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Red Antisemitism: Anti-Jewish Violence and Revolutionary Politics in Ukraine, 1919

by Brendan McGeever

Abstract

When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, they announced the overthrow of a world scarred by exploitation and domination. In the very moment of revolution, these sentiments were put to the test as antisemitic pogroms swept across the former Pale of Jewish Settlement. The pogroms reached a devastating peak in the year 1919, marking the most violent chapter in pre-Holocaust modern Jewish history. A century of scholarship has conclusively shown that most of the atrocities were perpetrated by forces hostile to the Revolution. But antisemitism was not the preserve of the counterrevolution: it manifested across the political divide, finding traction among the revolutionary left, as well.

This article examines the nature and extent of antisemitism in the Red Army and more generally the Bolshevik movement in Ukraine in the spring and summer of 1919. In bringing together internal Bolshevik security reports, memoirs, newspapers, and Party and governmental communications, the article shows that revolution and antisemitism could be overlapping as well as competing worldviews. It does so by offering an analytical framing of Red Army antisemitism: drawing on works in Critical Theory, it brings into view the importance of class relations, and uncovers the complex ways in which antisemitism could find expression in revolutionary politics.

Introduction

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“Down with the Communists, long live Soviet Rule!”

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Antisemitism in the Red Army: Towards an Understanding

Introduction

The Russian Revolution of 1917 promised a world free not only of class exploitation, but of gendered and racialized forms of domination, as well. In the very moment of revolution, however, this vision was put to the test as mass outbreaks of antisemitic violence spread across the former Pale of Jewish Settlement. The pogroms posed fundamental questions of the Bolshevik project, and revealed the nature and extent of antisemitism among sections of the working class and peasantry. Even more troubling for the Party leadership was the depth of antisemitism in Soviet institutions at the local level, and in particular, within the Red Army.



Fig. 1: "The distribution of Jewish pogroms according to their organisers." Poster produced by the Jewish Social Committee for the Relief of Victims of Pogroms (Evobshchestkom) for an exhibition on pogroms in Moscow in 1923 (Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research).

A century of literature on the Russian Civil War pogroms has demonstrated that the arc of anti-Jewish violence peaked in the year 1919, and that most of the atrocities were carried out by forces hostile to the Revolution.¹ What remains less

¹ On the Russian Civil War pogroms, see: N. I. Shtif, *Pogromy na Ukraine (period dobrovol'cheskoi armii)*, (Berlin: Wostok, 1922); Elias Tcherikower, *Istoriia pogromnogo dvizheniia na Ukraine 1917-1921*, (Berlin: Ostjüdisches Historisches Archiv, 1923); Id., *Di ukrainer pogromen in yor 1919*, (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1965); Joseph B. Shechtman, *Pogromy dobrovol'cheskoi armii na Ukraine (k istorii antisemitizma na Ukraine v 1919-1920 gg.)*, (Berlin: Ostjüdisches Historisches Archiv, 1932); Nahum Gergel, "The Pogroms in the Ukraine in 1918-1921," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 6 (1951): 237-251; Peter Kenez, "Pogroms and White Ideology in the Russian Civil War," in *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, eds. John D. Klier, Shlomo Lambroza, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Oleg V. Budnitskii, "Jews, Pogroms, and the White Movement: A Historiographical Critique," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2/4 (2001): 1-23; Id., *Rossiiskie evrei mezhdru krasnymi i belymi, 1917-1920*, (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2005); Lidia Borisovna Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov: pogromy na Ukraine, v Belorussii i evropeiskoi chasti Rossii v period grazhdanskoi voiny 1918-1922 gg. Sbornik dokumentov*, (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2008); *Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History*, eds. Johathan Dekel-Chen et al. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2011); Vladimir Prokhorovich

well known, however, is the extent of antisemitism in the Red Army during this period. In his classic study, Gergel calculated that the Red Army was responsible for 8.6% of the civil war pogroms, while the Petliura and Denikin armies were culpable for 40% and 17.2%, respectively.² In other words, the Red Army was the *least* prone to anti-Jewish violence of all the military forces in the civil war. Important though these statistics are, however, they do not capture the traction antisemitism often found among Red Army units during this period, including among those that did not participate in the pogroms.

That antisemitism could be found in the Red Army during the Russian Civil War should come as no surprise. In his classic collection of short stories, *Red Cavalry*, published in the early 1930s in the Soviet Union, Isaac Babel famously captured the ferocity of anti-Jewish violence perpetrated by the Red Army during the Soviet-Polish War of 1919-1921. Most memorable is his character Gedali, who, faced with violence coming from all sides, poses the haunting question: “who is to tell which is the Revolution and which the counterrevolution?”³ Despite the international popularity of Babel’s writings, however, Red Army pogroms have remained relatively under-examined in the literature on the Russian Revolution and subsequent civil war.

Recent studies by Russian historians Oleg Budnitskii and Vladimir Buldakov have gone some way to addressing this oversight.⁴ This article builds on these works in three ways. First, it gives a deeper, more granular account of pogromist violence and antisemitic sentiment within the Red Army in Ukraine than has been available to date. It does so by bringing together internal Bolshevik security reports (*svodki*),⁵ memoirs, newspapers, and internal Party and governmental

Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos: etnicheskie konflikty v Rossii, 1917-1918 gg. Usloviia vzniknoveniia, khronika, kommentarii, analiz*, (Moskva: Novyi khronograf, 2010).

² Gergel, “The Pogroms in the Ukraine in 1918-1921,” 248.

³ Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry*, transl. Peter Constantine, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 65.

⁴ Oleg V. Budnitskii, “The Reds and the Jews, or the Comrades in the Arms of the Military Reporter Liutov,” in *The Enigma of Isaac Babel. Biography, History, Context.*, ed. G. Freidin, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 118-121; Id., *Rossiiskie evrei mezhdru krasnymi i belymi*; Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos*; Id., “Freedom, Shortages, Violence: The Origins of the ‘Revolutionary Anti-Jewish Pogrom’ in Russia, 1917-1918,” in *Anti-Jewish Violence*, eds. Dekel-Chen et al, 74-94.

⁵ Since the opening of the former Soviet archives, there has been fruitful debate about the limitations of internal Party, government, and Cheka/NKVD reports (*svodki*), which ostensibly provide insight into the “moods” of the Soviet population. These discussions have largely

communications to offer a comprehensive account of the nature and extent of antisemitism in the Red Army and the Bolshevik movement in Ukraine overall. Second, in examining antisemitism in the context of the spring and summer of 1919 – the deadliest period of antisemitic violence during the civil war – the article provides an empirically driven analysis of a crucial chapter in the history of pre-Holocaust Eastern European Jewish history. Third, it offers an analytical framing of Red Army antisemitism by drawing on the works of Critical Theory. This attentiveness to theory brings into view the importance of class and class relations in antisemitic representations of Jewishness - a hitherto overlooked dimension of the civil war pogroms. In doing so, the article uncovers complex ways in which antisemitism could overlap with and find expression through revolutionary politics.

Ukraine on the Eve of the 1919 Pogroms

To understand how antisemitism found traction within the Bolsheviks' social base in Ukraine in 1919, it will be useful to offer a sketch of the Ukrainian social

focused on the use of such sources for the Stalin era; this article, in contrast, relies extensively on *svodki* from the earlier, civil war period. Nevertheless, the limitations of these documents need to be noted. As critics have pointed out, these reports reveal less about popular opinions than they do about Soviet government perceptions of them. To mitigate this tension, Lesley Rimmel suggests garnering as broad a range of *svodki* as possible, including examples from both “peripheral” and central regions. To an extent, this article achieves this by examining *svodki* in each and every province of Ukraine for the year 1919. These reports were carried out every two to three days throughout the year by Bolsheviks on the ground, and they cover both rural and urban regions of the country. Nevertheless, to make inferences about the extent of antisemitism based purely on, say, Red Army *svodki* is problematic, not least because these sources tend to chart sudden sharp increases in antisemitism, not the longer-term patterning of such sentiments. To balance this, the article also draws on newspaper sources and memoirs to broaden the analysis. On the usage of *svodki* in Soviet history, see Terry D. Martin, “*Obzory OGPU i sovetskie istoriki*,” in “*Sovershenno Sekretno*”: *Lubianka - Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922-1934 gg.) Tom 1 Chast' I*, (Moscow: Institut Rossiiskoi Istorii Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk, 2001); Lesley A. Rimmel, “Svodki and Popular Opinion in Stalinist Leningrad,” *Cahiers Du Monde Russe: Russie, Empire Russe, Union Soviétique, États Indépendants* 40/1 (1999): 217-234; Peter Holquist, “Letter,” *Slavic Review* 55/3 (1996): 719; Tracy McDonald, *Face to the Village: The Riazan Countryside Under Soviet Rule, 1921-1930*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Timothy Johnston, *Being Soviet: Identity, Rumour, and Everyday Life Under Stalin 1939-1953*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xliv–xlvi.

formation during the revolutionary period.⁶ Ukraine in 1919 was a society markedly polarized by class and ethnicity. In urban regions, the working class was overwhelmingly comprised of Ukraine's minority ethnic populations - above all, Russians and Jews.⁷ Moreover, those sections of the working class which were ethnically Ukrainian tended to be politically and culturally oriented to Russia.⁸ In sharp contrast, the vast rural regions were overwhelmingly Ukrainian.⁹ The first Soviet census of 1926 captured it well: while Ukrainians constituted 80 percent of the total population of Ukraine, they represented a mere 4 percent of the industrial working class. At the same time, they totaled 91 percent of the peasantry, and according to some historians, the corresponding figure may have been as high as 97 percent in 1917.¹⁰ Those who were Ukrainian by ethnicity thus frequently found themselves to be minorities in the major cities, and in no case did they ever constitute the majority of the urban population.¹¹ These dynamics had significant implications for class relations. Nationality, ethnicity, and class frequently manifested as interlocking experiences; consequently, relations between urban traders and peasants were intersectional in character: they were simultaneously processes of class *and* identity formation. In Ukrainian peasant popular culture, the "city man" represented a ruthless profiteer, an oppressor of the poor Ukrainian toiler. The crisis of the revolutionary period frequently provided the foil for these representations to come to the fore, particularly when the breakdown of exchange channels left peasants without vital manufactured goods such as boots, cloth, nails, and ploughs.¹² In Ukraine, the national

⁶ The term "social base" is used in this article to refer not only to Party members, but also more broadly to those components of society on which the Bolsheviks depended to secure power in Ukraine. Significantly, this included Red Army soldiers, many of whom were not Party members. In a context of all out Civil War in 1919, Bolshevik power in Ukraine, wherever it existed, was largely a militarized form of statecraft.

⁷ Jurij Borys, *The Sovietization of Ukraine, 1917-1923: The Communist Doctrine and Practice of National Self-Determination*, (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1980), 70-71.

⁸ Edward Hallett Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923, Vol. 1*, (London: Penguin Books, 1950); Liliana Riga, *The Bolsheviks and the Russian Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁹ Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution, Vol. 3*, (London: Sphere Books, 1967), 46.

¹⁰ Henry Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government. Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999), 16.

¹¹ Borys, *The Sovietization of Ukraine*, 64-67.

¹² Arthur E. Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine: Second Campaign, 1918-1919*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 10.

question was keenly felt at the point of production, and in particular, in the realm of distribution and exchange.¹³

“Down with the Communists, long live Soviet Rule!”

This had profound political consequences. Writing in early June 1919, the Bolshevik Nikolai Podvoiskii admitted that the Party’s only real semblance of governmental power was in the capital cities of Kharkiv, Ekaterinoslav, Poltava, and Chernihiv;¹⁴ all industrial regions located in the east and northeast of the country, heavily populated by so-called “non-Ukrainians.” These contradictions found expression in popular representations of Bolshevik rule, which, in the eyes of many Ukrainians, was “foreign” and “urban.”¹⁵ In the popular Ukrainian imaginary, “the Communist” was a construct defined by the intersections of class, ethnicity, and place: Communists were urban dwellers, non-Ukrainians who stood aloof from peasant life; they were “Russian oppressors” and, above all, “speculating Jews.”¹⁶

These representations were taken up in revolutionary politics, particularly among sections of the radicalized Ukrainian peasantry, which in 1919 began to mobilize around the slogans “We Are for Bolshevik Rule But without Communists!” and “Down with the Communists, Long Live Soviet Rule!” This emergent form of revolutionary subjectivity was closely connected to the politics of antisemitism. Internal Bolshevik security reports show that across Ukraine in mid-1919, sections of the peasantry and other social classes were deeply attached

¹³ Christopher Ford, “The Crossroads of the European Revolution: Ukrainian Social-Democrats and Communists (Independentists), the Ukrainian Revolution and Soviet Hungary 1917-1920,” *Critique* 38/4 (2010): 573. As the Bolshevik N. Podvoiskii admitted in early August 1919, “the distinction between the city and the countryside in Ukraine strongly exacerbated national oppression,” YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (hereafter YIVO) RG80 Folder 48, 3852.

¹⁴ *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii* (Hereafter RGASPI) f.71 o.35 d.691 l.2. Or, as the Bundist Moïshe Rafes put it, the only “genuinely revolutionary proletarian elements in Ukraine were to be found in the mass of the proletariat of national minorities - Russians and Jews.” Borys, *The Sovietization of Ukraine*, 385.

¹⁵ In its propaganda the Party tried to overcome the popular perception of the Bolsheviks as “non-Ukrainian:” *Tsentral’nyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Hromads’kykh Ob’iednan’ Ukrainy* (hereafter TsDAHO) f.57 o.2 d.342 l.139

¹⁶ See, for, example RGASPI f.17 o.6 d.369 l.112-113, 248.

to the pernicious Jew-Communist conflation.¹⁷ The fight for the popular conception of “Soviet rule” often became associated with a fight against “Jewish communism.”¹⁸ In Poltava in late April, for example, peasants shouted “down with the Yids, down with this Moscow Communist government, long live Soviet rule!”¹⁹ The spring and summer of 1919 would reveal just how entrenched these sentiments had become, including within the Bolsheviks’ own social base.

The Elements of Red Army Antisemitism in Ukraine in 1919

The principal agent of Red Army antisemitism in Ukraine in early 1919 was the partisan peasant soldier, mobilized by the Bolsheviks on the basis of a radical anti-bourgeois political project. This mobilization was crucial for the Bolshevik victory in Ukraine: according to Red Army Commander Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, the Reds started out in late 1918 with some 7-8,000 troops, and by mid-February 1919 that number had risen sharply to over 46,000. This included at least 5,000 troops who had transferred directly from the Ukrainian Army to the Soviet Army. Even more substantial were the numbers of peasant militias (at least 14,000), who now aligned themselves to ad-hoc Red partisan units.²⁰ However, this was anything but a regular standing army. Writing in June 1919, Bolshevik leader Nikolai Podvoiskii claimed that an astonishing 90 percent of Soviet troops stationed in Ukraine were in fact composed of partisan and insurgent units.²¹ These nominally “Soviet,” ad-hoc Red Army units, overwhelmingly peasant by composition, tended to operate with little recourse to external control.²² They gave the Bolshevik leadership little cause to be

¹⁷ TsDAHO f.1 o.20. d.35 l.11-12; *Tsentral’nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh orhaniv vlad y ta upravlinnia Ukrainy* (hereafter TsDAVO) f.5 o.1 d.17 l.72.

¹⁸ For the most comprehensive work to date on the overlap between left Ukrainian nationalism and antisemitism in 1919, see Christopher Gilley, “The Ukrainian Anti-Bolshevik Risings of Spring and Summer 1919: Intellectual History in a Space of Violence,” *Revolutionary Russia* 27/2 (2014): 120; Id., “*Otamanshchyna?: The Self-Formation of Ukrainian and Russian Warlords at the Beginning of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*,” *Ab Imperio* 2015, 3 (2015): 83-84; Id., “Fighters for Ukrainian Independence? Imposture and Identity among Ukrainian Warlords, 1917-22,” *Historical Research* 90/247 (2017): 183-184.

¹⁹ TsDAVO f.5 o.1 d.17 l.64

²⁰ Vladimir Aleksandrovič Antonov-Ovseenko, *Zapiski o grazhdanskoi voine. Tom 3* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe voennoe izdatel’stvo, 1932), 166-167. See also RGASPI f.71 o.35 d.507 l.79-82.

²¹ RGASPI f.71 o.35 d.691 l.3

²² RGASPI f.71 o.35 d.507 l.79-82 On the peasant composition of the Red partisan units, see Borys, *The Sovietization of Ukraine, 1917-1923*, 201.

confident of their allegiance.²³ The centralization of the Red Army, so vigorously called for by Lenin and Stalin in 1919, was simply impossible in Ukraine.²⁴

In these circumstances, the Bolshevik leadership in Ukraine was heavily dependent on more reliable forces such as the International Division, a multi-ethnic regiment composed of Jewish self-defense units and Chinese, Hungarian, Austrian, and German workers.²⁵ Regiments of this kind often played a crucial role in putting down pogroms carried out by partisan Soviet units. However, from February onwards, Red Army Commander Antonov-Ovseenko repeatedly lost his most reliable troops as the Party center in Moscow ordered Red units to be sent from the Ukrainian front to fight on the southern and eastern fronts, where Admiral Kolchak was making westward gains on the Bolsheviks. The Ukrainian Bolsheviks were therefore forced to accelerate the formation of new partisan units and Red Guard detachments.²⁶ Such was the scramble for troops that Antonov-Ovseenko was in no position to check and screen those who volunteered for the Reds. If partisans simply declared that they would fight for the Reds or that they would defeat the “bourgeois enemy,” they were accepted.²⁷ In contrast to the first Bolshevik government of 1917-1918 in Ukraine, which had relied predominantly on Russian Red Guards, this second Bolshevik campaign to secure power drew almost exclusively on a Ukrainian peasant social base.²⁸ As

²³ Elias Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919*, (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1921), 89-90; Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine*, 133.

²⁴ Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919*, 89-90; Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine*, 133. See also RGASPI f.17 o.109 d.43 l.16-190b. On Lenin's and Stalin's call to centralize the Red Army, see S. M. Korolivskii, N. K. Kolensnik, and I. K. Rybalka, *Grazhdanskaia voina na Ukraine 1918-1920, Tom vtoroi*, (Kiev: Izdatel'stvo naukova duma, 1967), 1.

²⁵ See Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine*, 147-148; Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879-1921*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 428.

²⁶ Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine*, 147-148; Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, 428 and 439.

²⁷ Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine*, 148.

²⁸ Borys, *The Sovietization of Ukraine*, 194 and 201. This is captured in the memoirs of Zatonskii, a leading figure in the Soviet government in Ukraine: “[In 1919] we submitted to elements of the peasantry who, although very much sympathetic to Bolshevism, were nonetheless very suspicious, to say the least, of Communism. The peasant partisan enthusiastically interpreted our battle slogans during the period of the overthrow of the old regime, and saw us as willing allies in his fight against the landlords. But having won that fight, the partisan wanted one further thing: he wanted to be rid of everything foreign [*chuzhdoe*] and imposed [*nanosnoe*] (urban) so that he might finally be the master of his own land...[Previously] the Bolsheviks had said ‘arm yourself, beat the landlord and seize his land!’ The Communists now say ‘give the state your bread, subject yourselves to discipline...give us your weapons’...it is no surprise that...they turned against us with almost the same ferocity with which they had risen up against the *Hetman* and *Petliura*.” V. P. Zatonskii, “*Vodovorot (iz proshlogo)*,” in *Etapy bol'shogo puti. Vospominaniia o*

Podvoiskii noted in August 1919, “Bolshevism” in Ukraine had taken the form of agrarian *partizanstvo*, not the dictatorship of the proletariat.²⁹ As its ranks swelled, the Red Army was approaching the size required to consolidate power in Ukraine. The political and ideological foundations of this army’s base, however, were deeply contentious.

The consequences of this soon became apparent. As early as February 1919, internal Bolshevik reports began to note the depth of antisemitism in various units and divisions of the Red Army.³⁰ By early April, reports indicated that Red Army divisions in Ukraine were composed of troops formerly attached to the army of the Ukrainian Directory. Needless to say, such divisions were plagued by antisemitism.³¹ On April 5, Podvoiskii gave a stark assessment of the situation facing the Bolsheviks: “we have, to our own detriment, absorbed not only counterrevolutionaries, not only White Guard scum, but even more so the masses of poor peasants [*bedniakov*]... who, having been mobilized previously by the counterrevolution, have fled that camp and now joined ours.”³² In sum, antisemitism had its basis in the overwhelmingly partisan composition of the Red Army in Ukraine; the worldview of the Bolsheviks’ social base contrasted sharply with that of the Party leadership.³³

Throughout March and April, the fragility of Soviet rule was cruelly exposed as various Red Army units rose up against the Bolsheviks. Ostensibly under the control of Red Army Commander Antonov-Ovseenko, these rebel units were, in actuality, loyal to their charismatic, independently minded leaders: *otamany*, self-styled warlords, who frequently changed sides in the civil war.³⁴ According to the head of the Ukrainian Soviet government, Khristian Rakovskii, between April 1 and May 1, at least 93 uprisings occurred within the ranks of the Soviet Ukrainian

grazhdanskoi voine, ed. V. D. Polikarpov, (Moskva: Voennoe izdatel'stvo ministerstva oborony SSSR, 1963), 155. I thank Dimitri Tolkatsch for bringing this source to my attention.

²⁹ YIVO RG80 folder 48, 3851.

³⁰ TsDAVO f.5 o.1 d.17 l.23-230b

³¹ For example, see the following report on the 2nd Red Army Division: TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.5-6. For more on the composition of the 2nd Division, see Korolivskii, Kolensnik and Rybalka, *Grazhdanskaia voina na Ukraine 1918-1920. Tom pervyi, kniga pervaiia*, (Kiev: Izdatel'stvo naukova дума, 1967), 22.

³² RGASPI f.71 o.35 d.507 l.80

³³ RGASPI f.272 o.1 d.81 l.65

³⁴ The name given to commanders of these partisan units - *otamany* - was a reference to Zaporozhian Cossack leaders from the Early Modern period, who were seen by Ukrainian nationalists as the true bearers of the Ukrainian national idea. See Gilley, “Otamanshchyna?”

Army.³⁵ As they attacked buildings where soviets convened and shot Cheka agents, these rebels called for a “soviet rule” in its populist sense, that is, local self-government without communes, without grain requisitioning, without “Communists” and, above all, without “Jews.” The uprisings revealed the extraordinary confluence between radical politics, Ukrainian nationalism, and antisemitism. Most threatening of all was the *Grigor’evshchina* of May 1919, the rebellion of Red Army units under the control of Nikifor Grigor’ev.³⁶

The *Grigor’evshchina* of May 1919

A former officer in the Tsarist army during the First World War, Nikifor Grigor’ev initially sided with the German-backed Skoropads’kyi regime, before forming an alliance with the Ukrainian nationalist Petliura in 1918, when he commanded a number of partisan units in the south of Ukraine. In February 1919, however, Grigor’ev joined forces with the Bolsheviks, a defection which crucially opened up the front to the Red Army. At a time when the most reliable Soviet armies were being taken out of Ukraine and sent to the eastern and southern fronts, Grigor’ev provided the vital military resources needed to secure the key cities and regions in the Ukrainian south. His newly constituted 1st Transdneprian Red Army Division was huge, and comprised of some 13-16,000

³⁵ Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine*, 233.

³⁶ Grigor’ev was but one of several military leaders who sided with the Bolsheviks during the civil war in Ukraine. One of the most notorious cases of this kind is the Ukrainian anarchist Nester Makhno. The question of antisemitism among Makhno’s troops is contested in the literature. Some, such as Aleksandr Shubin, argue that Makhno’s army was free of antisemitism, and wherever it did arise (and the cases were few and far between, argues Shubin), Makhno took strong measures against the perpetrators of violence. See Aleksandr Shubin, “The Makhnovist Movement and the National Question in the Ukraine, 1917-1921,” in *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1970-1940. The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism and Social Revolution*, (London: Brill, 2010). However, in March 1935, the Jewish historian and chronicler of pogroms Elias Tcherikower wrote in a private correspondence: “There cannot be the slightest doubt that he [Makhno] is implicated in a series of pogroms. I have enough substantiated evidence in my archive to show that his men were exactly the same sort of bandits as all the others. Whether they perpetrated the pogroms with his permission or on their own initiative is difficult to say; either way – he is responsible...In some cases, he sternly punished his men for individual pogrom-excesses. In many cases, however, no punishment was meted out for pogroms... For me it suffices to know that the ordinary Jew in Ukraine consistently held Makhno for a pogromist and that the fear of Makhno was immense.” Tcherikower, *Di ukrainer pogromen in yor 1919*, 348. I thank Lars Fischer for bringing this quote to my attention.

soldiers, many of whom described themselves as “Bolshevik.”³⁷ Their “Bolshevism,” however, differed markedly from the politics of Lenin and Trotsky: in Grigor’ev’s army, socialism meant defending peasant aims and supporting direct self-government at the local level; in other words, the popular peasant conception of “soviet rule,” with all its contradictory forms of consciousness.³⁸

On April 6, just as the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic was established in Munich, Grigor’ev proved his worth by taking Odessa from the occupying French and Greek armies. Rakovskii, the head of the Ukrainian Soviet government, could scarcely contain his delight: “Of all the glorious victories with which the Red Army has covered itself...the taking of Odessa has the greatest, worldwide significance... Long live the Red Army of Ukraine! Long live Red Odessa!”³⁹ Yet the “Red Army” that captured Odessa was far from a communist army, and “Red Odessa” was far from “Bolshevik.” In actuality, the Bolshevik leadership in Ukraine was gambling the future of the Revolution on a partisan and highly contentious social base.⁴⁰

The following week, Bolshevik intelligence reports began noting that soldiers in Grigor’ev’s 6th Soviet Army were openly shouting slogans such as “Long live soviet rule! Down with the Communists! All Communists are Yids!”⁴¹ Although

³⁷ In his memoirs, Antonov-Ovseenko (1933, 131) put the figure at 13,000, whereas Zatonskii (1963, 157) suggests it was nearer 16,000. On May 12, 1919, in a telegram to the Ukrainian Sovnarkom, Antonov-Ovseenko estimated the number at 15,000. See Antonov-Ovseenko, *Zapiski o grazhdanskoi voine, Tom 4*, 131; Zatonskii, “Vodovorot (iz proshlogo),” 157; *Direktivny komandovaniia frontov Krasnoi Armii, 1917-1922. Sbornik dokumentov*, Vol. 2, ed. T. F. Kariaeva and N. N. Azovtsev, (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel’stvo Ministerstva Oborony SSSR, 1971), 202. Grigor’ev’s unit would soon be further expanded and renamed the 6th Soviet Ukrainian Rifle Division.

³⁸ Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919*, 89-90; Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine*, 165. For information on the composition of Grigor’ev’s units, see TsDAHO f.57 o.2 d.342 l.98.

³⁹ Antonov-Ovseenko, *Zapiski o grazhdanskoi voine, Tom 3*, 249-250.

⁴⁰ Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine*, 201. For a Menshevik take on Bolshevik rule in Odessa following the capture of the city by Grigor’ev’s troops, see Vladimir N. Brovkin, *Dear Comrades: Menshevik Reports on the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War*, (Stanford: Hoover Press, 1991), 167-170.

⁴¹ Bolshevik reports from mid-April detailing the extent of antisemitism within Grigor’ev’s units are discussed in Antonov-Ovseenko, *Zapiski o grazhdanskoi voine. Tom 4*, 75-80. See also TsDAVO f.5. o.1 d.17 l.55. Some reports sounded the alarm bell as far back as late March. A briefing by a political inspector for the Commissariat of Military Affairs on March 29, for

these reports were all sent to the Bolshevik Central Committee, the Party leadership continued to depend on Grigor'ev in the hope “that his military strength might be put to use,” as Commander of the Ukrainian Soviet Army, Antonov-Ovseenko, put it.⁴² As late as May 2, 1919, Antonov-Ovseenko dispatched a confidential memorandum to the Soviet government, advising it to maintain close cooperation with Grigor'ev, even praising him as “a local man” who has “always stood up against the oppressors of the peasantry.” While acknowledging Grigor'ev's unpredictability, Antonov-Ovseenko asserted: “it should be quite possible to keep him under control.”⁴³



Fig. 2: Grigor'ev and Antonov-Ovseenko, Znamianka, April 1919

[https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Григорьев,_Никифор_Александрович#/media/Файл:Grigoryev_\(green_insurgents\).jpg](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Григорьев,_Никифор_Александрович#/media/Файл:Grigoryev_(green_insurgents).jpg)

example, noted that among Grigor'ev's troops there was no political work being carried out and antisemitism was rampant Korolivskii, Kolensnik and Rybalka, *Grazhdanskaia voina na Ukraine 1918-1920. Tom pervyi, kniga vtoraiia*. (Kiev: Izdatel'stvo naukova дума, 1967), 278 and 332.

⁴² Antonov-Ovseenko, *Zapiski o grazhdanskoi voine. Tom 4*, 79.

⁴³ *The Russian Civil War: Documents from the Soviet Archives*, eds. V. P. Butt et al., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 85.

The gamble backfired. No sooner had the memorandum been sent, than a wave of ferocious antisemitic violence rushed forth from the ranks of Grigor'ev's army. Buoyed by his recent victories, Grigor'ev now turned against the Soviet government, initiating the deadliest of all the civil war pogroms. In just eighteen days, his units, formerly attached to the Red Army and now in open revolt, carried out at least fifty-two pogroms, in which over 3,400 Jews were murdered.⁴⁴ Although accounting for only a fraction of the total number of Jews killed in 1919, these massacres were distinguished by having the highest fatality rate of all the pogroms perpetrated during the Russian Civil War.⁴⁵

Despite a flurry of Party and central Soviet government decrees ordering Grigor'ev's troops to be shot on the spot,⁴⁶ the apparatuses of Soviet power in Ukraine were in no position to enforce these orders, given their lack of effective centralization and inability to rely on local forces. The seriousness of the situation came into view when one of the most dependable Soviet regiments, the 1st Regiment of Red Cossacks, was pulled out of Kyiv and sent to fight against Grigor'ev at Kremenchuk. *En route*, it attacked Cheka units and started a pogrom in Lubny with the slogan "Death to the Yids and Communists."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Grigor'ev's troops carried out pogroms in Zlatopol (May 2-5); Znamenka (May 3); Lebedyn (May 5); Gorodishche (May 11-12; Zolotonosha, (May 12); Rotmistrivka (May 13-14); Matusovo (May 13-14); Belozerie (May 14-15); Smila (May 14-15); Elisavetgrad (May 15-17); Novomyrhorod (May 17); Cherkasy (May 16-21); Raihorod (May 20); Oleksandriia (May 22); Chyhyryn (May 25); Oleksandrivka (May 15-18); Stepanivka (May 18) and Semonivka (May 18-19). See Harvard University Library (hereafter HUL) f.3050 o.1 d.162 l.4 See also Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919*, 70; Sergei Ivanovich Gusev-Orenburgskii, *Kniga o evreiskikh pogromakh na ukraine v 1919 g. Sostavlena po ofitsial'nyim dokumentam, dokladam s mest i oprasam postradavshikh*, (St. Peterburg-Berlin: Izdatel'stvo Z. I. Grzhebina, 1921), 10.; Id., *Bagrovaia kniga. Pogromy 1919-1920 gg. na Ukraine*, (New York: Ladoga, 1983), 7. Other reports estimate the total number of Jews murdered in the *Grigor'evshchina* at 6,000. See RGASPI f.272 o.1 d.81 l.92.

⁴⁵ Gergel, "The Pogroms in the Ukraine in 1918-1921," 250.

⁴⁶ RGASPI f.71 o.35 d.500 l.38; TsDAHO f.57 o.2 d.305 l.39, 45-46; TsDAHO f.57 o.2 d.342 l.85-86; Korolivskii, Kolensnik, and Rybalka, *Grazhdanskaia voina na Ukraine 1918-1920. Tom pervyi, kniga pervaiia*, 33 and 48. For an appeal by the Odessa Bolsheviks against the Grigor'ev pogroms, see *Documents of Soviet History. Volume 1. The Triumph of Bolshevism, 1917-1921*, ed. Rex A. Wade, (New York: Academic International Press, 1991), 384-385.

⁴⁷ TsDAVO f.5 o.1 d.19 l.5

The Confluence of Antisemitism and Revolutionary Politics in Ukraine

What the *Grigor'evshchina* revealed was the startling extent to which Bolshevik revolutionary discourse could overlap with antisemitic representations of Jewishness, and with devastating consequences. To give an illustration: on March 29, on the eve of his advance into Odessa, Grigor'ev issued a telegram to all Volunteer Army soldiers to “throw your generals into the sea, raise the Red Flag, put down your weapons and in place of ‘God Save the Tsar,’ come with us peacefully and sing ‘Arise, Arise, Working People’” [the opening lines of the chorus to the Russian version of *The Worker's Marseillaise*].⁴⁸ Just six weeks later, however, in a dramatic declaration of war against the Soviet state, Grigor'ev issued his defining statement, known as the *Universal*:

Ukrainian people!...The political speculators have deceived you and, with clever methods, have taken advantage of your trustfulness. In place of land and freedom they have subjected you to the commune, to the Cheka, and to the commissars, those gluttonous Muscovites from the land where they crucified Christ.... Holy Toiler! Man of God! Look at your calloused hands and look around! Injustice! You are the Tsar of the land...but who governs you? All those who desire the blood of the people.... Down with the political speculators! ... Long live the power of the soviets of the people of Ukraine!⁴⁹

As part of a more general attack on a range of “exploiters” of the peasants, Grigor'ev was expressing a non-referential antisemitism. “The Jews” were not explicitly identified, but the key signifiers of an antisemitic discourse were all in place: the Ukrainians had been “deceived” by a more “clever” people; the specter of the “bloodsucker” was invoked; the “honest” workers with “calloused hands” are ruled by “Christ killers” and *speculators*. Here we see the signification of a well-worn antisemitic conception of “labor.” In contrast to the “non-productive” Jew, stands the “real” toiler: the Ukrainian peasant, who, unlike “the Jew,” is engaged in “concrete,” “productive labor,” and holds an “organic” relation to the land and the nation.⁵⁰ Later in the same declaration, Grigor'ev demanded the formation of new soviets based effectively on the notorious

⁴⁸ Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine*, 190.

⁴⁹ Antonov-Ovseenko, *Zapiski o grazhdanskoi voine. Tom 4*, 203-204.

⁵⁰ Moishe Postone, “Antisemitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to ‘Holocaust,’” *New German Critique*, 19 (January 1, 1980): 97-115.

numerus clausus quota system⁵¹: 80% of seats in the soviets were to be reserved for ethnic Ukrainians, and Jews were to be allocated no more than 5%. This is but one illustration of the explosive capacity for revolutionary discourse and populist anti-bourgeois sentiment in 1919 Ukraine to be expressed through antisemitism.

Later, towards the end of his uprising in late May 1919, Grigor'ev's antisemitism came into full view as he openly attacked what he called the "Yid" Soviet government. Yet his antisemitism remained wedded to a left populist discourse. In a series of leaflets addressed to Red Army soldiers, workers, and peasants, Grigor'ev proclaimed in one breath "Long live world socialist revolution, long live the International," while in another he called on his troops to attack Bolshevik commissars, 99% of whom, he claimed, were "Yids."⁵²

Grigor'ev's rebellion provides an illustration of how lines of demarcation between revolutionary and counterrevolutionary, so clear in Bolshevik propaganda, could, in actuality, be fluid and porous. Radicalized peasants and workers moved between these categories. Grigor'ev was, in part, drawing upon the same experiential triggers that the Bolsheviks themselves had mobilized earlier in the year – class injuries, the desire for local control, left-populist resentment. What is more, Grigor'ev was recruiting from the very social base that the Bolsheviks had mobilized to come to power in the first place. In other words, antisemitism provided a nexus that enabled people to move between the seemingly antithetical categories of revolution and counterrevolution. The following two case studies in Elisavetgrad and Uman' provide a vivid illustration of this.

⁵¹ The *numerus clausus* was a quota system introduced in Tsarist Russia between 1882 and 1887, which set entry levels for Jews in education and various professions at 5-10%. Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 262-267.

⁵² TsDAHO f.5 o.1 d.265 l.1341, 1346-1347. In one document, Grigor'ev denounces the "people's provocateurs Rakovskii, Rafes, and Bronshtein-Trotsky," whose rule has led "eighty percent of the laboring peasants of the land of Ukraine to fall into the hands of a few little Yids (*zhidki*) and political speculators" TsDAHO f.5 o.1 d.265 l.1349. I thank Dimitri Tolkatsch for bringing these documents to my attention. Grigor'ev's leaflets around this time are also discussed in Gilley, "The Ukrainian Anti-Bolshevik Risings of Spring and Summer 1919," 121, and in Gilley's contribution to this Issue.

Elisavetgrad, May 1919

During May 15-18, one of the most ferocious pogroms of the spring and summer of 1919 took place in Elisavetgrad (present day Kropyvnytskyi), a city located in central Ukraine in the north of Kherson province. Surrounded by a large peasant population, the city was home to the Elvorti agricultural equipment factory, which in 1917 employed more than 7,000 workers.⁵³ In March 1919, the local Soviet state apparatuses were controlled largely by Left Socialist Revolutionaries (Left SRs) who, according to Bolshevik internal reports, frequently accused the Soviet government of being “a government of Yids.” However, such sentiments were hardly restricted to the Left SRs: the same reports note that the head of the local *ispolkom* – a Bolshevik named Ul’ianov⁵⁴ – campaigned for Jews to be removed from local government and replaced by Orthodox Christians.⁵⁵ The dynamic in the soviet did not fare much better: throughout February and March, there were speeches repeatedly demanding that the Jews be expelled from the soviet or pogroms would ensue.⁵⁶ In one particular session of the soviet, seventeen of its representatives debated for four-and-a-half hours whether or not to “beat the Jews” before finally resolving to vote in the negative.⁵⁷ Evidently, antisemitism was strongly pronounced in Elisavetgrad *before* the arrival of Grigor’ev’s troops.

In mid-April, 3,000 of Grigor’ev’s partisans arrived in Elisavetgrad;⁵⁸ by May 10, they had succeeded in dissolving the local Soviet government. Grigor’ev’s aforementioned *Universal* to the “Ukrainian people,” which depicted the Bolsheviks as “Christ killers,” was now plastered around the town. In a desperate attempt to hang on to power, a Soviet division of sailors from Odessa was sent to Elisavetgrad. Although they succeeded initially, when Grigor’ev’s troops

⁵³ <http://www.chervonazirka.com/index.php?part=static&cname=about> Accessed June 24, 2019.

⁵⁴ ‘Ul’ianov’ was apparently expelled from the Russian Communist Party in early 1919, but made his way back into Party work by moving to Elisavetgrad. TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.91 l.25

⁵⁵ TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.1

⁵⁶ O.K.K., *Gody bor’by. Sbornik materialov po istorii revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia na zinov’evshchine*, (Zinov’evsk: Okruzhnaia oktiabr’skaia komissiia, 1927), 78.

⁵⁷ Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917-1930*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 165.

⁵⁸ Antonov-Ovseenko, *Zapiski o grazhdanskoi voine. Tom 4*, 78. Grigor’ev’s unit was composed almost exclusively of peasants from the Kherson region. See HUL f.3050 o.1 d.130 l.1.

returned on May 15, many defected. Later that day, the very same Red sailors participated in a vicious pogrom in which at least 1,526 Jews were murdered.⁵⁹

On the morning of the pogrom, a committee of trade unionists, metalworkers, and members of the local Peasant Congress tried to put a stop to the massacre by forming armed detachments. The working class, however, was divided on the issue. On May 20, the local social democratic newspaper *Nasha Zhizn'* (*Our Life*) reported that the pogrom had in fact been carried out not only by Grigor'ev units and Red sailors, but also by workers.⁶⁰ Internal Bolshevik reports also indicate that those Communists who continued to fight against Grigor'ev (the majority of who were Jewish) were rounded up and shot by workers from the local Elvorti factory, the same factory from which the Bolsheviks had drawn their support throughout the preceding months.⁶¹ Furthermore, local (non-Jewish) members of the Party who had stayed after the arrival of Grigor'ev's units *also* took part in the pogrom.⁶²

As is clear, antisemitism was a problem that crossed the military and political divide in Elisavetgrad. As one local Communist admitted in a frank telegram written in late June, "the entire work of Elisavetgrad Soviet institutions... including the Communists, is fundamentally compromised."⁶³

Uman', May-July 1919

Even more shocking were the events that unfolded during the struggle for power in Uman', a mid-sized town in central Ukraine in what was then Kyiv province (now Cherkasy oblast'). Its population in 1919 was around 60-65,000, the majority of whom were Jewish (approximately 35,000), with Russians and Ukrainians together making up 22,000.⁶⁴ Soviet power was established in Uman'

⁵⁹ HUL f.3035 o.1 d.130 l.1; TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.91 l.25. See also Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919*, 244-245; Evgeniia B. Bosh, *God Bor'by: bor'ba za vlast' na Ukraine s aprelia 1917 g. do nemnetskoi okkupatsii*, (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1925), 89. The figure of 1526 is from a report by the Russian Red Cross: HUL f.3050 o.1 d.162 l.8. Other reports, however, put the number at 3,000: RGASPI f.71 o.35 d.486 l.412-413.

⁶⁰ HUL f.3050 o.1 d.130 l.33. One report even claimed that up to 75% of the pogromists were workers. HUL f.3050 o.1 d.130 l.12ob.

⁶¹ TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.91 l.25.

⁶² TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.91 l.25

⁶³ TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.91 l.25ob

⁶⁴ Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919*, 316.

on the evening of March 11, when partisan units of the 8th Ukrainian Soviet Regiment pushed out the Directory army. Almost immediately, the same Soviet units engaged in an extensive pogrom, which was only brought to an end by the arrival of a second Soviet detachment.⁶⁵ Following a brief occupation of the city by Ukrainian Cossack insurgents, who were no friends of the Jews,⁶⁶ the pogrom-prone 8th Soviet Regiment again took the city on March 22. Antisemitism was not restricted to the Red Army, but was present in local Soviet state institutions as well. Within the Executive Committee, for example, Left SRs succeeded in expelling Jews from office. They did so by making the now familiar charge that true “soviet rule” had been taken out of the hands of the “toilers” and sabotaged by “strangers” and “foreigners;” in other words, by the *Jews*. At about the same time, an antisemitic campaign was also initiated by the local Ukrainian and Russian population in Uman’, who accused the Bolshevik “Yids” of closing down Orthodox churches.⁶⁷

This was the background to the arrival of Grigor’ev’s troops on May 12. The political field in Uman’ was one in which ostensibly pro-Bolshevik Red soldiers carried out pogroms; pro-soviet Left SRs successfully campaigned for the expulsion of Jews from the Executive Committee; and sections of the local population waged a populist campaign against the “Yid Soviet rule.” Antisemitism traversed the political divide in Uman’ in 1919.

When Grigor’ev’s insurgents arrived and deposed the local Soviet government, they initiated a ferociously violent pogrom in which at least 300 Jews were murdered.⁶⁸ In some cases, well known Soviet officials joined Grigor’ev’s troops in carrying out the assault.⁶⁹ The pogrom was finally brought to an end on the

⁶⁵ I have been unable to determine which Soviet Regiment this was.

⁶⁶ According to a report of the Russian Red Cross, the Cossacks had murdered 300 Jews in the town of Teplyk. On arrival, they threatened to do the same in Uman’, but were apparently persuaded not to upon payment of contributions in kind in the shape of shoes and clothing, as well as money. Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 129.

⁶⁷ Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 118-119; Gusevi-Orenburgskii, *Bagrovaia kniga. Pogromy 1919-1920 gg. na Ukraine*, 83-85.

⁶⁸ P. F. Kurinnyi, *Uman’ ta umanhany ochyma P. F. Kurinnogo (z osobystiyh shchodennikiv za 1918-1929 rr.)*, (Uman’: Uman’skyi kraieznavchyi mysei, 2014), 208. I thank Dimitri Tolkatsch and Igor Opatskiy for bringing this source to my attention. Reports compiled by the Russian Red Cross in Ukraine detail entire families being massacred and tortured, with hands, feet, ears, noses and women’s breasts cut off. See Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 122.

⁶⁹ Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 124.

morning of May 22 by the arrival of the 7th Soviet Regiment.⁷⁰ However, just three days later, the 7th Regiment was pulled out of Uman' by the central authorities to put down uprisings in the surrounding provinces, and in its place returned the dreaded 8th Soviet Ukrainian Regiment, the same unit responsible for the pogrom in March.⁷¹ With its return came a new wave of pogromist violence every bit as brutal as the first. Reports by the Russian Red Cross in Ukraine⁷² give details of armed Red soldiers stopping civilians on the street to ask "are you a Yid?" Those who did not answer convincingly were mercilessly beaten.⁷³ Jews who dared appear in public to go to synagogue had to run a gauntlet of soldiers from the 8th Soviet Army, who would stand outside shouting "who is your god?"⁷⁴

The situation in Uman' is illustrative not only of the extent of antisemitic violence within sections of the Red Army, but also of the inability of the Soviet government to stop it, even when there was a desire to do so at the local level. As the pogrom raged from May 22 on, local Communist Party cells tried to fight the 8th Soviet Regiment, and several orders making pogroms punishable by death were issued. While local Bolsheviks did succeed in ensuring that ten Red Army pogromists were shot by firing squads, they were unable to halt the violence. Despite repeated appeals by Bolsheviks to the central authorities in Kyiv that the 8th Regiment be immediately dissolved, relieved of its duties, and replaced by another, *non-antisemitic* unit, there were no such forces at the state's disposal. Consequently, the 8th Regiment remained in Uman' throughout the month of June.⁷⁵ Perhaps most controversially, according to reports by the Russian Red

⁷⁰ According to the Ukrainian Left SR newspaper *Bor'ba*, Soviet troops did not arrive in Uman' until May 23 RGASPI f.71 o.35 d.486 l.217-219. However, a memoir from a local Uman' lawyer suggests the Red Army arrived at 9 o'clock on the morning of the 22nd. See Kurinnyi, *Uman' ta umanhany ochyma*, 205.

⁷¹ This was an enlarged 8th Regiment now totaling some 2,100 troops RGASPI f.71 o.35 d.498 l.167ob. The Regiment just two weeks earlier had carried out a pogrom in Haisyn, a town in central Ukraine. Committee of the Jewish Delegations. *The Pogroms in the Ukraine under the Ukrainian Governments (1917-1920). Historical Survey with Documents and Photographs*. (London: John Bale, Sons and Danielsson, Ltd., 1927), 228, 232.

⁷² The Russian Red Cross was legalized by the Ukrainian Soviet government in 1919 and was allowed to exist until 1921. See Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 849. In mid-late 1919, it carried out extensive investigations into pogroms and collected testimonies by survivors and witnesses. See, for example, the files in TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.126.

⁷³ Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 126. See also Kurinnyi, *Uman' ta umanhany ochyma*, 209.

⁷⁴ Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Pogrom: The Origins of the European Genocide of the Jews*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020), 282.

⁷⁵ Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 127.

Cross, the 8th Regiment was *intentionally* kept in Uman' by the Bolshevik leadership because it had proven itself more than capable of maintaining “soviet rule” by fending off various rebel movements throughout late May and June.⁷⁶ In six weeks of violence, the 8th Regiment killed approximately 150 Jews.⁷⁷ To be clear: in the spring and early summer of 1919, the Bolsheviks were kept in power in Uman' by and through militarized antisemitism embodied by the 8th Soviet Regiment.

Finally, on July 3, the 8th Regiment was replaced by the First Ukrainian Soviet Cavalry under the command of Fedor Gribenko.⁷⁸ However, this force proved to be just as antisemitic as its predecessor: upon arrival, Soviet cavalrymen robbed and attacked Jewish neighborhoods while declaring that they were there to fight “the Yids and the Communists.” It was only with the arrival of the multi-ethnic “International 4th Soviet Regiment” on July 5 that two months of anti-Jewish violence at the hands of the Soviet military were finally brought to an end. The International 4th Regiment was composed of Jewish self-defense groups, as well as Chinese, Hungarian, German, and Russian workers.⁷⁹ More pogroms would follow in Uman' in late July, but these would be carried out by anti-Bolshevik peasant insurgents. This time, the new Soviet government, backed by the International 4th Regiment, took an unconditional stance in opposition to the violence.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ *Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv* (Hereafter RGVA), f.103 o.1 d.49 l.355-356. I wish to thank Dimitri Tolkatsch for bringing this source to my attention. See also Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 127; Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919*, 87-88.

⁷⁷ Veidlinger, *Pogrom: The Origins of the European Genocide of the Jews*, 282.

⁷⁸ For more on Gribenko, see Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 850; Zatonskii, “Vodovorot (iz proshlogo),” 160.

⁷⁹ When the International 4th Division arrived in Uman', the pogrom-prone First Soviet Cavalry was sent to Poltava. See Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 118-130. Other sources give the date of the arrival of the 4th Division as July 8. See Kurinnyi, *Uman' ta umanhany ochyma*, 223. Often, the International 4th Division proved the most reliable Soviet unit in Ukraine and the one most capable of confronting anti-Jewish violence in the Red Army. On the Division, see Kelly Johnson, “Sholem Schwarzbard: Biography of a Jewish Assassin,” (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2012), 111-112.

⁸⁰ University of Glasgow, Russian Revolutionary Literature Collection, Reel 47, Document 1162.

The *Grigor'evshchina* in the Spring and Summer of 1919

These were not isolated incidents. In Cherkasy, a city 190 kilometers northeast of Uman' on the River Dnieper, a substantial section of local Bolsheviks openly interpreted the struggle against the bourgeoisie as one against "Jewish speculators."⁸¹ When Grigor'ev's troops arrived there on May 10, a call was immediately issued for self-defense units to be formed within the trade unions. However, local "Christian" workers refused, leaving 100-200 Jews to defend themselves (all were reportedly killed).⁸² The pogrom by Grigor'ev's troops in Cherkasy commenced on May 16 and lasted for five days. In the ensuing violence, some 617 Jews were murdered.⁸³ Reports stated that "Christian" workers in the trade unions' soviet either took part in the violence or were indifferent to it⁸⁴. When local Bolshevik leaders tried to mobilize their Red Army division to put down the violence, copies of Grigor'ev's *Universal* were found circulating among the soldiers waiting to depart. When they were ordered to fight, sections of the Red Army refused, and declared their intention to side instead with Grigor'ev. When asked why they had defected, they stated their agreement with the *Universal*.⁸⁵ Although a Red Army regiment *did* eventually put up a fight against Grigor'ev's troops, testimonies by local Red soldiers reveal how those who defected to Grigor'ev did so on the grounds that Christian "brothers" should unite to fight the "Communist Yids."⁸⁶

Similar developments occurred in the town of Zolotonosha, in Poltava province, where the Bogunskii regiment of the Red Army was stationed.⁸⁷ The regiment was utterly pervaded with antisemitism, and had perpetrated pogroms back in February.⁸⁸ In mid-April, prior to their arrival in Zolotonosha, Bogunskii soldiers apparently tore off the Red stars on their uniform, shouting "this is a Yid star!" The regiment's antisemitism was further underlined with the arrival of Grigor'ev's troops on May 12, which saw Bogunskii soldiers defect *en masse* and

⁸¹ Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919*, 251.

⁸² HUL f.3050 o.1 d.162 l.17ob. For more on Jewish self-defence units in Cherkasy, see RGASPI f.272 o.1 d.81 l.90-91

⁸³ Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 351.

⁸⁴ Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919*, 257.

⁸⁵ Gilley, "The Ukrainian Anti-Bolshevik Risings of Spring and Summer 1919," 114.

⁸⁶ Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 140-141; Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919*, 268-269. For more on the aftermath of the Cherkasy pogrom, see Johnson, "Sholem Schwarzbard," 111-13.

⁸⁷ On the composition of the Bogunskii regiment, see Miliakova, *Kniga pogromov*, 856.

⁸⁸ See *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii* (Hereafter GARF) f.1318 o.1 d.426 l.5-5ob.

help carry out a pogrom under the slogan “Down with Jewish rule!” When asked by a local Bolshevik why they had deserted the Red Army, Bogunskii soldiers answered: “because they [Grigor’ev’s troops] stand for Soviet Rule, but they also kill the Yids and Communists.”⁸⁹

Beyond Grigor’ev: Antisemitism in the Red Army and Party in 1919

The *Grigor’evshchina* was an expression of a much deeper problem of antisemitism within the apparatuses of Bolshevik authority at the local level in Ukraine in 1919. Intelligence reports sent to the Party Central Committee in April and May make clear that antisemitism was embedded within the Red Army across the *whole* of Ukraine, including many of those regiments and brigades that did *not* carry out pogroms.⁹⁰ Although the wave of pogromist violence subsided after May,⁹¹ reports from June and July show that antisemitism continued to be a profound problem within the Red Army and local Bolshevik and Soviet institutions.⁹² The situation was so grave in some regions that Bolshevik agitators simply could not go near the Red Army for fear that they would be shot on the spot as “Yid speculators.”⁹³ Typical of such reports was an inspection carried out into the Ukrainian Soviet 1st Army in early June, which concluded that “political work among the troops is entirely impossible” owing to antisemitism, which is so “strongly developed... pogroms have become a regular occurrence” (*obychnoe iavlenie*).⁹⁴ Bolsheviks who wished to disseminate propaganda against antisemitism faced equally challenging circumstances in many rural regions. In Lityn (Podolia province) and Fastiv (Kyiv province), the

⁸⁹ TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.116, 121-123; f.5 o.1 d.17 l.55; TsDAVO f.5 o.1 d.17 l.61; HUL f.3050 o.1 d.162 l.40b; RGASPI f.272 o.1 d.81 l.65. See also Gusev-Orenburgskii, *Bagrovaia kniga. Pogromy 1919-1920 gg. na Ukraine*, 9; Gilley, “The Ukrainian Anti-Bolshevik Risings of Spring and Summer 1919,” 114.

⁹⁰ Security reports for the months of April and May show that antisemitism found traction in Red Army units all across Ukraine, from the regions of the north such as the Volyn oblast’, Konotop, and Berdychiv; to Bila Tserkva, Poltava, Vasylykiv, Oleksandriia, Koziatyn, and Kryvyi Rih in central Ukraine; and from Konstantingrad (present day Krasnohrad) and Donetsk in the east, to Ochakiv and Kherson in the south and Koziatyn in the west. See the reports held in TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.40-42, 126-128, 156-158; f.1 o.20 d.41 l.2-12, 25; f.57 o.2 d.283 l.19-21; and RGASPI f.17 o.6 d.369 l.109-111; f.71 o.35 d.507 l.363-394.

⁹¹ HUL f.3050 o.1 d.162 l.40b-6

⁹² RGASPI f.71 o.35 d.507 l.363-394; f.71 o.35 d.489 l.251-292; TsDAVO f.5 o.1 d.20 l.6-30

⁹³ TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.95, 146-148; f.5 o.1 d.17 l.23-23ob

⁹⁴ TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.95

local Party had virtually no contact with the peasant population, which on more than one occasion rose up against the regime with the slogan “We are the Bolsheviks, beat up the Yids!”⁹⁵ The disjuncture between the Party leadership and rural communities was often considerable: one report from the Pustovoity village, in the Vinnytsia province, revealed that local peasants had no information about what Soviet rule was; nor did they know which party was in power in Moscow. They were, however, convinced that the Bolsheviks were all “Yids.”⁹⁶

Similar difficulties appeared within the Party itself. In Fastiv, for example, a report noted that of the twenty-two Communists in the local Party organization in mid-June, only two were actual card-carrying members, the rest being antisemitic “Petliura agitators.” Membership, so the report indicated, was being coordinated through inter-personal friendship groups, and the antisemites in the Party could not be arrested such was their dominance.⁹⁷ Again, it is important to note that these were not isolated cases.⁹⁸ In some regions, antisemitism had become so pervasive that local Party and soviet organizations had split into opposing camps. In Lipovets (Kyiv province), for example, the soviet was composed of sixty Communist Bundists, twenty Mensheviks, and twenty Bolsheviks. The principal divide, however, was *not* a party one: according to a local Party report written in mid-May, the soviet was split along ethnic lines, with the Jewish and Russian groups effectively operating as separate, opposing camps.⁹⁹ In Ovruch (Zhytomyr region), the local Communist organization was similarly divided between a non-Jewish group which “openly tried to start pogroms” and a Jewish group composed of “honest workers.” The report concluded by demanding that the Central Committee immediately replace the antisemitic individuals with “real Communists.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.78-81,162

⁹⁶ RGASPI f.71 o.35 d.489 l.118

⁹⁷ TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.142-143

⁹⁸ See, for example, the following reports sent to the Party Central Committee in June 1919: TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.118-119,127-128,139-141; TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.41 l.19 and RGASPI f.71 o.35 d.507 l.374. As an article about pogroms and counterrevolutionary sentiment in the Kharkiv Bolshevik daily *Kommunar* put it: “the great hindrance and deficiency of our [Party] work derives from the complete absence of conscious party workers in the provinces” *Kommunar* 57 (71) pl. 29/5/1919.

⁹⁹ TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.86-87

¹⁰⁰ TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.78-81. Similar cases were reported in Fastiv: TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.142-143

Yet the central authorities were simply in no position to effect such changes. Illustrative of this is the fact that on May 30, just a few days after the *Grigor'evshchina*, a meeting of the Cheka and Soviet government leadership declared that responsibility for dealing with local outbreaks of “counterrevolution” rested at the local level, in soviet institutions such as the Executive Committees.¹⁰¹ However, these were *precisely* the bodies that were at times complicit in antisemitic violence during the spring and summer of 1919. The central authorities often tried to send “honest Communists” to the provinces, to ensure some stability. However, in some cases, things did not work out as planned: in Pavlohrad (a town in Ekaterinoslav Governorate), the “Communist” sent by the Party center, a man named “Panov,” turned out to be an antisemite.¹⁰² This, again, was not an isolated case.¹⁰³ Such was the separation between the center and the periphery, that Bolshevik leaders were simply unable to check the composition of Party organizations at the local level; as such, these institutions were often staffed by antisemites over whom the leadership had little control.¹⁰⁴ All of this led the Central Bureau of the Jewish Sections of the Communist Party (the Evseksiia) to conclude in late 1919 that Jewish workers were “*often the only source of local resistance*” to Red Army pogroms and anti-Soviet uprisings in mid-1919.¹⁰⁵

Antisemitism in the Red Army: Towards an Understanding

Faced with this unprecedented explosion of anti-Jewish violence, Bolshevik leaders tried to initiate an extensive campaign against antisemitism in the summer of 1919.¹⁰⁶ Yet they faced great difficulties in doing so, since many within

¹⁰¹ TsDAVO f.2 o.1 d.25 l.72

¹⁰² TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.24

¹⁰³ Reports by the Information Bureau of the Ukrainian Commissariat for Military Affairs make it clear that in Vasil'kov (Kyiv), the “Communists” sent from the center to put a stop to peasant uprisings were themselves interpolated by antisemitism. RGVA f.25860 o.1 d.148 l.81ob. I thank Dimitri Tolkatsch for bringing this source to my attention.

¹⁰⁴ TsDAHO f.1 o.20 d.35 l.40-42,118-119; f.57 o.2 d.342 l.30-33. A report by the Poalei Zion in June 1919 (sent to Lenin) complained that several Red Army units responsible for carrying out pogroms had yet to be disbanded. Similarly, it warned that “openly counterrevolutionary bandits” continued to occupy key positions in local apparatuses of the Soviet government. RGASPI f.272 o.1 d.141 l.18-19.

¹⁰⁵ RGASPI f.445 o.1 d.1 l.78. Emphasis original.

¹⁰⁶ See Brendan McGeever, *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

the Bolsheviks' social base in Ukraine saw no contradiction between fighting for "soviet rule" and against "Jewish exploiters." All too frequently, the revolutionary visions conjured up by radicalized peasants in Ukraine overlapped and combined with antisemitism.

Critical Theory can help us to understand why. In Ukraine in 1919, a key feature of antisemitism was the representation of "the Jew" as a holder of power, a bearer of a "foreign" and distinctively exploitative class position. As late theorist Moishe Postone once noted, in moments of crisis antisemitism "can appear to be anti-hegemonic." Its particular danger for socialists and anti-capitalists, he argued, lies in its unique configuration "as a fetishized form of oppositional consciousness, [as] the expression of a movement of the little people against an intangible, global form of domination."¹⁰⁷ In 1919, popular interpretations of "Bolshevism" proved to be susceptible to precisely this dynamic. Many radicalized peasants and workers in Ukraine fought for a populist conception of Soviet authority, a power of "the people" (*narod*), of the "laboring people" (*trudiashchiesia*), against the capitalists, the speculators, the exploiters. These were standard categories of revolutionary Bolshevism, and as far as Bolshevik leaders were concerned, they were precisely the kinds of concepts that were best equipped to cut through racialized discourse and show the way towards a true class consciousness.

However, in the Ukrainian revolutionary conjuncture, class and ethnic categories could not be easily separated. Indeed, the terms "Ukrainian" and "Jew" simultaneously bore both class *and* ethnic overdeterminations. "Ukrainians" were "true" and "honest" "toilers" who put their hands to "productive" labor. "The Jew," in addition to being a "Communist," was a "non-laborer," a "speculator." In other words, the categories Bolshevik leaders deployed in their class analysis – "bourgeois," "toiler," "the people," "exploiter," and "exploited" – were, on the ground, understood in profoundly complex and racialized ways.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Moishe Postone, "History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism," *Public Culture* 18/1 (2006): 99.

¹⁰⁸ The place of "speculation" or petty trade in popular conceptions of Jewishness has been addressed in Andrew Sloin's pioneering work on Bolshevik rule in Belorussia. For Sloin, the Soviet state's designation of "speculation" as a criminal (not to mention "counterrevolutionary") activity coincided and often overlapped with the widespread antisemitic identification of "speculation" as a defining feature of Jewishness. There was a "tendency inherent in the Soviet project," writes Sloin, "to conflate Jewish economic practices with the workings of "merchant capital" and problematically impute to Jewish actors a certain agency over basic economic functions." See Andrew Sloin, "Speculators, Swindlers and Other Jews: Regulating Trade in Revolutionary White Russia," *East European Jewish Affairs* 40/2 (2010): 112.

Revolutionary class discourse was taken up in social struggles that were shaped not only by class antagonisms, but also by the politicization of ethnicity, antisemitism especially. It was in this context that slogans such as “Smash the Yids, long live Soviet rule!” gained such traction.

The mobilization of the Ukrainian peasantry around an anti-bourgeois populist politics had brought the Bolsheviks to power in Ukraine in early 1919. By the spring and summer, however, that same social base turned against the regime in an unprecedented wave of anti-Jewish violence. Red Army antisemitism was not confined to 1919, but would resurface in the Soviet-Polish war in the summer of 1920 and in different locales in 1921, as well.¹⁰⁹ When the Bolshevik leadership responded to antisemitism during the Russian Revolution, therefore, their confrontation was with an antisemitism that had become entrenched within sections of the Party’s support base.¹¹⁰ Ukraine in 1919 would show, with devastating consequences, the extent to which class could become racialized, and radical ideas be taken up on the ground in ways over which the Party leadership had little control. This explosive overlap between class politics and antisemitic representations of Jewishness proved to be the Party’s biggest challenge. Although Red Army antisemitism culminated in just a fraction of the civil war pogroms, it posed the most serious test of the Bolshevik promise to build a world free of exploitation and domination.

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¹⁰⁹ RGASPI f.17 o.109 d.73 l.60-60ob; GARF f.R-339 o.1 d.424 l.119-119ob. See also On a Red Army pogrom carried out by the 6th Regiment in Bohuslav in 1921, see YIVO RG80 38 3474. On antisemitism within 12th Division of the Red Army in the summer of 1920, see YIVO RG80 39, 3519.

¹¹⁰ For an extended discussion, see McGeever, *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution*.

Keywords: Revolution, Pogroms, Antisemitism, Ukraine, Critical Theory

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