In the land of the trident

The Ukraine war and the Jews

By Jonathan Spyer
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UKRAINE IS a territory saturated in Jewish memory – memory both tragic and sublime. In every field of endeavor – religious thought, Zionist and socialist politics, art, music, military affairs, science – Jews from the territory on which the modern Ukrainian state is located have registered outstanding achievement.

It is the birthplace of Rabbi Yisrael ben-Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidic Judaism, who grew up near Kameniec in what is now western Ukraine; Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, founder of the Breslov Hasidic movement, who was born in Miedzyboz in central Ukraine; Haim Nahchman Bialik, the poet laureate of modern Hebrew literature, who was born in Zhitomir, in north central Ukraine. Goldie Meyerson, who became prime minister Golda Meir, was born in Kiev. Israeli-born Moshe Dayan, famed fighter and commander, was the son of Shmuel Dayan, who came from Zhashkiv, in the Cherkassy region, central Ukraine. Isaac Babel, one of the foremost Soviet novelists of the mid-20th century, whose “Red Cavalry Tales” remains a classic of 20th-century Russian literature, came from Odessa. Leon Trotsky, born Lev Bronstein, the architect of the Russian revolution and founder of the Red Army, came from Yanovka, in the Kherson region of Ukraine. Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky, father of Revisionist Zionism, came from Odessa. Solomon Rabinovitch, better known as Sholem Aleichem, came from Pereyaslav, in the Kiev governorate. And so on. The area has played host to an astonishing gathering of Jewish creative energies.

It is also prominent among the lands of destruction. Ukraine is the land of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, whose statue on his horse and brandishing his famous rhino horn mace stands outside St. Sophia’s Cathedral in central Kiev; his Cossack rebels butchered 100,000 Jews in a 17th-century uprising. It is the land of Simon Petlyura, whose fighters followed a similar murderous path during the chaotic period following the Russian revolution of 1917. And, of course, it is the land of the “Holocaust of bullets” of the mobile killing squads who followed the German armies as they swept through Ukraine in the summer and autumn of 1941, systematically slaughtering Jewish populations in the verdant ravines and forests that characterize the country’s landscape until 1.5 million were dead.

So, Ukraine is filled with Jewish ghosts, its soil with Jewish blood. But there is Jewish life here, too. Estimates of the precise Jewish population vary widely. The European Jewish Congress claims that 360,000-400,000 Jews live in Ukraine, which would make it the fifth largest Jewish community in the world. Other estimates place the number as low as 60,000. Since 2014, Ukraine has been embroiled in renewed strife and conflict. In August 2017, this reporter visited the country with the intention of taking a deeper look at the impact of this new war on its remaining Jews.

War returns to Ukraine

In summer, Kiev is a charming city filled with cafes and light. But the peaceful atmosphere is deceptive. History has not departed. Ukraine has been shaken in recent years once again by revolution, and its handmaiden, war.

The Euromaidan Revolution toppled the pro-Russian government of President Victor Yanukovych in March 2014. Yanukovych’s departure was followed by the Russian seizure of Crimea and then the outbreak of a Russian-supported separatist insurgency in the Donbass – the eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk. The ill-equipped, rusty Ukrainian forces moved to crush the insurgency but were then met by the entry of conventional Russian troops in August. The Ukrainians suffered bloody setbacks in the battles of Ilovaisk and Debaltseve, before a cease-fire agreement was signed in Minsk on February 11, 2015.

Yet, the war is not over, and the issues that led to its outbreak have not been resolved. Today, the Ukrainians and their Russian enemies face one another along a static 400-km frontline. Observers from the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) monitor the cease-fire. This reporter spent several days in the war zone of eastern Ukraine; shooting across the lines is a nightly occurrence. And not just rifles – RPG, self-propelled grenades and machine guns, too. Over the past three years, 10,090 people have died in this largely forgotten conflict. More than 2 million people have been made homeless.

The war has impacted on Ukraine’s Jewish community in two central ways.
Firstly, Jews resident in eastern Ukraine have suffered the direct physical effects of the fighting. Most of Donetsk and Luhansk’s Jews fled westward as the front lines approached their homes in 2014. The provisions offered by the Ukrainian authorities to those made homeless by the war are minimal. Efforts are ongoing by a variety of Jewish organizations to provide for those Ukrainian Jews made refugees by the events.

The second impact is a little less tangible. The war of 2014 was an important moment in the ongoing development of national identity in independent Ukraine. This is a complex and sometimes fraught business, and Ukraine’s Jews are part of it whether they like it or not.

Ukraine remains divided between pro-Western and pro-Russian forces. Both of these broad camps contain fringe elements that are hostile to the Jews. On the pro-Russian side, neo-Nazi groups maintain an armed presence in separatist controlled parts of Luhansk and Donetsk. On the Ukrainian side, there are also militia groups active in the combat zone who use far right and neo-Nazi imagery.

But more importantly, the mainstream Ukrainian leadership are keen to make use of a nationalist heritage that celebrates Khmelnytsky and Petlyura, and which includes organizations and figures that collaborated with the Nazi invaders during World War II, and with the persecution and murder of Ukraine’s Jews at that time. The public commemoration of such wartime nationalist leaders as Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych remains a starkly divisive issue that is unlikely to lessen in intensity over time.

The Jews of the Donbas

“We want to keep our community. People in Kiev can’t understand what we went through. So, we haven’t broken up the Donetsk community. It survives. But now it’s in Kiev, not in Donetsk,” says Rabbi Pinchas Vishedsky; we are in the community center in the Podil district of Kiev that the rabbi established for Donetsk Jews fleeing to the capital during the war of 2014.

Vishedsky, an Israeli and a veteran emissary of Chabad, spent 20 years in Donetsk, painstakingly building up a Jewish community there. Then, in 2014, he was faced with the task of dismantling much of what he had built and helping in the evacuation of the Jews of Donetsk to areas further west not touched by war. He paints a stark picture of the gradual disintegration of normal life in Donetsk in the spring and summer of 2014.

“On May 25, during the elections for the president of Ukraine, they put polling booths near the schools and I got a phone call from the Jewish school that it was surrounded by men with guns [supporters of the pro-Russian “separatist” cause who wanted to dissuade residents from taking part in the elections]. It was the last day of studies. I went down and they pointed the guns at me. I told them, ‘Aren’t you ashamed? Don’t you have children at home?’ I found the commander and he allowed the children to leave.

“Then, in June, the rebel army in Sloviansk began to approach Donetsk and people started to leave. I sent my wife and children to the US on the last train out of Donetsk. The rebel army camped out in the student residences by our home.”

Vishedsky with other supporters of the Donetsk community helped organize the evacuation of thousands of Donetsk Jews in the following weeks. He estimates that perhaps 10,000 Jews left the area during that period. Making his way to Kiev, he has sought to reestablish the community there.

The Jewish school in Donetsk is still functioning, but only 27 children now attend. There is still a minyan in the synagogue; 450 families receive food parcels each week in Donetsk. A total of perhaps 2,000-2,500 Jews remain in Donetsk city, according to
unofficial estimates. “The embers are still burning,” says Vishedsky.

But the picture he paints of life in the rebel-controlled “People’s republics of Donetsk and Luhansk” is bleak in the extreme. “Most of the people who could leave have gone. There are no banks working. Most shops have closed. You need to have connections with a shop owner so he can open it up for you. There is no work there and no future. It is mainly the older people who stayed; a needy population. The border is closed much of the time and this makes it hard for older people to get their pensions,” he says.

As for those who left, some have gone to Israel, some to Germany, some are in Kiev or other Ukrainian cities such as Odessa, Dnipropetrovsk and Kharkiv. The future? “Everything’s frozen,” sighs Vishedsky. “We’ve grown tired of expecting change.”

The process of the gradual collapse of order and normality as the war came to Donetsk and Sloviansk is echoed in the testimony of other Jewish IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) I interviewed in Kiev. At the Halom Center, a community center established and maintained by the Joint Distribution Committee, I was able to speak to a number of Jewish refugees from the war zone who have benefitted from the services offered by the Joint’s “Hesed” program and a number of other programs maintained by the organization.

The IDPs I interviewed all described a similar trajectory to that outlined by Vishedsky. Albert, a 78-year-old Holocaust survivor and retired mechanical engineer, spoke of the sudden appearance in Luhansk of “strange people... bandits” who seized control of the state security building and other administrative points. These were the pro-Russian “separatists” led at that time by the former Federal Security Service (FSB) officer Igor Girkin, known as “Strelkov” (Shooter).

Then came the groups of armed men and unmarked military vehicles on the streets, the cooked up “referendum” for independence and the coming of a new, severely constricted life. “We are afraid to talk about this,” says Ludmila, Albert’s wife, “because we still have an apartment there and those people check apartments.”

There have been many allegations of individuals close to the authorities established by the separatists seeking to confiscate abandoned apartments and cars in their areas of control. The couple left the area in November 2014, and have been living in Kiev since. Albert, as a Holocaust survivor, receives additional help from the Hesed program and this has enabled them to “live normally,” as Ludmila puts it. She says “Ukrainian” (i.e. non-Jewish) friends who have to make do with the very meager state pensions have been unable to leave the area of the Luhansk “people’s republic” established by the Russians and separatists.

Nina, a retired chemist from Donetsk city, also remembers the first appearance of the separatists in the spring of 2014. She is a widow, whose only daughter died a few years ago. She was living alone in an apartment near the center of the city. At first, she thought the men shouting and chanting in the night were “drunkards...They were banging on metal, and shouting ‘Russia, Russia.’” Then, the next morning, men with guns in black ski masks were on the streets of Donetsk and the “Donetsk People’s Republic” was on its way.

“From November, all the banks closed, the post offices closed. The local administration the separatists created barely functioned,” she says. Confiscation of cars by the armed groups began and Nina left for Kiev at the end of the year; she doesn’t see herself returning to the Donbas.

“Thanks to Hesed, I am not alone,” she adds. “They give me support, and in Donetsk I would be alone. The graves of my husband and daughter are there, but the graveyard is close to Donetsk airport and now the area is mined.”

There are common threads running through all these accounts — the extreme unpredictability of life in the Donbas under the Russians and their separatist proxies; the dysfunctionality of the threadbare administration they have established; the meager assistance given by the Ukrainian authorities to displaced people; and the impressive care given to Jewish IDPs by a variety of Jewish organizations and initiatives of which the JDC and Vishedsky’s work are only two of many possible examples.

There is something else, too. All the testimonies speak of suffering, displacement, danger, unpredictability. But none talk about being targeted as Jews. The difficulties were faced in common with their ethnic Ukrainian and Russian neighbors; if anything, the presence of Jewish organizations considerably alleviated the situation of the Jewish refugees. This is very notable given the undoubted presence of organized antisemitic forces among both the separatist groups and the Ukrainian volunteer battalions. All those we spoke to were adamant that neither the separatist authorities nor the Ukrainian forces had singled them out as Jews.

The battlefield of memory

The presence and place of Jews in the still-crystalizing Ukrainian state remains a sensitive issue, but this is not primarily because of a physical threat to Jewish well-being. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that Jewish communal buildings in Kiev require considerably less physical security around them than do their equivalents in western Europe. The reason for this is fairly clear and can be stated once politically correct pieties are set aside — there is no sizeable or vocal Muslim community in Ukraine, and the physical threat to Jews in western Europe emerges mainly from among these communities.

Nationalist groups, nevertheless, played a very visible role during the Maidan protests. This reporter witnessed the proliferation of banners of the far-right Svoboda Party on the square in December 2013 alongside the red and black flags invoking the memory of Bandera’s UPa (Ukrainian Insurgent Army), the armed volunteer groups, which bore the brunt of the fighting in the summer of 2014 when the Ukrainian army faltered,
flew similar colors.

But the nationalist candidate in the presidential elections of 2014, One Dmitro Yaros, scored just 0.7% of the vote. Svoboda also achieved a tiny showing in presidential elections. Efforts by the volunteer battalions to transform themselves into political parties have as yet achieved meager results. “Ukrainians don’t want to be led by extremists,” a young man in Kiev told me.

Still, while nationalist political achievements remain marginal and levels of antisemitic violence low, the debate over national memory and its symbols continues to raise difficult questions for Ukraine’s Jews.

Eduard Dolinsky, executive director of the Kiev-based Ukrainian Jewish Committee, contended in a conversation with me in Kiev that the apparent electoral weakness of the nationalists is deceptive. Dolinsky pointed to their strength at the municipal level. He is concerned at the role of what he called “apologists of national memory” – propagandist pseudo-historians who seek to downplay the role of Ukrainian nationalist movements in the Holocaust and the persecution of Jews in Ukraine.

Dolinsky says of such figures as Bandera and Shukhevych: “They participated in the Holocaust. Then people present them as protectors of Jews. This is Holocaust denial and desecration of Jewish memory.”

The placing of these figures in a mainstream pantheon of national heroes in Ukraine is certainly proceeding forthwith. In July 2016, a major street in Kiev was named for Bandera. On May 25, 2016, the Ukrainian parliament held a minute of silence for Petlyura.

Other voices, both Jewish and non-Jewish, dispute the gravity and implications of the “mainstreaming” of wartime nationalist leaders. Thus, Josef Zissels, chairman of the Vaad organization of Ukrainian Jews, was quoted recently by JTA on this subject as warning against “unnecessary assignment of blame” in a country in which Jews enjoy formal equal rights and levels of antisemitic violence are low.

The debate over historical memory is set to continue. Anyone who has travelled in the rural heartlands of Ukrainian nationalism in the west of the country will be aware of the depth and hold of the traditions of the insurgent OUN/UPA and the legacy of Bandera. It is difficult to imagine these being uprooted, and no doubt Jewish concerns with their nature and strength will continue, as well.

Nevertheless, it would be entirely wrong to paint an unmittingly gloomy picture of Jewish life in Ukraine. In the midst of the great destruction of recent years and facing a still ongoing conflict, Jewish individuals and organizations of a variety of orientations have demonstrated in practice the meaning of communal solidarity. And the rising hostility to Jews in many western European countries, tied to the growth of political Islam and hostility to Israel, is entirely absent here.

Jews, it appears, will be living under the “Tryzub” – the gold trident that forms Ukraine’s national symbol, for some time to come. The old demons, of course, should never be forgotten and may only be sleeping.

The country faces enormous challenges ahead in the building of institutions, fighting systemic corruption and forging a version of national identity with which all elements of society can at least broadly identify. The Jews, both the actual living examples of them in Ukraine and no doubt also the mythical, archetypal Jew that never seems to quite vanish from the European consciousness, will be playing their role in this.

The last words, in any case should go to old Solomon Rabinowitz – Sholem Aleichem – of Pereyaslav, in the Kiev Governorate: “If you haven’t been there, do him a kindness, and go down into the field, read the old, obliterated inscriptions on the leaning tombstones and you will find in them the story of a whole people. And if you happen to be a man of feeling and imagination you will look upon this poor little town with its rich cemeteries and repeat the old verses: “How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob and your houses, O Israel!”