

**Letter to the Editor, Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs,
from Alti Rodal, Co-Director, Ukrainian Jewish Encounter,
regarding the article by Simon Geissbühler, "The Ukrainian Crisis and the Jews: A
Time for Hope or Despair"**

Ukraine has experienced a further six turbulent months since publication of Simon Geissbühler's article on the Ukrainian crisis and its implications for Jews. Developments and media coverage since then have corroborated his main finding that Russia's characterizations of the Maidan protests as the work of anti-Semites and fascists were without foundation in reality. Such characterizations have been roundly dismissed by Jewish leaders in Ukraine and elsewhere, as well as in the mainstream media, as cynical Russian propaganda.

While Geissbühler's analysis is by and large sound and drawn from a variety of sources, it also delivers, through its choice of emphasis and wording, misrepresentations on key issues – concern about anti-Semitism on the part of Jewish leaders in Ukraine, the impact of the Maidan experience on the self-identification of many Jews in Ukraine, and the stereotyping of ethnic Ukrainians.

While endorsing the finding that anti-Semitism was not a significant factor among the Maidan protesters and in contemporary Ukraine, Geissbühler understates the extent to which Ukrainian Jewish leaders asserted this fact. For example, in addition to reporting on the statements made in this regard by Joseph Zissels, Chairman of the Vaad of Ukraine, and Abraham Foxman, head of the Anti-Defamation League, Geissbühler might also have noted the strong statements of other Jewish leaders, such as Ukraine's Chief Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, who dismissed outright "Russian allegations that extremist fascists and anti-Semites from Western Ukraine were causing the problems in Ukraine."¹ He might have noted that when Rabbi Kamenetsky, Chief Rabbi of Dnipropetrovsk, was asked whether there is a real threat of rising anti-Semitism in Ukraine, he responded: "the Jewish community of Dnepropetrovsk is in constant contact with other regional communities, with the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress and various Jewish organizations operating in Ukraine and abroad. Together we discussed the possible growth of anti-Semitism. Evaluating the situation... we agreed that these concerns are far-fetched...."²

The article highlights the gloomy future forecast in mid-February by Rabbi Moshe Reuven Azman, chief Chabad rabbi in Kyiv, who warned his congregation to "leave the city altogether – and, if possible, the country", and uses Rabbi Azman's remarks as the basis for concluding that "antipathy and violence directed toward Jews undoubtedly continue to be a problem in Ukraine". In fact, one month later Rabbi Azman did a complete about-face in an interview with *Ukrainska Pravda*, going to the other extreme to say "there is no anti-Semitism in Ukraine."³ In a more accurate assessment Joseph Zissels reports that the number of anti-Semitic incidents in Ukraine this year remains the

¹ <http://projectmaidan.com/post/78566439139/ukraines-chief-rabbi-on-claims-of-ukrainian>

² <http://www.jewish.ru/theme/cis/2014/06/news994324754.php>

³ http://www.historiavivens.eu/2/there_is_no_anti_semitism_in_ukraine_moshe_reuven_azman_1038030.html

same as last year, and that it is one of the lowest in Europe.⁴ Moreover, the anti-Semitic incidents that did occur, including several violent incidents in Kyiv in January 2014 and the later incidents in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, were in all likelihood staged by pro-Russian provocateurs, according to Vyacheslav Likhachev, who has monitored anti-Semitic incidents in Ukraine for the past fifteen years.⁵ There were a couple of incidents on the Maidan that gave rise to concern, such as the derogatory mention of 'yids' at an 'open mic' event by an amateur poet, and a demeaning stereotyped characterization of a Jewish character by a Svoboda MP in a staging of the Christmas 'vertep' nativity play. But the overwhelming impression is that anti-Semitism did not feature on the Maidan. As noted by Likhachev, "even the most radical oppositionists, even those who are by all appearances genuine anti-Semites, like some leading figures in the Svoboda Party, have deliberately avoided any controversial statements".⁶

The article offers a broader assessment of the extent to which anti-Semitism is a factor for the Jewish population in contemporary Ukraine (which he estimates to be 70,000, in contrast with estimates up to five times that number stated by Ukrainian Jewish leaders and the Jewish Agency), and concludes that "anti-Semitism is certainly more widespread in Ukraine than is officially acknowledged." Geissbühler bases this conclusion on a 2006 study that focused on the activities of the Interregional Academy of Personnel Management (MAUP), a non-governmental higher education establishment that was responsible for a flurry of anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic publications and conferences around 2005, and which was said to have received significant funding from Iran and Libya. A hundred members of the Ukrainian intelligentsia had signed an open letter in 2005 asking President Yushchenko to put an end to the xenophobic activities of MAUP. MAUP then sued several of the signatories, who were made to pay fines. After an appeal to the Supreme Court, however, MAUP revoked the original lawsuit. It strikes one as odd that Geissbühler should use this marginal, dated anti-Semitic phenomenon as the basis of his conclusion regarding organized anti-Semitism in contemporary Ukraine, when there are numerous, more recent, and more authoritative assessments by experts and Ukrainian Jewish leaders that support a different conclusion. One may say that while the Jewish community and individual Jews in Ukraine have a heightened level of anxiety today, it is not because of anti-Semitism but rather because they feel vulnerable (as do other citizens of Ukraine, especially in the east) to the vagaries of war and lawlessness, and because they worry about the possible consequences of being used as pawns for political purposes by those seeking to undermine the legitimacy and viability of Ukrainian independence.

While Geissbühler observes that Jews were among the activists and fighters on the Maidan, and that Jews are well represented in the new government structures, he

⁴ Speech by Chairman of the Vaad of Ukraine Joseph Zissels at a meeting of the Board of Governors of the World Jewish Congress in Berlin on September 15, 2014, <http://ejac.org/page18/news47273.html>

⁵ Vyacheslav Likhachev, "Attacks on Jews in Kyiv" (01.19.2014), <http://ejac.org/page18/news42754.html>
"Anti-Semitism and the Ukrainian Political Crisis (11.02.2014), <http://ejac.org/page34/news43249.html>
Fishman, David E., "The Real Truth about those Anti-Semitic Flyers in Donetsk. Russia Has Its Fingerprints All Over Them", *Jewish Daily Forward*, 22 April 2014.

<http://forward.com/articles/196864/the-real-truth-about-those-anti-semitic-flyers-in/?p=all#ixzz2zod4cV4r>
⁶ Vyacheslav Likhachev, "Anti-Semitism as a Weapon of Political Technology" (27.01.2014) in *Jews, Ukrainians, and the Euromaidan*, ed. Lubomyr Luciuk (Toronto 2014).

overlooks the remarkable self-identification with Ukraine of growing numbers of Jews. In fact, the changes in the self-identification of many Jews – from "Jews of Ukraine" to "Ukrainian Jews" – is one of the effects of Maidan, understood as ‘the birth of a new nation’. Observers have noted that this is a development enabled by the sense of common cause and the unifying vision given expression at Maidan of a democratic, pluralistic, European- and rights-oriented Ukraine. For example, Vitaly Portnikov, one of the country’s most respected journalists, has commented that Ukrainian Jews (and citizens of other ethnic backgrounds) are today able to consider themselves a natural part of a new political nation.⁷ This assessment also underlies Amelia Glaser's observations in February:

"A great number of protest organizers across Ukraine are Jewish intellectuals: artists, teachers, and academics among others, of varying ages.... Many prominent Jews have come out in support of the Maidan movement, among them the oligarch Victor Pinchuk, the journalist Vitaly Portnikov, and the artist Alexander Roitburd. [Among the] Jewish events on the Maidan platform: Rabbi Hillel Cohen of one of the city’s Orthodox synagogues offered a prayer for peace, the Pushkin Klezmer Band performed Yiddish songs, and scholars lectured about Ukrainian Jewish history.... Some Ukrainian-born Jews who have emigrated to Israel and served in its army have returned to Kiev in order to help the cause by putting their military experience into practice.... what is at stake is the preservation not of an imagined Ukrainian ethnic sovereignty, but of a richly multiethnic territory...."⁸

Noteworthy as well is that a number of Geissbühler's comments and their wording risk reinforcing stereotypes of ethnic Ukrainians. Even while citing a warning about "the dangers of generalizing and labeling a people as a whole as an enemy," he refers to "the collaboration between *the* [Ital.-AR] Ukrainians and the Germans during the Holocaust" and to "the long history of the tortured relations between Jews and Ukrainians," which is repeated as "the long history of troublesome relations between Jews and Ukrainians [which] does not provide much reassurance or solace to Jews in Ukraine today." It is not possible in a brief letter to the editor to convey the diverse perspectives, nuances, and contexts that underlie the historical facts with respect to the World War II period, or the longer history. Suffice it to say that a widely accepted estimate is that between one and two percent of the ethnic Ukrainian population (estimated at 29.5 million in 1939) collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War, and that more than seven times as many Ukrainians fought in the Soviet military *against* the Nazis.⁹ Without

⁷ Vitaly Portnikov, "The Jews and the Maidan", *Eurozine*, 26 March 2014.

<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2014-03-26-portnikov-en.html>

⁸ Amelia Glaser, "Russia has likened the protests to pogroms, but Jews have joined the movement because what’s at stake is an independent future", February 25, 2014, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/163972/jews-in-maidan>

⁹ Zvi Gitelman, "*Rethinking Collaboration*", presentation given at Ukrainian Jewish Encounter Experts' Roundtable on the World War II Period in Ukraine, June 27-30, 2011, Potsdam, Germany. Sources include: Alexander Prusin "The Ukrainian Police and the Holocaust in the General Vicinity of Kiev, 1941-1943: Actions and Motivations", *Holokost i suchasnist I* (Kiev: Ukrainian Centre for Holocaust Studies, 2007), 35, 37; Peter Potichnyj, "Ukrainians in World War II Military Formations: An Overview" and Myroslav Yurkevich, "Galician Ukrainians in German Military Formations and in the German Administration", both in Yury Boshyk, ed., *Ukraine during World War II* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1986); Frank Golczewski, in Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower, eds., *The Shoah in*

having crunched numbers, my guess is that the number of Ukrainians who collaborated with the Nazis is likely proportionately comparable to the numbers who collaborated in other eastern and central European countries, and in France and Holland as well. The critical message is that in order to do justice both to the past and the future, we should take great care to avoid tainting all Ukrainians on account of the one to two percent, large though this number is, however diverse the particular motivations and circumstances. Indeed, the issue of collaboration – the numbers, roles, styles, and effects – is a growing subject of research today.

Regarding the "long history", there were indeed episodes of violence against one stateless people – the Jews, which were committed by members of another stateless people – ethnic Ukrainians (and others), often in the context of oppressive ruling empires. Separate and contradictory narratives of these episodes have developed, in which long periods of peaceful co-existence have largely been ignored. It is only in recent years that Jewish, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian and other scholars have begun to meet to discuss the shared histories, to acknowledge the bitter aspects of the past, and to appreciate that there are different perspectives and a more complex array of evidence-based facts than those contained in each of the various national histories. These issues need further study, and the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter (UJE) is dedicated to undertaking, encouraging, and facilitating such study, with the help of a broad network of scholars and institutions.

Ukraine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 139; and Walter Guinn, "A Footnote to the 1939 Census of the USSR", *Soviet Studies*, 14, 4 (April 1963), 421-424.