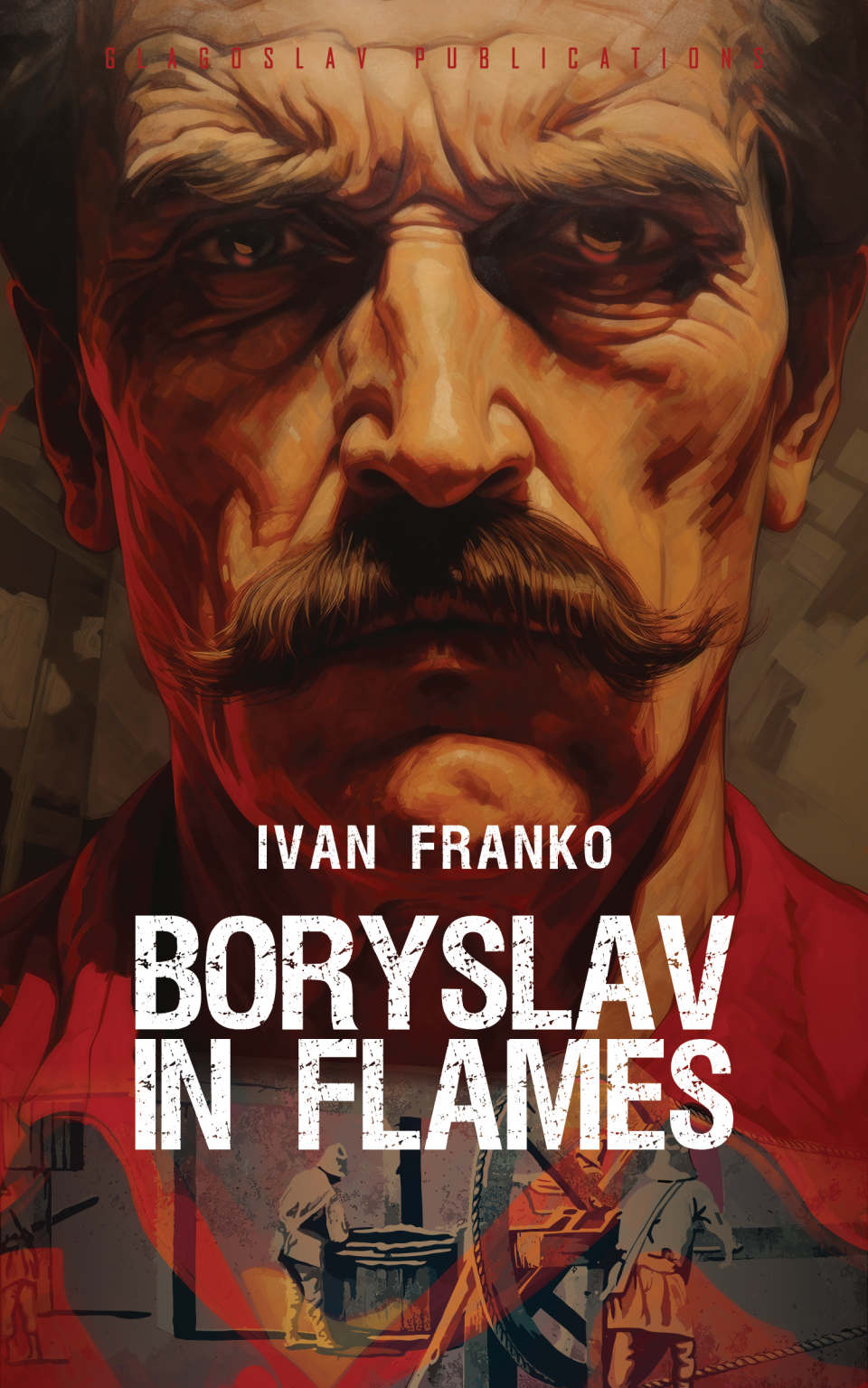


GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

IVAN FRANKO

# BORYSLAV IN FLAMES





**IVAN FRANKO**

**BORYSLAV  
IN FLAMES**

**UKRAINIAN  
///BOOK  
INSTITUTE**

This book has been published with the support  
of the Translate Ukraine Translation Program

# BORYSLAV IN FLAMES

by Ivan Franko

First published in Ukrainian as *Борислав сміється* in 1922

Translated from the Ukrainian by Yuri Tkacz

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of the Translate Ukraine Translation Program**

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IVAN FRANKO

# BORYSLAV IN FLAMES

TRANSLATED FROM THE UKRAINIAN BY YURI TKACZ

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IVAN FRANKO

(1856 – 1916)

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## INTRODUCTION

In January 1881 the first issue of *Svit* (*The World*, but also *Light*), a journal of literature, politics and scholarship published in Lviv and dedicated to the propagation of socialist ideas, contained the first instalment of a novel about labour and capital. Its setting was the oil mining town of Boryslav, one of the few industrial sites of the province of Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The novel, *Boryslav in Flames* as it is called in Yuri Tkacz's translation (its Ukrainian title was *Boryslav smiiet'sia* – *Boryslav is Laughing*), appeared serially in *Svit* until the journal ceased publication in September 1882; the novel was never completed. Its author, Ivan Franko (1856–1916), not 25 years of age when publication of the novel began, already had a substantial body of literary work to his name: a novel in the Gothic manner, short prose works on peasant life and its hardships, the realist early stories of his Boryslav cycle, and numerous as yet unpublished poems. Franko was also notorious as a political firebrand, the translator of a chapter of Marx's *Capital* and the author of numerous political essays with such titles as "Solidarity," "Workers and Employees" and "A Catechism of Economic Socialism." He had twice been arrested by the Austrian authorities for his political views and activities (two more arrests would follow later).

In the course of Franko's life material hardship proved no barrier to his prodigious industriousness in an extraordinarily broad array of fields: poetry, prose and drama; literary scholarship and criticism; philology and folklore studies;

translation and editorship; as well as party politics, political organisation and political journalism. His political convictions evolved with time. Always dedicated to the ideal of human liberation from injustice and oppression, Franko came to the conviction that the precondition for the achievement of an individual's social rights and political freedoms was the liberation from foreign dominion of the nation within whose compass alone those rights and freedoms could be secured. In the twentieth century Franko came to be viewed as one of the triad of Ukraine's pre-eminent cultural nation-builders, alongside the poet Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861) and the dramatist and poet Lesia Ukrainka (1871–1913).

In Franko's lifetime the territory inhabited by Ukrainians was divided between the Russian Empire, home to more than 80% of Ukrainians, and the empire of the Habsburgs, where more than 6 million Ukrainians lived, mainly in eastern Galicia and northern Bukovina. In the Russian Empire tsarist edicts of 1863 and 1876 placed onerous restrictions on Ukrainian-language publication and cultural activity. One of the consequences was that Lviv, the capital of Galicia, became the main cultural and intellectual centre for the whole of Ukraine, just as it was a significant hub of Polish and Jewish culture and politics.

Franko was born in the village of Nahuievychi, less than fifteen kilometres from Boryslav. His father was the village blacksmith, while his mother was one of the large number of persons in Galicia who were of aristocratic descent, but so impoverished that their material conditions differed little from those of peasants. Franko identified himself with society's lower estates, famously referring to himself as a "peasant's son." He attended school in the nearby city of Drohobych, the business centre for the Boryslav oilfields. As a child he was exposed to stories about the Boryslav mines: "I listened to those stories as if to fantastic tales of distant enchanted lands. Boryslav with its horrors and its wild anecdotes and wild



leaps of fortune, its strange industries, strange way of life and strange people fuelled my imagination.”<sup>1</sup> Franko had occasion to visit Boryslav during his school years and to observe the way of life of workers there. The experience was undoubtedly vivid in his memory as, during his university years in Lviv, he became active in the socialist movement and read works by such socialist thinkers as Ferdinand Lassalle and Friedrich Lange and his Ukrainian compatriots in the Russian Empire Mykhailo Drahomanov (1841–1895) and Serhii Podolyns’kyi (1850–1891).

The economy of Galicia was overwhelmingly agricultural. Peasants, emancipated from serfdom after the revolution of 1848, remained in a state of poverty so dire that many could not support their families by working their small tracts of land. From the 1880s onward, many emigrated. Boryslav was one of the few places in Galicia where peasants could augment their income by taking seasonal work in industry.

Oil mining commenced in Boryslav in the 1850s. The region also proved to have major deposits of ozokerite, or mineral wax. Prior to the advent of the internal combustion engine the refined end products were used mainly for lighting. As historian Yaroslav Hrytsak shows, an industrial boom ensued, in the course of which Boryslav’s population exploded from 759 in 1850 to 12,439 in 1900. Workers came from the surrounding Ukrainian rural areas and nearby Jewish shtetls, but also from ethnically Polish western Galicia; there were also a small number of professionally experienced miners from the Czech lands and Prussia. About half of the workforce was Ukrainian, one quarter Polish and one quarter Jewish – an obstacle, as Hrytsak points out, to the evolu-

.....

<sup>1</sup> Ivan Franko, “U kuzni (iz moikh spomyniv)” [In the Blacksmith’s Shop (From my Memoirs)], *Zibrannia tvoriv u piatdesiaty tomakh* [Collected Works in Fifty Volumes], Vol. 21 (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1979), p. 164.

tion of a sentiment of worker solidarity. As for the industrialists, in Boryslav they were mainly Jewish, in contrast to some other Galician oil-mining sites, where Polish capital prevailed. The Boryslav enterprises, of which there were some hundreds, were generally small until the 1890s, when laws imposing minimum safety standards and mandating the use of modern equipment put many out of business. By the early twentieth century the industry was dominated by large foreign firms.<sup>2</sup> In the 1880s Boryslav saw practically no labour unionisation and little worker unrest. It was not until the consolidation of the industry into larger enterprises and the increase in the permanent (as distinct from seasonal) workforce that significant worker activism led by Polish, Ukrainian and Jewish social democrats emerged, culminating in a major strike in 1904.<sup>3</sup>

Readers of *Boryslav in Flames* will readily notice that the social phenomena which Franko describes as prevailing at the time of his writing would come into being only two decades later. In 1879, writing to Ol'ha Roshkevych, he acknowledged the anticipatory quality of the book he was planning:

This will be a novel somewhat larger in scope than my previous ones. Along with the life of Boryslav workers it will also show “new people” [proletarians with a developed class and ethical consciousness] at work – in other words, it will show not what is [at present] the case but, as it were, the full embodiment of what now exists only

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<sup>2</sup> Yaroslav Hrytsak, *Ivan Franko and his Community*, trans. Marta Olynynk ([Edmonton]: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press; [Cambridge, MA]: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute; Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2018), pp. 246-49. Hrytsak's study, first published in Ukrainian in 2006, is to be recommended as an invaluable guide to Franko's life and the social and political context in which *Boryslav in Flames* was written and received.

<sup>3</sup> Hrytsak, p. 251.

embryonically. [...] The main idea is to show what in reality does not [yet] exist in the context of what *does* exist and in the colours of what exists.<sup>4</sup>

What is it, then, that does not yet exist, but is projected in the novel as desirable? It is the set of values espoused by the bricklayer and workers' organiser Benedio, the hero of one of the novel's two interwoven plot lines (the other concerns the family lives of two industrialists), as well as the organisational principles and resistance strategies that Benedio introduces. Benedio's objectives are fair pay for miners, scaled to take account of the difficulty and danger of different kinds of work, and decent working conditions: insurance for workers in the event of injury or disablement; financial support for the families of workers killed or incapacitated at the workplace; the establishment of a fund providing for the subsistence of workers during strikes; and respectful treatment of miners by their employers. At the same time Benedio strives, successfully, to establish a high degree of worker organisation, solidarity and discipline, resolute picketing against strike-breakers and a clear focus among miners on practical measures that bring advantage to all workers in the industry. What Benedio explicitly does *not* wish for, and what energises Andrus Basarab, another member of the workers' leadership group, is resistance in the form of revenge: violent action with no goal beyond punishing employers. It is clear that the "author" – the structuring intelligence responsible for the construction of the work and the arguments that it implies – sides with Benedio, however egregious the abuses committed by the employers and their lackeys might be, and however understandable the outrage and pain of Andrus and the great majority like him.

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<sup>4</sup> Ivan Franko, letter to O. M. Roshkvykh, c. 14 March 1879, *Zibrannia tvoriv*, Vol. 48 (1986), pp. 205–06.

To make these points, and to sharpen the focus on the conflict in the Boryslav oil industry as a class conflict, Franko represents the social and economic situation in his fictionalised Boryslav as somewhat simpler than the state of affairs in the real Boryslav of the early 1880s. In order to render plausible the rapid development of worker solidarity and the swift dissemination of information among them, the novel depicts workers as a culturally homogeneous group. No ethnic descriptors are applied to them, though their real-world counterparts belonged, as pointed out above, to several groups. Employers and overseers, on the other hand, are consistently identified as Jews and as members of a single ethno-cultural community. The confrontation between labour and capital is presented as a conflict, not between a multiethnic workforce and employers mainly of Jewish background, but between workers and Jews. The workers' adversaries – the “Jews” – are represented in almost wholly negative terms, whether drawn as a collective or revealed through detailed portraiture, as in the case of the two capitalists Hermann Goldkrämer and Leon Hammerschlag. Their motivations are never good; personal profit is their only value, deceit their chief method, compassion for workers non-existent. In instances where characters of Jewish ethnicity are not directly involved in exploitative economic activity, they are represented as deviant in other ways. Goldkrämer's wife Rifka suffers from what readers are guided to recognise as hysteria, which is explained as the result of this simple and uneducated working woman's transition into a life of leisure, luxury and boredom. The Goldkrämers' son Gottlieb, poorly endowed with intelligence but spoiled by his adoring mother, grows up lazy, talentless except when exercising emotional blackmail, verbally and physically violent, and obsessive in his fixation on objects of desire. The sole exception is Hammerschlag's daughter Fanny, an embodiment of the literary stereotype of the beautiful and virtuous Jewess who shines by contrast to her environment.

*Boryslav in Flames* thus appears to replicate without objection, indeed to share, the prejudicial view of Jews characteristic of much of European, and especially central and east European, society of its time. This is difficult to reconcile with Franko's quite different attitude to Jews attested in his life practice and some, though not all, of his other literary and journalistic works. He was involved in the endeavours of a socialist committee associated with the journal *Praca* (*Labour*) to establish a Ukrainian-Polish-Jewish political party for workers and peasants, and his fluency in Yiddish qualified him to interact with the party's potential Jewish constituency. In the aftermath of pogroms in the Russian Empire in 1881 he wrote a cycle of poems, "Ievreis'ki melodii" (Jewish Melodies), based on Jewish folklore that he had recorded, expressing sympathy with the victims. Jewish characters are represented with warmth in such novellas as "Poluika" (The Barrel, 1899) and "Gava" (Crow, 1888). Philosemitic and antisemitic elements stand side by side in Franko's work. As Hrytsak puts it,

Franko's socialist views led him to defend the weak and the downtrodden, and where the Jewish community was concerned, his sympathies lay with poor Jews who were exploited by wealthy Jews. But the need to defend the poor non-Jewish population forced him into a confrontation with the entire Jewish community which, in his view, demonstrated a high level of internal solidarity on the question of the exploitation of Ukrainian and Polish workers and peasants.<sup>5</sup>

Franko's depiction of miners gaining the upper hand in their struggle against capital is one factor that distances the content of *Boryslav in Flames* from the reality of the 1880s attested by historical sources. Other features of the novel that

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<sup>5</sup> Hrytsak, pp 312-20; quotation p. 320.

stretch plausibility are the heavy reliance of its plot on coincidence, the impossibly short timeframes in which complex transformations of collective habits of thought and practice are supposed to take place, and the hyperbole that accompanies the description of the behaviour of characters intended to be perceived as eccentric or disturbed.

Imperfect correlation with what is generally perceived as “reality,” however, by no means disqualifies a work from being classified as “Realist,” as *Boryslav in Flames* generally has been in Ukrainian literary history. Realism is the conventional designation of a period and a style in the literature and other arts; features generally shared by works regarded as Realist which are readily found in *Boryslav in Flames* include attentive description of social relations, emphasis on the underlying (genetic or environmental) causes of human behaviours, nuanced description of psychological states, and a critical authorial stance toward prevailing forms of human oppression. The erudite Franko was familiar with the contemporary Realist canon, including Balzac, Flaubert, Dickens, Eliza Orzeszkowa and Ivan Turgenev. He was alert to the Positivist thought of Auguste Comte and the idea that society was subject to general laws and knowable through science as the physical world is knowable. He held in high esteem the work of Émile Zola and Zola’s advocacy of a literature scientific and objective in its analysis of the laws that determine human behaviour. He did not, however, find satisfaction in the cool detachment of what Zola termed “Naturalism,” proposing in his essay “Literature, its Tasks and its Most Important Features” (1878) a literature that would not merely offer an accurate image of society, but seek to change society for the better. This would be a literature of “scientific realism”:

Like contemporary science, literature must labour on the field of human progress. Its tendency and method must be scientific. It collects and describes the facts of everyday life, caring only for truth, not for aesthetic rules, and



at the same time it analyses these facts and draws conclusions from them. *That is its scientific realism.* By these means it shows forth the flaws in the social order where science may not always be capable of penetrating (in everyday life, in the psychological development of drives and human passions), and strives to ignite in its readers the will and the power to combat such flaws. That is its *progressive tendency* (emphases in the original).<sup>6</sup>

Objective description, analysis, the drawing of conclusions and the correction of social faults: such were the tasks that Franko in his essay set for modern literature, and such, evidently, were the goals that he set himself when writing *Boryslav in Flames*. His success in achieving them, as the preceding discussion has sought to show, was mixed.

How should readers in the third decade of the twenty-first century assess this unfinished, from our contemporary perspective ideologically awkward, late nineteenth-century novel? One way of valuing it is to see it as a document of an historical period. The novel is a vehicle for understanding, not so much Boryslav and the intersection of social, cultural, economic and political forces that it embodied – the novel is too partisan and too one-sided in its vision for that – but one contemporary perspective upon that reality. It is a perspective energised by a powerful drive to defend justice and humanity, yet limited by its own ethical blind spots. It is also possible to apprehend *Boryslav in Flames* as an important document of one station along the complex creative path of a remarkable and gifted individual. Franko was one of the giant intellectual figures of Europe at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, unjustly invisible to much of the world because the country and the culture from which

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<sup>6</sup> Franko, "Literatura, ii zavdannia i naivazhnishi tsikhy," *Zibrannia tvoriv*, Vol. 26 (1980), p. 13.

he came and which he did much to shape were themselves scarcely visible to the world, occluded by the shadows of two imperialisms. Finally, however, it is possible to appreciate *Boryslav in Flames* as the literary scholar Tamara Hundorova has done: "The veracity and vividness with which characters familiar from earlier works of the Boryslav cycle are depicted, the picturesqueness of descriptions and the plasticity of mass scenes, the attention paid to the inner world of individuals, the introduction of the parallel plot line from the life of the Galician bourgeoisie [...] secure the intrinsic worth of this literary text."<sup>7</sup> We value *Boryslav in Flames* not for what it documents, but for what, when all is said and done, it is: a story well told.

Marko Pavlyshyn

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<sup>7</sup> Tamara Hundorova, *Franko ne kameniar / Franko i kameniar* [*Franko: Not a Stonecutter / Franko: Also a Stonecutter*] (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2006), p. 63.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ivan Franko (1856–1916) was a prominent Ukrainian poet, writer, journalist, and social activist. Born in a small village in Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and now Ukraine, Franko emerged as a leading figure in Ukrainian literature and cultural revival during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Franko's literary career began with poetry, where he expressed his deep love for his homeland and its people. His works often touched on themes of social justice and the plight of the Ukrainian peasantry. He also contributed significantly to the development of modern Ukrainian literature, introducing innovative literary forms and styles.

Beyond his literary pursuits, Franko actively engaged in political and social activism, fighting for the recognition of the Ukrainian language, culture, and education. He co-founded and edited several Ukrainian newspapers and journals, using them as platforms to promote his ideas.

Franko's contributions extended beyond literature and politics. He was an accomplished translator, bringing the works of many Western European authors to Ukrainian readers. Additionally, his plays and novels, such as *Zahar Berkut* and "Stolen Happiness" remain staples of Ukrainian literature.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Born in Melbourne, Australia in 1954 and educated as an engineer, Yuri Tkacz left the profession to translate a broad range of works from Ukrainian by such authors as Kaczurowskyj, Honchar, Dimarov, Valeriy Shevchuk, Kariuk, Vynnychenko, Yanovsky and Antonenko-Davydovych. He lived and worked in Canada in the 1980s and in Ukraine in the 1990s. His translations of *Hardly Ever Otherwise* by Matios, *Hard Times* by Vyshnia, *The Lawyer from Lychakiv Street* by Koko-tiukha and *Precursor* by Vasyl Shevchuk have been published by Glagoslav Publications.

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*Borystav in Flames* by Ivan Franko is a pioneering novel that depicts the rise of the labour movement in Western Ukraine. The story unfolds against the backdrop of the industrial revolution in the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the 1860s. As industry burgeons in Borystav, a nascent working class emerges, inspired by socialist ideals – a unique phenomenon in mostly agrarian Galicia.

Central to the narrative is Benedio, a lowly mason's assistant who organizes the striking workers. This is offset against the impulsive rebelliousness and violence purveyed by the Basarab brothers.

Woven throughout this tapestry of labour strife is a "Romeo and Juliet" subplot of romance between the offspring of two affluent oil tycoons.

Serialized in the Lviv magazine "Svit" from 1880 to 1881, the novella remained unfinished, due to the magazine's closure. It was eventually published as a book in 1922.

Over time the novel has undergone evolving interpretations. Initially lauded as a portrayal of the budding labour movement, it was later dissected for its intricate character psychology and examination of wealth and power dynamics. Franko's representation of the perspectives of the workers continues to provoke critical analysis, solidifying its status as a seminal work in Ukrainian literature.

