

My grandparents' greatest gift was their history

They believed in both their history and destiny as Jews. Loss of personal and collective Jewish identity in the USA pained them.



Jews were targeted in Lviv, 1941

by Matthew M. Hausman, JD

As the war in Ukraine drags on longer than anyone thought possible, it seems Jewish history has become one of the unintended casualties. Though warfare against civilians should always be condemned, the willingness of many Jewish organizations and congregations to declare ardent solidarity with Ukraine glosses over the unspeakable atrocities suffered by Jews there over the course of centuries.

In echoing President Biden's moral pronouncements about a conflict many believe was greenlit by his foreign policy weakness, some Jewish supporters have proclaimed their supposed Ukrainian roots and loyalties. But such claims are revisionist fantasies that ignore how their ancestors were persecuted with forced ghettoization, pogroms, and massacres in the Pale of Settlement and beyond. Most who didn't flee were ultimately slaughtered during the Holocaust by German forces and Ukrainian collaborators.

Jews are not ethnically or culturally Ukrainian any more than they are truly Russian, Polish, or Scandinavian – regardless of where their forebears ended up. They have a distinct national and ancestral character, as well as a dynamic history that saw their progenitors migrate after the Dispersion to many foreign lands, carrying with them idiosyncratic beliefs, traditions, language, and blood connections.

While Jews experienced occasional periods of prosperity in Ukraine, they were more commonly consigned to ghettos and subjected to harassment and persecution. Hundreds of Jewish communities were annihilated by Bogdan Khmelnytsky's cruel hordes during the Cossack uprising of 1648, and thousands more Jews were butchered a century later by Ivan Gonta and thereafter in the bloody pogroms that marked the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between 1917 and 1921, Ukrainian forces massacred well more than one-hundred thousand Jews during the Russian civil war, a horror that was eclipsed twenty years later when the Nazis murdered a million or more Jews there with the aid of many local confederates.

It says more about the historical tolerance for Jewish suffering that Khmelnytsky, Gonta, and prominent Nazi collaborators are considered national heroes by many in Ukraine today...

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