

Re-thinking the Revolution in Ukraine: The Jewish Experience, 1917–1921

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One productive way to reconceptualize the experience of the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–21 is by using Peter Holquist's notion of "Russia's continuum of crisis," according to which the revolution constituted part of a wider European period of mobilization and violence that started in 1914 and continued until the early 1920s.¹ The same idea of the "continuum" can be applied to the Jewish experience of the same events. Traditionally presented in the historiography as a grim story of unrelenting pogroms, the history of the Jews in the lands claimed by the Ukrainian People's Republic (which existed from June 1917 until March 1921, with interruptions) was indeed a time of extreme violence and ordeals.² The imperial collapse also opened up possibilities, however, for the development of both Ukrainian and Jewish national communities. The "Ukrainian" revolution was also a Jewish one.

The "continuum of crisis" opened the way for the blossoming of multiple imagined communities, to use Benedict Anderson's concept of nationalism, which were in the process of developing their public spheres and striving to promote the national interests of each particular nationality coexisting in the former imperial southwestern region (Jewish, Ukrainian, Polish, and Russian). In particular, the case study of Kyiv's Jewish community as one of multiple imagined communities shows that their creation and development in 1917 when the Empire collapsed was in fact made possible by the war. It was the war that served as a catalyst for social development. In many ways, this evolution occurred due to, and not in spite of, their desperate wartime situation. The complex dynamics of these processes of social transformation also involved a realignment of ethnic hierarchies and the development of new alliances, as well as new conflicts. In order to treat this subject properly, we need to start by acknowledging both the specificity of the situation in the Ukrainian lands and the greater significance of the war for the nationalities that lived there. The wartime experience of the Jews (persecutions, expulsions, and relief effort to aid the refugees and the destitute population) also created new possibilities for their communal organization that allow us to say that the "Ukrainian" revolution was also a Jewish one.

Jan Gross has argued that war itself is revolutionary because it alters social relations, the balance of power between society and state, and the patterns of interaction between the two.³ The war drive starting in 1914, on a scale unsurpassed until World War II, mobilized young men and women, changing their social roles and transforming them into soldiers and breadwinners. Although

1. Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 4.

2. Jonathan Dekel-Chen, Natan M. Meir, and Israel Bartal, eds., *Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History* (Bloomington, 2010).

3. Jan Gross, "War as Revolution," in Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii, eds., *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944–1949* (Boulder, 1997), 18.

the war initiated social and economic changes, the revolution amplified them. Revolution was a dramatic rupture, the end of the *ancien* regime, and the beginning of a new social order. Yet accompanying this utopian futurism was an explosion of ethnic and class conflict, as well as extreme communal violence.

Thirty years ago, Steven Zipperstein noted that scholars had a tendency to consider the history of “Russian” Jewry during the Great War as unworthy of attention; those years were usually seen as “dark” and “barren” due to the absence of activity in any of the Jewish political parties.⁴ Therefore, the majority of the studies on the history of “Russian” Jewry during the late imperial period end at 1914 rather than crossing this traditional divide into the period of the “continuum of crisis.” Scholars have, by contrast, lavished attention on the Revolution and the Civil War as times of rampant antisemitism and pogroms, but often do not include the late imperial background to this story. Tellingly, the recognition of “Ukraine” as the homeland of “Russian” Jewry often comes only at the point when scholars focus on antisemitism and the pogroms of 1919 in “Ukrainian” lands. We should not forget, however, that the events of the Great War and the Revolution overlapped, and the dynamics of interethnic relations should be seen in their proper geographical and chronological context. The Ukrainians did not appear out of nowhere in 1917; the Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, and Jewish communities in revolutionary Ukraine were building new relationships on the legacy and foundation of pre-war tensions, which were reinforced by the ethnicization of politics brought by the war.⁵ The imperial collapse and the struggle for power were not the immediate causes of ethnic violence. Moreover, the revolution generated not only conflict, but also attempts at cooperation, and these attempts are especially notable in the Ukrainian-Jewish case.⁶

The war was a mobilizing event that provided Ukrainian Jewry with a public sphere separate from political parties.⁷ As Mark von Hagen notes, the intended and unintended consequences of state policies (such as forced expulsions and the stigmatization of Jews as an unreliable and treacherous social group) during the Great War offer an explanation for the emergence of ethnonational conflict in the disintegrating Russian Empire.⁸ Wartime policy and its economic and social consequences undermined the positions of traditional elites and accelerated democratization of national elites. Thus, the mobilization of the Jewish national movement and its dynamic

4. Steven J. Zipperstein, “The Politics of Relief: The Transformation of Russian Jewish Communal Life during the First World War,” in Jonathan Frankel, ed., *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 4, *The Jews and the European Crisis, 1914–21*, (New York, 1988), 22.

5. Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens during World War I* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Mark von Hagen, “The Great War and the Mobilization of Ethnicity in the Russian Empire,” in Barnett R. Rubin and Jack Snyder, eds., *Post-Soviet Political Order: Conflict and State Building* (New York, 1998), 34–97.

6. Only Abramson’s book exists on this topic; it is now available in Ukrainian translation. See Henry Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917–1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).

7. “Ukrainian Jewry” refers here to the Jews living in the southwestern region of the Russian Empire that would become claimed by the UNR.

8. Mark von Hagen, “The Great War and the Mobilization of Ethnicity.”

in 1917–1918 can be understood only in the greater context of the wartime “mobilization of ethnicity.”

While Natan Meir’s excellent study of Jewish life in late-imperial Kyiv demonstrates both the linkages and tensions developing in the city’s multinational setting, it does not go beyond 1914.⁹ As I have just argued, the war only exacerbated Jewish separateness. Jewish philanthropic activity during the war created a new and officially-sanctioned Jewish space, which enabled the development of a Jewish civil society and established an imagined national community. Although Jewish welfare organizations, such as the Jewish Committee for the Relief of War Victims, functioned under the auspices of Russian government bodies and were partly sponsored by the state, they represented the Jewish population as a separate nationality. Importantly, however, this notion included not only “Russian” Jews, but also Jewish subjects of the Habsburg Empire, who had inhabited recently-conquered Galicia and Bukovina and were in the process of being forcibly deported to the inner Russian provinces. The mixing of Russian and Austrian Jews and the literal and figurative necessity of finding a common language of communication created a feeling of community and fraternity across former imperial borders.¹⁰ An awareness of commonalities, regardless of citizenship, was the crucial condition for testing modern Jewish national slogans, and this sense of community enhanced the fight for Jewish equality, which in turn became the basis for the political mobilization of Jewry in this region in 1917. It took place alongside the Ukrainian resurgence and against the background of Russians losing their privileged social position in the region.

Rogers Brubaker states that a nation is realized in practice and this realization depends on surrounding circumstances. The legal restrictions and antisemitism prevalent in the Russian Empire were not necessarily factors working against nation-building for the Jewish community. These measures, in fact, institutionalized national identities and enabled the mass mobilization of the population. When the regime excluded Jews from the ranks of loyal subjects and neglected their economic, social, and cultural interests, it institutionalized them as a separate group. This created a feeling of solidarity, and the war acted as a factor stimulating Jewish social and political activity.¹¹

Due to this separateness, increased by the nationalizing campaign in Russia during the Great War, the Russian Jews, the majority of whom lived in the Pale of Jewish Settlement, which included the majority of Ukrainian provinces, did not need to choose between Ukrainian and Russian competing nationalisms in 1917. By that time, due to the broad social activity of relief organizations, Jews had produced a group of professionals ready to formulate and act on Jewish aspirations of national-cultural autonomy. The boundary-defining drive of Ukrainians, which was clearly visible in Kyiv in 1917, compelled the Jews to stick to Jewish national organizations, such as the Jewish

9. Natan M. Meir, *Kiev, Jewish Metropolis: A History, 1859–1914* (Bloomington, 2010).

10. Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington, 1999), 148.

11. Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), 17–18.

Council and later the Jewish Secretariat (Ministry). Experienced social and political organizers staffed these organizations. The new Jewish political institutions, born of the revolution, enabled the representation and defense of Jewish national interests at the local and state levels.

The Jewish community of Kyiv, the central city of the region, offers a useful prism for reconceptualizing the Great War and the “Russian” Revolution. The years of revolution and civil war (1917–1921) were a period of unprecedented political activity on all territories of the collapsed Russian Empire. However, most of the existing research is focused on the internal Russian regions and the capital cities of St. Petersburg/Petrograd and Moscow. This “Russian imperial model” still defines how scholars write about this period, such that the southwest provinces of the empire become a footnote to the “central” story of Petrograd/Moscow. We should not forget, however, that in the south- and northwestern regions of the Russian Empire, the territories closest to the front and largely under German occupation in 1918, experienced the revolutionary turmoil differently. Nation-building and the refashioning of ethnic hierarchies were far more important there than in Russia proper. I argue for focusing on regional case studies and paying attention to other national communities, not only the Russian or Ukrainian. Focus on other nationalities that populated the Ukrainian lands (for example, Jews or Poles) could help researchers understand the multi-dimensionality of the events of 1917–21, as well as the causal connections between them. After all, the Ukrainian lands constituted a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multilingual world. In order to grasp the logic of the processes that turned life in the region upside down, it would help to focus on the minority experiences.

The Ukrainian archives now provide unrestricted access to a variety of valuable collections that document both the political debates in Kyiv and the voices of small Jewish communities in the countryside. These rich primary sources offer an opportunity to extend the interpretive boundaries of historical research and move beyond the political history of the revolution and the pogroms to the work engaging the concepts of gender, emotions, trauma, and the culture of violence. Case studies and microhistorical studies armed with new methodological tools can change our understanding of the impact of war and revolution on Ukrainian Jewish society.

The years 1917 and 1918 were relatively calm in comparison with the fratricidal violence that would erupt in 1919 and 1920. On March 22, 1917, the Provisional Government in Petrograd declared the “abolition of all class, religious, and national restrictions,” which meant the full abolishment of the Pale.¹² The first two years of freedom were contemporaneous with the end of the war and military demobilization, the creation of the Ukrainian People’s Republic in November 1917, the first Bolshevik seizure of Kyiv in January 1918, the proclamation of the independence of the Ukrainian People’s Republic on January 25 (backdated to January 22), 1918, and the German occupation of Ukraine that followed.

12. “Postanovlenie Vremennogo pravitel’sтва ob otmene veroispovednykh i natsional’nykh ogranichenii,” *Evreiskaia Nedelia* [ekstrennyi vypusk], (March 1917): 12–14.

Transformed by the war, Kyiv played a major role in this period, because it became a space for liberated minorities to organize politically, a place of competing identities: Ukrainian, Jewish, and Russian. Kyiv became the capital city of the Ukrainian People's Republic on June 10, 1917. This was an important change; before 1917, Kyiv may have been the capital of the Empire's southwestern region, but it was still a provincial city on the imperial map. Indeed, although Kyiv was a major city in the Jewish Pale of Settlement, until the spring of 1917 most Jews saw Kyiv through the prism of empire and Russian culture. While the Pale officially ceased to exist in 1917, the communal models it prompted did not disappear from the mental maps of the Jewish population. Kyiv had loomed large in the Ukrainian imagination as well, and after June 1917 many Ukrainians viewed the city as the capital-in-waiting of a Ukrainian autonomous republic within a democratic, federated Russia (the slogan of an independent Ukrainian state did not acquire serious traction in the region until the start of the first Bolshevik-Ukrainian war in the winter of 1917–18). Although the new national freedoms ushered in by the revolution created openings for civic initiatives, it also accentuated the differences between national social groups. The intensive demarcation of national borders heightened tensions between Jews and gentiles.

Jews articulated their national claims in the national discourse created by revolutionary events and by the dissolution of the Russian Empire. The Jewish Renaissance, to use a term of Kenneth Moss, during the first year of the Revolution in Ukraine, though owing much to the opportunities provided by the revolutionary power vacuum, stemmed from the networks of Kyiv's Jewish wartime philanthropy.¹³ Jewish activists developed well-structured systems that successfully managed relief work. Members of the Kyiv Jewish Society to Aid the Victims of War (KOPE) created the Council of United Jewish Organizations of Kyiv, the forerunner of the Vice-Secretariat/Ministry of Jewish Affairs. By establishing Jewish relief organizations and working with the Jewish refugees from the western and northwestern provinces of the Russian Empire, as well as newly occupied territories of the Habsburg Empire, Kyivan Jewish activists could test new notions of modern Jewish politics and society, notions that were secular and nationally-oriented.

This was a time of multiple public spheres, in the sense that communities of people “gathered together as a public, articulating the needs of society” (societies, committees, parties, Soviets, conventions, conferences), and performing multiple and situational identities.¹⁴ Jews as well as Ukrainians were seeking to establish new national communities. Political revolutionaries sought to reconstitute society and recreate social relations. In Kyiv, governing bodies tried to balance national differences. Jewish welfare organizations, which were created during the war years to aid Jewish refugees, had already carved out a certain public sphere and vigorously debated the place of Russia's Jewish communities in the broader polity. Their organizational networks and

13. See Kenneth B. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009).

14. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 176.

secular educational and philanthropic institutions were transformed into organs of Jewish self-government in 1917.

Historians studying the Ukrainian Revolution mostly focus their narratives on Ukrainian state building, with the main accent on what was traditionally called the Ukrainian “national revival.” In 1917, however, Kyiv became a center of both the Ukrainian and Jewish (and, briefly, Polish) national movements. Before the war, St. Petersburg’s wealthy Jewish community played the leading role for the Jews of the empire. Jewish notables there had access to Russian political leaders and central governmental institutions, and thus performed the function of Russian Jewish intercessors (*stadlanim*), who advanced the interests of their community. In 1917 and 1918, however, Petrograd lost its importance for the Jewish borderland populations. Old certainties and structures of power collapsed together with the empire. Kyiv, as the capital of the newly-created Ukrainian state and a place of relative stability in 1917 and 1918, also became an informal capital for Jews in the (former) Pale and a place where they could realize national ideas and form national governing bodies. The Ukrainian People’s Republic established the Vice-Secretariat/Ministry of Jewish Affairs, which became a new “intercessor” representing the interests of the Jewish nation regionally. The Jewish imagination, however, did not cease to be “imperial,” for it was a very short period of time to make profound changes in people’s world-view and self-understanding. Moreover, Kyivan (and Ukrainian Jews in general) did not want to separate from the Jews of the former Russian Empire. Finally, they did not believe that the new Ukrainian state could defend them and their interests; it could hardly defend itself.

In this period, Jewish political identity was always multilayered. The Jews of the period can be described, in Ron Suny’s terms, as a modern nation that had been successfully organized and mobilized by the work of educated professionals, intellectuals, and politicians, and that could articulate cultural and political aspirations.¹⁵ However, Jewish national political aspirations as they emerged in the Ukrainian lands by 1917 were not fully developed or exclusive of other allegiances. They coexisted with contested loyalties and identities (national, class, professional, political, regional, religious), constantly adapting to local discourses and remaining advantageously fluid and often necessarily ambiguous.¹⁶

As a multiethnic city, Kyiv was the epicenter of Ukrainian and Jewish political and cultural life. Although the Jewish Pale of Settlement bureaucratically ceased to exist in March 1917, it continued to shape the Jewish vision of the political situation. Jews perceived the revolutionary changes—social, political, but also geographic—through the prism of “Russia one and indivisible,” a Russian imperial concept they embraced not out of sympathy for the empire, but because as long as the former Russian political space remained united, they remained part of a larger “Russian” Jewish community with its established networks. Some Jews, especially in larger imperial cities such as Kyiv, were culturally Russian and regarded themselves as Russian.

15. Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 2004), 13.

16. *Ibid.*, 18.

They certainly did not see themselves as Ukrainian. Ukraine offered them national-cultural autonomy, which might have worked, but only as long as the Ukrainian People's Republic was able to protect its Jews as a minority group. Unfortunately, the Ukrainian state was weak and Ukrainian-Jewish cooperation had no immediate future. Yet it was not out of question, either, as Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern shows in his book on a Ukrainian Jewish identity after the revolution.¹⁷

Though the first two years of the revolutionary era did not witness mass violence and antisemitism, these would become common features during the Civil War. The pogroms of 1919 and 1920 were unprecedented in their brutality and number of victims. Organized and trained military troops of different political forces (Ukrainian, White and Red armies, and warlords without clear political affiliations) bear the bigger part of the responsibility for violence against the Jewish population. During the war, the local civil and military administration controlled and manipulated levels of antisemitism. Military defeats and food shortages piqued anti-Jewish sentiment.¹⁸ The collapse of the Russian Empire created a power vacuum that favored violence. Economic dislocation, anti-Semitic propaganda, and the collapse of civil order during the civil war made the mass destruction of regional Jewish life possible.

Zygmunt Bauman has argued that “the intensity of antisemitism is most likely to remain proportional to the urgency and ferocity of the boundary-drawing and boundary-defining drive.”¹⁹ Although Jews had lived in the region for centuries, they were considered “foreigners” by non-Jews. The situation in Kyiv was even worse because the city, although within the boundary of the Pale, was closed to most Jews until 1917. The collapse of the Russian Empire and the rise of nation-states from its ashes led to the demarcation of national territory. Traditional social boundaries collapsed, while new ones had yet to be established. Fear and tension caused by the disintegration of the old regime and the emergence of a new order, which was neither known nor universally welcomed, pushed people to transgress old boundaries of social behavior, leading to mass violence in 1919 and 1920. Though the new national freedoms ushered in by the revolution created openings for civic initiatives, they also accentuated the differences between national groups. Civil society opened the way for multiple imagined communities, with intensive demarcation of national borders that only heightened tensions between Jews and non-Jews.

The wartime turmoil, growing state antisemitism, and the activity of Jewish relief organizations all stimulated political activity and furthered the development of a civic collective identity, which enabled an impressive Jewish national movement in 1917–1920. Economic problems caused by the war divided the urban population and raised hostility and suspicion; the war also created new social divisions and hierarchies. During the war and the

17. Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Anti-Imperial Choice: The Making of the Ukrainian Jew* (New Haven, 2009), 5–6.

18. Cherikover I., *Antisemitism i pogromy na Ukraine, 1917–1918 gg.: K istorii ukrainsko-evreiskikh otnoshenii* (Berlin, 1923), 29.

19. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY, 2000), 34.

revolution, Kyiv became a laboratory of identities, where old institutions were made anew (modern, secular, and democratic). Kyiv's experience shows how the city and ethnic communities, transformed by the war, paved the way for new modern identities (in this case, a Jewish one), which were not completely the result of Soviet social and political transformations, but had took their roots in the time before the Bolsheviks came to power. The Jewish prism highlights the multiplicity of competing projects in this period and helps researchers to look at the events of 1914–1921 from a different perspective.