

A Short History of Jewish Ukraine

The region my family hail from is part of present-day Ukraine. The country gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Previously the region belonged partly to Russia as well as to Poland, with ever changing borders. The literal translation of Ukraine means 'Borderland' in Russian, which already tells us something about the complexity of this country. From always being 'in-between' the East and the West, the country never really developed a self-identity. Ukraine once had a deeply rich multi-ethnic character shaped by Ukrainians, Polish, Russians, Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Turks and many more sub-cultural groups, but, throughout its deeply fractured history this has come to a brutal end, with much bloodshed.

Once, Eastern-Europe was the biggest centre of Jewish life in the world, with more than five million Jews: they were the Ashkenazim, Jews who fled persecution from the German lands from medieval times on. They spoke Yiddish, a melting-pot language of German, Hebrew and Slavic languages. When Russian rule came, the Jews were banished to a restricted area. In 1791 Catherine the Great, who was very intolerant of Jews, created 'The Pale of Settlement': an annexed region with an ethnic border stretching from the Baltic to the Black sea where Jews were banished to live, far away from the metropolises of Russia.

Jews were stigmatised as second-rate citizens and were not allowed to leave the Pale or live in larger cities. They lived under continuous deprivation in the Russian Empire. Their whole life had been arranged around anti-Jewish measures, living in an almost prison-like environment. The restrictions included that Jews were obligated to pay taxes for candles, kosher meat and even had to pay taxes for simply 'being Jewish'. They were not allowed to attend universities or have city professions, were terrorised and repressed continuously by Cossacks and local gangs in terrible pogroms.

Shtetl-life was the limit for most Jews. Shtetls were large villages where Jews lived, completely isolated from the rest of the world. It was a rough life in shtetls, with lots of poverty, fear, insecurity and confinement, though it was also rich in different forms. Even in such miserable conditions, the Jews tried to make a living as best as they could. This is also what makes their story so compelling; they kept on being resilient. Regardless of all the terrorisation and poverty that came their way in a world crumbling under their feet, they lived life to the fullest. In this community-based world, where everyone had a place. Constructed by traditions, Chassidic mysticism and values, they were able to endure through the richness of their culture.

1914

At the start of the 20th century tension rises. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914 tumult erupts in the Pale of Settlement; the chaos of the eastern front takes place in the midst of the Jewish world. The Jews get blamed for the misery and are expelled from their lands. Anti-Semitism is increasing and a mass emigration of Russian Jews takes place, in parallel with the rise of Zionism (the pursuit for an independent Jewish state and homeland). The war depletes the country, and the people become increasingly more unsettled. There is immense suffering, poverty and hunger.

In 1917, this results in the October revolution and the fall of the Russian Tzar. The Czarist white army and the Bolshevik Red army led by Wladimir Lenin who wants to create a communist state start fighting, resulting in the Russian Civil War taking place between 1917 and 1922. The majority of Ukraine is under Bolshevik control. The Ukraine starts rebelling, with Ukrainian nationalist parties fighting the Bolsheviks, seeking independence. So within the Russian Civil War the Ukrainian Civil War also takes place.

The chaos becomes enormous, and within the mayhem terrible Jewish massacres are taking place. Such pogroms were relatively frequent in Russian history, but the pogroms of 1917 and 1920 were particularly vicious. Due to the chaos of World War I, the revolution and the Civil War - which all took place at the same time - the Jews again became the scapegoats for the mayhem affecting the region. Nationalist gangs and self-designated armies attacked the shtetls. They murdered, ravaged and raped, leaving behind only misery. With the fall of the Russian Empire, the Pale of Settlement fell as well. The soviet regime was instated at the end of 1922, and everyone, also the remaining Jews, became Soviet citizens: comrades.

1941

Following the outbreak of World War II, Germany invades the Soviet Union in 1941; the invasion is known as Operation Barbarossa. In only a few months time, the Nazi's 'Einsatzgruppen' systematically annihilate Jewish life in Eastern-Europe, known as 'The Holocaust by bullets', through mass-executions. Shtetl-life, along with its inhabitants, was completely wiped off the map. Names of villages disappeared, as if they never existed, leaving behind an emptied land and its bare remnants and traces of Jewish life, left to the neglect of time for almost a century, until this day.

The Jewish genocide by the Nazis together with the terrorisation of Stalin's regime almost completely erased Jewish life in Eastern-Europe. With the fall of the Iron Curtain, many of those surviving Jews migrated, especially to Israel. Today, from the 42 million people who live in Ukraine, less than 1% is Jewish¹. And the indifference of the Ukrainian people towards Jews, gives little hope for a serious Jewish future in Ukraine.

1 European Jewish Congress, "Ukraine", 2014.

References

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