

# THE UPPER LOWER EAST SIDE UKRAINE IN NEW YORK

BY ALEXANDER J. MOTYL

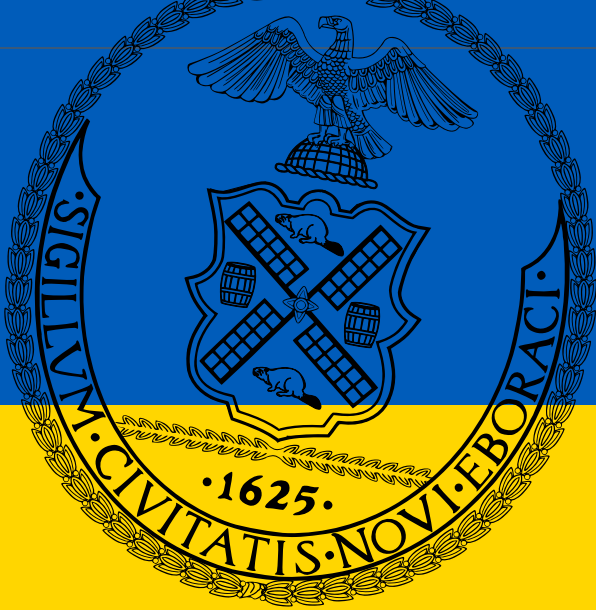
It was Alex Cooley's idea, not mine. He contacted me sometime in 2016 and suggested I teach a course on the Ukrainian diaspora in New York. I immediately said yes. A few months later, the Committee on Instruction approved "Ukraine in New York"—the title was also Alex's—and the course launched in spring 2017. I've been offering it every year since then. It's housed in Columbia's History Department, but the approach is decidedly multidisciplinary. As the syllabus notes:

"Ukraine in New York" is a multidisciplinary exploration of the Ukrainian American community in New York City from its beginnings in the late 19th century to the present. The course focuses on the history, politics, culture, demographics, economics, religion, and society of the community, devoting particular attention to the influence of the New York setting; the tensions encountered in navigating between America, Soviet Ukraine, and independent Ukraine; the impact on community politics and culture of major crises (World War I, Ukrainian independence in 1918, the Famine of 1933, World War II, Ukrainian independence in 1991, and the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014); identity shifts within and between immigrant waves; and self-representations.

The reference to the "New York setting" bears underlining. The course explores the primary area of Ukrainian settlement—bounded by Houston and 14th Streets on the one hand and Third Avenue, the Bowery, and the East River on the other—in relation to the neighborhood's Irish, Italian, Polish, German, Jewish, and Puerto Rican communities as well as to the larger forces that shaped the environment with which New York's immigrants had to contend. Our second session is always a walking tour of what residents called the Lower East Side, the upper part of which gentrifiers later rechristened as the East Village.

## Germans, Jews, and Ukrainians

The neighborhood is an ethnic palimpsest whose traces remain visible—but only if you know where to look—in buildings, houses of worship, and monuments. In the second half of the 19th century the Lower East Side was home to a huge German community, with Avenue B serving as the German Broadway. The Ukrainian National Home on Second Avenue was originally the German YMCA; facing it are two red-brick buildings: the Ottendorfer Public Library (described above the portal as the Freie Bibliothek und Lesehalle) and the former German Polyklinik. The building that houses La MaMa Theater was once the headquarters of the German Turnverein movement, which arose during the resistance to Napoleon. (Its combination of gymnastics and patriotism later inspired the Sokols in Bohemia and the Scouts.) By the late 1800s, the Germans began moving uptown to Yorkville—the site of several newly built breweries. Their move was accelerated in 1904, when over a thousand German women and children perished after their cruise



ship, the *General Slocum*, caught fire in the East River and sank. There's a white stone monument to the victims of the disaster set on the northern side of Tompkins Square Park. I remember playing in its shadow as a child.

After the Germans left, the Lower East Side turned overwhelmingly Jewish. The stretch of Second Avenue between Houston and 14th Streets was known as the Yiddish Rialto, featuring numerous Yiddish theaters (three of the buildings still stand) and restaurants. The Hebrew Actors Union building is located diagonally across from St. George's Ukrainian Catholic Church (an earlier incarnation of which used to be a German church, of course) on East Seventh. The famous Ratner's restaurant is long gone, but the Jewish eatery on the corner of Ninth Street and Second Avenue was transmogrified as Veselka (or Rainbow), now a fashionable Ukrainian café. A synagogue on East Sixth once served as the German parish that sponsored the ill-fated *General Slocum* boat ride.

My personal favorite is the Congregation Tifereth Israel Town and Village Synagogue on East 14th Street.

Built in 1869, when the Lower East Side was still *Kleindeutschland*, the structure originally served as the First German Baptist Church. In the 1920s, Orthodox Ukrainians purchased the church, named it after Saint Volodymyr—the grand prince who christened Kyivan Rus, and added three green onion domes with crosses. In 1962, the building changed hands again and became a synagogue. The crosses were removed, and a Star of David was added above the main entrance, but the onion domes were left in place.

Like the Germans before them, many of the area's Jews left after World War II and either moved uptown or settled in the suburbs. Ukrainians had already coexisted with the Germans, Jews, and other groups before the war, but the area acquired a distinctly Ukrainian feel to it after 1949, when the inhabitants of West German and Austrian Displaced Persons' camps were permitted to immigrate to the United States. Four years of living in the camps enabled the Ukrainians to establish a vigorous "civil society" consisting of scholarly institutions, newspapers, journals, publishing houses, choirs, and political groupings

and to transfer many of them to New York and other cities in the Northeast. My own childhood was defined by an overwhelmingly Ukrainian world in which the church, school, youth organization, store, doctor, lawyer, and dentist were all Ukrainian. Naturally, my friends and I also lived in an American world. Although we mostly spoke English with one another, we'd revert to our Ukrainian secret code among Americans. In contrast, my parents and their friends referred to Americans as "the foreigners."

Ukrainians began leaving the Upper Lower East Side in the 1960s and 1970s. New York was in the throes of a severe economic decline; Saint Mark's Place had become a mecca for a hippie culture that was alien to most East Europeans (even as the *Polski Dom* [Polish Home] hosted Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground); and drugs, crime, and homelessness came to saturate the neighborhood. We moved to Queens in November 1967. It was in those years that some savvy Ukrainians bought buildings for a song and became real estate moguls.

The 1970s and 1980s were hard for the neighborhood, but, as rents

fell, impecunious young people and artists discovered it. Then came the affluent professionals who brought in their wake the gentrification that transformed the Lower East Side into the East Village. The irony is that, although very few Ukrainians can now afford to live in the area, almost all the Ukrainian institutions servicing the community—from the churches to the museum to the banks—are still there. The big question is: Can they survive in the long term in the absence of an immediate community base?

### Diasporas

The German, Jewish, and Ukrainian experience in the Lower East Side is reflective of the general immigrant experience in New York and other cities, but it is also a case study of the diaspora experience. Diasporas—and by this term I simply mean the ethnic groups who live apart from their eponymous homelands but still harbor some allegiance for those homelands—and borderlands are currently in vogue in the academy, partly because peripheries are supposed to say something about centers, but also because life on the

margins exposes people to forces that affect their identities and livelihoods in ways that life in the core does not. Diasporas are thus doubly marginal, living beyond their putative homelands *and* their new homelands. One could imagine that double marginality would incline diasporas to want to leave this condition of existential uncertainty and seek to be fully integrated into their new homelands. And yet, ethnics remain, as Michael Novak once said, “unmeltable.” Why, then, do some members of diasporas choose to assimilate and lose all or most of their ethnic identity? And why do others choose to retain that identity and buck the assimilationist tides?

These questions take us into the realm of nationality studies and pose equally tough questions for its practitioners and their theories. If, as Benedict Anderson famously said, nations are “imagined communities” created by a variety of conditions related to modernity, then why retain an imagined old loyalty in a setting that encourages and rewards an imagined new loyalty? If, as rational-choice theorists argue, identity is a function of rationality, then why

choose to remain Ukrainian, when being American brings so many more rewards—as millions of Germans who assimilated in the aftermath of the two world wars can testify? One might imagine that those scholars who claim that national identity is primordial or perennial might take succor from these conundrums, were it not for the fact that many immigrants discover their ethnic identity *after* coming to America. A friend of mine, who lived his life as a Soviet in the USSR, came around to a Ukrainian identity only after enrolling in a university in western Pennsylvania and, after repeated encounters with local Rusyns and Russians, realizing that he was neither.

Clearly, identity is not immutable, despite claims to the contrary by identitarian activists. Identity can change, but it generally does so slowly, under the influence of a concatenation of forces ranging from the workplace to friends to clothes to food to political cataclysms. When people speak of multiple identities or rapidly shifting identities, what they really mean, I suspect, is that the *roles* we play can be many and varied, even as the answer to the question, Who exactly are



St. George's  
Ukrainian Catholic  
Church on East  
Seventh Street off  
Third Avenue.





*Farthest left: One of the few remaining Yiddish theaters on Second Avenue, the Yiddish Rialto, currently the Village East Cinema. From immediate left, also along Second Avenue: Veselka Restaurant; the Ukrainian scouting organization, Plast; the Ukrainian National Home.*

you?, remains fairly stable. While not providing a definitive answer to why Ukrainians are still around in New York, this fairly obvious insight does suggest that we shouldn't expect them to abandon their identities at the drop of a hat. But neither should we expect them never to abandon their identities, especially as the years go by. So much depends on the environment and on whether diasporas are continually replenished by new members.

The Ukrainian diaspora in the United States has experienced four waves of immigration. The first, involving about half a million poorly educated villagers, extended from the late nineteenth century to World War I. The second, numbering some 30,000 as a result of the tightening of U.S. immigration laws, took place in the interwar period. The third, deeply anti-Soviet wave came after World War II and numbered about 85,000. The fourth, which began with Ukraine's independence in 1991 and has a large percentage of well-educated city folk, has exceeded 100,000 and is still continuing.

Each wave made its contributions to Ukrainian American culture. Each experienced a period of growth, a

period of vitality, and a period of decline, as assimilation inevitably took its toll. But each new wave revitalized and changed the declining culture of the previous wave. Ironically, while the Ukrainian American community and the United States may have benefited from these waves, the clear loser has been and is Ukraine. Emigration, especially of the third and fourth waves, has been equivalent to a massive brain drain.

On the other hand, with some 1.25 million people of Ukrainian ancestry in the United States, Ukraine has benefited from their unceasing lobbying on its behalf. No less important, Ukrainian Americans have managed to preserve the language and culture, even if in occasionally antiquated forms, while they were under attack in the Soviet Union and at times in post-1991 Ukraine. Diasporas, in other words, can use their double marginality to serve as interest groups in their new homelands and as activists in their old homelands.

Students appreciate and are fascinated by these complexities. Those who've taken my course have come from a variety of departments and

ethnicities, and the resulting discussions have always entailed a multiplicity of contending and complementary views. By the time we've completed our intellectual tour of the East Village, their understanding of Ukrainians, of New York, and of its ethnic groups has deepened. As has, of course, mine. Indeed, I've probably learned the most, if only as a result of repeated explorations of my own past. ■

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