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Searching for a Sense of Belonging: Lewis Namier, a Champion of Galician Ukrainians at a Crossroads of Identities

Lewis Namier was among the few historians who could not only record the course of history, but also influence it. As a Polish-Ukrainian expert in the Foreign Office, he was writing memoranda regarding nations, whereas, according to his father, he was neither a Jew, a Pole, nor a Ukrainian, but “a nothing.”¹ The present paper contends that whereas Namier succeeded in finding a new home in Britain, his diplomatic efforts on behalf of the Ukrainians (and Czechs) during World War I have yet to be recognized.

It was in the year 1888 when Lewis Bernstein Namier, aka Ludwik Bernsztajn Niemirowski, was born as the second child of wealthy Polish-Jewish landowners. Alongside Nobel Prize-winning writer Henryk Sienkiewicz, he remains the only famous native of Wola Okrzejska, a small village (then part of Russia), now in South-east Poland. Initially very feeble, Ludwik soon grew stronger, thanks mainly to his aunt, who compensated for his mother’s coldness: they grew so close that from the moment the small family moved five hundred kilometres south-east (to present-day Ukraine), the child began to suffer nightmares, which did not abate when they headed west again to Galicia (then part of Austria-Hungary), where, from the age of seven Ludwik was to start school.²

As the parents’ deepest aspiration was to enter the Polish Catholic nobility, their Jewish origin remained a well-guarded secret which young Ludwik accidentally uncovered at the age of nine. From then on, quite until his death, the sense of not belonging fully remained with him. The family spoke only Polish at home; the father also understood Russian, German, English, and French. Nevertheless, he strictly forbade his children from learning even a little Ukrainian from their schoolmates or servants, a language that he believed did not exist.³ In the absence of his parents, however, they ignored all this, and Ludwik confronted his father in other ways: under the influence of his first teacher, the Marxist Edmond Weissberg, he grew to hate both the Dual Monarchy and the Polish aristocracy, which oppressed Jews and the predominantly Ukrainian peasant minority. Soon he also joined the

¹ Julia Namier, *Lewis Namier: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 18.

² D. W. Hayton, “Lewis Namier: Nationality, Territory and Zionism,” *International Journal of Politics Culture and Society*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2017): 171–182, 173.

³ Julia Namier, *Lewis Namier*, 31.

Polish Social Democratic Party, the aim of which was to establish equality between competing nations, essentially under Polish auspices.⁴

A few weeks at Lemberg (Lviv) University's Faculty of Law marked a decisive turning point in Ludwik Niemirowski's life: by his admission, threats from the later Polish Foreign Minister Roman Dmowski's highly anti-Semitic circle led him to emigrate to England in 1907, where he took up modern history at Balliol College, Oxford. Soon he was granted British citizenship and officially changed his name to Naymier, which soon became Namier, to make it sound more English. (His German-Polish/Yiddish accent, however, remained for the rest of his life, possibly deliberately.) "Balliol taught me to think," Namier later recalled;⁵ there he was surrounded by equally talented young men, generally with "invincible ignorance"⁶ about his original home, Eastern Europe. But there were exceptions: the language-talent and ardent pro-Romanian Allen Leeper, the aristocratic and much-travelled Harold Nicolson, or Arnold Joseph Toynbee, whose interest as a child was piqued by the Armenians, Georgians, and Turks, in the footsteps of Alexander the Great.⁷

The outbreak of war in August 1914 meant a great caesura for the great Balliol generation: within three years, about half of them lay dead on the Western front, but for Leeper, Nicolson, Toynbee, or Namier⁸ new opportunities arrived in diplomacy. Namier began contributing to Lord Edward Gleichen's Intelligence Bureau, especially to Allen Leeper's weekly reports on Austria-Hungary. It was during this time that he came into close contact with the historian-publicist Robert William Seton-Watson, whom he mentioned with gratitude in his first solo publication, *Germany and Eastern Europe*, published later that year.⁹ Fully in line with the *New Europe* contributors who advocated the ethnic reorganisation of the continent,¹⁰ Namier pointed out that the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, by its very existence, reinforced German imperialism and must therefore be abolished, which would diminish the danger of war in the region. Great Romania as well as a great South-Slav State ought to be created, together with separate "Tchech," Slovak, and Magyar independent

⁴ Amy Ng, *Nationalism and Political Liberty: Redlich, Namier, and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47–55.

⁵ Julia Namier, *Lewis Namier*, 81.

⁶ Arnold Joseph Toynbee, *Acquaintances* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 64.

⁷ William H. McNeill, "Toynbee Revisited," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 41, No. 7, (1988), 13–27, 14.

⁸ Toynbee was declared "medically unfit" given the dysentery he suffered from during his 1912 visit to Greece after drinking polluted water. However, he would have been accepted for active duty if he had not made his former sickness known. The feebler Leeper was seconded to the home front, Namier was discharged in 1915 due to poor eyesight, while Nicolson, already a Foreign Office diplomat, was also exempted.

⁹ Lewis Namier, *Germany and Eastern Europe* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1915), v.

¹⁰ Namier wrote regularly under the pseudonym "N" for the *New Europe* journal, which was founded and largely financed by Seton-Watson and Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. Its motto, *Pour Victoire Integrale*, speaks for itself.

national states, he opined, whereas the Poles and Ruthenians in the North-East would have to join “their compatriots in the Russian Empire.” He concluded with no little optimism that

The freedom of all nations in Europe will mean an end to all Imperialisms within it. But then the future of the white race lies with Empires, that is with those nations which hold the vast expanses of land outside Europe, the British Empire, the Russian Empire, and the United States, none of which is in its essential parts an Empire in the old meaning of the term. Their mutual relations, their internal development, and their relations to the coloured races will in all probability form the chief contents of the history of the twentieth century.¹¹

Interestingly, while Namier quite accurately foretold the future dominated by the USA and Russia (alongside Britain), he could not escape the blindness that befell all fellow British champions of the small nations, who saw no contradiction in advocating the disintegration of Austria-Hungary as proud citizens of a vast realm.

In December 1916, David Lloyd George was appointed Prime Minister, which coincided with the publication of Namier’s second work, *The Case of Bohemia*, which was published as a separate pamphlet a few months later. The reader learns that “never has so great a disaster befallen any other civilised nation” as the Czechs, who, after having been defeated by the Habsburgs in 1620, soon experienced spectacular growth in wealth and education, which put them on a par with the most advanced nations in Europe. In 1867, the Dualist settlement, however, “handed Slovaks over to the mercies of the Magyars,” thus ripping the two nations apart, and to counterbalance the flood of *Mitteuropa*, the Czechs continued to work for a rapprochement of the Dual Monarchy with Russia and France, “with the desperation of drowning men.” Moreover, this *Mitteuropa* design, i.e. the idea of a German-dominated Central Europe in alliance with the Hungarians, Bulgarians and Turks, not only ran counter to the desire for freedom of the oppressed nationalities, but also threatened the interests of Russia, France and, by reaching out to Asia and Egypt, eventually the British Empire.¹² The creation of an independent Bohemia, on the other hand, would become not only a main obstacle to German imperialism, but by her very existence, it could destroy “the nightmare of a German-Magyar hegemony of Europe.”¹³

The above two works could have been written by practically any member of the *New Europe* circle. Still, Namier differed from his comrades in that his advocacy of the independence of the small East Central European nations was not fundamentally inspired by the liberal British tradition since Gladstone, but by his socialist views. He believed that the break-up of existing dynastic, multi-national states was

¹¹ Lewis Namier, *Germany*, 128.

¹² Lewis Namier, *The Case of Bohemia* (London: The Czech National Alliance in Great Britain, 1917), 4–7.

¹³ Lewis Namier, *The Case of Bohemia*, 10.

primarily necessary to create a more just and increasingly egalitarian social order.¹⁴ No wonder that Namier sympathized with the Russian Revolution, which, he opined, acknowledged the right of nations to self-determination and the potential for agrarian reform, and would undoubtedly link “Little Russians” and “White Russians” (ie. Ukrainians and Belarusians) with the future Russian state.¹⁵

Namier’s influence and the weight of his arguments greatly increased when, in March 1918, he was transferred to the *Political Intelligence Department* of the Foreign Office under James Headlam-Morley. He worked alongside his former Balliol fellow students, Allen Leeper¹⁶ and Arnold Toynbee. In addition to the future establishment of an independent Poland, Seton-Watson’s departure soon led to Namier taking responsibility for Austria-Hungary. Headlam-Morley stressed that, although he had “great knowledge and ability,” his interpretations “could not be relied upon as being unbiassed.”¹⁷ Presenting himself in the press as the only British expert on the Polish, let alone the Ukrainian question, Namier began to defend the rights of the Ukrainians (and Jews) of Eastern Galicia to an autonomous (Ukrainian) state under the protection of the League of Nations; he spoke out against the support of the over-expansionist, imperialist Poles, who also claimed the eastern borderlands populated by a majority of non-Polish peoples. In his writings, he often compared the dominant Poles to the Hungarians, who, although not particularly fond of the Germans, were still allied with them to dominate their minorities.¹⁸

“The various nationalities of Central Europe are so interlocked, and their racial [i.e. ethnic] frontiers are so unsuitable as the frontiers of really independent sovereign states, that the only satisfactory and permanent policy for them lies in their incorporation in a non-national superstate,” wrote Leo Amery, an adviser to David Lloyd George, in his memorandum in October 1918. To avoid the expected economic-political conflicts of small nations, he suggested that one or more Central European federations should be created. The war, however, took a sudden turn: the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was dissolved with the victory of the Entente, and power was transferred to the national councils in Prague and Zagreb. So when in mid-November the memorandum was commented on by Lewis Namier, a confessed imperialist at the British Foreign Office, he found it much easier to confront Amery: dreaming of a Central European federation, he argued, was “unnecessary” as well as “imprudent,” especially as it would not constitute a counterweight

¹⁴ Amy Ng, “A Portrait of Sir Lewis Namier as a Young Socialist,” *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 40, No. 4, (2005): 621–636, 626.

¹⁵ Bartłomiej Rusin, “Lewis Namier, the Curzon Line, and the shaping of Poland’s Eastern frontier after World War I,” *Studies into the History of Russia and East-Central Europe* Vol. 48, (2013): 5–26, 13.

¹⁶ Leeper was his witness in his 1907 January marriage with Clara Sophia Poniatovska, Allen and Rex Leeper’s Russian instructor. The union was an unhappy one, ending in divorce.

¹⁷ James Headlam-Morley, “A Note on the Austrian Treaty,” quoted in Miklós Lojók (ed.), *British Policy on Hungary 1918–1919: A Documentary Sourcebook* (London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1995), 362–365, 363.

¹⁸ Rusin, “Lewis Namier,” 13.

against Germany. Namier was convinced that the future borders would be more “reasonable” than those that had been drawn up so far, even though strategic and economic considerations would in some places override the ethnic principle.

As a friend of Edvard Beneš and an ardent Czechophile, Namier is acknowledged for having influenced British diplomats to view Prague more favourably than Warsaw, which is also shown in the above document. Although he pointed out the duality of the Czechs’ claim to historical and strategic borders and the Slovaks’ ethnic claim to annexation, he did not say a word about the intended Hungarian-Slovak border, let alone the Czech (and Slovak), in many cases absurd, claims to Hungarian-inhabited territories. Instead, he concluded with a fair degree of optimism: “It is unwise to allow ourselves to be frightened by the kaleidoscopic changes in the map of Europe; self-determination will inevitably lead to much confusion and rivalry, but the League of Nations should do much to localise the danger and eventually to stabilise the situation.”¹⁹

In the meantime, on 31 October 1918, the Ukrainians of Galicia took over power from the Austrian administration, and the short-lived state of West Ukraine was born. Reacting to the event, Namier called attention to the strength of Ukrainian national consciousness, stressing that they had to be allowed to “be masters in their own home.”²⁰ No wonder his old opponent, Roman Stanisław Dmowski, a champion of Polish expansion in the east, was enraged! Dmowski, the Head of the Polish National Committee, passed alleged evidence to the *Intelligence Department* that Namier had been spying for Germany and Austria, however, the Headlam-Morley-led organization stood by their colleague and even threatened to withdraw their support if the Polish operation continued.²¹

Opening in January 1919, the Peace Conference marked another important stage in Namier’s life. As a member of the British peace delegation with special attention to the future borders of Poland, he became a close associate of his former mentor, James Headlam-Morley. Headlam-Morley, who was responsible for drafting the treaties for the protection of minorities, however, did not share Namier’s pervasive anti-Polish sentiments. In Paris, Namier left no stone unturned for the territorial claims of Ukrainians in Eastern Galicia to be recognised by the victorious powers, which would have meant territorial autonomy with a guarantee of a popular federation until the referendum on the question of Polish nationality was held; he was constantly critical of the Polish delegation in his writings, especially

¹⁹ Namier added: “Jugo-Slavia will take the place of Serbia whilst Transylvania will go to form a Greater Roumania, and neither of them will constitute a new problem for the future.” “The Austro-Hungarian Problem,” Memorandum by Leo S. Amery, October 20, 1918, minuted by Lewis Namier. Public Record Office, London, Foreign Office, 371/3136/17223. Quoted in Géza Jeszenszky, Egy előrelátó angol javaslat Közép-Európa föderatív rendezésére. Leo Amery memoranduma, 1918. október 20. *Korunk*, Vol. 30, No. 8 (2019): 94–103.

²⁰ Rusin, “Lewis Namier,” 12.

²¹ Julia Namier, *Lewis Namier*, 128–129.

for their “imperialist” activities in promoting the primacy of historical arguments. It is perhaps not surprising that he was soon proclaimed one of the greatest enemies of Poland and he was also accused of having altered the British proposal for the eastern border of Poland – the Curzon Line – leaving the city of Lwów [Lviv] and its surroundings on the Eastern side, by setting the number of Poles living in the area at six to seven hundred thousand instead of two million. All this was eerily similar to the distortions of his friend, the Romanian expert Allen Leeper, on the ethnic composition of Transylvania, to the detriment of the Hungarians.²²

Namier’s yet another argument ran counter to the interests of the Poles. To ensure the viability of Czechoslovakia, he opined, access to the coalfields around Teschen was more significant than the ethnic composition of the area, which constituted the basis of the corresponding Polish claims.²³ Thus, a double standard attitude was equally characteristic of all proponents of a *New Europe*, Namier not excepted: it is clear from his proposals and writings that at times he did not extend the right to national self-determination to the vanquished, the Germans, or the Hungarians, and, for personal reasons, sometimes even to the Poles!

On 28 June 1919, largely owing to French and American support, as well as to the fear of the spread of Bolshevism, Poles could rejoice as one of the winners of Versailles: with few exceptions, the historic Greater Poland came almost entirely under Polish sovereignty, with significant Ukrainian, Belarusian, Lithuanian, Jewish and German minorities. Namier’s pro-Ukrainian efforts were therefore to no avail, even though he tried to conceal the early June atrocities against his own family for nearly a month when retreating Ukrainian soldiers ransacked his parents’ family farm in Koshilovtsi, raided their house, deported his mother and sister and killed the estate’s caretaker. Owing to the intervention of the Polish Head of State [!] Józef Piłsudski the family members finally returned safely, and Namier’s attitude remained unchanged. He summed up the events in one of his reports:

They strove hard to be a proper government. But a peasant nation exasperated by centuries of oppression and fighting for its life against landowners – and the foreign dominion for which these stand – cannot be expected to show super-human self-control. My father was always on the Polish side and known to be closely involved with the Polish nobility. The wave of cruel reprisals could hardly bypass him ... For all my personal loss and anxieties, I do insist that grievous wrong has been done to the Ukrainians.²⁴

²² Diary entry by Allen Leeper, March 8, 1920. Papers of Allen Leeper, Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge, LEEP 1/3.

²³ Namier to Headlam-Morley, February 1, 1919. Headlam-Morley Papers, Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge, HDLM Acc. 688/2. Qtd. in T. G. Otte: “The System of Odd and Even Numbers, Lewis Namier the Diplomatic Historian,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2021): 132–155, 154.

²⁴ Julia Namier, *Lewis Namier*, 144.

The period after the peace treaty brought many struggles into Namier's life: his wife deserted him and his father, somewhat understandably, disinherited him. His financial difficulties were alleviated by the income he received from private lessons for Headlam-Morley's children. "When I am in difficulty about everything connected with that part of the world," wrote his mentor, the new Historical Adviser to the Foreign Office in 1925, "I always turn to you, especially when it is a matter in which economic and political things interact."²⁵

Besides teaching, Namier was primarily a historian who broke away from the prevailing and rather boastful Whig interpretation of English history. In 1929, he published *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, and the following year *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, which overturned the widely held view that George III's political activities and character (i.e. his insanity) had caused, among others, the loss of the North American colonies. These two works also revolutionised 18th-century historiography with the so-called collective biography research process which drew important social and political conclusions after having traced the origins and other significant historical aspects of an elite group. The volumes have generated considerable response; in a review, the great historian and academic George Trevelyan lauded Namier's new and "unique" method, calling him "a new factor in the historical world."²⁶

Namier had sympathised with Zionism since the First World War, and between 1929 and 1931 he worked as political secretary of the Jewish Agency in Palestine under Chaim Weizmann who would become the first Prime Minister of Israel. Nevertheless, Weizmann severed ties with him after Namier's conversion to Anglicanism to be able to marry the deeply religious Russian writer, Yulia Mikhailovna Kazarina. Notwithstanding such radical and unexpected steps, Namier emphasised his exclusively Jewish origins for the rest of his life, correcting all opinions that, due to his family background, connected him to Polish nobility.²⁷

In the late 1930s, Namier became a fierce critic of the policy of appeasement together with Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Shoulder to shoulder with Seton-Watson, he fiercely attacked the Munich Agreement that allowed the Third Reich to annex the ethnic German Sudeten areas. Namier's hatred of Germany was legendary. "It did not require either 1914, or 1933 or 1939 to teach me the truth about the Germans" – he wrote in 1942. "Long before the last war, I considered them a deadly menace to Europe and to civilisation."²⁸ But there was nothing new in this. As early as 1915, he had stated: "Militarism forms the creed of the German nation and will survive any number of defeats."²⁹

²⁵ Headlam-Morley to Namier, February 9, 1925. Headlam-Morley Papers, HDLM Acc. 727/39. Quoted in Otte, "The System of Odd and Even Numbers," 4.

²⁶ Linda Colley, *Namier*, New York, 1989, 13.

²⁷ Hayton, "Lewis Namier," 176. See also Lewis Namier, *Conflicts: Studies in Contemporary History* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1942), 163.

²⁸ Chris Wrigley, *A. J. P. Taylor, Radical Historian of Europe* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 70.

²⁹ Lewis Namier, *Germany*, xv. Prior to WW2, Namier's mother, sister and nieces moved from Lwów

At the height of the Cold War, in 1952, Namier was knighted and continued to be held in great esteem in British academic and intellectual life; to such an extent that some of his fellow historians called their country civilised for having once welcomed him. (Even then, however, there were limits to recognition: i.e. he was never appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford.)

From the 1950s, Namier espoused the ideology of conservatism and remained a lifelong admirer of English aristocracy owing to the fact that it had managed to maintain political independence and an active and direct role in local and national governance for generations. The new priority for all social strata thus became that they follow the example set by the nobility and gentry. Namier claimed that the advantages and powers of the aristocracy were progressively extended to everyone, rather than the monopoly of the ruling classes being removed all at once. Therefore, he identified English liberty as the outcome of security and stability that eliminate any fear of arbitrary actions by the government or individuals, rather than a revolt against established institutions.³⁰ Interestingly, alongside his late-found conservatism, Namier also pledged support to the left-wing historian and academic, A. J. P. Taylor. Thus, these fragments of a life's work are so diverse that US historian Charles Ritcheson aptly noted that "any attempt to juggle them into a logical totality must fail. Namier himself never managed it."³¹

Perhaps the greatest acclaim for his enormous impact on British history came sixteen years after his death, in 1976, when the Oxford English Dictionary Supplement took it as a fact that the verb "to namierize," the adjective "namierian" and the noun "namierization" had become an integral part of the English language. However, the recognition of Ukraine which has undergone a radical shift in memory policy since 2014, is still to come; none of the nearly one hundred streets in Kyiv, renamed in 2022, bears the name of the British historian who once took the fate of Ukrainians to heart.

Abstract

Three years of war in our eastern neighborhoods has put Ukraine in the spotlight. The paper describes the life of Lewis Namier, a Polish Jewish-born advocate of Ukrainian interests as well as a British diplomat at the Versailles Peace Conference, who struggled to find his identity. Although the historian finally found a home in Britain, the recognition of Ukraine, which has recently undergone a radical shift in historical memory policy, is still yet to come.

Keywords: Lewis Namier, identity crisis, Polish-Ukrainian nationalism, Versailles

[Lviv], where their racial origin was known, to Warsaw where, as Polish Catholics, they lived in relative security outside the ghetto. Hayton, "Lewis Namier," 173.

³⁰ Lewis Namier, "Nationality and liberty," in Lewis Namier (ed.), *Vanished Supremacies: Essays on European History 1812–1918* (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1958), 31–53, 52.

³¹ Charles R. Ritcheson, "Julia Namier, *Lewis Namier: A Biography*," *The William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 30., No. 1 (1973):174–176, 175.

*Rezümé**Küzdelem az önazonosságért: Lewis Namier, az ukrán érdekek szószólója*

A keleti szomszédunkban három éve tartó háború a figyelem középpontjába helyezte Ukrajnát. A tanulmány ismerteti az ukrán érdekek lengyel-zsidó származású támogatójának, a versailles-i békekonferencia brit diplomatájának, Lewis Namiernek az életútját, amelyet végigkísért az identitáskeresés küzdelme. Bár választott hazájában, Nagy-Britanniában a történész végül otthonra lelt, a radikális emlékezetpolitikai fordulatot vett Ukrajna elismerése még várat magára.

Kulcsszavak: Lewis Namier, identitásválság, lengyel-ukrán nacionalizmus, Versailles