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'Putin's Hybrid War and the Jews'

Sam Sokol looks at the fate of Jews in Ukraine

By John Rogers

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ISGAP

Award-winning journalist Sam Sokol is the author of "Putin's Hybrid War and the Jews," a book covering the tragic fate of the Jewish communities in Ukraine since the 2013 Euromaidan revolution, the annexation of Crimea and war in the Donbass. As a reporter for the Jerusalem Post covering European diasporas, Sokol was ideally placed to witness how the Jewish communities were affected by both political scheming and physical fighting.

On the macro level, Sokol assesses whether Ukrainian Jews have been used as pawns in a propaganda assault by the Russian government and in revisionist Ukrainian history that makes heroes out of war criminals responsible for Jewish and Polish atrocities. These ideological issues serve as the setting for stories of human struggle, which is placed at the forefront of the book. Sokol's extensive range of interviews with Jewish refugees, fighters, presidents and victims are seamlessly woven into the wider context to create a book that is

broad in scope but always returns to individual people. The story is tragic and complex, and the book is impossible to put down.

Sam Sokol talked to The Moscow Times' John Rogers about the making of his book. Some questions have been edited for brevity and clarity.

How did the book come about?

I was a reporter for the Jerusalem Post covering Jewish diaspora affairs... When the Euromaidan started, because of Svoboda's [a far-right political party] role in the protests we thought it would be appropriate if I went out and reported from the ground there... As the conflict continued you started to see that even though it wasn't a Jewish conflict, Jewish issues kept coming to the fore. There was a rise in anti-Semitic attacks, and this started to be used in the propaganda on the Russian side which said it was a "fascist junta" and "Nazis were taking over Ukraine." As Russia took Crimea and started fermenting separatist uprising in the Donbass you started seeing these Jewish issues more and more, and more accusations of anti-Semitism. It was brilliant if twisted idea from Putin and the Kremlin: if you can tap into the legacy of the Great Patriotic War, make people think that they're going to fight the fascists, then it's easier to mobilize people, easier to cause divisions within Ukraine...

When the issue of anti-Semitism was instrumentalized during this period, I realized this is something I should be reporting on. As the war progressed, I decided I wanted to go and see how the Jewish communities in the war zones were faring.

I decided to write the book after I'd been in Dnipro and had interviewed a number of refugees. One man told me that he saw a woman have her arm blown up in front of his eyes and that's when he decided to leave. I started thinking that I had all these stories and I couldn't tell them all... but I couldn't let these stories be forgotten... I went to sleep that night and woke up screaming, drenched in sweat because I was dreaming that I was with that guy watching that woman get blown up. These stories have to be told because nobody else is doing it.

How have Jews been reflected in propaganda from both the Russian and Ukrainian sides of the conflict?

To oversimplify a little bit, the Russian side has primarily lied about what's happening now, while the Ukrainians have lied about what's happened in the past. Russian state-controlled media and government spokespeople have consistently exaggerated or even fabricated anti-Semitism in Ukraine. I remember in 2015 both Izvestia and Pravda [Russian newspapers] ran an article saying about 20 Jews had been beaten up in Odessa. When I called, it turned out that nothing had happened and the Jewish community leader who had been quoted in Russian media didn't exist. They just made him up...

They use the issue of anti-Semitism for propaganda. I've interviewed dozens of Jews who fled Ukraine, and every single one I spoke to said it was because of either the war or collapsing economy. I haven't met a single person who said it was because of anti-Semitism.

Meanwhile, on the Ukrainian side after the war started there was a psychological need to separate themselves from their communist Soviet and Russian past. So they created a new national narrative based on the fight for independence and began to rehabilitate people like

Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych from the UON [Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists] and UPA [Ukrainian Insurgent Army]. These are the new national heroes. This was deeply problematic both to Jews and to Poles; between them the UON and UPA killed between 70,000 to 100,000 ethnic Poles during the war and thousands of Jews. There is revisionism to show that these groups saved Jews instead of then killing them...

So, Russians lie about what's happening now, and Ukrainians lie about the past, but in both cases, it involves efforts to instrumentalize the Jews.

How many Jews have been displaced from Ukraine and how many remain?

It's hard to get exact numbers... A demographer at Hebrew University – Sergio Della Pergola – estimated that before the Maidan there were 70,000 Jews in the country. If you ask the local Rabbinic leadership there, they'll tell you there was anywhere from 400,000 to 1 million. Everyone has a different figure, but I tend to be more conservative. In Donetsk, the local community estimated [there were] between 10-11,000. Of them, there's probably a couple thousand left...

Tens of thousands have been displaced from the Donbass, and more than 32,000 Ukrainians have fled to Israel since right before the conflict to the end of last year.

Do displaced Jews want to return as soon as possible?

A lot of people who were displaced did their best to stay in Ukraine. For instance, the Rabbi of Donetsk re-established a community of Donetsk Jews in Kiev. Many people didn't want to leave, when the fighting would spike people would go to Israel, and when things would calm down the numbers slacked off because people really didn't want to leave... People don't want to go but sometimes there's not a choice. I've interviewed Ukrainian refugees in Israel who would love to go back to Ukraine if they could. People miss Ukraine.

Would you say Jewish people have suffered more during the war than non-Jewish Ukrainians?

Everyone suffered. I wouldn't say they've suffered more, but they've suffered in a unique manner that deserves to be told. Ukrainian Jews have a unique story and their suffering differs from that of ethnic Ukrainians because of their history and how communal structures have fallen apart.

What is President Zelensky's attitude towards Jewish communities?

Zelensky was asked about the importance of his Jewish identity in a recent interview and he replied that it was number 20-30 in his list of attributes. Zelensky is a comedian and politician who happens to be Jewish; he's not a Jewish politician. It's sort of incidental to who he is and how he acts. I think it's much more important to look at his business ties or the values that he exhibited as a comedian to figure out how he's going to act than to look at anything in his Jewish background.

What message would you like a reader to take away from your book?

In a contemporary conflict, the first victim is truth. Both the present and the past are malleable, and conflicts don't just take place on the battlefields, but in hearts and minds, in

history books and the newspapers... Contemporary hybrid war involves the fabrication of information, attempts to create and fan racial animosity...

The second thing is that even though conflicts like the war in the Donbass don't always get headlines, people should remember there are real people suffering, people on both sides losing their lives, their homes and everything they have. And I hope a Jewish audience would be interested in finding out what their co-religionists in Ukraine are going through.

The freezing wind cut through my thin leather jacket and tattered Yankees cap as I ducked my head low between my shoulders and hugged my arms for warmth. My sneakers crunched through Kyiv's December snow as I made my way through the Ukrainian capital, intent on reaching the city's central square, known as the Maidan. Ahead of me a line of minibuses stretched perpendicular to the street, blocking off access. I continued my slow march through the frigid conditions, placing one numb foot in front of the other, intent only on skirting the blockade, when an armored member of the Berkut, Ukraine's riot police, yelled something in unintelligible Russian and motioned for me to head back.

"What the hell am I doing here," I wondered as I turned away, searching for a clear path between my hotel and the site of Ukraine's second popular revolt in less than a decade.

At the time I was the Diaspora Correspondent for the Jerusalem Post—with a beat that encompassed Jewish communal, religious, and political life on several continents—and I had been lured (or, more accurately, had lured myself) to this former Soviet republic's capital by the promise of a story involving antisemitism, neo-Nazis, and a violent revolution that had many of the country's approximately 70,000 Jews in the grips of existential fear. I would soon learn that things are rarely that simple.

I soon found myself walking down Khreshchatyk Street—a wide boulevard that serves as downtown Kyiv's main shopping district—and coming across another set of barricades. Rather than being made of buses and backed by masked and armed police, however, this barrier belonged to the protesters and was a slapdash affair put together from aluminum siding, park benches, wooden beams, bags of snow, and any other detritus that its builders had been able to scrounge within the confines of the territory they has staked out.

Before entering the Maidan proper, however, I was determined to enter the belly of the beast (as I grandiosely thought of it at the time), the Kyiv City Council building, which had recently been taken by fighters loyal to the far-right nationalist Svoboda party and turned into a makeshift protest headquarters. It was primarily my interest in Svoboda that had brought me to Kyiv. How, I wondered, was the local Jewish community faring during a revolution in which radical antisemites were playing such a prominent role?

Blocking the doors of the imposing Soviet era municipal building were several masked men wearing Svoboda armbands and orange construction helmets, one of which was emblazoned with the Wolfsangel, a Germanic symbol popular among neo-Nazis. I joined a line of protesters and we moved forward as, one by one, the helmeted nationalists allowed us through the wooden and glass doors into the building's lobby. Barely breathing as I walked past Svoboda propaganda plastered across the foyer's walls, I made my way through the crowd and up a grand marble stairway to the second floor where helmeted men were rolling up fire hoses on the slick tiles next to the windows overlooking the street below.

At one in the morning, only hours before my arrival from Tel Aviv, the police had stormed the barricades and attempted to enter the building, only to be driven back by protesters firing high-pressure jets of water. Perversely, distress that I had missed the fighting mingled with relief that I had not been present when the fighting had broken out.

Entering the building's two-story tall main chamber, my heart pounded as I gazed at the Svoboda banners hanging limply from the gallery, each with its yellow hand against a blue field flashing an eternal victory sign. Standing in the center of the grand plenum chamber of Kyiv's Stalinist Gothic city council building, young men in combat boots and army helmets jostling around me, I felt intensely alone. Alongside the Svoboda flags were suspended the black and red standard of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, an extreme nationalist militia which had carried out an infamous "campaign of ethnic cleansing of Poles, Jews, and other minorities" during the Second World War. Protesters sleeping on floor mats filled much of the floor space around the edge of the hall, many with gas masks and helmets kept on the cold marble within easy reach. Several men draped in Ukraine's blue and yellow flags slept upright in velvet upholstered wooden chairs in the center of the room, while a party leader standing on a stage harangued the mob over a public address system.

Unnerved by my surroundings, I struck up a conversation with a young man, a linguist by trade, who sought to reassure me that, despite the fears of many in the Jewish community, there was no real danger of an outbreak of antisemitism, even with the active participation of Svoboda in the protests. "I've been teased and called a Jew by friends for standing up against antisemitism, and I support Svoboda here," he said, adding that he believed that the opposition must be supported as an alternative to an inept and corrupt ruling elite. It wasn't very comforting.

Turning to leave I ran into a small table near the stage manned by a diminutive and elderly woman with a doughy face and red knit cap. The table held a number of items sporting the Svoboda logo. When she looked away I quickly pocketed a small flag and made my way back down the stairs and into the street. Suddenly, I was able to breath again.

In the city council chamber, I had hooked up with a local television crew. After we left they brought me through the barricades and into a building housing the revolutionaries' media center, where I was given my press credentials. Thus armed with as much protection as a small piece of paper issued by anti-government forces could provide, I set out to meet with a representative of the Jewish community. As I made my way back out of the Maidan and away from the hub of the conflict, the streets became progressively calmer and quieter. I was trying to find the address of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee (UJC), an advocacy group funded by Aleksandr Feldman, a Jewish oligarch and member of parliament who had been outspoken in his criticism of the protesters.

Only meters from the UJC's offices, I stopped, transfixed by a swastika scrawled outside a small restaurant. "This can't be real," I thought. By that time, frozen both in spirit and in body, I had wrapped myself up as tightly as possible, my face hidden between the upturned collar of my jacket and the lowered brim of my hat, making me unidentifiable at a glance. I had forgotten that I was carrying the Svoboda flag. Glancing up as I entered, the secretary took one look at me and began to scream.

But let’s back up. How did I get here?

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Footnotes have been removed for ease of reading.

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