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Why the West's 'Anti-war' Camp Is So Hostile to Ukrainians – and to Jews

Ben Gidley and Jan Rybak, June 2023

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When a major UK academic union recently passed a motion on the war in Ukraine that crudely trampled over Ukrainian suffering, there was a significant backlash. But there was another part of the motion that garnered less attention, but was just as revealing about the conspiratorial and too often antisemitic nature of the left-wing "anti-war" camp.

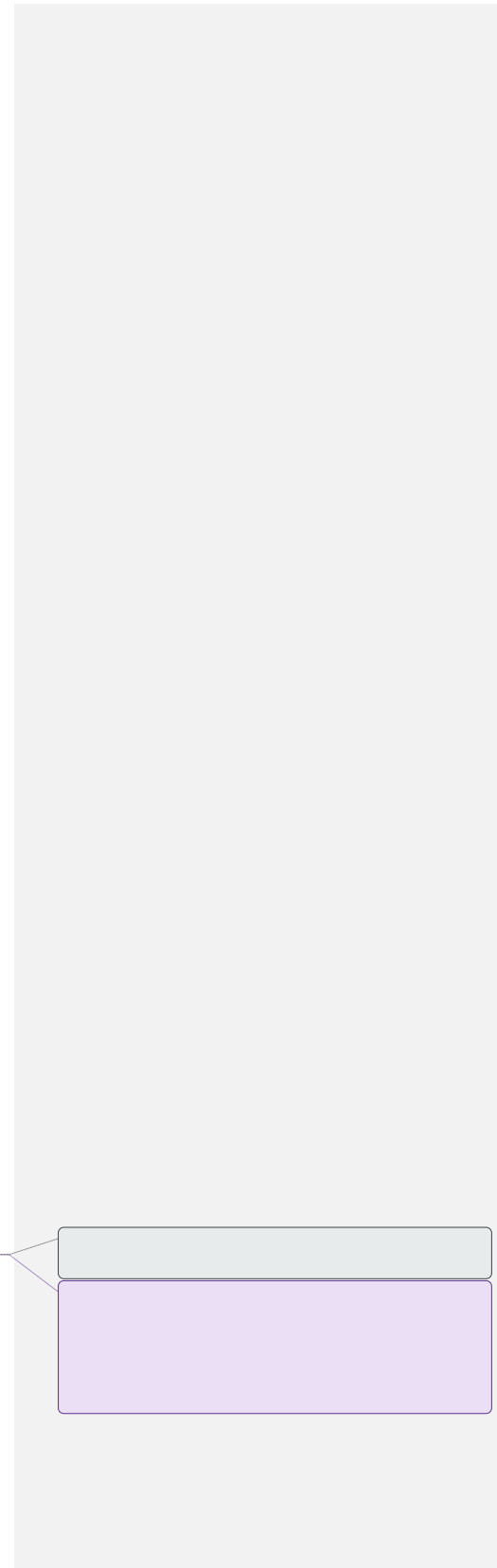
The University and College Union represents over 120,000 university staff. Its motion, <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/12945/Business-of-the-strategy-and-finance-committee-open-session#5-composite-stop-the-war-in-ukraine--peace-now> narrowly passed, described the full Russian invasion of Ukraine as a battle between 'Russian and US imperialism' and demanded the UK stop delivering arms. That triggered a wave of outrage by union members – [letters of protest](#) were drafted, some [resigned](#) in disgust – focused on the insult to Ukrainians' suffering and disregard for their wish to survive in the face of the Russian onslaught.

But there was another component to the motion. 'Congress notes that Volodymyr Zelensky says he wants Ukraine to become a "big Israel" – an armed, illiberal outpost of US imperialism.'

In the aftermath of the [Bucha massacre](#), President Zelenskyy had indeed [made such a comment](#). However, contrary to the motion's insinuation, he didn't express an aspiration for Ukraine's future; he suggested that Russian aggression would *force* the country to rely on the militarization of its populace for the sake of security. One may disagree with this assessment or question whether "big Israel" was a fitting analogy, but the misrepresentation of the quote by academics is concerning.

Even more concerning is that this line served little purpose other than to remind everyone of Zelenskyy's Jewish background. In doing so, the motion's authors – wittingly or not – revived a toxic antisemitic defamation: that 'the Jews' – Zelenskyy serving as a stand-in here – want to 'Judaize' [which ever country over which they were purportedly conspiring to control.]

The idea that Jews want to turn those countries into a 'Jewish state' (in contemporary terms, Israel) is a longstanding rallying cry of antisemites and pogromists, particularly in Eastern and Central European history. It was, for example, at the heart of the [Protocols of the Elders of Zion](#), the antisemitic forgery first published in Russia a century ago, and of the nationalist right's anti-Jewish boycott campaign in Poland in the early twentieth century.



How could this be possible? In some ways, it wasn't surprising. Alongside two motions on Ukraine – the [other one](#) defended Ukraine's right to self-determination, called for practical solidarity and passed by a large margin – this year's UCU congress passed no fewer than [three motions condemning Israel](#), plus a [motion](#) about Sudan that listed Israel (whose role in Sudan is negligible) among a list of countries which 'fuelled the crisis through support to the combatants.'

And there is a longer history: In 2019, the union had to [apologize](#) for omitting Jews from a list of victims of the Holocaust; its [Scottish Congress](#) defended Bristol professor [David Miller](#), who [had accused Jewish students](#) of being 'pawns' of a 'violent, racist, foreign regime.'
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-03-04/ty-article-opinion/david-miller-textbook-case-of-anti-zionism-becoming-vicious-antisemitism/0000017f-db6a-db5a-a57f-db6a4e720000>

At the same time, though, this motion must be contextualized with the wider rise of antisemitism in the wake of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine.

Unsurprisingly, some of the ugliest smears have come from the Kremlin and its representatives. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov compared Zelenskyy to Hitler, whom he also suspected of having had 'Jewish blood'; <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/2022-05-01/ty-article-premium/lavrov-compares-zelenskyy-to-hitler-who-also-had-jewish-blood/00000180-989a-dc94-a1b4-ffdb36f90000> his Cairo embassy tweeted that Zelenskyy's 'regime' had '[blood ties to Israel](#)'.

More striking is the extent to which such tropes have found a receptive audience in the West's self-identifying 'anti-war' movement (albeit the term 'anti-war' being quite a stretch, given that it is primarily concerned with opposing the delivery of arms for Ukraine's self-defense).

One of the reasons is the 'anti-war' scene's openness to the right, including the far right. At recent [demonstrations in Germany](#), for instance, veterans of the 1980s 'peace movement' and supporters and deputies of the Die Linke (The Left) political party stood alongside neo-Nazis and known Holocaust deniers. Clearly, [not everyone](#) was happy with this informal alliance, but there they stood. In a recent [European parliamentary vote](#) on supplying Ukraine with ammunition, several Die Linke and Catalan left-wing republican parliamentarians joined the AfD and other radical right MEPs from Germany, Austria, and France in voting against sending military aid.

Since February 2022, conspiracy theorists and far-right activists have shifted their attention from the COVID <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/2021-11-23/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/50-of-anti-vaxxers-voted-afd-a-visit-to-germanys-infection-capital/0000017f-ef85-d8a1-a5ff-ff8fc6fd0000> [pandemic](#) towards the war in Ukraine, [seeing in it](#) yet another conspiracy by the 'globalist' cabal <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2023-06-07/ty-article-premium/tucker-carlson-trafficks-in-antisemitic-tropes-about-ukraines-zelenskyy-on-twitter-debut/00000188-968d-df21-a1b8-b78dff590000> to dominate the world. In this wake antisemitic [conspiracy theories flourish](#). Ukraine is represented as being controlled by the Jews, the war as being waged by 'the West' (not the Kremlin), using Ukrainians as pawns on behalf of a 'Jewish elite.'

Long-dormant Judeophobic tropes are dusted off and redeployed. Using an antisemitic code popular among the Nazis and on [the anti-Communist American right](#) after World War II, Ukraine is

portrayed as the remnant of 'Khazaria', an early medieval Khanate in the region whose elites may have converted to Judaism. Russia, in this narrative, wages war against the '[Khazarian Mafia](#)'; its president, [another conspiracy theory claims](#), is George Soros' cousin.

Early in the 2022 Russian assault, these notions spread virally on far right and QAnon social media, showing how our culture's deep [reservoir of antisemitism](#) can be used – including by state actors – to 'explain' current events when its themes become salient. But before long, such tropes were repeated on the left too, where a narrative of Ukraine as a tool of Western imperialism often short-circuits to conspiracy theories about Jews.

[David Miller](#) is a good example of this. In [Miller's tangled account](#), Ashkenazi Jews are in fact of [Iranian-Turkish-Slavic origin](#) close to Ukraine (a version of the Khazar hypothesis based on recent genetic pseudo-scientific raciology), Jewish 'settler-colonists' in Odessa are responsible for both Ukrainian nationalism and Zionism, and the Chabad movement is at the heart of a [shadowy network](#) linking Zionism to Ukrainian 'Nazis'.

Another popular voice of the 'anti-war' movement, Roger Waters, recently best-known for his [trivialization of the Holocaust](#), [spoke at the UN in February at the invitation of Russia's ambassador](#), declaring that 'the Russian invasion of Ukraine was not unprovoked, so I also condemn the provocateurs in the strongest possible terms' – language that is echoed in the UCU motion. Waters' antisemitic belief that a British politician was directed to criticize him by '[the Foreign Office in Tel Aviv](#)' is part of the same conspiratorial worldview.

What these trends and theories have in common – and what is at the heart of any conspiracy theory – is to deny people agency. Everything and everyone appear to be controlled by a global 'elite,' whether Jews, the United States, or other sinister forces. That most Ukrainians' experiences and demands do not feature in any of these 'anti-war' statements is not a coincidence; it is the consequence of this logic. Why would their opinions matter if they are merely pawns in the hands of U.S. imperialism or the global cabal?

To be sure, not everyone who voted for the UCU motion or who opposes the delivery of arms to Ukraine subscribes to these delusions. Many would be appalled by them. This does not change the fact, however, that conspiratorial thinking – not always making much effort to disguise its antisemitism – is deeply rooted here.

It is thus that antisemitism finds its way into this heterogenous 'movement.' It functions as a [cultural code](#) to express the idea of foreign control, as a means to deny people agency, as an attack not only against Jews, but against a free society. Not only has this 'anti-war' camp proven itself no friend to Ukrainians, the actual victims of warmongering in this conflict, but it often subverts what sounds like a universalistic idea of resisting conflict in order to compound bigotry.