Jewish-Ukrainian-Soviet Relations during the Civil War and the Second Thoughts of a Minister for Jewish Affairs

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Abstract
A century after the dissolution of the Russian Empire and its descent into multidirectional civil war, the memory of what took place in Ukraine during 1917–1922 diverges into very different stories among Ukrainians, Russians, and Jews. By focusing on the example of Avraham Revutsky, a Minister for Jewish Affairs in Ukraine’s Directory government, this article suggests that the lines of conflict during those violent years may not have been as clear as they appear now. From Revutsky’s previously unknown statement made to Soviet authorities in Berlin in 1922, included in full and translated here, it is possible to glimpse both the complications of Jewish-Ukrainian-Soviet relations during the civil war, and how, in the face of the first Soviet show trials, individuals sought to shape the way their wartime actions and motives would be remembered.

The 100th anniversary of the Bolsheviks’ October Revolution also marks the 100th anniversary of the first modern attempts to create a Ukrainian nation-state during the bloody multidirectional civil war that engulfed Ukraine between 1917 and 1922. The retreat of German and Austrian forces in 1918 and the Red Army’s victories in the civil war and Polish-Soviet war led to the incorporation of the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic into the new Soviet Union, and, excepting territories occupied by the Germans and their allies during World War II, Ukraine would remain a Soviet republic until its independence in 1991. Today, while the independence of a Ukrainian state seems secure, a civil war rages once again in Ukraine pitting Ukrainian nationalists against those — Russian and Ukrainian citizens — who seek the territorial unification of at least part of Ukraine into a

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Russian-dominated federation. In the current conflict, compared to that of the last century, social, economic, and political ideology about how to organize state and society has taken a back seat to geopolitics and nationalism, though of course the issue of geopolitical alignment — especially when cast in terms of West versus East — cannot be fully separated from ideological questions.

The current civil war in eastern Ukraine has exacerbated questions of historical interpretation, but did not create them. Ever since 1991, the struggle for Ukrainian independence has been cast by Ukrainians as the struggle against communism, Russia, and, sometimes too, the perceived allies of both; namely the Jews.\(^1\) 2004’s Orange Revolution and 2014’s Euromaidan Revolution, in particular, were both accompanied by a surge in nationalist historical projects that sought to shift Ukraine’s historical consciousness away from the Russian-dominated east and towards western Ukraine, perceived as the heartland of the Ukrainian independence movements.

Statues have been erected and streets renamed for heroes of Ukrainian independence, from the seventeenth century to World War II. The Cossack leader Bohdan (Bogdan) Khmelnytsky (1595–1657) who led a revolt of Orthodox Ruthenian peasants against Polish rule and created a Cossack Hetmanate (but ultimately signed a treaty with the Russian tsar), now graces the Ukrainian five-hryvnia note. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries both Russian and Soviet powers viewed the figure of Khmelnytsky favourably for his supposed role in uniting Ukrainians and Russians, with a monument built to Khmelnytsky in Kiev’s Sophia Square completed in 1888, and a Soviet military honour called the Order of Bohdan Khmelnytsky (in Russian, the Order of Bogdan Khmel’nytskii) created in 1943 (Library of Congress World Digital Library; Yekelchyk 2004).\(^2\) Post-Soviet Ukraine has further elevated Khmelnytsky, this time as a founder of the forerunner of an independent Ukraine, by putting Khmelnytsky on its currency and reviving the Order of Khmelnytsky as a high presidential honour.

While Soviet and post-Soviet Ukrainians memorialized Khmelnytsky for different reasons, Ukrainian independence has also provided space for the sanctification of Ukrainian heroes who were treated as villains during the Soviet period, perhaps the best examples being Symon (Simon) Petliura (1879–1926) and Stepan Bandera (1909–1959). Petliura was a leading figure in the civil-war Directory government of independent Ukraine and after being forced out of Kiev formed an ill-fated alliance with Josef Piłsudski (1867–1935) and the Polish government, thus launching the Polish-Soviet War.\(^3\) Bandera was a fascist and leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (Orhanizatsiya ukraïns’kykh natsionalistiv, OUN), which fought against both Poland and the Soviet Union in the 1930s. After the OUN split into two factions Bandera headed the OUN-Bandera, which received German assistance during World War II and whose leaders later founded the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Ukraïns’ka povstans’ka armiya, UPA) (Snyder 2003:133–78).\(^4\)

Besides their use for the post-1991 creation of a coherent and heroic narrative of Ukrainian national struggle, Khmelnytsky, Petliura, and Bandera also have in common their association with periods of intense anti-Jewish violence and the military and paramilitary groups who committed such violence. As such, the link between Ukrainian nationalism and antisemitism has appeared to many Jews as indissoluble. Each historical figure is linked to a period of Jewish physical insecurity and Ukrainian
violence against Jews: Khmelnytsky and what Jews named ‘Gzeyres Takh Vetat’ to describe the peasant revolts of 1648–1649; Petliura and the mass anti-Jewish violence of the civil war; Bandera and the German use of Ukrainian auxiliaries and militias during the Holocaust. Furthermore, the anti-Jewish violence in the last two instances, both as it occurred and as interpreted since, was justified by many Ukrainians according to an equation that Jews equalled Bolsheviks and vice versa. This equation was first made during the civil war by Ukrainian militias and strengthened during World War II by the Nazis and their allies. Such entanglements between Ukrainian national narrative and the memory of anti-Jewish violence have only been made more complicated on the ground, where memorials to the OUN and to victims of the Soviet Secret Police – the NKVD – have been erected at the very sites where Jews faced mass murder (Bartov 2007). Some on the Ukrainian right also continue to make latent or explicit suggestion of Jewish responsibility for the man-made famine under forced collectivization known as the Holodomor, or Terror Famine.5

Because the reality of anti-Jewish violence poses a danger to the moral purity of the Ukrainian national struggle, interpreting the nature of Jewish-Ukrainian-Soviet relations during and after the civil war has been a particularly fraught exercise (Fischer 2003, 2008). This is a problem that dates back at least to the trial of Scholem Schwarzbard, who assassinated Petliura on the streets of Paris in 1926. During his trial for murder, Schwarzbard’s lawyer, the French socialist Henri Torres (1891–1966), used the expertise and documentation of Jewish political activist émigrés from Ukraine to shift the case to the question of Petliura’s rather than Schwarzbard’s guilt. Torres in fact managed to secure Schwarzbard’s acquittal by arguing that the murder was a crime of passion committed in retribution for the wave of anti-Jewish violence perpetrated by troops of the Ukrainian National Republic (Ukraïns’ka narodna republika, UNR) only a few years before. While there were instances of Ukrainian and Jewish attempts to narrow their differences, the trial exacerbated the divergence of narratives (Abramson 1999:131–140, 169–78; Engel 2006, 2016).

Yet looking back, the reality of Jewish-Ukrainian-Soviet relations during the civil war was often more blurred than it appears, after many years in which Jews and Ukrainians have clarified the lines of conflict. The years between the abdication of the Tsar during the February Revolution in 1917 and the final end of the possibility of Ukrainian independence in 1922 (outside the confines of Soviet power) were anarchic, with political groups ranging from socialist Ukrainian nationalists, to counter-revolutionary Whites, to the Red Army aligned with anarchists, all competing for power and backed by militias they could not effectively control (for an overview of the chronology of rapidly shifting governments see Magocsi 1996:468–520).

Even given the chaos, after the Bolsheviks dismissed the Constituent Assembly in January 1918, thereby ending the possibility of broad political participation in the new Russian state, some Jewish political activists moved from Petrograd to Kiev with the hope of building Jewish autonomy in a newly independent Ukraine (Moss 2009). In January 1918, Ukraine’s Central Rada (Tsentral’na rada, or Central Council; the parliamentary body created after the February Revolution) declared independence from Russia and at the same time passed a Law on National and Personal Autonomy granting wide-ranging powers to Jews, Poles, and Russians to create their own national institutions. When the Red Army invaded, the various socialist and
nationalist Jewish political parties backed the Ukrainian Rada, created their own Jewish proto-parliament, and attempted to establish Jewish autonomy. (On the politics of Jewish autonomy in independent Ukraine see Abramson 1991, 1999; Frankel 1990; Rabinovitch 2014:255–57; Zaidman 1980.) Despite much of the Jewish political classes initially supporting Ukrainian independence immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, as tens of thousands of Jews were murdered in gruesome pogroms conducted by Ukrainian and White forces (and a much smaller number by the Red Army), Jews came to see their physical safety as possible only under the communists (Budnitskii 2005:275–343).

The civil war in Russia and Ukraine between 1917 and 1922 marked the bloodiest period of anti-Jewish violence possibly ever, anywhere, up to that point, and some of the worst of that violence occurred in 1919 during the period of the UNR, when peasant militias armed with weapons abandoned by the retreating German army killed Jews and Bolsheviks (whom they equated to being one and the same) in the name of Petliura, who had become a symbol of the Ukrainian national movement. Because of Petliura’s assassination and the subsequent Schwarzbard trial, much of the conversation about anti-Jewish violence during the civil war has revolved around Petliura’s responsibility. As Christopher Gilley convincingly argues (2017; also in this Special Feature issue, pp. 326–338), however, the scholarly focus on Petliura has obscured the record of the broad culpability of nationally conscious Ukrainians who perpetrated pogroms, and the Directory government’s role in justifying them. The Russian government’s accusation of Jewish pro-German treason during World War I easily evolved into the broadly accepted canard of Judeo-Bolshevism and, Gilley suggests, ‘the persistence of the Judeo-Bolshevik myth in Ukrainian nationalist discourse is perhaps less a product of the long-standing association of Jews with revolution and more of the Bolsheviks’ enduring place as the enemy of Ukrainian statehood’ (2017:56–57).

The Directory government only held Kiev between 15 December 1918 and 6 February 1919, and then took the city back for one brief day in August that year (Khiterer 2015:29–40), but for much of that time Avraham Revutsky served as the government’s Minister for Jewish Affairs (the Directory retreated to Vinnytsia and then established a capital in Kamenets-Podolskii, where it created a new Ministry for Jewish Affairs). A previously unknown statement by Revutsky, published here, is a valuable window into both the complicated role played by Jewish socialists during the period and the process in which explanatory narratives were constructed after the events. According to a report sent in June 1922 to the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Ukraine by the Berlin attaché of the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic, a former Minister for Jewish Affairs in the Ukrainian National Republic entered the Ukrainian Soviet mission in Berlin requesting ‘rehabilitation’. Revutsky had just learned of his conviction in absentia for anti-Soviet activities in an early Soviet show trial (protsess) and sought to relay a statement defending his pro-Soviet record. A letter such as this generates more questions than it does answers. Why did Revutsky, as an émigré safe out of the Bolsheviks’ grasp, try to clear his name with the Soviets? What does his petition say about perceptions of Soviet power and nationalities policy among Jewish socialists at the time? Finally, what, if anything, does Revutsky’s petition tell us about how and when the Ukrainian, Jewish, and Soviet narratives of civil-war Ukraine diverged and converged?
Revutsky was born near Kiev and spent much of his childhood in Palestine, where his family helped found the town of Rehovot, before returning to the Russian Empire. After becoming active in socialist Zionist politics and as a follower of its ideological founder, Ber Borochov (1881–1917), Revutsky moved to Vienna, and during World War I he returned to Kiev to work for Poalei Zion and edit its weekly paper (Revutsky 1998:v–vi ‘Translators’ Introduction’). Ukraine’s Ministry for Jewish Affairs was created under the first independent Rada, dismantled by the puppet government installed by the Central Powers (the so-called Hetmanate), and re-established by the Directory. Avraham Revutsky became the Directory’s first Minister for Jewish Affairs under contentious circumstances among the Jewish parties, but mainly because the Directory wanted a socialist in the position and Revutsky’s party, Poalei Zion, was the most accommodating (Abramson 1999:142–143; Tcherikower 1965:39–48).

Revutsky’s tenure as Minister for Jewish Affairs lasted only a couple of short months before he resigned from the position. However, Revutsky did not resign because of the severe anti-Jewish violence that, fairly or unfairly, came to be associated with the Directory. Rather, he resigned under pressure from his party, Poalei Zion, because the Directory struck an alliance with the Entente Powers. Poalei Zion’s rather awkward policy had been to support the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Ukrainian socialists in Ukraine, but this policy became untenable the moment the Directory joined with the ‘imperialist’ powers in a war against Russia. After leaving Ukraine and making his way to Palestine in 1919, Revutsky worked there for Poalei Zion, and he found himself in Berlin in 1922 by something of an accident. He had gone to a conference in Danzig and afterwards discovered that he would not be allowed by the British to return to Palestine (Revutsky 1998:258).8

In Berlin, more than just the news of his blacklisting reached Revutsky. Evidently, Revutsky also heard rumours of his implication in the trial and of the conviction in absentia of another former minister in the Directory (Revutsky refers to the ‘Golubovich protsess’ [see Figure A1 in the Appendix], a reference to the show trial of V. A. Golubovich, who was chairman of the Council of People’s Ministers in the Central Rada [Eudin 1941:95]). With the bloody suppression of the Kronstadt revolt in 1921 and the Red Army’s victory in the civil war clear by 1922, the Bolsheviks intensified the legal repression of other socialists and began to exile abroad non-Bolshevik socialists and any intellectuals considered potential political opponents (Finkel 2003).9 The spring and summer of 1922 marked the first serious crackdown on socialist Zionist organizations as ‘anti-Soviet illegal organizations’, with the arrest of the participants of the Tse’irei Tsiyon (Young Zion) conference in April 1922, and their public trial in August (Morozov 2006:15). Then in June 1922 the Bolsheviks decided to definitively break the back of the socialist opposition by introducing new treason clauses into the Soviet Penal Code and establishing the first public show trials (Jansen 1982). Rumours no doubt swirled around Berlin during the spring and summer of 1922, as intended, about the nature of the indictments and trials. The Soviets made great use of the foreign press, as the primary purpose of the trials, according to one argument, was to justify to socialists in the West the Soviet repression of socialist opposition on its own soil (Jansen 1982; Rappoport 1991:421).10
Troubled by the rumours, Revutsky decided to take action and went directly to the Berlin delegation of the Ukrainian Socialist People’s Republic (the Soviet Union would be officially consecrated in December 1922). In a formal statement he made an impassioned defence of his pro-Soviet record while serving in the Directory government. It is clear from the note attached to the statement, written by the Soviet attaché (First Secretary) in Berlin (Figure A1), that Revutsky came into the office of the delegation in person, because the attaché mentions details that are not in Revutsky’s statement, such as the fact that Revutsky had become more pro-Soviet since travelling to ‘Egypt’ (though he almost certainly meant Palestine). The First Secretary also used the term ‘to rehabilitate himself’ to describe Revutsky’s intentions. Although Revutsky did not use that term in his formal statement, the fact that the attaché put reabilitirovat’sia in quotation marks seems to suggest that is how Revutsky explained himself when he delivered the statement.

In Revutsky’s formal statement, or zaiavlenie (Figure A2 in the Appendix), he claims that rumours had reached him through private individuals that he had been accused of participating ‘in some kind of conferences about the organization of a partisan movement against Soviet power in Ukraine’. As a result, Revutsky felt compelled to ‘defend my revolutionary honour and bring the authors of such statements, if not to a legal, then to a strict moral accountability’. What follows is an impassioned defence of his and Poalei Zion’s participation in the Directory government. He claims that he and Poalei Zion were pro-Soviet and only joined the Directory because of their knowledge of a secret agreement between the Directory and Soviet Russia. He argues that within the cabinet he upheld a ‘resolute Soviet orientation’ and resigned as soon as he lost faith in the Directory’s will to cooperate with Soviet Russia. In a section that has been crossed through (Figure A2) he states that even his departure from Ukraine was not caused by political opposition to Soviet power, but rather by repression at the hands of the White Army (described as ‘Volunteers’). And he suggests that since being forced out of Ukraine he has categorically separated himself from the Directory and underscored in his own political circles the need to support Soviet power in Ukraine.

The question of whether Revutsky believed he could convince the Soviets of his pro-Soviet credentials, given his participation in the Directory, upon first consideration seems suspect. The Soviets, after all, were far more interested in discrediting every individual involved with the Directory than in establishing the truth. Nonetheless, the First Secretary dated his note 8 June, the exact day that twenty-two members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party were charged in Moscow by the Supreme Revolutionary Tribunal for participating in an array of anti-Soviet activities (Revutsky’s statement is dated 29 May). At the very moment that indictments, arrests, and trials were beginning, émigrés and socialists in the West may have held out some belief that the trials would create a legal framework for the accused to properly defend themselves, and it is this hope that may have led Revutsky to write his own letter. As a socialist Zionist, a member of the Directory, and an émigré, Revutsky was triply damned, yet he apparently still placed hope in his ability to put himself in good standing through rational explanation.

The petition also reflects a certain degree of naïveté, or at least misunderstanding, regarding Soviet intentions in Ukraine. Revutsky claimed in his statement that he
categorically separated himself from the Directory, and ‘underscored the necessity of supporting the Soviet power existing in Ukraine, at the same time defending within the settings of Soviet power the principle of the independence of Ukraine’. He added, ‘I rejected all kinds of attempts at the Russification of its nationality’. This section of the letter was likewise crossed out, presumably by the official who read it, and likely for the purpose of indicating what should be censored if the letter were reproduced. Because Petliura’s success in raising the peasantry against the Bolsheviks in 1919 was attributed to unnecessarily chauvinist Bolshevik policies, Lenin himself forced the Ukrainian Bolsheviks to support Ukrainization, at least in theory. Still, as Terry Martin explains, ‘From 1919 to 2023, the majority of Ukrainian [Bolshevik] party members remained either hostile to or bewildered by the policy of Ukrainization’ (2001:17; see also Borys 1980). As a petition strategy, rejecting the Russification of Ukraine was, in 1922, of questionable wisdom, but nonetheless reflected the divergence between official and unofficial Bolshevik policy at the time.

Most importantly, Revutsky’s zaiavlanie reflects the very complicated legacy of this period on the consciences of the Jews who participated in the Directory and in general in the failed experiment with Jewish autonomy in Ukraine. Because the worst outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in the civil war took place during the period of the Directory, and more often than not by the troops of the Ukrainian National Republic, Revutsky and others felt compelled ex post facto to defend, disclaim, or justify their participation in this government. At the same time, however, despite the anti-Jewish violence, Jewish socialists knew they looked guilty in Soviet eyes for having cooperated with every independent Ukrainian government, and worse, having done so in order to defend and build Jewish autonomy, something that the Bolsheviks had by 1922 mostly eradicated as a remnant of ‘bourgeois nationalism’ (Pinkus 1988:49–76; Shneer 2004:1–29; Silberfarb 1993).

Although the driving narrative of Revutsky’s zaiavlanie is his personal support for Soviet power while serving the Directory, his memoir, which he composed in Berlin in Yiddish between 1922 and 1924, relates how the pogromists — and indeed some members of the government — used the accusation of Jewish support for the Bolsheviks to justify anti-Jewish violence (Revutsky 1924, 1998). Revutsky assumed his office immediately following pogroms in Berdichev and Zhitomir conducted by Directory troops. In a telling anecdote, Revutsky describes in his memoir an argument with the head of the Directory cabinet, Volodymyr Vynnechenko, on the day Revutsky’s ministerial appointment was confirmed, about the phrasing of the Directory’s proclamation condemning the Berdichev and Zhitomir pogroms. Revutsky objected strongly to a passage in the declaration stating that although most Jews are not Bolsheviks, the Jews themselves should take the initiative in rooting out their anti-Ukrainian elements. Revutsky claimed with some justice, ‘This gives the pogrom-agitators the excuse that Jews do not oppose the enemies of Ukraine [in this context the Bolsheviks] in their midst vigorously enough’ (1998:113). Thus in the narrative constructed in his memoir — in stark contrast to his zaiavlanie — Revutsky relates that while serving in the Directory he fought against the perceived association between Jews and Bolsheviks.

In the immediate wake of the civil war, the terrible anti-Jewish violence, and the failure of Jewish autonomy in Ukraine, it is no surprise that Jews who were
connected to the independent Ukrainian governments attempted to explain their involvement, deny responsibility for the chaos, and distance themselves from the figures in the Directory who had, at that time, become the greatest villains in recent Jewish history. Most of the apologias that sprang forth, including Revutsky’s memoir, were written in Yiddish and directed at a Jewish audience. In his memoir Revutsky claims that he knew that boycotting the government would be interpreted by Ukrainians as boycotting Ukrainian sovereignty and would lead to anti-Jewish violence (which occurred regardless). As in his petition, he suggests that he only joined the Directory because of his knowledge of a secret pact with the Soviets. In his memoir, however, he claims he wanted this agreement not for ideological reasons, but rather because he feared it was the only way to avoid anti-Jewish violence, which was his main concern. Revutsky’s memoir even goes on to liken his desire for an agreement with the Soviets to the actions of ‘a drowning man grasping at a straw’ (Revutsky 1998:66–67) — a far cry from ‘resolute’ support.

During the civil war, when the Bolsheviks were the enemies of Ukraine and Jews were being murdered, a Jewish socialist such as Revutsky had to oppose the slander of Jewish allegiance to Bolshevism, but after the Red Army had won the war, a record of opposition to Soviet power could be a liability to one’s standing in the international socialist movement. Thus, if the memoir’s purpose was as an apologia, it is the internal politics of socialist Zionism that may have led Revutsky to appeal to the Soviets for ‘rehabilitation’ or for some written indication that the rumours were false. The Soviet attaché in Berlin commented that Revutsky had become much more pro-Bolshevik while in ‘Egypt’, where he became even more convinced that ‘their [presumably Jewish] “freedom” is secured only while the Soviet Republic exists’ (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). As Anita Shapira (1988) and others have demonstrated, in the years following the Revolution, the Palestine branch of Poalei Zion as well as more moderate aspects of the Palestinian socialist movement were decidedly pro-Bolshevik. Poalei Zion in Europe split into pro- and anti-Bolshevik left and right wings (see Kassow 2003), but in Palestine the socialist movement was almost uniformly sympathetic to the Bolsheviks at this time.

Revutsky’s participation in the Directory likely became a cause of embarrassment for him in Palestine. He returned to Berlin to rumours of the Bolsheviks trying him in absentia, or at the least implicating him in a trial, and he may have considered how such accusations de-legitimized his role in the Poalei Zion movement. Between May and November of 1922 Revutsky was in regular contact with the central committees of Poalei Zion in London and Palestine about strengthening the pro-Bolshevik Left-Poalei Zion in Europe, as well as other party matters regarding their party publication Der Kampf and facilitating the settlement of Jewish workers in Palestine. Revutsky’s correspondence with his colleagues in Poalei Zion in 1922, however, never mentions the ‘Golubovich prosess’ or his statement at the mission in Berlin.

The petition strategies Revutsky employed in his statement share similarities with those later employed by individuals who in different circumstances were officially disenfranchised in the Soviet Union. As Golfo Alexopoulos demonstrated in her study of such petitions made between 1926 and 1936, disenfranchised citizens rarely admitted wrongdoing and, in contrast to what they might have been reading in the newspapers about repentant party members, wrote with detailed narratives of
their past and continued efforts on the part of the Soviet state (2003:108–09). In his zaiavlenie Revutsky attacked his accusers, framed his actions as the most Soviet option available in the context of the civil war, and attempted to demonstrate his redemption through productivity for the Soviets ever since the events in question. Although he denied the specific accusations against him (participation in an anti-Soviet partisan movement), he in effect accepted the implications of his participation in the Directory by presenting himself as a Soviet ally within the government. That someone who was so obviously an enemy according to the Soviets’ categorizations – a member of the Directory, a Zionist, and a political émigré – believed he could hold his accusers morally, if not legally responsible, also suggests that at least on the brink of the first Soviet show trials, the Bolsheviks successfully projected an image of theoretical accommodation, if not legality.

It did not take long after the definitive end to the civil war in Ukraine for interpretations of loyalties and complicity to diverge and calcify. Within the Soviet Union, the narrative of Ukrainian national revolution was delegitimized and replaced by one of Soviet liberation from counter-revolutionaries and bourgeois nationalists. For the Ukrainian diaspora, a self-conscious Ukrainian national liberation movement was cut short by external Russian, Soviet, and Jewish interests. For Jews, the civil war was a period of unrestrained anti-Jewish violence — perpetrated by all sides — that only came to an end with the Red Army’s total victory. Despite often overlapping and fluid allegiances in a chaotic civil war, once the civil war was given a revolutionary script it was left to the actors to attempt to clarify their roles in the revolutionary drama. After all, being written into the wrong side of the ledger — as antagonist rather than protagonist — could have real implications, certainly in the Soviet Union, but also in the international socialist movement. Thus, from a political activist attempting to institute Jewish autonomy and protect Jewish lives in the midst of civil war, Revutsky recast himself as a Soviet revolutionary. Such revolutionary credentials would have been necessary not only for ‘rehabilitation’ in the Soviet Union, but also for participation in Jewish socialist circles in Palestine and the diaspora.

As historians attempt to reconstruct both the pogroms of the civil war in Ukraine and the eventual consolidation of Soviet power there, a Ukrainian nationalist historical memory of both victimhood and national triumph, centred on a pantheon of Ukrainian heroes, elides or denies the connection between such heroes, Ukrainian national struggle, and periods of intense anti-Jewish violence. Revutsky’s brief tenure as Minister for Jewish Affairs did nothing to mitigate the mass violence perpetrated against Jews between 1918 and 1922, overwhelmingly by Ukrainian troops. His ministry failed to protect the Jews (or rather, it had no ability to do so), as the Ukrainian National Republic failed to maintain its independence. What Revutsky’s zaiavlenie highlights is the extent to which the revolutionary scripts — who played what role, and with what motives — were constructed after the fact, and took different forms depending on the audience. In Ukraine in 1919, unlike Berlin in 1922, the fates of an independent Ukrainian state, a Bolshevik Russia, or the Jews in either, were entirely up in the air. Even to categorize individual and collective loyalties as Ukrainian, Jewish, or Soviet ignores the reality of the many Ukrainians who supported the Bolsheviks, Jews who supported Ukrainian nationalists, and Jews, Ukrainians, Russians, and Poles
who saw themselves as socialist supporters of an independent socialist state in Ukraine. Keeping this context in mind, Revutsky’s secret заявлenie and his request for ‘rehabilitation’ provides a snapshot of the complexity of affiliations during the period, and one individual effort to clarify them.

Notes

1 As Serhii Plokhy (1995) observed fairly soon after Ukrainian independence, the problem for Ukrainians seeking to create a Ukrainian national history lay in the paradox that Ukrainians who supported independence in 1991 did so as an expression of their ties to the Ukrainian SSR in the context of a disintegrating Soviet Union, rather than any sense of understanding of or affiliation to the independent revolutionary Ukrainian state.

2 Khrushchev personally telegraphed Stalin to explain that creating the order would be popular and good politics because Khmelnytsky was revered among Ukrainians as a statesman and military leader and for fighting for Ukraine’s liberation and union with Russia. Stalin took this encouragement a step further and simultaneously renamed the town of Pereiaslav as Pereiaslav-Khmelnytsky (Yękelchyk 2004:35–36).

3 Monuments to Petliura and streets renamed for him have appeared in different parts of Ukraine since 1991. As Lars Fischer states, ‘Uncritical reverence for Petliura as a national hero has become official state policy in Ukraine and is proudly flaunted on the international stage too’ (2008:303).

4 Bandera was posthumously made a ‘Hero of Ukraine’ in January 2010 by President Viktor Yushchenko (after he lost re-election in 2009) and has become a central figure in the mythology of right-wing Ukrainian nationalism, especially for the followers of Pravyi Sektor (Right Sector) and their leader Dmytro Yarosh (Rossolinski 2014; Snyder 2010a).

5 The canard that Jews orchestrated the famine, the ‘real Holocaust’, has become a favourite claim of antisemitic and white supremacist websites (see for example https://holodomorinfo.com/). On the rise of right-wing revisionism in Ukraine see Joshua Cohen’s (2016) article for Foreign Policy, ‘The Historian Whitewashing Ukraine’s Past’. The famine and its relationship to genocide has come under renewed interest with recent books by Timothy Snyder (2010b) and Anne Applebaum (2017).

6 The most conservative estimates of casualties are 50 000–60 000 Jews murdered in pogroms between 1918 and 1921, though the number was possibly closer to 100 000. Most scholars rely on the calculations of Nahum Gergel (1951). See also the documentary collection edited by L. B. Miliakova and I. A. Ziuzina (2007).

7 A touchstone in this debate occurred in the journal Jewish Social Studies in 1969 with an article by Taras Hunczak and response by Zosa Szajkowski.

8 Supposedly the British had blacklisted him for arguing that the British Colonial Office was responsible for instigating Arab anti-Jewish riots. Revutsky published Fun Balfur biz Samyuel: tsvey deklaratsyes in Yiddish in Warsaw in 1921. It seems unlikely the British would have learned of the arguments made in this book, but that seems to be what Revutsky believed.

9 Those people Lenin described in May 1922 as ‘manifest counterrevolutionaries, accomplices of the Entente, the organization of its servants and spies and corrupters of the studying youth’ (as quoted in Finkel 2003:602).

10 The Soviet attaché in Berlin noted his intention to use Revutsky’s letter in the international Jewish press, though I have found no evidence that he did so. If news of Revutsky’s request for ‘rehabilitation’ were to appear anywhere, it probably would have been in the Communist Party’s Moscow Yiddish paper Der Emes, started by S. Dimanshteyn and edited by M. Litvakov after 1921, but no mention of Revutsky appears there from June through to September of 1922.
While intended for the NKVD, the statement was instead passed to the Kiev Communist Party Central Committee. This petition ended up in a fond of ‘The Commission for the history of the civil war. Under the central committee of the Communist Party /Bolsheviks/ in Ukraine’ located in the Central State Archives of Public Organizations of Ukraine, Kiev (TsGAOO/TsDAHO, f. 5, o. 1, d. 370). The fond’s catalogue listed the petition as ‘Letter from former minister for Jewish affairs in the Directory Revutsky to the Central Committee of the Communist Party /Bolsheviks/ in Ukraine regarding his rehabilitation’.

The Soviet Union was officially formed on September 30, 1922, as a union of federated republics, in order to address the problem that officials in the Bolshevik governments in Ukraine, Belarussia, and the Caucasus were almost entirely Russian (and urban).

Moses Silberfarb (Moyshe Zilberfarb), independent Ukraine’s first Minister for Jewish Affairs, recorded in his own account of the period that even during the Red Army’s first occupation of Kiev, in January 1918, the Bolsheviks attempted to dismantle Jewish autonomy, seizing the quarters of the Ministry for Jewish Affairs along with their archive, and portraying Jewish autonomy as a bourgeois plot (1993:81–82).

See the article by Victoria Khiterer (2005) about an exception, Arnold Margolin, who served as Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Revutsky’s telling is more or less corroborated by Solomon Goldelman, Vice-Minister of National Economy in the Directory, who suggests (1968:108) that Revutsky actively sought to convince the Directory and other members of the government to reach a compromise with Moscow in order to save the Republic (consistent with a general re-orientation towards the Bolsheviks among Jewish socialists in Ukraine). Elias Tcherikower, though responsible for assembling a key archival collection for the study of the civil-war pogroms (currently housed at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York), also relied considerably on Revutsky’s memoir and other Yiddish memoirs for his book on the 1919 pogroms and thus reaffirms much of Revutsky’s version of events within the Directory in January and February of 1919 (1965:92–113), and in particular, that there was little Revutsky could do for the victims of the pogroms (1965:106).

Several historians such as Frederick Corney, Keith Baker, and Dan Edelstein have recently tried to study revolutions comparatively by focusing on the diffusion of ‘revolutionary scripts’ (see Corney 2004; Baker and Edelstein 2015).

In this context the Ukrainian SSR.

References

Archives:
Central State Archive of Public Organizations of Ukraine, Kiev.
Russian State Archive of Social-Political History, Moscow (microfiche by IDC Publishers located at Harvard College Library).

Published Sources:


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Figure A1. A note by the First Secretary of the Berlin Mission of the Ukrainian Socialist People’s Republic (the precursor of the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic) explaining that the former Minister for Jewish Affairs in the Ukrainian National Republic (Ukraїns’ka narodna respublika, or UNR), Abram Revuts’kii (Avraham Revutzky), seeks ‘to rehabilitate himself’. Source: Central State Archive of Public Organizations of Ukraine, Kiev (TsGAOO/TsDAHO f. 5, o. 1, d. 370).
Translation of Figure A1

Berlin, 8 June 1922

To the Secretary of the Central Committee: Central Committee — Communist Party of Ukraine

Enclosed herewith is a copy of a letter from the former ‘Minister of Jewish Affairs’ of the Directory, Abram REVUTSKII, who appealed to our Mission with a request to allow him ‘to rehabilitate himself’ in view of the rumours that had reached him about how, during the Golubovich trial, his name had been brought up as a participant of an anti-Soviet conference.

REVUTSKII recently arrived from Egypt, where, according to him, he became all the more affirmed in his ‘Soviet orientation’ under the influence of the enormous sympathy, in the East in general and particularly within Egypt, to Soviet power (the Egyptians are convinced that their ‘freedom’ is secured only while the Soviet Republic exists). REVUTSKII addressed his letter (apparently accidentally) to the NKVD. We ask that you pass it on to the appropriate committee for a response through the mediation of our government, and also, if you find it necessary, to use this letter in print. On our part, we shall use it within the foreign Jewish press.

1st Secretary
Figure A2. A Statement by Abram Revutskii (Avraham Revutsky) addressed to the Internal Affairs Commissar (of the NKVD, which was not yet the Soviet secret police) regarding his implication in a trial for alleged anti-Soviet activities in 1919. Source: Central State Archive of Public Organizations of Ukraine, Kiev (TsGAOO/TsDAHO f. 5, o. 1, d. 370).
Figure A2. (Continued)
Translation of Figure A2

To the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the USSR

From Abram Samoilovich REVUTSKII,

Recently in Berlin, at the address of the Berlin Mission of the USSR

Statement:

On my arrival in Europe after a lengthy stay in various countries, the rumour reached me that, apparently, during the GOLUBOVICH trial in Kiev, the accused claimed that I, as the former National Minister of Jewish Affairs in Chekhovskii’s Cabinet, participated during my tenure in some kind of conferences about the organization of a partisan movement against Soviet power in Ukraine. Inquiries that I made, both at the Berlin Mission of the USSR and through private individuals, did not provide any confirmation of said rumour. I am deeply convinced that such a statement could not have been made, for Ukrainian political circles are well aware of the resolute Soviet orientation which I upheld within Chekhovskii’s Cabinet. Still, deeming that such a statement about me, if it was in fact made, was extremely insulting to both me personally and the party that I represented, I permit myself to ask the [acronym crossed out, but likely the NKVD] to verify whether
such a statement had been made during the aforementioned trial by either Golubovich himself or someone else, so that I can, in the case of the aforementioned rumour’s confirmation, defend my revolutionary honour and bring the authors of such statements, if not to a legal, then to a strict moral accountability.

In addition to this request, I feel it is necessary to remind you that the party ‘Poalei Zion’, which decided at the end of December, 1918, with its sympathies to Soviet power known even then, to join the first Government of the Directory (the Chekhovskii Cabinet), was directed mostly by categorical statements of V. M. Chekhovskii and V. K. Vinnichenko, that they and the party they represented were bound by agreements with Soviet Russia, that they would to the extent possible fight against reactionary influences outlined within the ranks of the Directory, and in no case participate in any negotiations with the Entente, especially those against Soviet Russia. Once we became sure that the activists we trusted were in part powerless and in part even insincere in their assurances, and that with each day the influence of the elements, which, under the control of Petliura, strengthened and consciously aspired to a union with the Entente, then I, in accordance with the party which I represent, resigned, underscoring with this my complete lack of confidence in the Directory.

In the course of the few following days when I, already resigned, was forced to wait for the transfer of my duties, I did not fulfil any political functions. Being abroad, I, at the first available opportunity, at a presentation organized by the Czechoslovakian section of the Jewish World Socialist Workers Union Poalei Zion in Prague (April 1919!), categorically separated myself from the Directory and underscored the necessity of supporting the Soviet power existing in Ukraine, at the same time defending within the settings of Soviet power the principle of the independence of Ukraine. I rejected all kinds of attempts at the Russification of its nationality.

Even my personal departure from Ukraine was caused not by political opposition to Soviet power, but solely by the persecutions to which I was subjected by the Volunteers at the time of my last sojourn in Odessa (February–March 1919).

From all of the aforementioned, it becomes clear to what extent armed battle against Soviet power, not to mention partisan statements against said party, would contradict the entire spirit of politics which I conducted in Ukraine, and because of which I, so definitively, refute such rumours, without even having confirmation of their existence.

I dare to hope that the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs will not deny me the requested information.

Please accept [and so on] comrades, the assurance of my sincere respect.

Abr. Revutskii

Berlin, 29 May 1922