

ХОРЕОГРАФІЧНЕ МИСТЕЦТВО

УДК 792.8.09.03(477.83-25:47+57)“1939/1941”:316.75

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.30970/vas.27.2025.306-313>

SOVIETIZATION OF THE GRAND THEATRE IN LVIV (1939–1941)

Oleh PETRYK

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4245-3839>

*Ivan Franko National University of Lviv,
Department of Directing and Choreography,
18 Valova Str., Lviv, Ukraine, 79008
e-mail: Oleh.Petryk@lnu.edu.ua*

Roman BEREST

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7405-2020>

*Ivan Franko National University of Lviv,
Department of Directing and Choreography,
18 Valova Str., Lviv, Ukraine, 79008
e-mail: Berest_liet@ukr.net*

Based on archival documents, periodical publications, and scholarly literature, this article examines the specific features of the establishment and development of the Lviv Opera and Ballet Theatre under the conditions of the forcible consolidation of Soviet power in Western Ukrainian lands during 1939–1941. The study emphasizes that Bolshevik ideology was intrinsically embedded in the policy of Sovietization, which relied on both overt and covert terror exercised by NKVD security structures. This policy included the compulsory imposition of Bolshevik ideology; the creation and functioning of auxiliary party institutions in the form of Communist Party, Komsomol, and trade union organizations; the dominance of the Russian language in education, culture, and the arts; ideologically controlled repertoire formation; the marginalization and humiliation of representatives of national culture; intensified surveillance of the local population; anti-religious campaigns; and the widespread practices of denunciations, arrests, repression, deportations, and other forms of political violence.

The article analyzes the process of theatre nationalization carried out by the Bolshevik authorities, the real living and working conditions of performers, and the factors that influenced staffing, financial, ideological, material, and technical support of the institution. The research methodology is grounded in the principles of historicism, scholarly rigor, objectivity, and systemic analysis, employing general scientific (analysis, synthesis, generalization), special (comparative, typological, hermeneutic), and specific (systemic and prosopographic) methods.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in introducing previously unknown archival documents, governmental decrees and resolutions of the Ukrainian SSR, little-known publications, memoirs, and press materials into scholarly circulation. These sources make it possible to reconstruct the competitive struggle among Galician theatre troupes for the theatre building, to reveal the actual position and status of actors, and to examine the activities of the theatre administration under conditions of ideological control.

Conclusions. Sovietization in the sphere of culture and art resulted in a radical transformation of ideological and worldview orientations, the dominance of the Bolshevik political and ideological system, and, consequently, arrests, repression, deportations, administrative abuses, and profound distortions in governance, artistic production, religion, and national spiritual life.

Keywords: theatre, dance, culture, art, ballet, performance, staging, repression.

Problem Statement

The Soviet occupation of Western Ukrainian lands in the second half of September 1939 fundamentally altered the position of the local population. Despite the attractive national, social, economic, cultural, and educational slogans proclaimed by the so-called “Soviet liberators,” the consolidation of the new regime involved numerous concealed mechanisms of coercion. Against the backdrop of large-scale propaganda promoting socio-economic, political, and cultural transformations, denunciations, searches, arrests, torture, executions, and deportations became everyday realities.

The tragic consequences of repressive practices are now well documented through archival materials, excavations of mass execution sites, memoirs of contemporaries, and other forms of evidence. Nevertheless, many significant issues remain insufficiently explored. Among them is the formation and functioning of cultural and artistic institutions in Western Ukrainian lands under conditions of total Russification and the forced imposition of Bolshevik culture and ideology, which systematically marginalized national artistic traditions.

By the end of 1939, the Lviv State Opera and Ballet Theatre emerged as the leading artistic institution in Western Ukraine. Its personnel and creative activities were placed under strict supervision by administrative bodies, Communist Party structures, Komsomol and trade union organizations, as well as NKVD security agencies, a situation that significantly complicated the work of the collective and defined its primary artistic and ideological priorities.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications

Among recent scholarly works, particular attention should be paid to the study by O. Bonkovska, which proposes a classification of theatres operating in Western Ukrainian lands during the interwar period. Significant contributions to the study of Lviv’s theatrical life during the period of German occupation have been made by S. Maksymenko. The creative achievements of prominent representatives of Ukrainian ballet art of the late 1930s and early 1940s have been examined in publications by O. Plakhotniuk, O. Petryk, O. Kuzyk, R. Berest, and others.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this article is to examine, using the Lviv Opera and Ballet Theatre as a case study, the specific characteristics of the establishment of Bolshevik

power, policy, and ideology in the cultural and artistic sphere of Western Ukrainian lands.

Main Material

At the beginning of the twentieth century, one of the most significant and monumental cultural institutions of Lviv was the Grand City Theatre. Constructed during the Austro-Hungarian period at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and designed by the Polish architect Zygmunt Gorgolewski, the theatre became one of the city's most refined architectural landmarks and a symbol of its cultural prestige.

From its inauguration until the outbreak of the Second World War, the Grand City Theatre functioned as a leading venue for high cultural representation, primarily associated with Polish artistic traditions. Ukrainian culture at that time remained fragmented and marginalized, limited mainly to small itinerant amateur theatres, including troupes named after Ivan Tobilevych, "Zahrava," the Ukrainian Traveling Drama Theatre of I. Kohutiak, amateur collectives affiliated with "Prosvita," the first Ukrainian professional theatre "Ukrainska Besida," workers' societies, Ukrainian trade unions, and other public organizations.

Reflecting on the condition of Ukrainian theatres in Lviv under Polish rule, actor Ivan Kudla wrote in an article published in *Chervona Ukraina* on October 9, 1939, that Ukrainian theatre troupes were effectively excluded from the City Theatre, forced to perform sporadically in marginal venues, and subjected to strict censorship that eliminated any repertoire containing Ukrainian or folkloric elements. According to Kudla, this policy aimed at the systematic destruction of Ukrainian culture.

It should be noted that prior to the First World War, under Austro-Hungarian governance, relations between Poles and Ukrainians in Eastern Galicia – particularly in the fields of culture and education – were comparatively balanced and tolerant. Ukrainian cultural institutions occasionally received patronage from Polish aristocrats, including Prince J. Czartoryski and Count T. Dzieduszycki. However, interethnic relations deteriorated sharply following the Polish-Ukrainian War and the consolidation of Polish state authority in Western Ukrainian lands, which intensified policies of political repression and cultural discrimination against Ukrainians.

Amid these strained interwar relations, the Greek Catholic Church emerged as the principal supporter of Ukrainian national culture, preserving spiritual traditions, customs, and ritual practices.

With the arrival of Bolshevik power in Western Ukraine in September 1939, Ukrainian culture was, at least rhetorically, proclaimed dominant within the artistic sphere. In reality, however, this declared Ukrainization functioned primarily as an instrument of Soviet ideological expansion. Disguised as support for national culture, Soviet policy sought to accelerate the political and ideological incorporation of Galicia into the Soviet system.

The history of the Grand City Opera and Ballet Theatre during the Polish period was already complex; the establishment of Bolshevik authority further intensified these difficulties. A struggle soon emerged among Ukrainian theatre troupes for control of the nationalized theatre building. In early October 1939, the Traveling Ukrainian Theatre named after I. Kotliarevsky, directed by Volodymyr Blavatsky, merged with the "Artistic Tour" Theatre led by Yosyp Stadnyk. This

union resulted in the proclamation of the Lviv State Ukrainian Theatre named after Taras Shevchenko, with Blavatsky as director and Stadnyk as his deputy.

Initially, the newly established Ukrainian theatre shared the premises of the Grand City Theatre with the Polish Drama Theatre, which continued to operate there after the Soviet takeover. Contemporary press reports emphasized the unprecedented access Ukrainian actors gained to a space previously closed to them. Soon thereafter, the newspaper *Vilna Ukraina*, the official organ of the Lviv Regional Committee of the Communist Party, reported that the Shevchenko Theatre was preparing new productions for the October celebrations under the supervision of Stadnyk and Blavatsky [17].

Another note published in the same newspaper emphasized the following:

“...Within the Trade Workers’ Union, active preparations are underway for the celebration of the twenty-second anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. Relia Hotlib and Telia Bukhdorf are decorating the hall where the ceremonial evening will take place. Young artists Otto Lenz and Leon Kontorsky have painted portraits of Comrades Stalin and Voroshilov. Lviv sculptors are assisting with the decoration by creating a new map of Europe. A special artistic montage has also been prepared, symbolically representing the collapse of aristocratic Poland. The choral ensemble is rehearsing songs by Soviet composers” [18].

Despite these demonstrative cultural initiatives, the efforts and hopes of the Galician artistic community to secure permanent access to the premises of the Grand Theatre ultimately proved futile. The fate of the Grand Theatre was determined by the Resolution of the Council of People’s Commissars of the Ukrainian SSR “*On the Establishment of State Theatres in Lviv and the Organization of Their Work*,” issued on December 19, 1939. Its first clause mandated the establishment in Lviv of a State Ukrainian Opera and Ballet Theatre and assigned it the premises of the former Grand City Theatre. The State Ukrainian Drama Theatre was temporarily allocated the premises of the Narodnyi Dim and the Rozmaitosti Theatre, while the former Polish Theatre was relocated to the Novyny Theatre building [16, p. 68].

Nevertheless, the director of the Drama Theatre, Volodymyr Blavatsky, continued to hope that his troupe would secure permanent residence in the Grand City Theatre. In newspaper publications he emphasized ideological loyalty to the Soviet authorities and the necessity of promoting national creativity within the framework of Soviet cultural policy. However, on January 8, 1940, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR issued a decree granting the theatre the name of Lesia Ukrainka, allegedly in response to a petition from theatre employees and public organizations in Lviv. This decision caused significant unease within the troupe, as no such collective petition had, in fact, been submitted.

In an interview published in *Vilna Ukraina* on February 4, 1940, Blavatsky noted:

“Four months have passed since the Ukrainian Theatre named after Ivan Kotliarevsky and the theatre of Yosyp Stadnyk were united into a single creative collective. The theatre was granted the magnificent premises of the Lviv Grand Theatre. Its first productions were works by Ukrainian classical authors—*Khmara* by A. Sukhodolski and *A Zaporozhian Beyond the Danube* by Semen Hulak-

Artemovsky. The troupe takes pride in being the first theatre in Western Ukraine to stage a Soviet play. We worked with great enthusiasm on *Platon Krechet* by the Ukrainian Soviet playwright and Order-bearer Oleksandr Korniiichuk.”

A characteristic example of conformity toward the Bolshevik authorities was the pronounced pro-Soviet activity of deputy director Yosyp Stadnyk, one of the first cultural figures in Lviv to participate in the construction of the Soviet theatrical system. In 1940, he was elected a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR. His demonstrative support of the communist regime appears to have been motivated primarily by career ambitions [11].

Modern historical scholarship increasingly acknowledges the problematic reality that the institutionalization and rapid development of Ukrainian theatrical life – not only in Lviv but throughout Soviet-occupied Western Ukraine – were often facilitated by collaboration between cultural figures and the occupation regime. At the very moment when actors of Blavatsky’s theatre celebrated what was proclaimed as a historic triumph – the first “national” productions on the stage of the Grand Theatre – mass arrests, executions of nationally conscious Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews, as well as large-scale deportations, were taking place in the city. In education, culture, and the arts, Western Ukrainian lands experienced an influx of pro-Soviet, predominantly Russian-speaking personnel. Under the pressure of Bolshevik ideology, reinforced by coercive practices, a new form of moral and cultural liminality emerged.

Soon thereafter, adorned with portraits of Bolshevik leaders, red banners, communist slogans, and other ideological symbols, the Grand City Theatre became a central venue for political spectacles and mass ideological performances. From late 1939 onward, a new theatrical institution was formally established within its walls. In December 1939, it was officially designated the Lviv State Opera and Ballet Theatre and placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine.

During the reorganization, administrative subordination was redefined, staffing structures revised, and the orchestra, choir, ballet troupe, workshops, and production facilities reconfigured. Approximately twenty qualified specialists – mostly Russian-speaking actors, choreographers, and ballet masters – were transferred from Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, and other cities. The Ministry of Culture appointed O. M. Holtsman as director and M. Y. Pekerman as chief accountant. Party and Komsomol organizations were established within the theatre.

From its inception, the theatre functioned not only as a cultural institution but also as an instrument of Sovietization. Cultural events – especially those connected with electoral campaigns – were intended to demonstrate the proclaimed “steel unity” of Ukrainians around the Lenin-Stalin Party [8].

From the earliest days of Soviet rule, the authorities sought to recruit prominent figures of culture and the arts into open or covert collaboration. This strategy was particularly evident during the so-called People’s Assembly of Western Ukraine held in the Grand City Theatre on October 26–28, 1939, where the annexation of Western Ukrainian lands was presented as the fulfillment of a long-awaited “reunification” [19].

Despite the rich material legacy inherited from the former Polish theatre, financial mismanagement, embezzlement, and systemic abuses characterized the

institution's early years. Wage deductions, non-payment of earned salaries, and close surveillance by NKVD officers became normalized practices. In this climate of repression and fear, theatre artists were rendered powerless hostages of a system protected by state security structures.

Ultimately, the widely propagated narrative of "liberation" and "reunification" in September 1939 proved to be a cover for annexation and total Sovietization. Beneath the rhetoric of prosperity and cultural flourishing lay denunciations, arrests, executions, deportations, Russification, and the radical reformatting of national cultural values within a rigid ideological framework.

References

1. Bulyk, N., Berest R. (2023). The Didushytsky Family's Mission in the Conservation and Research of Galician Historical and Archaeological Heritage. *East European Historical Bulletin* 27: 81–89.
2. Berest, I., Berest R. (2020). Pedagogical Ideas and the Educational System of Eastern Galicia in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century: The Professional Activity of the *Towarzystwo Pedagogiczne we Lwowie*. *Journal of Complementary Medicine Research* 11: 373–379. Retrieved from <http://www.jocmr.com/fulltext/55-1596724176.pdf> [in Ukrainian].
3. Berest, R. (1995). *Essays on the History of the Trade Union Movement in Western Ukraine (1817–1939)*. Drohobych [in Ukrainian].
4. Berest, R., Petryk, O., Kuzyk, O. (2022). "Valentyna Pereiaslavets: A Long Journey into High Ballet Art." *Visnyk of Lviv University. Art Studies* 23: 104–114. <https://doi.org/10.30970/vas.23.2022.12199> [in Ukrainian].
5. Berest, R., Plakhotnyuk, O. (2024). The Choreographic Phenomenon of Roma Pryima-Bohachevska. *Dance Studies* 7 (1): 8–18. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.31866/2616-7646.7.1.2024.3069> [in Ukrainian].
6. Bilorusets, Andrii. (2022). Crimes of the USSR in Western Ukraine, 1939–1941: Imprisonment, Torture, Executions, and Deportations. *Radio Liberty*. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/srsr-represiya-tortury-deportatsiya/32036952.html> [in Ukrainian].
7. Bonkovska, Olha. (2008). Western Ukrainian Theatre of 1918–1939: Issues of Periodization. *Art Studies of Ukraine* 9: 120–129 [in Ukrainian].
8. A Great Joyful Event. (1940). *Vilna Ukraina*, October 16. Retrieved from <https://zbruc.eu/node/42807> [in Ukrainian].
9. State Archive of Lviv Oblast (DALO). Fund 1, Inventory 53, File 10297. *Case on the Registration of the Ukrainian Nationalist Reading Society "Prosvita" in Lany of the Bobrka District*. 84 folios [in Ukrainian].
10. State Archive of Lviv Oblast (DALO). Fund R-2133, Inventory 1, File 2. *Annual Financial Report on the Economic Activity of the Lviv Opera and Ballet Theatre for 1940*. 40 folios [in Ukrainian].
11. Candidate for Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR Yosyp Dmytrovych Stadnyk. 1940. *Vilna Ukraina*, March 4. Retrieved from <https://zbruc.eu/node/33571> [in Ukrainian].
12. Kudla, Ivan. (1939). A Free Creative Path Lies Before Us. *Chervona Ukraina*, October 9. Retrieved from <https://zbruc.eu/node/27810> [in Ukrainian].

13. Maksymenko, Serhii. (2015). *Ukrainian Theatre in Lviv during the German Occupation (1941–1944)*. Lviv [in Ukrainian].

14. Petryk, Oleh. (2020). The Ballet Troupe of the Lviv Opera Theatre in the Late 1930s–Early 1940s. *Dance Studies* 3 (2): 104–113. <https://doi.org/10.31866/2616-7646.3.2.2020.220527>

15. Pasitska, Olha. (2013). *Lviv 'Zoria': A Society of Ukrainian Artisans, Industrialists, and Merchants (1884–1939)*. Lviv [in Ukrainian].

16. Council of People's Commissars of the Ukrainian SSR. (1995). On the Organization of Theatres, Musical Ensembles, and Cultural Institutions in Western Ukraine. In *Cultural Life in Ukraine: Western Lands. Documents and Materials, 1939–1953*, edited by T. Halaichak and O. Lutskyi, 1, 68–69. Kyiv [in Ukrainian].

17. Theatre for the October Celebrations. (1939). *Vilna Ukraina*, October 24. Retrieved from <https://zbruc.eu/node/28385> [in Ukrainian].

18. In the Trade Workers' Union. (1939). *Vilna Ukraina*, October 24. Retrieved from <https://zbruc.eu/node/28385> [in Ukrainian].

19. Shurkhalo, Dmytro. (2019). Not Reunification but Annexation: How Stalin Legitimated the 1939 Annexation. *Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30237782.html> [in Ukrainian].

РАДЯНИЗАЦІЯ ВЕЛИКОГО ТЕАТРУ У ЛЬВОВІ (1939–1941)

Олег ПЕТРИК

*Львівський національний університет імені Івана Франка,
кафедра режисури та хореографії,
вул. Валова, 18, Львів, Україна, 79008
e-mail: Oleh.Petryk@lnu.edu.ua*

Роман БЕРЕСТ

*Львівський національний університет імені Івана Франка,
кафедра режисури та хореографії,
вул. Валова, 18, Львів, Україна, 79008
e-mail: Berest_liet@ukr.net*

Завдяки архівним документам, періодичним виданням та науковій літературі ця стаття досліджує особливості становлення та розвитку Львівського театру опери та балету в умовах насильницького закріплення радянської влади на західноукраїнських землях протягом 1939–1941 рр. Наголошено на тому, що більшовицька ідеологія була невід'ємно вплетена в політику радянзації, яка спиралася як на відкритий, так і на прихований терор, що здійснювався силовими структурами НКВС. Ця політика включала примусове нав'язування більшовицької ідеології; створення та функціонування допоміжних партійних установ у вигляді організації Комуністичної партії, Комсомолу та профспілок; домінування російської мови в освіті, культурі та мистецтві; ідеологічно контрольоване формування репертуару; маргіналізацію та приниження представників національної культури; посилений нагляд за місцевим

населенням; антирелігійні кампанії; поширену практику доносів, арештів, репресій, депортацій та інших форм політичного насильства. Проаналізовано процес націоналізації театру, проведений більшовицькою владою, реальні умови життя та праці виконавців, а також фактори, що впливали на кадрове, фінансове, ідеологічне, матеріально-технічне забезпечення установи. Методологія дослідження ґрунтується на принципах історизму, наукової ретельності, об'єктивності та системного аналізу, використовуючи загальнонаукові (аналіз, синтез, узагальнення), спеціальні (порівняльний, типологічний, герменевтичний) та специфічні (системний та прозопографічний) методи. *Наукова новизна* дослідження полягає у введенні в науковий обіг раніше невідомих архівних документів, урядових постанов та постанов УРСР, маловідомих публікацій, мемуарів та матеріалів преси. Ці джерела дають змогу реконструювати конкурентну боротьбу галицьких театральних труп за будівлю театру, розкрити фактичне становище та статус акторів, а також дослідити діяльність адміністрації театру в умовах ідеологічного контролю. *Висновки.* Радянізація у сфері культури та мистецтва призвела до радикальної трансформації ідеологічних та світоглядних орієнтацій, домінування більшовицької політичної та ідеологічної системи, а отже, до арештів, репресій, депортацій, адміністративних зловживань та глибоких спотворень в управлінні, художньому виробництві, релігії та національному духовному житті.

Ключові слова: театр, танець, культура, мистецтво, балет, вистава, постановка, репресії.

Стаття надійшла до редколегії 29.09.2025 р.

Прийнята до друку 24.11.2025 р.

Опублікована 24.01.2026 р.