Antisemitism in Ukraine

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"The level of antisemitism in Ukraine is one of the lowest in Europe"

Serhiy Hirik

The question of antisemitism in Ukraine is one of the issues at the center of debates over Russia's war on Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022. Russian president Vladimir Putin justified the Russian invasion claiming that he was going to "de-Nazify" the country. Some on both the left and right agree with Putin, arguing that Ukrainian Nazis play a leading role in the government, military, and society. Others, in the U.S. and Western European governments and on the left, have dismissed the claim as highly exaggerated. Nazism, of course, is associated with violence and antisemitism. What is the history of Ukrainian antisemitism and violence against Jews?

To look more deeply into this issue Patrick Le Tréhondat of Syllepse, a leftwing publishing house in France, interviewed *Serhiy* Hirik. Hirik, a historian, is a lecturer in the Kyiv-Mohyla National Academy's Jewish Studies Master's Program and a researcher at the State Research Institute Encyclopedia Press (Kyiv). He was Vice-President of the Ukrainian Association for Jewish Studies (2020-2023). The interview was conducted on October 8, 2022, and has been edited for clarity.

Patrick Le Tréhondat: What was the situation of the Jewish community in Ukraine before February 24? Before World War II, there were more than one and a half million Jews, and today the figure is often given as being 40,000. Where do Ukrainian Jews live today? What kind of organizations do they have, particularly cultural and labor institutions that cultivate Jewish memory?

Serhiy Hirik: It's very difficult to count the real number of Jews in Ukraine. The majority of Ukrainian Jews live in mixed families and have a double identity, as both Ukrainian and Jewish, and

generally consider themselves to be Ukrainians of Jewish origin. Many of them do not have direct contacts with Jewish community organizations.

In the Soviet era, personal documents, such as internal passports, contained information about ethnic identity, so the authorities collected information about the total number of Jews as well as about representatives of other ethnic groups. Since 1991, the state's mandatory collection of such information is forbidden. People may declare their ethnic identity during the national census, but it has been conducted only once since the collapse of the USSR, and that was in 2001. Some 103,000 Ukrainian citizens called themselves Jews then, but one needs to consider that many members of mixed families have double identities and called themselves Ukrainians.

There were many more than one and a half million Jews living in Ukraine before World War II. According to the 1939 Census, in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), there were one and a half million. But this number does not include Galician and Volhynian Jews since the census was conducted in January, but these regions were only annexed by the USSR that November. This number also does not include the number of Jews living in the Chernivtsi region and the western part of Odessa, annexed by the USSR in 1940, nor Transcarpathia, annexed in 1945, as well as in Crimea, which became a part of Ukrainian SSR in 1954. The total number of Jews in Ukraine in contemporary borders as of 1939 was about three million.

The total number of Holocaust victims in Ukraine, according to various estimates, ranges from one to one and a half million. Many Jews who were evacuated to Central Asia, in 1941, did not return after World War II. A significant number of Holocaust survivors, from Galicia, Volhynia, Bukovyna, and Bessarabia, left the USSR between 1945 and 1948. These were Jews who had preserved their prewar Polish and Romanian documents, some of whom survived in occupied Ukraine, while others were evacuated in 1941. Some of them were arrested and deported by Soviet authorities as "bourgeois" in the period between 1939 and 1941, which, inadvertently, saved their lives.

According to the first Census after World War II, in 1959, there were about 840,000 Jews. From the 1960s to the 1980s, their number has been steadily declining because of mixed marriages, migration, and natural demographic processes. Jews living in the cities experienced negative natural increase in population, as cities grew due to migration from rural areas. In 1989, the very last Soviet Census found that there were 486,000 Jews in Ukraine. After the late 1980s, when the government abolished restrictions for those who wanted to emigrate, the majority of Ukrainian Jews left for Israel. This process was accelerated by economic crises in the 1990s.

According to the data of the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine (Vaad of Ukraine), in 2019 there were about 300,000 people of Jewish origin. This includes Jews, members of mixed families, and those who were born in mixed families but do not have the right to move to Israel under Israel's "Law of Return." Many of them do not consider themselves to be Jewish, but preserve personal connections with Jewish communities, celebrate Jewish holidays, etc. About 50,000 of them consider themselves Jews, others simply as people of Jewish origin. The largest Jewish communities are in Kyiv, Odessa, and Dnipro. Many Jews also live in Kharkiv, though a significant part of the Kharkiv Jewish community was evacuated after February 24 because the city is near the frontlines. Other important Jewish communities can be found in Kryvyi Rih, Chernivtsi, and Lviv.

There are a few umbrella organizations uniting Jewish communities. The largest one is the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine (Vaad of Ukraine). The others are the United Jewish Community of Ukraine and the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine. All of them are active in preserving Jewish memory. The Jewish memorial sites in Kyiv are preserved, first of all, by local Jewish communities, with participation of local authorities, as well as by Jewish all-Ukrainian

umbrella organizations and international Jewish organizations. For example, many Jewish cemeteries in Ukraine were described and preserved thanks to the large-scale international project carried out by the European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative (ESJF) project. Jewish historical monuments, such as old synagogues, have been restored thanks to private donations as well as contributions from international Jewish organizations. The heritage of Ukrainian Jews and the history of Ukrainian Jews also attract the attention of Ukrainian scholars, many of whom are members of the Ukrainian Association for Jewish Studies.

PLT: In the 2000s, figures like Stepan Bandera or the Ukrainian Nationalist Party (OUN-UPA) were rehabilitated. The latter, made up of about 200,000 men, joined with the German Army and participated in the mass murder of Jews. It should also be remembered that four million Ukrainians were fighting against the Nazis. How did the Jewish community react to this rehabilitation?

SH: First of all, there was not a single "OUN-UPA" at all. There was the OUN (since 1929) as a political organization; and in fact, after the 1940 split within this organization, there were two OUNs (the Bandera and Andriy Melnyk factions—the OUN-B and OUN-M). And there was also the UPA, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, a military formation created by OUN-B, but not fully controlled by it. The UPA was established in the Spring of 1943, though it pretends to have been created in the Fall of 1942 (though this date is not real: by then the majority of Galician and Volhynian Jews had already been exterminated by the Nazis).

Both the Bandera and Melnyk factions of the OUN cooperated with the Nazis from 1940 to 1941 and planned to achieve their own goals using German help. The OUN-B even tried to proclaim the establishment of a Ukrainian state on June 30, 1941. But their romance with the Germans was very short. There were several waves of arrests of the OUN-B and OUN-M activists after July 1941. In January-February 1942 both groups were finally made illegal and their most popular activists in Ukraine were arrested and executed (members of the OUN-M: Olena Teliha, Orest Chemerynsky, Daria Huzar, and others in Kyiv; members of the OUN-B: Dmytro-Myron Orlyk in Kyiv, Mykhailo Pronchenko in Kryvyi Rih etc.). At the same time, in occupied Poland, especially in Cracow, they operated almost openly.

So, after January-February 1942 both wings of the OUN operated underground. In 1943, the OUN-B took control of some partisan paramilitary groups spontaneously organized in the Volhynia and Polissia regions and later created its own partisan groups in Galicia. In 1943–1944, they operated against the Germans (on a limited scale) and after 1944—also against the Soviets and also on a limited scale. The highest level of its activity was in the late 1940s when the UPA confronted the Stalinist terror in rural areas in Volhynia and Galicia.

The total number of Ukrainians who joined the German army was up to 20,000. In 1941, two battalions were created ("Roland" and "Nachtigal"), with participation of the OUN-B, each of them consisting of about 300–400 people. Both were reorganized in the Fall of 1941 into *Schutzmannschaft* units, units made up of collaborators, who became military police. They were finally dissolved in 1942. In 1943, 13,000 Ukrainians joined the 14th *Waffen Grenadier* Division of the SS (Galizien). Several thousand also joined the *Wehrmacht* individually.

There were antisemites as well as philosemites in both OUN factions. OUN propaganda did not condemn the Holocaust and did not even mention it. In general, both OUN factions did not have any clear position on the German policy against Jews. The OUN ideological texts, published during the 1930s, rarely mentioned Jews and did not consider them to be a political factor. They contained statements against Polish rule in Galicia and Volhynia and against Soviet rule in central and eastern Ukrainian regions. The so-called "Jewish question" was not important for them at all. Some OUN-B members participated in anti-Jewish atrocities personally because they were influenced by Nazi

propaganda. At the same time, some OUN-B activists saved Jews. For example, Fedir Vovk (Ivan Vovchuk), who was one of OUN-B's leaders in the Dnipropetrovsk region in 1941–1943, and one of the OUN-B leaders in the U.S. after the war, saved four Jews in Nikopol; Yad Vashem has recognized both him and his wife, Yelizaveta Shkandel, for its "Righteous Among the Nations" award—given to non-Jews who saved Jews during the Holocaust—in 1998.

Ukrainian Jews do not have any common position on this subject. They also understand that OUN members and UPA combatants are memorialized primarily for their struggle against the Stalinist USSR after the war. Some Ukrainian Jews, mostly older ones, oppose their memorialization. But the majority of Ukrainian Jews and Ukrainians of Jewish origin are neutral regarding this.

PLT: In 2016, you published an article, titled "The 'decommunization' of Ukraine: The Jewish Dimension," where you observe that the new toponymy of street names did not consider, in a satisfactory way, the Jewish dimension of the Ukrainian nation. Have things changed since then?

SH: Yes, things have changed. One of the most impressive examples is in Kyiv, where streets have now been named after Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, Golda Meir (she was born in Kyiv), and local Jewish philanthropists of the early 20th century (the Brodsky family and Yosyf Marshak). Also, streets were named after the Righteous Among the Nations in a number of cities.

PLT: What is the level of antisemitism in Ukraine? How does it manifest?

SH: The level of antisemitism in Ukraine is one of the lowest in Europe. It increased for a short time in the 2000s but has been constantly decreasing since. The Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities in Ukraine has monitored antisemitic related violence and vandalism for more than twenty years and publishes annual reports. In the 2000s, it documented several cases of antisemitic violence each year. In 2004, there were eight cases, in 2005, thirteen, in 2006 and 2007, eight again, and in 2008, there were five. Later the number of such incidents significantly decreased: with only one reported in 2009 and 2010, none in 2011, and only as many as four in each of the following years of that decade. For comparison, there were 108 cases of antisemitic violence reported in France in 2014, forty in 2016 and twenty-nine in 2017.

More frequent are cases of antisemitic vandalism (antisemitic graffiti and slogans, damage to Jewish memorial sites, etc.). There were only ten such cases reported in 2020, while by comparison there were fifty-three such incidents in Austria in 2020 and 104 in France in 2019.

According to a research report published in 2018 by the Pew Research Center, a non-partisan American think tank, in 2015–2016 the level of social distance toward Jews in Ukraine was the lowest in Central-Eastern Europe. While only five percent of Ukrainian citizens would not accept Jews as fellow citizens, in Russia the figure reached fourteen percent, in Poland, eighteen percent, in Romania, twenty-two percent, and in Armenia, thirty-two percent.

PLT: Since February 24, how has the Jewish community reacted to the war? What has happened to the community since the start of the war?

SH: The attitude of Ukrainian Jews towards the Russian aggression does not differ from the attitude of other parts of the Ukrainian population. More than one thousand Ukrainian Jews participate in the war as soldiers. Many of them are religious, so in July 2022, Hillel Cohen was appointed the chief rabbi of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The famous Rabbi Asher Yosef Cherkassky, and his son David, serve in the voluntary battalions of territorial defense.

The Jewish community organizations aid those who need it, Jews and non-Jews, in the form of

providing medical supplies to military hospitals, and other necessities.

Many Jews who lived near the frontline or in the occupied territories were forced to leave. Some of them emigrated to Israel. But most of them found refuge in the European Union countries, or stayed in relatively safe Ukrainian regions, especially in Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Chernivtsi, and Transcarpathia. So, the fate of Ukrainian Jews during this war is roughly the same as the fate of other Ukrainians. Missiles and shells do not ask their victims about their ethnic origin.

PLT: Do you have any information on the situation of the Jewish communities in the territories occupied by the Russians?

SH: Unfortunately, no. My Jewish friends and those Jews whom I know personally left the occupied territories. It is better to address this question to Jewish community leaders. However, I believe that it is not safe to share such information until these territories are liberated.