Interview

"The level of anti-Semitism in Ukraine is one of the lowest in Europe"

Friday 14 October 2022, by [HIRIK Serhiy](), [LE TRÉHONDAT Patrick]() (Date first published: 8 October 2022).

Interview with the historian Serhiy Hirik [1] by Patrick Le Tréhondat.

What was the situation of the Jewish community in Ukraine before February 24? Its importance (the figure of 40,000 Jews in Ukraine is quoted, whereas there were 1.5 million before the Second World War), where does it live ?, What are its organizations, particularly in the cultural and labor fields Jewish memory?

It is too hard to count the real number of Jews in Ukraine. Majority of Ukrainian Jews live in mixed families and have double identity (both Ukrainian and Jewish) and consider themselves as Ukrainians of Jewish origin. Many of them do not have direct contacts with Jewish community organizations.

In the Soviet times the personal documents (internal passports) contained an information about ethnic identity, so the authorities collected information about the total number of Jews as well as about representatives of other ethnic groups. After 1991 it is forbidden. People may declare their ethnic identity during the national census but it was organized only once after the collapse of the USSR (the 2001 census). 103 thousands of Ukrainian citizens called themselves Jews then but one needs to take into account that many members of mixed families have double identity and called themselves Ukrainians.

There were much more than 1,5 million Jews in Ukraine before the Second World War. According to the 1939 census in the Ukrainian SSR there were 1,5 million Jews in Ukraine. But this number does not include Galician and Volhynian Jews since the census was conducted in January but these regions were annexed by the USSR in November 1939). It also does not include the number of Jews in Chernivtsi region and the western part of Odessa region (annexed by the USSR in 1940), Transcarpathia (annexed by the USSR in 1945) as well as in Crimea (became a part of Ukrainian SSR in 1954). The total number of Jews in Ukraine in contemporary borders as of 1939 was about 2,8 million.

The total number of Holocaust victims in Ukraine is (according to various estimates) from 1 to 1,5 million. Many Jews who were evacuated to Central Asia in 1941 did not return to Ukraine after the Second World War. The significant part of Holocaust survivors from Galicia, Volhynia, Bukovyna and Bessarabia (those who preserved their prewar Polish and Romanian documents, some of them survived in occupied Ukraine, other were evacuated in 1941, somebody was arrested and deported

by Soviet authorites as "bourgeois" in 1939–1941 and after all it saved their lives…) left the USSR in 1945–1948. In 1959 (first census after the Second World War) there were about 840 thousand Jews. In the 1960s–1980s their number has been steadily declining because of mixed marriages, migration and natural demographic processes (Jews lived in the cities where the natural increase of the population was negative, cities grew thanks to migration from rural areas). In 1989 (the very last Soviet census) there were 486 thousand Jews in Ukraine. After the late 1980s, when the government abolished restrictions for those who wanted to emigrate, majority of Ukrainian Jews repatriated to Israel. This process was accelerated by economic crises of 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 thousand of people of Jewish origin (Jews, members of mixed families and those who were born in mixed families but do not have right for repatriation to Israel according to Israeli law). Many of them do not consider themselves as Jews but preserve personal connections with Jewish communities, celebrate Jewish holidays etc. About 40–50 thousand among them consider themselves as Jews, others — as people of Jewish origin.

The largest communities are in Kyiv, Odessa and Dnipro. Many Jews also live in Kharkiv (the significant part of Kharkiv Jewish community was evacuated after February 24 because this city is near the frontline), Kryvyi Rih, Chernivtsi, and Lviv.

There are few umbrella organizations uniting Jewish communities. The largest one is the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine (Vaad of Ukraine) [2]. The others are the United Jewish Community of Ukraine [3] and the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine [4]. All of them are active in preserving Jewish memory. The Jewish memorial sites out of Kyiv are preserved first of all by local Jewish communities with participation of local authorities, Jewish all-Ukrainian umbrella organizations as well as international Jewish organization. E.g., many Jewish cemeteries in Ukraine were described and preserved thanks to the large scale international project carried out by the ESJF project [5]. Jewish historical monuments (first of all, the old synagogues) are restored thanks to private donations as well as international Jewish organizations. The heritage of Ukrainian Jews and the history of Ukrainian Jews attract the attention of Ukrainian scholars, many of whom are members of the Ukrainian Association for Jewish Studies [6].

In the 2000s, figures like Bandera or the Ukrainian nationalist party OUN-UPA were rehabilitated. The latter (about 200,000 men joined the German army) participated in mass murders of Jews. It should also be remembered that 4 million Ukrainians were fighting against Nazism. How did the Jewish community react to this rehabilitation?

First of all, there was not "OUN-UPA" at all. There was the OUN (since 1929) as a political organization and there were two OUNs (the Bandera and Melnyk factions — the OUN-B and OUN-M) after the 1940 split within this organization. And there was the UPA (the Ukrainian Insurgent Army) as a military formation created by one of the OUN wings (OUN-B) but it was not fully controlled by it. The UPA was created in Spring 1943 (it pretend to be created in Fall 1942 but the official date is not real) when majority of Galician and Volhynian Jews were already exterminated by the Nazis.

Both Bandera and Melnyk factions of the OUN cooperated with Nazis in 1940–1941 and planned to achieve their own goals using German help. The OUN-B even tried to proclaim the Ukrainian state on June 30, 1941. But their romance with Germans was very short. There were several waves of arrests of the OUN-B and OUN-M activists since July 1941. In January–February 1942 both of them finally became 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 acted in the underground. In 1943, the OUN-B took under control some partisan paramilitary groups spontaneously organized in Volhynia and Polissia regions and later created its own partisan groups in Galicia. In 1943–1944, they operated against Germans (on a limited scale) and since 1944 — against Soviets (also in 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 German army was up to twenty thousand. In 1941, two battalions were created ("Roland" and "Nachtigal") with participation of the OUN-B, each of them consisted of about 300–400 persons. Both of them were reorganized in Fall 1941 into Schutzmannschaft units and finally dissolved in 1942. In 1943, 13 thousand Ukrainians joined the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS (Galizien). Several thousand also personally joined Wehrmacht.

There were antisemites as well as philosemites in both OUN factions. OUN propaganda did not condemned the Holocaust and even did not 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 considered them as 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. E.g., Fedir Vovk (Ivan Vovchuk), who was one of OUN-B leaders in Dnipropetrovsk region in 1941–1943 and one of the OUN-B leaders in the USA after the war, saved four Jews in Nikopol; Yad Vashem has recognized him and his wife Yelizaveta Shkandel as Righteous Among the Nations in 1998 (No. 8152).

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

In 2016, you published an article "The"decommunization"of Ukraine - the Jewish dimension" where you observed that the new toponymy of the streets did not take into account in a satisfactory way the Jewish dimension of the Ukrainian nation. Have things changed since then and how do you hope it will change?

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

What is the level of anti-Semitism in Ukraine? How does it manifest?

The level of antisemitism in Ukraine is one of the lowest in Europe. It increased for the short time in the 2000s and is constantly decreasing since then. The Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities in Ukraine (vaad of Ukraine) monitors antisemitic related violence and vandalism for more than 20 years and publishes annual reports on this problem. In the 2000s it documented several cases of antisemitic violence each year (2004 — 8 cases, 2005 — 13 cases, 2006 — 8, 2007 — 8, 2008 — 5. Later the number of such incidents significantly decreased: 2009 — 1, 2010 — 1, 2011 — 0, 2012 — 4, 2013 — 4, 2014 — 4, 2015 — 1, 2016 — 1, 2017–2019 — 0, 2020 — 4) [7]. For comparison, there were 108 cases of antisemitic violence in France in 2014, 40 in 2016 and 29 in

2017 [8].

More frequent are the cases of antisemitic vandalism (antisemitic graffiti and slogans, damages in Jewish memorial sites, etc.). There were only 10 such cases in 2020 (e.g., there were 53 such incidents in Austria in 2020 and 104 in France in 2019.

According to the research conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015–2016 (published in 2018) the level of social distance toward Jews in Ukraine was lowest in Central-East Europe — only 5% of Ukrainian citizens would not accept Jews as fellow citizens. In Russia this figure reaches 14%, in Poland — 18%, in Romania — 22%, in Armenia — 32% [9].

Since February 24, how has the Jewish community reacted to the war? What has happened to her since the start of the war?
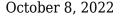
The attitude of Ukrainian Jews toward the Russian aggression against Ukraine does not differ from the attitude of other parts of Ukrainian population. More than one thousand Ukrainian Jews participate in the war as soldiers. Many of them are religious, so in July 2022 the chief rabbi of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Hillel Cohen was appointed. The famous rabbi Asher Yosef Cherkassky with his son David serve in voluntary battalions of territorial defence.

The Jewish community organizations provide assistance to those who need it (Jews as well as non-Jews), provide medical supplies to military hospitals, etc.

Many Jews who lived near the frontline or on the occupied territories were forced to leave. Some of them repatriated to Israel. At the same time, most of them are found refuge in the EU countries or stayed in relatively safe Ukrainian regions (especially in Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Chernivtsi and Transcarpathia regions). So, the fate of Ukrainian Jews in the wartime is roughly the same as the fate of other Ukrainians. Missiles and shells do not ask their victims about their ethnic origin.

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

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 guess that it is not safe to share such information until these territories will be liberated.

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Footnotes

[1] Serhiy Hirik, 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).

[2] https://vaadua.org/rubrika/vaads-news-english

[3] https://jew.org.ua/en.html

[4] https://jcu.org.ua/en

[5] https://www.esjf-cemeteries.org/

[6] https://uajs.org.ua/en/news

[7] https://vaadua.org/sites/default/files/files/2021/Antisemitism2020draft.pdf

[8] https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2021-antisemitism-overview-2010-2020_en.pdf

[9] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/28/most-poles-accept-jews-as-fellow-citizens-and-neighbors-but-a-minority-do-not/ft_18-03-26_polandholocaustlaws_map/