and Wrocław

**At home or abroad? Chişinău, Černivci, L'viv and Wrocław: Living with historical changes to borders and national identities.**

Bo Larsson, (ed.) (Lund: Universus Academic Press, 2020), 560 pages.

**T**his impressive work reports on a large research project on four European cities – Chişinău (Moldova), Černivci (Ukraine), L'viv (Ukraine) and Wrocław (Poland) – whose population was more or less totally altered in connection to WWII, which raises interesting questions about memory and urban heritage in these cities. The four cities have in common that the inhabitants were largely replaced as the pre-war inhabitants were either killed or forced out when Europe was burning, somewhat similar to what we see repeated today in Russia's aggression and unlawful war since 2014 on Ukraine. In addition to its other purposes, the book hereby also becomes a reminder of how fragile urban life could be and a prompt to never relax the defenses of democratic societies to imperialistic attacks. The project was carried out in the years 2011 to 2018 and involved an international and multi-disciplinary team of researchers from Sweden, Germany, Moldova, Ukraine, and Poland.

**THE BOOK, WHICH** is one of the project's outputs, is 560 pages long and consist of several parts, all of which are well illustrated by a large number of photos, maps and graphs. The many color photos and maps make the book very pleasant to open, glance through and look at almost any page. The text, in turn, is filled throughout with very detailed accounts about city life and the cities themselves which in total provides the reader with in-depth information from a region not very well known to urbanists in other parts, or at least in the Anglophone part, of the world, which also gives an obvious additional value to the work.

The book is organized in seven main parts. The first is an introduction, giving the aim and research questions and a general overview of the material and literature that the book is based upon. The work is not driven by any particular theoretical agenda; rather, the overall purpose is to empirically analyze and describe, firstly, how the cities looked and how they functioned before and up to WWII, with comparisons to the present day, and secondly, to investigate the relations of post-war urban planning and conservation policy with "those older buildings and urban environments that are representative of the vanished population

groups". The latter aim is not least supported by the interviews with old persons from the cities, now mostly living elsewhere in the world, which provide additional detail to the work which is otherwise primarily based on plans, photographs, and archive research as well as surveys and interviews with the current population. This first part, and the next two, are written by architect and researcher Bo Larsson, who initiated the project and led it from Lund University's Centre of European Studies. Bo Larsson is also the editor of the book.

The second part provides an approximately 50-page historical background to the region and the four cities, offering both an overall context of the population and how the cities have been subject to the shifting political geography of Europe and various types of (often) authoritarian takeovers, as well as providing detail on persons, buildings and events. Important here, and to a great extent throughout the book, is the Jewish population. In three of the four cities, Jews made up a very large part of the population before the war, whereas after the Holocaust the Jewish populations were almost totally gone. In all cities there were also large population changes concerning other nationalities when the cities came under new regimes as wars were settled and borders changed.

The third part follows up the historical background with a substantial chapter per city on "everyday urban environments" in the interwar period. The focus here is on very detailed descriptions of each city with information, for example, on who lived where (i.e. the exact address of named persons often including mention of their ethnicity), property owners, individual buildings or streets, markets, shops, churches, synagogues and other landmarks, some of which are gone, whereas some still stand and others still have become a protected heritage. The information is very dense, detailed, and very well illustrated which in total gives this part value as a reference book regarding the urban environments it covers.

The fourth part consist of three chapters written by authors from the region discussing and describing urban history and architecture in Černivci with a focus on the period before WWII. The first two chapters, by Julia Lienemeyer and Svitlana Bilenkova respectively, have a clear urban history perspective much in line with the preceding parts and covering mainly the interwar period, whereas the third by Ihor Piddubnyi has a focus on the everyday social and economic conditions in the city during the same period.

**IN THE FIFTH PART** the perspective shifts towards urban planning and development in the postwar period and is covered by two chapters per city by various authors. Anatolie Gordeev's chapter is concerned with an oversight of Chişinău's urban plans up to the present. The next chapter, by Tamara Nesterov and Andrei Vatamaniuc, compares Chişinău's urban structure plans in the (Romanian) interwar and (Soviet) post-war periods. In the following chapter, by Vasyl' Kholodnyts'kyi, the theme of Sovietiza-



Armenian Černivci.

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tion is continued regarding Černivci with a focus not so much on urban plans but on the change in politics in a number of policy fields relevant to the city's inhabitants and everyday life. The independent Ukrainian period is also covered. In the second chapter on Černivci, urban planning and preservation is described by Iryna Korotun with the emphasis on policies after the war. In the two following chapters L'viv is at the center of attention. In both Vitaliy Shulyar's and Bo Larsson's respective chapters on L'viv the focus is on urban plans from the 1940s and onwards, of which the former emphasizes development projects and the latter discusses non-realized plans, urban memory and heritage. The last two chapters in this part are concerned with Wrocław. In the first, Elzbieta Przesmycka provides a broad urban and social history of the city from the war onwards, and in the second Bo Larsson describe urban plans and (changes in) preservation and cultural heritage from the war till the present day.

The sixth part of the book is called "Selected results of surveys and interviews" and is made up of four chapters. The first by Bo Larsson reports about interviews with 40 intellectuals held in Chişinău on the city's multi-ethnic heritage. The second, by Tamara Marusyk and Svitlana Herehova, gives an account with several tables and diagrams of a survey with 200 university students about their knowledge and attitudes to Černivci's

cultural heritage. In the third chapter, Barbara Pabjan analyzes the results of two large interview studies in Wrocław with the population and the 'elite' respectively and argues, among other things, that remembrance attitudes differ depending on if a local or national perspective is used for understanding the cultural heritage of the city. In the fourth chapter Paweł Czajkowski discusses symbols, myths and monuments in Wrocław and their significance today.

The seventh and last part of the book is written by Bo Larsson. This is a 10-pager summary and conclusion for the whole book with discussion and comparison of differences and similarities of the four cities.

**TO SUM UP**, this work is a feast of empirically detailed and well-illustrated descriptions for those interested in urban history, urban plans and urban physical environments and thus covers well the first of the book's purposes. The social transformations in these urban environments are also covered and it is clear to the

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Former synagogue and Jewish school in Chişinău.

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reader that various nationalities have had various influences at different times. The role of the war, Soviet influence and later independence destined radical changes not only to politics, urban planning or preservation but also for how the respective heritage of the cities could - and during Soviet times, should - be understood. The second purpose is thus also covered, primarily empirically and with somewhat less detail compared to the how the urban environments are described. Much of the work comprises empirically driven descriptions and these have great value, not least as documentation and reference. However, the results in relation to especially the second purpose would have benefitted from an overall and more conceptually driven argumentation. As shown by Barbara Pabjan in her chapter on Wrocław, the rich material produced in the project could be taken beyond description to thought-provoking analyses with the potential to open up new discussions and debates. When results are treated this way, they become a starting point of something new. This critique aside, the book as a whole is a rich source for anyone interested in urban development in the region and discusses interesting questions regarding how different nationalities treat each other's cultural and architectural heritage when borders change and people are replaced. In the case of Ukrainian cities today these are not only of historical interest but burning issues once again.

Finally, to an extent the book also settles with the Soviet and Russian influence in the region with regard to how people,

places and the urban environment were treated up till the years around 1990 when the Soviet Union collapsed and the iron curtain was lifted. Again, the book acts as a reminder, in the light of current Russian aggressions against independent democratic societies, of the pertinence of keeping the defenses of freedom and self-determination high, including among those defenses an honorable and worthy treatment, preservation and understanding of our urban environments and the people creating and living in them, now and in the past. ✖

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Note: The book reviewed here is also published, with the same inlay, in 2023 by DOM Publishers, Berlin under the title *The city as a political pawn: Urban Identities in Chişinău, Černivci, Lviv and Wrocław*.