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Specter of Anti-Semitism Hangs Over Ukraine

By Matthew Kupfer

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As the conflict in eastern Ukraine continues to escalate, one doesn't have to look far to find proof that the Ukraine crisis is a mass of contradictions. It's been that way from the beginning. The separatist forces of the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics have long claimed to be at war with a fascist regime in Kiev, yet they count among their ranks volunteers pulled from the Russian far right, people often much closer to fascists than anyone in the Ukrainian government.

Meanwhile, on the Ukrainian side, strident Ukrainian nationalists once known for anti-Semitism and bigotry have teamed up with Jews, Russian-speaking Ukrainians and individuals of other ethnicities in defense of their country. And, although the Kiev government itself is in no way fascist, it does have a far-right detachment, the Azov Battalion, fighting in the Donbass. In short, marriages of convenience abound on both sides.

Meanwhile, ideology can be very flexible. Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the recent comments by Alexander Zakharchenko, the head of the Donetsk People's Republic.

On Feb. 2, while announcing a mass mobilization in the de facto republics, Zakharchenko disparagingly called the current regime in Kiev Jewish. More specifically, he referred to the supposedly Jewish Ukrainian leaders as "miserable representatives of a very large, great nation." He described this situation as farcical — Jews who "have never held a sword in their hands" commanding Cossack warriors — and suggested that Ukraine's historic heroes would turn over in their graves if they caught wind of this.

The Donetsk leader was clearly attempting to tap into Ukraine's latent anti-Semitism, a prejudice that historically has been endemic to the Eastern European region. At the same time, ever mindful of maintaining his republic's "anti-fascist" credentials, he couched his comment in politically correct language. Jews are, he said, a "great nation." The implication was that he does not disapprove of all Jews — just the miserable ones.

This is, on the whole, a very perplexing, bizarre quote. Can the government in Kiev simultaneously be fascist, neo-Nazi, and Jewish? And when an anti-Semite must couch his anti-Semitism in half-hearted, but complimentary platitudes about the "great" Jewish nation, is that a victory or a failure for political correctness?

Unfortunately, this incident reveals yet again how the Ukraine crisis has often rendered Jews the object of others' narratives, and not the subject of their own. The separatists and their Russian supporters are the most guilty of this.

Yet efforts to counter these claims have at times hardly been better. In April 2014, several masked men waving Russian flags and claiming to represent the separatists gathered near a Donetsk synagogue to hand out fliers ordering local Jews to register with the separatist authorities or face deportation.

Given the intensity of "fascism" accusations during that early period of the conflict, it is possible that the masked men were pro-Kiev provocateurs who hoped to discredit the separatists by associating them with Nazism. Yet, their actions did more to victimize Jewish citizens than discredit the rebels.

Even positive efforts have, at times, seemed forced. There was a cheesy photo op of a nationalist Right Sector member painting over anti-Semitic graffiti with the help of a rabbi. And a recent photo tweet by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, which showed the president talking with two elderly Ukrainians, contained the caption, "Grandchildren of those who defended Ukraine 70 years ago fight today for their native land against an aggressor."

The sentence was heart-warming, but historically questionable. Did these elderly Ukrainians fight in the ranks of the Red Army to defend their country from Hitler, or were they among the Ukrainian nationalists who collaborated with the Nazis in hopes of breaking free from the Soviet yoke? The photo selection seemed aimed at skirting over the issue: A bearded rabbi stood peering out from behind Poroshenko and an elderly woman, perhaps absolving the tweet of any historical baggage by his very presence.

As a Jew, it is difficult to feel positively about any of this, even the well-intentioned pro-Kiev photo ops. No one wants his or her ethnicity or religion to become a political football.

But the predicament of Jews in Ukraine and Russia is hardly doom and gloom. Anti-Semitism remains a regional problem, but it is no longer almost an official policy, as it often seemed in the Soviet Union. And both the Russian and Ukrainian leadership openly reject anti-Semitism.

Furthermore, in Ukraine, the Euromaidan revolution and the struggle against Russian aggression in the Donbass have bridged major gaps that once divided Ukrainian society. Today, Ukrainian Christians, Jews and Tatar Muslims find themselves on the same side of the conflict. And the Ukrainian government also includes several Jewish figures, including parliamentary speaker Volodymyr Groysman, who holds the third most powerful position in the government.

Kiev's willingness to overlook the Azov Battalion's far-right ideology is still a concern, but there is also reason to believe that, with time, marriages of convenience between different political, ethnic and religious groups will lead to a more unified, tolerant Ukraine. In short, as a direct result of the conflict, the word "Ukrainian" may in the future denote a truly civic national identity.

As fighting rages in the Donbass, it may seem preemptive to think about a time after the conflict, but it is still important. Moving forward, the Ukrainian government should not lose its momentum. It must seize the opportunity to better incorporate all of the country's diverse ethnic, religious and social groups into Ukrainian society.

Ukraine's interethnic history is extremely complicated, with many dark chapters. A resolution of past tensions will require an open, respectful discourse between all groups involved.

That means creating a climate in which individuals can come to understand each other's histories, cultures and grievances. To achieve this, Kiev should partner with cultural organizations, civil society and academics engaged in the study of Ukraine's history and diversity. But the process will take time and effort.

In the meantime, however, we can all support this process by calling comments like Zakharchenko's what they are: anti-Semitism.

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