

Butchering History but Not the Jews, the Case of Post-Revolutionary Ukraine

By Samuel Sokol

Samuel Sokol was until recently the Jewish World correspondent for the Jerusalem Post. His reporting on the Jewish IDPs of revolutionary Ukraine garnered the 2015 B'nai B'rith World Center Award for Journalism Recognizing Excellence in Diaspora Reportage. He is currently writing a book on Ukrainian anti-Semitism and Russian propaganda.

“Glory to the nation! Death to the enemies!”

This chant was heard across Kiev’s central Maidan Square in late 2013 as thousands of Ukrainians massed in protest against the corruption and brutality of Viktor Yanukovich, their pro-Russian President.

It was a chilling slogan, bearing harsh connotations for those who understood its identification with the Ukrainian nationalist movement of the early to mid-twentieth century, especially the descendants of their Jewish victims.

Carrying the red and black flags of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army -which murdered thousands of Jews in western Ukraine during the Holocaust¹- as well as those of the Svoboda party (the UPA’s self-proclaimed spiritual heir) those screaming the ultra-nationalist protesters represented a minority of those who had come out to vent their rage, albeit a disproportionately vocal and violent one.

During the years immediately prior to the conflagration, which would engulf the Ukrainian capital and split the country in two, Ukrainian Jews had become increasingly worried about the rise of Svoboda. Proudly antisemitic, the party had a history of harassing Jews and had been declared a neo-Nazi faction by both local community leaders and the World Jewish Congress.

¹ John-Paul Himka, The Ukrainian Insurgent Army and the Holocaust, Paper prepared for the forty-first national convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Boston, 12-15 November 2009

Initially known as the Social-National Part of Ukraine, the part that would become Svoboda was a fringe movement for much of its history, only coming to prominence following elections in 2012 when it won 36 out of 450 seats in the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament.

Party cadres, alongside members of the newly formed ultra-nationalist Pravy Sektor (Right Sector) coalition, provided most of the fighters who took part in violent clashes with riot police and the Titushky², hired thugs used by the government against the Maidan activists.

During the early stages of the protests, several signs pointed to the possibility of an upswing in nationalist sentiment that could prove dangerous to Kiev's Jewish population.

Prior to the outbreak of protests in late 2013, physical violence against Jews was not a major concern for most community members, although antisemitic propaganda and vandalism were distressingly common.³

On December first, 2013, Oligarch Petro Poroshenko, who would later be elected as Ukraine's first post-maiden President, was booed at out the square by protesters screaming "piss off you Jewish garbage."⁴ While not of the Mosaic persuasion himself, conspiracy theories claiming that Poroshenko is really the son of a Jew named Valtzman have dogged the Ukrainian leader for years.⁵

Scattered graffiti against Jews⁶, such as a Swastika down the block from the offices of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee,⁷ contributed further to an atmosphere of worry.

² For an at length explanation of the origins of the term, see Kurkov, Andreï. *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev*. London: Random House, 2014. Print.

³ Porat, Dina, ed. *Antisemitism Worldwide 2013*. Moshe Kantor Database for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism, n.d. Web. 2014.

⁴ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/profile-of-petro-poroshenko-in-the-run-up-to-the-ukraine-elections-a-970325-2.html>

⁵ <http://forward.com/news/world/198758/ukraine-presidential-frontrunner-petro-poroshenko/>

⁶ <http://www.forumdaily.com/zhid-na-majdane-evrei-i-antisemity-v-epicentre-ukrainskogo-protesta/>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/SamuelSokol/status/411089492024377344>

“It’s not a surprise. You can see a lot of them here,” Eduard Dolinsky of the UJC said when asked about the scrawls.

And while one ultra-orthodox cleric was invited to address the Maidan⁸ from the main stage in late December, only two days later a Svoboda MP would use the same platform to perform a traditional Ukrainian antisemitic skit dressed as a Hasid named Zhyd (Kike).⁹

It wasn’t long before local Jews’ worries would be validated.

On January eleventh a Jew was stabbed near the Podil Synagogue¹⁰, followed by the stabbing of a yeshiva student on the seventeenth¹¹. In March, the rabbi who spoke in the Maidan was attacked when walking down the street¹² and a Hasidic couple was chased down the street with sticks.¹³

Several incidents of attempted arson against synagogues as well as graffiti calling for the death of Jews also appeared during this period¹⁴, as did antisemitic material on the social media accounts of Ukraine’s riot police, a group which played an active part in the violence in the Maidan.¹⁵

As a result of the mounting threat, security measures were increased at Jewish communal institutions across the capital and, in late February, Rabbi Moshe Azman, the leader of a downtown Chabad Hasidic synagogue, warned his congregants to flee the city.

I don't want to tempt fate, but there are constant warnings concerning intentions to attack Jewish institutions,” he explained.¹⁶

⁸ <http://www.forumdaily.com/zhid-na-majdane-evrei-i-antisemity-v-epicentre-ukrainskogo-protesta/>

⁹ See note six

¹⁰ <http://eajc.org/page18/news42754.html>

¹¹ <http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-News/Jew-stabbed-in-Kiev-on-way-home-from-synagogue-338594>

¹² <http://eajc.org/page16/news43878.html>

¹³ Vyacheslav Likhachev. Anti-Semitism in Ukraine - 2014. Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, n.d. <http://www.eajc.org/data//file/AntisemitismReport2014engl.pdf>

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ <http://evreiskiy.kiev.ua/ukrainskijj-berkut-nashel-krajnikh-12687.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-news/1.575732>

Azman said at the time that his primary concern was that "groups of hooligans" would seek to use the conflict as an excuse to attack his community. Rabbi Azman cancelled a public menorah lighting ceremony due to his concerns.

"We know from the past that the first ones to be hit are the Jews," he said, citing the presence of Svoboda members among the protesters.¹⁷

One Hasidic shopkeeper in central Kyiv told me his concern was that the anger manifest in the streets, stoked by the alcohol being imbibed by many protesters, would erupt and that the protesters would turn against his community.

There is ample precedent for such worries.

Following the Russian revolution of 1905, pogroms erupted in Kyiv, Ekaterinoslav (modern day Dnipropetrovsk) and Odessa, killing hundreds.

As Serhii Plokhy writes in his magisterial historical of Ukraine, "as the demonstrators attacked the city prison, released political prisoners, desecrated the monument to Nicholas I in front of Kyiv University, removed the imperial insignia from the facade of the university building, destroyed Russian imperial flags and replaced them with red ones, and called for the emperor to be hanged, the conservative public blamed the Jews."¹⁸

To be fair, antisemitism had not been an issue the last time Ukrainians came out into the streets en masse during Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004, but Jews have long memories and there is a history of pogroms in the territories of the Former Soviet Union.

Speaking at a press conference on March third, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned against the "rampage of reactionary forces, nationalist and antisemitic forces going on in certain parts of Ukraine, including Kiev." This was later followed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stating that "it could never occur to anybody that radicals and neo-Nazis could come to dominate Ukrainian politics."¹⁹

¹⁷ <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/174715#.Vf20ISCqgko>

¹⁸ Plokhy, S. (2015). *The gates of Europe: A history of Ukraine*.

¹⁹ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Analysis-Propaganda-battle-over-Ukrainian-Jews-is-not-over-439057>

The Russian propaganda juggernaut had aimed itself squarely at Ukraine.

Such statements became commonplace in the Russian media, with stories about nonexistent pogroms and accusations of Ukrainian politicians' secret Jewish backgrounds making the rounds on television, print and Internet outlets.

Several Ukrainian Jewish leaders, however, shot back, blaming the Kremlin for instigating the incidents²⁰. Chief Rabbi Yaakov Dov Bleich was one of the more outspoken figures, lashing out at Putin not only for his statements on antisemitism but also for his annexation of the Crimean peninsula. This led to a harsh war of words between Jewish leaders loyal to Moscow and Kiev, each taking their respective country's side.²¹

In contrast to the Russians, however, other actors in the international community failed to register the same sense of concern.

“When they accuse the government of being extreme right, that's wrong,” French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said at the time. “There are three members of the Svoboda party, that is a party further to the right than the others, but the extreme right is not in the government.”²²

The State Department also weighed in, responding to a claim by Vladimir Putin of a spate of attacks against synagogues and churches in southern and eastern Ukraine, claiming that “Jewish groups in southern and eastern Ukraine report that they have not seen an increase in antisemitic incidents.”²³

Speaking to the Jewish Daily Forward, State Department envoy on antisemitism Ira Forman went even further, stating that he did not “think President Putin's claims at this point seem to be very credible.”²⁴

²⁰ <http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-News/Ukrainian-Jewish-leaders-blame-Russia-for-antisemitic-provocations-345516>

²¹ Kiril Feferman (2015): The Crisis in Ukraine: Attitudes of the Russian and Ukrainian Jewish Communities, Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs, DOI: 10.1080/23739770.2015.1061259. Also see <http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-Features/War-of-words-between-Ukrainian-and-Russian-Jews-heats-up-346721>

²² <http://www.lemondejuif.info/2014/03/ukraine-pour-fabius-le-parti-antisemite-svoboda-nest-pas-dextreme-droite/>

²³ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/03/222988.htm>

²⁴ <http://forward.com/news/world/194458/anti-semitism-envoy-blasts-russian-effort-to-play/>

In fact, while antisemitic violence would soon drop precipitously, the coming months actually did see a spike in arson attempts and vandalism across the country, with repeated desecrations of the Babi Yar memorial in Kyiv and incidents at synagogues in Zaporizhyya, Simferopol, Mykolaiv, Kiev and Hust.²⁵

Despite the Jewish community's pitched defense of Ukraine, however, there was a palpable sense that the Russians might just be right after the announcement of the composition of Ukraine's interim cabinet following Yanukovich's flight to Russia in February 2014.

Among the members of the so-called Kamikaze Cabinet were newly appointed Defense Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ihor Tenyukh and Oleksandr Sych, both members of Svoboda.²⁶

While in 2011, Anton Shekhovtsov, an expert on European far right movements, could state²⁷ that Ukraine was unique in that "here has been no overtly nationalist group in the parliament (Verkhovna Rada) since independence, and no Ukrainian radical right-wing political party as such has ever been elected to the Verkhovna Rada," now the country's defense establishment was under the direct control of a Neo-Nazi.

Scary, indeed.

The end of Svoboda

Svoboda's success was not to last, however, proving that while antisemitism may be much more socially acceptable in mainstream Ukrainian discourse than in America and western Europe, Ukrainians were by no means fascists or supporters of the UPA or its parent group, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN).

During parliamentary elections in October 2014, Svoboda's public support dropped precipitously, garnering less than the five percent threshold necessary to enter parliament, although several members did gain mandates in single member

²⁵ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Report-Anti-Semitic-vandalism-spiked-in-Ukraine-in-2014-402631>

²⁶ <http://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-whos-who-cabinet/25279592.html>

²⁷ The Resurgence of the Ukrainian Radical Right, *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 63, No. 2, March 2011, 203–228

districts. (Ukraine's electoral system combines both a proportional representation system and direct election of candidates by region.)²⁸

A reasonable explanation for Svoboda's dramatic decline is that the cooption of the party's anti-Russian agenda by more mainstream political actors sapped it of its main draw in the post-revolutionary period.

While Svoboda's prominent role in the fighting that ultimately led to Yanukovich's hegira to Russia could reasonably be expected to have led to further electoral gains, Shekhovtsov has asserted that the party's support was already drying up prior to EuroMaidan and that the developments of the revolutionary period proved to be the final nail in the party's coffin.

“Svoboda's relative failure to mobilise its former electorate can be attributed to the demise of former president Viktor Yanukovich's regime: Svoboda was successful in 2012 because it was considered an anti-Yanukovich party, so with Yanukovich ousted, almost half of Svoboda's electorate was gone too,” he asserted.

“Furthermore, in 2012, Svoboda was also considered almost the only ‘patriotic’ party, but now all democratic parties are patriotic, so Svoboda has lost its ‘monopoly’ on patriotism.”²⁹

Ironically, the success of Svoboda may have been directly attributable to the pro-Moscow Yanukovich and his dominant Party of Regions.

Secret party ledgers recently released by government investigators purport to show a cash payment of two hundred thousand Dollars to Svoboda from the party, adding weight to previously unprovable allegations.

Reacting to the news, which broke in mid-August, Max Seddon, the Moscow correspondent for the Financial Times tweeted that he “once shared a massive strudel with a soccer hooligan who said the Party of Regions paid for all the Svoboda muscle.”³⁰

Red flags had been raised previously, with researcher Ivan Katchanovski alleging back in 2012 that “the party and its leader Oleh Tiahnybok undeniably derive

²⁸ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Election-results-buoy-Ukrainian-Jews-379969>

²⁹ <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.co.il/2014/10/ukraines-parliamentary-elections-and.html>

³⁰ <https://twitter.com/maxseddon/status/766601762354630656>

considerable benefit from their regular and prominent presence on prime-time TV shows on major national channels controlled by oligarchs from the Yanukovich camp or by the government.”

Such actions, he continued, “can be regarded as an attempt to tighten [the Yanukovich camp’s] grip on power for a long time by turning radical nationalists, unlikely to win national parliamentary or presidential elections, into the main opposition force.”³¹

Trading propaganda barbs

In any case, the decline of Svoboda should have put accusations of a fascist coup to rest, but Russian propaganda was, by its nature, less concerned with facts than with what people were prepared to believe.

Rather than peter out, Russia’s propaganda efforts against Ukraine intensified in early 2014 as Moscow annexed the Crimean peninsula and began inciting separatism in the country’s eastern Donbas region.

One of the earliest and most blatant examples of Russian propaganda was broadcast shortly after unmarked Russian troops began the takeover of the Crimean peninsula.

Reporting on attacks against Jews in Kiev and efforts to organize communal self-defense bodies³², Russia Today, the Kremlin’s English propaganda arm, reported that “With the lack of peace and stability and the rise of neo-Nazi hardliners many Jews are considering fleeing the country.”³³

Among those featured in the segment was Misha Kapustin, the Rabbi of Sevastopol’s Reform synagogue, who was interviewed while packing up his belongings in preparation for a move away from the recently captured territory.

Discussing the appearance of swastikas and other antisemitic graffiti on the walls of his synagogue, Kapustin told RT correspondent Paula Slier that he felt that “nobody will do anything wrong to us because we are protected under the law.

³¹ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/ivan-katchanovski/ukrainian-%E2%80%98freedom%E2%80%99-party-should-be-ringing-alarm-bells>

³² <http://www.jta.org/2014/05/08/news-opinion/world/kiev-jews-set-up-self-defense-unit>

³³ <https://www.rt.com/news/jews-jewish-ukraine-nationalist-106/>

Ukrainian law. Nowadays, there is no law because everything is changing so fast and I don't expect anybody would protect the Jews if anything happens.”

Kapustin's synagogue had indeed been desecrated but he was worried less over Ukrainian antisemitism than Russian conquest. Earlier that month Kapustin had published an open letter denouncing Russia.

“Our town, Simferopol, is occupied by the Russians. Help us, save our country, save Ukraine! Ask your government for help,” he wrote.³⁴

In a subsequent interview, not all of which I have yet published, Kapustin cast doubt on the putative Ukrainian origins of the graffiti, noting that Crimeans were more pro-Russian than most Ukrainians and that right wing Ukrainian nationalism was relatively unpopular in his region.

“I did not expect anything to be done like that, they just misused my words, they just mislead my words, they just perverted my words,” he told me.

“In fact it was me, my voice, my words, it was me all the time there, and I must admit they did it professionally, they professionally changed the context so nicely, they do it so professionally.”³⁵

Russian media reports of a Jewish exodus did not stop. In early May 2014 I reported on preparations being made to evacuate members of the Jewish community of Odessa, especially children in the local orphanage, from the city, should violent clashes between pro-government and pro-separatist protesters that left dozens dead continue unabated.

This story was picked up by multiple Russian news outlets, promoting a flood of worries calls to local community leaders and compelling them to issue a denial of their earlier statements.

A spokesman for the Russian Jewish community explained that the Russian media had exaggerated my initial report and claimed that a mass evacuation of the city's Jews was imminent.³⁶

³⁴ <http://www.thejc.com/news/world-news/116196/danger-looms-crimea-ukrainian-jews>

³⁵ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Analysis-Propaganda-battle-over-Ukrainian-Jews-is-not-over-439057>

Shortly thereafter the Russian television news program Vesti aired a report claiming that “Jewish organizations and schools are closed without reasons” and that as a result of Ukrainian antisemitism, thousands of Jews had fled the country. While emigration did rise significantly in the post-Maidan period³⁷, over the course of dozens of interviews over the past two years I have yet to come across one Jewish IDP or refugee who cited antisemitism, rather than the Russian-Ukrainian war and subsequent economic dislocation, as their motivation for flight.

The rhetoric used on Vesti took a balanced assessment of Ukrainian antisemitism and stretched it beyond its breaking point.

“Jewish cultural and historical monuments were destroyed already more than once by men in uniform with the symbols of volunteer battalions that are fighting in Donbas,” it was claimed. “There are criminal slogans with an appeal of forced relocation of Jews at mass meetings and demonstrations. The shocking revival of traditions of Nazi Germany in a modern state is a manifest threat to Europe and European values. It is important that the EU leadership responds to these challenges as soon as possible”.³⁸

Jewish leaders such as Menachem Margolin of the European Jewish Association have been appealing to the west because “Jews are being persecuted,” the program added, incorrectly.³⁹

One of the most blatant examples of Russian propaganda, however, centered not on generic warnings but on specific (and needless to say, fabricated) incidents in the city of Odessa.

In October, concurrent reports in Pravda, Izvestia and other Russian news outlets claimed that members of Pravy Sektor had “declared war” on the city’s Jewish community beating 20 Jews and prompting local leaders to appeal to the World Jewish Congress to “disarm and disband” the group.

³⁶ <http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-Features/Russian-Jewish-Congress-disputes-report-of-Odessa-evacuation-351603>

³⁷ <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Netanyahu-links-spike-in-aliya-to-anti-Semitism-in-Europe-385451>

³⁸ <http://www.vesti.ru/videos/show/vid/645287/cid/1/#>

³⁹ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Ukrainian-rights-group-blasts-Russia-for-faking-anti-Semitic-news-405608>

The reports quoted community leader Mikhail Maiman as stating that “Pravy Sektor is just destroying us, it is pure militant Nazism.”⁴⁰

Both the World Jewish Congress and the local community disputed veracity of the pogrom reports. Local Jewish leaders also noted that there was nobody in their community hierarchy by the name of Maiman, indicating that reports quoting such a man were fabricated.

“There is no question that from the beginning we became a tool,” one community leader told me at the time, adding that Ukrainian authorities “realize[d] that any antisemitic attack could reflect badly on them.”

Knowing the propaganda value of antisemitism to Russia, Pravy Sektor, despite being composed of several neo-Nazi groups, made great efforts to counter its image, promising to protect Jewish institutions⁴¹ and bringing on board a Jewish spokesman.⁴²

Concurrent with accusations of Ukrainian antisemitism came both attacks on Jews for loyalty to the Ukrainian state and accusations (meant to pander to the Russian far right) that Ukrainian leaders were secretly Jewish.

The following exchange on Russian television is emblematic of such rhetoric:⁴³

Prokhanov: It's strange that these Jewish organizations -- European and our Russian ones -- support the Maidan. What are they doing? Don't they understand that with their own hands they're bringing a second Holocaust?

Zakamskaya: They did it the first time too.

Prokhanov: It's an amazing blindness that is being repeated again. Until 1933 many liberal European organizations fed the Fuhrer.

⁴⁰ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Russian-media-possibly-using-fake-anti-Semitism-reports-as-war-time-propaganda-378664>

⁴¹ <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/right-sector-ultra-nationalists-back-odessa-jews-over-holocaust-memorial-nazi-defacement-1444276>

⁴² <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/187217/borislav-bereza>

⁴³ <http://www.rferl.org/a/russian-tv-anchor-accuses-jews-of-bringing-holocaust-on-themselves-/25307640.html>

In May 2014, Spiegel Online reported that a Russian television program entitled the “Chocolate Bunny” had argued not only that Petro Poroshenko was born of a Jewish father but that he “was responsible for radicalizing the Maidan and was tapping the help of right-wing nationalists in order to make the leap to the country's highest elected office.”⁴⁴

This exchange illustrates the cognitive dissonance inherent in Russian state media’s attempts to both accuse Ukrainian leaders of anti-Semitism while portraying them as secret Jews collaborating with Neo-Nazis. Such parallel propaganda narratives contradicted each other, with one aimed delegitimizing Ukraine among more liberal elements while the other was intended to mobilize support among members of the Russian far right.

Similar documentaries on politicians Yulia Tymoshenko and Arseniy Yatseniuk alleged that they were hiding Jewish roots, prompting Russia expert David Fishman to assert a shift in the focus of Kremlin propaganda.

“In a nutshell: the Kremlin’s attempt, back in late February and March, to paint the new Ukrainian regime as Nazi and antisemitic has failed,” he wrote in April 2014. “It didn’t pick up much traction in world public opinion. So now the Kremlin is spreading the line that the Ukrainian leaders are Jews. Or at the very least, servants and lackeys of Jews. The intended audience is no longer international; it is domestic.”⁴⁵

Subsequent events such as the Odessa “pogrom” proved that Russia had not given up on its attempts to portray the Ukrainians as antisemites. Both accusations of antisemitism as well as classical antisemitic tropes could co-exist in the Kremlin’s arsenal of misinformation weapons.

It is naive to think that media reports of Ukrainian antisemitism would be particularly useful in and of themselves in rallying Russian domestic support for action in Ukraine. I believe that the use of Nazi imagery by the Russians served two purposes.

⁴⁴ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/profile-of-petro-poroshenko-in-the-run-up-to-the-ukraine-elections-a-970325-2.html>

⁴⁵ <http://forward.com/opinion/world/196864/the-real-truth-about-those-anti-semitic-flyers-in/>

The instrumentalization of the Jewish issue was key to Putin's goal of awakening Russian national memory related to the Second World War.

Known to former Soviet citizens as the Great Patriotic War, the memory of the millions of lives lost in the struggle against Nazism and fascism still resonate in Russia today. By packaging the war as a fight against the modern-day successors of the Nazis, Putin was able to tap into a reservoir of emotion incredibly useful in any attempt to mobilize popular support.

Accusations of antisemitism also provided Putin with a pretext for interference in his neighbor's affairs while supplying a ready-made propaganda weapon to delegitimize the new administration in Kyiv in the international arena. Antisemitism is one of the most pressing problems in contemporary Europe and by linking Ukraine to troubles in France, England and elsewhere, the Russian leadership hoped to influence public opinion abroad.

Much ink has been spilled regarding Russia's embrace of hybrid warfare and nowhere is this approach more readily discernible than in Ukraine.

The Ukrainians are not without sin when it comes to using the Jewish card, however.

In April 2014, several balaclava-clad men were filmed handing out flyers outside of Donetsk's synagogue. The flyers called for local Jews to register with the new, separatist authorities.

City Rabbi Pinchas Vyshetsky called the flyers a provocation and theorized that it could be the work of "antisemites looking to hitch a ride on the current situation," adding that he had sent someone to the address given for registration to check into the matter but "there was nobody there."

The flyers, theorized Dr. Efraim Zuroff of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, appeared to be "some sort of provocation and an attempt to paint the pro-Russian forces as antisemitic," an assessment that Vyshetsky said was not out of the realm of possibility.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ <http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-News/Jews-cast-doubt-on-origin-of-anti-Semitic-flyers-in-Donetsk-349848>

In January 2015 the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry announced the imminent formation of an office of a special envoy to combat anti-Semitism.⁴⁷ Nothing was ever done and no further announcements were forthcoming. It may be that the propaganda value of the announcement was all that was desired.

Around the same time, the Donetsk Jewish community demanded an apology from the Ukrainian media after reports began circulating that separatists had murdered Yehuda Kellerman, a senior communal figure.⁴⁸ Just as Russian reports had “cited” Margolin of the European Jewish Association, the Ukrainian reports “quoted” Vyacheslav (Moshe) Kantor, the president of the European Jewish Congress, as a source. Kantor vehemently denied any connection to the reports.

One of the most blatant lies came in December 2015, when Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko addressed the Knesset in Jerusalem, telling Israeli lawmakers that the Jews of occupied Crimea should be worried as “the conquerors have started to cultivate the antisemitism issue as well.”⁴⁹

According to Israeli legislator Ksenia Svetlova, Poroshenko also told her that Jews are “oppressed” in Crimea and are “not allowed” to attend synagogue.⁵⁰ This naturally prompted a harsh backlash from the combined heads of a number of Crimean Jewish institutions and organizations.⁵¹ Despite Ukrainian claims, unlike the Tatars, the Jews of Crimea have been left unmolested.

Speaking a month earlier in the Netherlands, Poroshenko had made a similar claim about the self-declared separatist Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and the

⁴⁷ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Kiev-to-appoint-special-envoy-to-combat-anti-Semitism-388814>

⁴⁸ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Reports-of-death-of-Jewish-leader-in-Ukraine-greatly-exaggerated-388632>

⁴⁹

http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:iEnUI_JpE_MJ:https://www.knesset.gov.il/spokesman/eng/PR_eng.asp%3FPRID%3D11839+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=il

⁵⁰ “А вот в Крыму евреев притесняют, и даже в синагогу их там не пускают.”

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153914847231414&set=a.10150221290791414.348974.542996413&type=3&theater>

⁵¹ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Crimean-Jews-angry-after-Poroshenko-says-Russia-instigating-anti-Semitism-438513>

Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), claiming that "now there's racism, intolerance, antisemitism" there.⁵²

Separatists and "Miserable Jews"

As the separatists began the process of taking over the Donbas, Jewish leaders with whom I spoke stated quite clearly that while their communities were incredibly shaken by events and a general sense of anarchy prevailed, there was no worry about antisemitism. Death could come in many forms but antisemitic attacks were not among them.

"There is, in general, no antisemitism or problems but there is a lack of security," the Rabbi of Luhansk said in late April.⁵³

As far as I have been able to determine, antisemitism directed against members of the Jewish communities of the Donbas is not a problem overall, with one Jewish leader in Donetsk telling me that the separatists "have acted well toward us."⁵⁴

However, that does not mean that no incidents occurred.

In April, Luhansk's synagogue came under attack.

Chana Gopin, the Rabbi's wife, described the incident for the website of the Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States]:

"There was a lot of tension on the day of the event. I got to the synagogue to check on how things were coming along and to see what I could do to help. And then it happened. A motley crew of vicious rabble tried to get past the wall surrounding the synagogue. A few years ago, thank G-d, we moved to a new building, which shone like a lighthouse of Judaism in Lugansk. But the building wasn't finished,

⁵² <http://ukranews.com/news/393381-poroshenko-obvynyl-boevykov-na-donbasse-v-rasyzme-y-antysemytyzme>

⁵³ <http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-Features/For-Jews-in-Eastern-Ukraine-anarchy-is-a-concern-but-not-anti-Semitism-351949>

⁵⁴ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Top-rebel-leader-accuses-Jews-of-masterminding-Ukrainian-revolution-406729>

and there was only a temporary wall around it. For a few seconds, I stood mesmerized. A situation that had seemed like child's play had just become dangerous. The building's supervisor, Isana Razinkova, who is very devoted to the activities of the community, tried to scare away the rabble, but they soon toppled the fence and Isana fell on the ground. We called in our security company for backup, and they managed to scatter the hooligans. How did it end? Isana was lightly wounded; one of the community's supporters decided that the community needed and deserved more robust security; and another community supporter, who is a contractor, decided that the time had come to build a more permanent wall. And they did."

"Another serious incident occurred on Friday at 2 p.m., a time when the synagogue is quite busy. Suddenly, unexpected guests appeared. Ten armed ruffians broke in and insisted on searching the premises. Why? They'd heard a rumor that the community had received a shipment of humanitarian aid. (That was the only thing they'd heard that was true.) Some thought that the Ukrainian army was passing arms through synagogue. (That part of the rumor wasn't true, of course.) Explanations did no good. You could have cut the tension with a knife."

"They searched the synagogue and disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. But the atmosphere didn't just go back to what it had been. The Rabbi decided to move the supplies we'd received further from the synagogue, and more than that, to wrap the new Torah scroll and another Torah, and hide them in a safe place. Who knew what else the day would bring, and what other surprises were in store for us? That Shabbat, as we read the weekly portion from our old, small Torah, the atmosphere was bitter. Until that day, synagogues had been neutral territory, disconnected from political conflict. One felt the holiness when entering the synagogue and forgot the strife in the streets. Because of this, even more Jews than usual flocked to the synagogue, as if they were running away from the turmoil outside."⁵⁵

Speaking with me the next month, Rabbi Gopin did not raise the issue of antisemitism. Asked if it was a concern, he replied that "there is, in general, no antisemitism or problems but there is a lack of security."

People are “nervous about war. There is vandalism. There are people going around with guns,” he said. However, Jewish institutions in his city are operating normally and the community has beefed up its security.

“We are not in the picture,” he concluded.⁵⁶

While antisemitism may not be a daily concern, for the most part, “antisemitic views constantly appear in the separatists’ mass media and websites,” according to Tel Aviv University antisemitism researcher Irena Cantorovich.

“A recent example...is an article claiming that Israel deliberately provides medications containing barbed wire, which kills patients. The article was uploaded on the official page of the Donetsk municipal TV station sponsored by the People’s Republic of Donetsk on the “Odnoklassniki” social network,” she told the Jerusalem Post last November.⁵⁷

The leaders of both people’s republics have made public antisemitic comments, with the head of the DNR claiming that “miserable Jews” run Ukraine⁵⁸ and the head of the LNR blaming the Jews for launching the EuroMaidan.

“I’d like to ask the historians...or maybe the philologists, can’t choose, really, why was it called the ‘Euromaidan’? Where did the name come from? From the area [Euromaidan Square in Kiev]? Or perhaps from the people? Those same people who now make up the majority of leaders of what was once our Ukraine?” he asked, intimating that there is a connection between Jews and the revolution because the Russian word for Jew, “Evrei,” sounds like “Euro.”

“I have nothing against... Valtzman, Groysman, and many others. [Groysman, a Jew, was then parliamentary speaker and is now Prime Minister] I have nothing against the Jews as a people, as the ‘Chosen People,’ we can talk about this separately if we have the time.

⁵⁶ <http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-Features/For-Jews-in-Eastern-Ukraine-anarchy-is-a-concern-but-not-anti-Semitism-351949>

⁵⁷ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/OSCE-denies-rebel-claim-it-will-attend-Donetsk-conference-on-fascism-and-anti-Semitism-432407>

⁵⁸ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Separatist-leader-says-miserable-Jews-running-Ukraine-389883>

But the crux of the matter is that when we call what has happened a ‘Euromaidan,’ we infer that the leaders now are representatives of the people who have been harmed the most by Nazism.”⁵⁹

Gopin responded to that statement, which was made last June, by saying that it “smell[ed] of antisemitism.”

Other signs of antisemitism in the Russian backed republics include a rally in which protesters called out “Zionists”⁶⁰ and the presence of alleged neo-Nazi and far right movements among the separatist troops.⁶¹

Just as Bereza was used as the Jewish front of Pravy Sektor, the separatists also had a Jewish representative, in their case a Foreign Minister.

Alexander Kofman served as the face of the DNR until February 2016, deflecting criticisms of antisemitism on the part of his superiors and later organizing a conference in Donetsk on combating fascism and antisemitism.⁶²

Bandera, Babi Yar and the Return of Yuschenkoism

Despite knowing that much, but far from all, of the antisemitism attributed to Ukraine is Russian propaganda, the Ukrainians still make it incredibly hard to disbelieve the Kremlin and while Jews are not being beaten in the streets, in some ways, certain aspects of antisemitism have enjoyed a state sponsored renaissance.

Last April the Rada passed four bills, known collectively as the Decommunization laws, which enshrined OUN/UPA in Ukraine’s national pantheon of heroes. Intended to wipe the country clean of the stain of its communist past, the bills banned the use of Soviet and Nazi symbols, required the renaming of streets and cities named after communist figures and banned the denigration of members of armed insurgent groups that fought for Ukrainian independence.

- <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Top-rebel-leader-accuses-Jews-of-masterminding-Ukrainian-revolution-406729>

⁶⁰ <http://forward.com/opinion/world/196864/the-real-truth-about-those-anti-semitic-flyers-in/?p=all>

⁶¹ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Alleged-links-to-neo-Nazi-groups-of-fighters-on-both-sides-of-Ukrainian-civil-war-374981> & <http://forward.com/opinion/world/196864/the-real-truth-about-those-anti-semitic-flyers-in/>

⁶² <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/OSCE-denies-rebel-claim-it-will-attend-Donetsk-conference-on-fascism-and-anti-Semitism-432407>

The bill explicitly stated that “public denial of the legitimacy of the struggle for independence of Ukraine in the twentieth century is recognized as insult to the memory of fighters for independence of Ukraine in the XX century, disparagement of the Ukrainian people and is unlawful,” essentially banning anything but an official state approved narrative of the history of the OUN/UPA.⁶³

The driving forces behind the law were MP Yurii Shukhevych, the son of the UPA’s wartime commander and Volodymyr Viatrovych, a revisionist historian and the director of the government-sponsored Institute for National Memory.

The depravity of OUN/UPA’s actions were described in an open letter signed by scholars from around the world who objected to the law on the grounds that it curtailed freedom of expression and academic inquiry in Ukraine.

“The potential consequences of both these laws are disturbing. Not only would it be a crime to question the legitimacy of an organization (UPA) that slaughtered tens of thousands of Poles in one of the most heinous acts of ethnic cleansing in the history of Ukraine, but also it would exempt from criticism the OUN, one of the most extreme political groups in Western Ukraine between the wars, and one which collaborated with Nazi Germany at the outset of the Soviet invasion in 1941. It also took part in anti-Jewish pogroms in Ukraine and, in the case of the Melnyk faction, remained allied with the occupation regime throughout the war.”⁶⁴

Scholars like Jared McBride have repeatedly called out Viatrovych, pointing out that his entire career has been dedicated to whitewashing the record of the twentieth century Ukrainian nationalist movement, rebranding it as a savior of Jews and banishing references to its fascist nature.⁶⁵

In Viatrovych’s work, McBride writes, “radical right-wing Ukrainian nationalists are depicted as nothing but tragic freedom fighters, occasionally forced to don Nazi uniforms to struggle for independence, liberty, and Western values.”

⁶³ <http://www.memory.gov.ua/laws/law-ukraine-legal-status-and-honoring-memory-fighters-ukraines-independence-twentieth-century>

⁶⁴ <http://krytyka.com/en/articles/open-letter-scholars-and-experts-ukraine-re-so-called-anti-communist-law>

⁶⁵ <https://www.thenation.com/article/how-ukraines-new-memory-commissar-is-controlling-the-nations-past/>

Appointed by Poroshenko to head the Institute of National Memory in 2014, Viatrovych has largely been responsible for a resurgence of historical revisionism that had been suppressed under the pro-Russian Yanukovych regime.

Explaining his work as the triumph of democratic forces against a repressive Soviet narrative, Viatrovych has also led efforts to rehabilitate Stepan Bandera, the head of the OUN(b), one of two competing OUN factions, which “anticipated the establishment of an ethnic Ukrainian state, without Jews, Poles, Russians and other minorities.”⁶⁶

As scholars such as Rudling⁶⁷ and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe have pointed out, following the end of the Second World War Ukrainian emigres to the west created an entire mythology around Bandera, turning him into a Ukrainian national martyr and developing “an entire literature that denied the OUN’s fascism, its collaboration with Nazi Germany, and its participation in atrocities, instead presenting the organization as composed of democrats and pluralists who had rescued Jews during the Holocaust.”⁶⁸

Following the fall of the Soviet Union and Ukraine’s emergence as an independent sovereign nation-state for the first time in its history, the new narrative developed abroad was ready and available for importation back to the Motherland.

However, opinion polls conducted in the period immediately prior to the revolution of 2013-2014 indicate that most Ukrainians do not actually buy into the Bandera myth nor do all OUN/UPA supporters accept the academic consensus that Ukrainian nationalists killed thousands of Jews and Poles during the war.⁶⁹

Under President Viktor Yushchenko (2005-2010), Rudling explained, the Ukrainian state apparatus was turned toward manufacturing what Rudling termed a “new set of historical myths” through the founding the Institute for National

⁶⁶ Grzegorz Rossoliski-Liebe. *Stepan Bandera: The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist. Fascism, Genocide, and Cult.* Stuttgart: ibidem Publishing House (ibidem Verlag), 2014. pgs. (paperback), ISBN 978-3-8382-0684-4.

⁶⁷ *The Return of the Ukrainian Far Right: The Case of VO Svoboda,* in Ruth Wodak and John E. Richardson (eds.) *Analyzing Fascist Discourse: European Fascism in Talk and Text.* (London and New York: Routledge 2013), 228-255.

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Katchanovski, I., *Terrorists or national heroes? Politics and perceptions of the OUN and the UPA in Ukraine,* *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2015.06.006>

Memory. At the same time, Yushchenko attempted to present the Holodomor, a man-made famine caused by retributive Soviet collectivization policy in Ukraine, as “the genocide of the Ukrainian nation.

I would contend that this policy, which Rudling termed Yushchenkoism, has been revived under Poroshenko, who is desperate to create a unifying mythology in order to rally his people against the Russians.

I believe that it was Yushchenkoism and its glorification of OUN/UPA, groups held in low esteem in southern and eastern Ukraine, which helped prepare the ground for the Russian propaganda necessary to mobilize support for a separatist agenda in the Donbas. If there was already suspicion of western Ukrainians in the east (bearing in mind the historical split between right and left bank Ukraine), it would follow that the prominence of Svoboda, the spiritual heir to OUN/UPA, would be enough to convince eastern Ukrainians of the truth of Russian claims of a fascist putsch in Kyiv.

What is certain is that the passage of laws honoring the OUN/UPA and the willingness of Ukrainian leaders to look the other way regarding manifestations of antisemitism indicate an inability to engage in painful historical introspection in the mold of Poland or Germany. Such introspection has not been seen in other post-Soviet States such as Hungary and Lithuania and the current conflict with Russia makes it even less likely in Ukraine. It is hard to tear down national heroes who fought the same enemy who is currently at the gates.

I would like to offer three examples of the government’s willingness to tolerate antisemitism when convenient to the smooth functioning of the war.

The first is the appointment of Vadim Trojan, an alleged neo-Nazi appointed the head of the Kyiv regional police in November 2014.⁷⁰

As I wrote in the Jerusalem Post at the time, prior to his appointment he was deputy commander of the volunteer Azov Battalion, which has been engaged in combat operations against pro-Russian separatists in the country’s east. Kiev, while within the district, is an independent jurisdiction.

⁷⁰ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Kiev-regional-police-head-accused-of-neo-Nazi-ties-381559>

Azov, which I bring as my second example, was one of the only effective fighting forces the government had in the east at the time. Comprised mainly of ultra-nationalists, the unit flag features a Wolfsangel, a symbol associated with neo-Nazi groups.⁷¹ While the authorities likely had little choice but to accept the existence of Azov due to the weakness of its own official military units, the government's collaboration with such a group served to undermine its public statements regarding combating anti-Semitism.

And finally, I propose the case of Artyom Vitko, the former commander of the government-backed Luhansk-1 Battalion and now a member of Oleh Lyashko's Radical Party. Video of the militant parliamentarian leaked online showing him singing a Russian rock song in honor of Adolf Hitler. As far as I am aware, no condemnations were forthcoming from anyone in power in Kyiv.⁷²

Vitko's actions came to light the week after Poroshenko's Knesset speech in which he apologized for Ukrainian complicity in the Holocaust (without, of course, touching on the issue of the Decommunization laws).

More recently, questions have been raised regarding Ukraine's willingness to grapple with its past due to controversies surrounding the seventy fifth anniversary of the Babi Yar massacre. More than 33,000 Jews were murdered at Kyiv's Babi Yar ravine in a two-day period in 1941 as part of what has come to be known as the "Holocaust of bullets."

Ukraine has come a long way from the Soviet period when mourning over the deaths of the Jews slaughtered here was suppressed, subsumed under the general victimhood of "Soviet citizens," but in the period following the Ukrainian revolution of 2013, renewed efforts at rehabilitating Ukrainian collaborators have stunted efforts to come to grips with the nation's past.

Kyiv came under fresh criticism regarding its policies of national memory in February when it came to light that a government-backed design competition invited architectural proposals to resolve what it sees as a "problem" of a "discrepancy between the world's view and Jewry's exclusive view of Babi Yar as a symbol of the Holocaust."⁷³

⁷¹ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/US-lifts-ban-on-funding-neo-Nazi-Ukrainian-militia-441884>

⁷² <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Ukrainian-legislator-toasts-Hitler-438561>

⁷³ <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Ukraine-backtracks-on-Babi-Yar-plans-amid-accusations-of-Holocaust-revisionism-444268>

During official state commemorations this September, held in collaboration with the World Jewish Congress, Ukrainian officials erected a sign honoring members of OUN/UPA killed at the site⁷⁴ despite the organization's known role in the Holocaust. This, needless to say, ruffled Jewish feathers.

Speaking before the Rada prior to the commemoration, Israeli President Reuben Rivlin took the Ukrainians to task for their revisionism.

“Many of the collaborators were Ukrainian, among the most notorious the members of the OUN who carried out pogroms and massacres against the Jews and in many cases handed them over to the Germans,” he said. “It is true, there were more than 2,500 Righteous Among The Nations, lone candles who shone in the darkness of humanity. Yet the majority remained silent,” he said, asserting that Ukrainians need to “recognize antisemitism as it was and as it is found today, and not rehabilitate or glorify antisemites.”

Rivlin's statement touched a nerve, with Viatrovych responding by stating that Rivlin was repeating “Soviet myths.”⁷⁵ Paul Podobyed, an employee of Viatrovych's, went even further, stating that the Israeli President's speech was the same as Poroshenko flying to Jerusalem to blame the Jews for orchestrating the Holodomor, a popular conspiracy theory.⁷⁶ No official condemnations were issued.

The Ukrainian state is certainly far from being overtly antisemitic. It currently has a Jewish Prime Minister and, during the worst of the fighting, Ihor Kolomoisky, a prominent and pugnacious Jewish oligarch, was appointed governor of the Dnipropetrovsk oblast and is widely credited with helping limit the spread of separatism in the east. However, Kyiv's tolerance for historical revisionism is unacceptable (if unremarkable when placed alongside Hungary and the Baltic states) and its willingness to overlook the neo-Nazi affiliations of those involved in its war effort is worrying indeed.

⁷⁴ <https://twitter.com/SamuelSokol/status/781652152511070208>

⁷⁵ <http://uatoday.tv/politics/israeli-president-s-speech-is-spit-in-the-soul-ukraine-s-nationalists-leader-755053.html>

⁷⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/pavlo.podobed/posts/10210289329326193?pnref=story>