

ANTISEMITISM POLICY TRUST

A photograph of a destroyed building and a damaged car, overlaid with a dark purple triangle. The image shows the aftermath of a conflict, with rubble and debris visible. The text is positioned within the dark purple triangle at the bottom right.

RUSSIA'S USE
OF ANTISEMITIC
PROPAGANDA IN
THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine and escalated a war between the countries that dates back to 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine. The fierce fighting between the sides has resulted in tens of thousands of casualties on both sides, including more than 6,600 Ukrainian civilians.¹

Russia has been employing various propaganda tools to gather both domestic and international support for its invasion. These include spreading disinformation about Ukraine, about Russia's war objectives and how well it has been performing. This briefing will focus on the antisemitic propaganda employed by the Russian State and its supporters during the war.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293492/ukraine-war-casualties/#:~:text=The%20Office%20of%20the%20United,reported%20to%20have%20been%20injured>

1941 / 2022

BACKGROUND –

ANTISEMITISM IN RUSSIA AND THE USSR

The history of Russia's Jews and their relationship with the Russian State is complex. It has changed significantly over time, alternating between eras when Jews living in Russia suffered restriction and prejudice, to times when Jews were treated equally, and antisemitism was discouraged by officials and the state.

Russian history is riddled with violence against Jews from as early as the Middle Ages. During times of institutionalised antisemitism, promoted by imperial Russia between 1783 and the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, Jews were confined to the Pale of Settlement. The region in which Jews were allowed to settle was in Western Russia, which these days includes Belarus, parts of Ukraine, Latvia and Poland, and Lithuania (although the region consisting of the Pale has changed over time).² Beyond this region, Jewish residency was largely forbidden.

The Tsarist Government weaponised antisemitism in order to fight liberal and radical movements that posed a threat to the imperial rule. They used antisemitic propaganda to divert public opinion and incite violence against Jews. This resulted in pogroms,³ show trials, purges, bans, and religious suppression.⁴

The pogroms against Jews that followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 are but just one example which demonstrates the effectiveness of antisemitic propaganda in inciting the public to commit violence against Jews. During the various pogroms suffered by Russian Jews, Jewish people were raped, beaten or killed, and their properties looted by mobs.⁵

The Bolshevik revolution brought momentary relief to Russia's Jews. Vladimir Lenin famously said: 'no other nationality in Russia is so oppressed and persecuted as the Jews.'⁶ Under Lenin's leadership, the Bolsheviks abolished the settlement restrictions and promoted the assimilation of Jews. Unfortunately, more than a decade of antisemitic propaganda could not easily be uprooted. Pogroms continued between 1917 and 1920, culminating in the killing of tens of thousands of Jews.⁷ When Joseph Stalin rose to power, following Lenin's death, there was a resurgence of antisemitism. Stalin implemented deadly political purges in Russia, also known as The Great Terror. These were meant to crush dissent and consolidate Stalin's power.

Jews were particularly targeted and presented as a common enemy of the State in an effort to expunge the Soviet Union of Jews.⁸ Actions against Jews included show trials, imprisonment on charges relating to conspiracies against the Party or the country, dismissing Jews from their jobs, and targeting them with insults or violence.⁹ One prominent example is known as the Doctor's Plot. It involved accusations made by the Soviet government against prominent medical specialists, who were accused of plotting to murder government and party officials. Many of those accused were Jews, who were blamed to be working on behalf of the US, Britain and international Jewry (in a way resembling a plotting cabal of Jews out of the infamous forgery the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion first published in Russia in 1903¹⁰). This conspiracy was used by Stalin to purge the

2 <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-pale-of-settlement>

3 Violent attacks by non-Jewish population on Jews in the Russian empire. from: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/pogroms>

4 Gibson, J.L and Howard, M.M. Russian Anti-Semitism and the Scapegoating of Jews. British Journal of Political Science, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp.193-223. p.194 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/abs/russian-antisemitism-and-the-scapegoating-of-jews/416DAC8515E9D3370DB6FFD7154D0CAD>

5 <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/pogroms>

6 Rogger, H. Jewish Policies and Right-wing Politics in Imperial Russia, University of California Press, p.27

7 <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/pogroms>

8 Gibson and Howard, 2007, p.198

9 <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/imagining-stalins-plot-to-exile-the-jews>

10 More on the Protocols and antisemitic conspiracy theories: <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/APT-Protocols-Report.pdf>

party of those he received as a threat.¹¹

Antisemitism peaked under Leonid Brezhnev, who served as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union between 1964 and 1982. Unlike past antisemitism, this time it also incorporated anti-Zionism which involved negative stereotypes of Jews.¹² Initial relations between the USSR and Israel were positive. The USSR voted in favour of the establishment of a Jewish State in Israel (UN General Assembly Resolution 181, 29 November 1947¹³). The Soviet Union also stood by Israel in the early years (1947-1951), when Israel defended itself against surrounding Arab nations, including Egypt, Syria and Jordan.¹⁴ The Soviets had hoped that Israel will be an ally in the Middle East. However, when Israel allied itself with the West, primarily with the USSR's greatest enemy – the United States, attitudes began to shift. By the late 1950s, the Soviets supported the Arab nations fighting Israel, equipped them with weapons used in wars against Israel and supplied them with a strategic umbrella.¹⁵ The Soviet block (except Romania) eventually broke off diplomatic relations with Israel following Israel's triumph in the 1967 Six Day War.¹⁶

The breakdown of the relationship meant that the Soviet government had an opportunity to not only target Jews as the enemy, but Israel too. This continued into the 1980s and 90s. The campaign against Israel emerged out of Russia's deeply rooted history of antisemitism, combined with the fact that Israel allied itself with the

West. A state committee entitled the 'Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Public' was established and was supervised by the KGB.¹⁷ The Soviet government accused the Zionist movement of collaborating with the Nazis. Officials claimed that Zionists colluded in the genocide of Jews and exaggerated Jewish victimhood during the Second World War (referred to in Russia as the Great Patriotic War, fought between 1941 and 1945 not the Eastern Front), all in order to make way for establishing a Jewish State.¹⁸ This theme echoes in Russia's current war propaganda, which will be addressed later in this briefing. For the Soviet public, who suffered mass casualties in the Second World War/Great Patriotic War, there was no greater evil than Nazis and fascists. Therefore, the assertion that Zionists colluded with the Nazis, had the net effect of vilifying Israel, Zionism and by extension, Jews in general.

The smear campaign against Zionism presented the Zionist movement as a racist and fascist movement of Jews to domestic and international audiences.¹⁹ It included circulating thousands of anti-Zionist and anti-Israel books and articles in the USSR, with similar themes appearing in newspapers, films and on the radio. Some of the publications were translated into English, German, French, Spanish and other languages, and circulated internationally. Many of the tropes in the campaign were derived directly from the famous antisemitic work of forgery, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. These tropes included the claim that 'international Zionism' is a plot to destroy socialism,

11 <https://www.britannica.com/event/Doctors-Plot>

12 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/99945786B60F74C869F8F1E36BE7280E/S0037677900158966a.pdf/the-origins-and-development-of-soviet-anti-semitism-an-analysis.pdf>

13 <https://mfa.gov.il/Jubilee-years/Pages/1947-UN-General-Assembly-Resolution-181-The-international-community-says-Yes-to-the-establishment-of-the-State-of-Israel.aspx>

14 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2001/04/02/israel-russia-relations-pub-659>

15 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2001/04/02/israel-russia-relations-pub-659>

16 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2001/04/02/israel-russia-relations-pub-659>

17 The Soviet Union's main security agency

18 <https://fathomjournal.org/soviet-anti-zionism-and-contemporary-left-antisemitism/>

19 <https://fathomjournal.org/soviet-anti-zionism-and-contemporary-left-antisemitism/>

undermine Soviet values and give Jews more power and influence. The Soviet anti-Zionist campaign 'contributed to the adoption of the notorious 1975 UN General Assembly Resolution 3379, which held Zionism to be a form of racism and paved the way for the demonisation of Israel within that organisation.'²⁰ It is an image of Zionism that still exists today, especially among the far-left, which was heavily influenced by USSR ideology, although this is not only as a result of the Russian anti-Zionist campaign.²¹

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a tumultuous transitional period of political and social changes and instabilities. Once again, Jews were pointed to as the cause of Russia's troubles.²² However, things appeared different under Vladimir Putin. Putin was not widely considered an antisemite; indeed, some of his closest personal allies are Jewish and his government had avoided promoting institutionalised antisemitism.²³ He was also seemingly not an anti-Zionist. Putin's Russia had enjoyed a positive and constructive relationship with Israel, driven by pragmatic strategic calculations relating to Russia's role and ambitions in the Middle East.

The War in Ukraine changed things. Russia has been facing major difficulties in achieving its goals in the face of fierce fighting between Russian troops and Western-backed Ukrainian forces. As a result of the war, Russia's relationship with Israel has suffered, while relations with Iran, Israel's enemy, have become closer. Iran, for example, has provided military assistance to Russia. True to its heritage at times of crisis, Russia has once again turned to antisemitism. Antisemitic rhetoric has been present in Russian mainstream media outlets, promoted online by Russian 'influencers' and by Russian officials and politicians. However, as this briefing will demonstrate, only some of

the antisemitism espoused by the state is against Jews. Russia has also used age-old antisemitic conspiracy theories in a way that is anti-Western, rather than anti-Jewish. The following section explains how Russian officials and Russia-backed media channels, think tanks and social media, are conducting a well-orchestrated propaganda campaign aimed at demonising Ukraine, the West, and Jews.

20 <https://fathomjournal.org/soviet-anti-zionism-and-contemporary-left-antisemitism/>

21 For more on left wing antisemitism and Russia's influence: Rich, D. *The Left's Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel and Anti-Semitism*. Biteback Publishing, 2016

22 Gibson and Howard, 2007, p.194

23 Parker, B. *Putin's Chosen People: Theories of Russian Jewish Policy, 2000-2017*, Penn Journal of Philosophy, Politics & Economics: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 5, 2018
<https://repository.upenn.edu/spice/vol13/iss1/5/>



ANTISEMITISM IN RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA BY THEME

Jews are to Blame for the War

Blaming Jews for wars is not a new theme in Russia and elsewhere, and much of it is inspired by The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Historically, Jews have been blamed for wars and revolutions, including the French Revolution, the Second World War and the 11 September terror attacks in the US. Similar claims were used by Germany to explain its loss in the First World War and again in Nazi propaganda in the 1930s to incite the German public against Jews.²⁴ Today, these conspiracy theories are normally pushed by far-right, far-left and Islamist groups and individuals around the world.

Claims have surfaced that the war in Ukraine is a Jewish plot, made to encourage Jewish immigration from Ukraine and Russia to Israel, or for Jews to gain financial control and increase their global prowess.²⁵ In reality, Israel has taken a cautious view of aiding Ukraine during the war. It supplied humanitarian aid and a limited supply of non-lethal military equipment, but no offensive weapons, despite pleas from the Ukrainian government.²⁶ Israel's policy is restricted by its strategic relationship with Russia which is important to its security concerns in the Middle East. For example, Israel's ability to operate against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria and Lebanon, depends in part on Russia. Claims that individual Jews, or a cabal of Jews, has somehow orchestrated this war, are as fanciful as they are unsubstantiated.

The Strategic Culture Foundation – an influential Russian think tank that is often quoted in Russian mainstream media – is helping to spread this conspiracy. One example can be found in an article on its online platform, in which the think tank suggests that the war is funded by George Soros, who supports the

'Kiev regime.'²⁷ Soros is a Jewish Hungarian-American financier and philanthropist. For years he has been the subject of antisemitic conspiracy theories,²⁸ as a continuation of such tropes relating to other wealthy Jewish individuals or families. The Rothschilds, a Jewish family of bankers, are also the subject of similar conspiracy theories that regard them as a part of a Jewish plan to control global financial markets and general world-domination. On the far-left and far-right around the world, conspiracy theories about George Soros have claimed that he is responsible for illegal immigration, voter fraud, violent protests and Covid-19. Soros has been accused of being responsible for the government crisis in Macedonia, unrest in Venezuela, the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and the fall of President Mugabe in Zimbabwe²⁹. Many of these conspiracies have also been pushed by Putin's old ally and Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The Strategic Culture Foundation claimed that: 'Jewish-born billionaire [is] funding a Nazi regime in Ukraine to do his bidding.'³⁰ The article also refers to Soros as the Devil. Accusations of Jews as worshipping the devil and using satanic rituals have been common since the Middle Ages, and the reference to Soros is another manifestation of these old tropes.

Some of the conspiracy theories blaming Jews for the war emerge outside of Russia, in the Middle East and among far-right extremists in Europe and the US. These justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine and serve Russian interests.

For example, Ukraine has been referred to as a 'Zionist' puppet by a pro-Russian prominent Malaysian politician.³¹ He claimed that 'Ukraine became an established Zionist base, as 40% of its citizens were

24 <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/APT-Protocols-Report.pdf>

25 <https://www.adl.org/blog/antisemitic-conspiracy-theories-abound-around-russian-assault-on-ukraine>

26 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-ukraine-president-zelenskys-speech-to-israeli-lawmakers/>

27 <https://strategic-culture.org/news/2022/10/17/soros-and-kiev-regime-supping-with-devil/>

28 <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Final-George-Soros-Briefing.pdf>

29 <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Final-George-Soros-Briefing.pdf> p.6

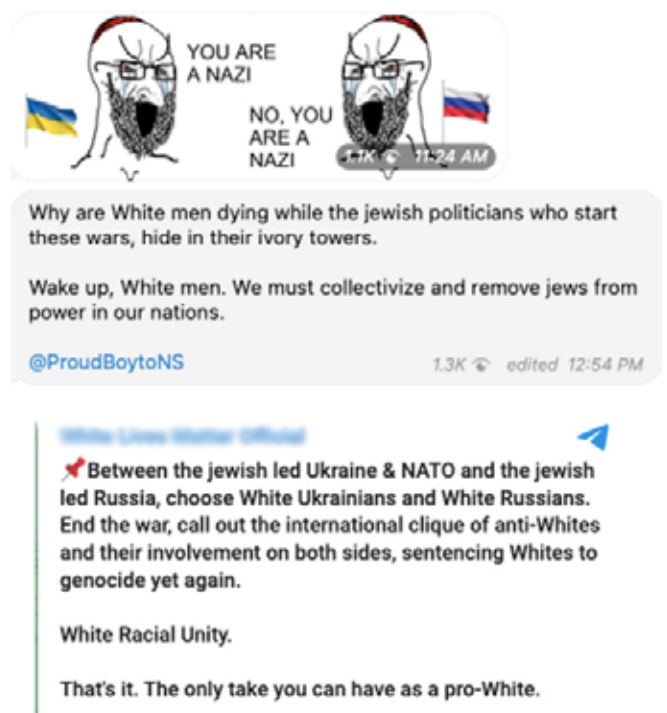
30 <https://strategic-culture.org/news/2022/10/17/soros-and-kiev-regime-supping-with-devil/>

31 <https://www.polygraph.info/a/fact-check-malaysia-ukraine-zionist-conspiracy/6743346.html>

Zionists or Jews despite the real, hidden statistics' (this is false. Less than 1% of Ukrainians are Jewish). He also claimed that Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, who is Jewish, is an agent working for the Zionists: "Now, the Zionists have succeeded in appointing a new head of state of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, from among the Jews and hardcore Zionists."³² Blaming Jews as disloyal and foreign agents working for Israel, the Zionist movement, or a cabal of Jews, is a prominent theme featuring in the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion³³ and a common antisemitic trope. Similar claims were made by Mraweh Nassar, a Palestinian Islamic scholar appearing on an Arabic-language TV channel in Turkey which is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁴ Nassar claimed that Jews want to create a new Jewish State in Ukraine because the Zionist project in Israel has failed.³⁵

The notion that Jews are to blame for the war is receiving support from far-right extremists – both those who support Russia and those who support Ukraine. The far-right has not responded to the war in uniformity. Some far-right extremists, especially those belonging to the 'New Right'³⁶, had aligned with Russia, while Neo-Nazis, even those who in the past supported Russia and saw it as an 'all-white Christian nation',³⁷ tend to favour Ukraine.³⁸ Despite a divergence of views on who is to blame for the war, antisemitism is central to all far-right movements, and conspiracy theories are therefore used by extremists on both sides of the debate.

White supremacists and other far-right extremists have been using social media platforms to promote the conspiracy theory that the war is a Jewish plot.³⁹ They claim that Jews fund the war, that they gain profit from it, control both sides in the war, that it serves their Zionist cause and that it is a plot to kill white men.⁴⁰ The war has been portrayed as a war between two white nations, or a 'brother war', as a means to kill white people.⁴¹ These are examples from the Telegram channels of two white supremacist groups, 'White Lives Matter' and 'Proud Boys', in which they claim that Jews also control NATO and Russia:⁴²



32 <https://www.polygraph.info/a/fact-check-malaysia-ukraine-zionist-conspiracy/6743346.html>

33 <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/APT-Protocols-Report.pdf>, p.3, 9

34 <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-703061>

35 <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-703061>

36 A far-right movement that is more subtle than traditional extreme right movements. It presents itself as conservative and patriotic, but promotes racist, anti-democratic and anti-liberal ideologies. More here: <https://www.dw.com/en/who-is-germanys-new-right/a-57949592>

37 <https://www.adl.org/blog/white-supremacists-other-extremists-respond-to-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>

38 <https://gnet-research.org/2022/04/14/how-the-european-far-right-is-using-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-to-radicalise-its-audience/>

39 <https://www.adl.org/blog/antisemitic-conspiracy-theories-abound-around-russian-assault-on-ukraine>

40 <https://www.adl.org/blog/antisemitic-conspiracy-theories-abound-around-russian-assault-on-ukraine>

41 <https://www.adl.org/blog/antisemitic-conspiracy-theories-abound-around-russian-assault-on-ukraine>

42 <https://www.adl.org/blog/antisemitic-conspiracy-theories-abound-around-russian-assault-on-ukraine>

Another example of a common image blaming Jews of controlling both sides of the war:⁴³



Another antisemitic conspiracy theory thriving on social media, claims that the Khazars stand behind the war in Ukraine. Khazaria existed somewhere between modern-day south-eastern Russia, southern Ukraine, Crimea and Kazakhstan. Conspiracy theorists have long claimed that the Khazars had converted to Judaism, are now living in Ukraine and want to subjugate the Russian populous.⁴⁵ This and other related tropes about Khazars and Jews have been used to justify Russia's invasion. Much content has been found on Telegram,⁴⁶ but it is unclear whether the Russian government is involved in spreading these conspiracy theories or whether this is primarily the work of far-right extremists. Nevertheless, antisemitism emerges from both sources.

The image below blames Ukraine's President Zelenskyy for sending white soldiers to their death, and considers it part of a Jewish conspiracy:⁴⁴



⁴³ The link to the original is withheld but available on request

⁴⁴ The link to the original is withheld but available on request

⁴⁵ <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/myths-and-misconceptions-may-2020-1-1.pdf> p.9

⁴⁶ https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/an-antisemitic-conspiracy-theory-is-being-shared-on-telegram-to-justify-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/

Jews as scapegoats for Russian difficulties in Ukraine

Since its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has run into major difficulties achieving its goals and has faced determined and fierce Ukrainian opposition. The Russian army has suffered mass casualties,⁴⁷ experienced low morale, and has lost thousands of tanks and other armoured vehicles in battles. Many of its forces are poorly trained and use old and inferior weapons and equipment. The Russian government has adamantly refused to admit that it has run into difficulties and any criticism of the war is largely forbidden in Russia. Despite this, the Russian government has been looking for someone to blame, to divert attention away from its own failures.

As a propaganda tool, scapegoating has historically been a good predictor of rising intolerance and suppression. Scapegoating Jews at a time of national crisis, economic or political turmoil is not new to Russia.⁴⁸ Indeed, there are many documented instances of Jews being blamed and victimised by Russian authorities over the years. These, as has been outlined, preceded pogroms and other instances of violence and persecutions of Jews, and sometimes triggered migration of Jews out of Russia.⁴⁹

In light of this, it is of significant concern that in September 2022, reports began to surface of increased antisemitism in Russia.⁵⁰ Mainstream media outlets were bringing up the old antisemitic trope of Jews being disloyal to the state, claiming that they undermine Russia's war efforts by siding with Ukraine.⁵¹ A popular talk-show host named a list of Jews who he claimed 'lack patriotism.'⁵² Prominent Russian journalists compiled further lists of Jews they accused of being 'foreign agents' and accused them of being enemies of the state.⁵³ *The Times of Israel* newspaper reported that the anti-Jewish rhetoric and scapegoating was escalating.⁵⁴ As a consequence of rising antisemitism and the war, about 20,000 Russian Jews left Russia and emigrated to Israel⁵⁵ under its law of return.⁵⁶ This, of course, leaves the potential for a strengthening of the (false) view that Russian Jews are disloyal – a narrative which places remaining Russian Jews at risk.

47 Figures are unclear and contested. Some reports suggest that Russian casualties amounted to about 60,000 by October 2022
<https://www.newsweek.com/russian-death-toll-ukraine-war-overtakes-american-losses-vietnam-1752220>

48 Gibson and Howard, 2007
https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/416DAC8515E9D3370DB6FFD7154D0CAD/S0007123407000105a.pdf/russian_antisemitism_and_the_scapegoating_of_jews.pdf

49 Gibson and Howard, 2007, p.197
https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/416DAC8515E9D3370DB6FFD7154D0CAD/S0007123407000105a.pdf/russian_antisemitism_and_the_scapegoating_of_jews.pdf

50 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-ukraine-invasion-slows-antisemitism-seeps-into-russian-media-landscape/>

51 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-ukraine-invasion-slows-antisemitism-seeps-into-russian-media-landscape/>

52 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-ukraine-invasion-slows-antisemitism-seeps-into-russian-media-landscape/>

53 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-ukraine-invasion-slows-antisemitism-seeps-into-russian-media-landscape/>

54 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-ukraine-invasion-slows-antisemitism-seeps-into-russian-media-landscape/>

55 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-ukraine-invasion-slows-antisemitism-seeps-into-russian-media-landscape/>

56 The law of return grant Jews of any nationality the right to emigrate to Israel and receive an Israeli citizenship.

Denazification of Ukraine

One of the most notorious themes used by the Russian Government to justify the invasion of Ukraine, is that the Ukraine is a country led by Nazis and fascists, and Russia aims to 'denazify' Ukraine. To strengthen its claims, Russian officials and high-profile media personalities have even been falsely arguing that Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is not Jewish (despite the fact that he is a Jew and suffered the loss of Jewish family members in the Holocaust).⁵⁷

Russia has also been exploiting the existence of the Azov Regiment in Ukraine which has Neo-Nazi background and affiliation – itself deeply problematic – for propaganda purposes.

The Azov Regiment started as a volunteer grouping of fighters, many with far-right, and even Neo-Nazi, antisemitic views. It was founded in 2014 by Andriy Biletsky, who was leader of a neo-Nazi group called Patriot of Ukraine. The regiment has since expanded and integrated into the Ukrainian National Guard. Its fighters have been taking an active role in the war against Russia⁵⁸ and are considered particularly disciplined and committed.⁵⁹ Despite Russia's claims that it is a force of neo-Nazis, the regiment has been repeatedly reconstituted⁶⁰ and deradicalised to a degree⁶¹ over the years. Some far-right elements remain in the Azov Regiment, but these constitute a fraction of the Ukrainian armed forces and they lack political power. In fact, despite claims by Russia that it wants to de-Nazify

Ukraine, its own aggression has helped solidify the Azov Regiment's role within the Ukrainian army.⁶²

In their claim to denazify Ukraine, the Russians are conjuring Nazism and the horrors of the Holocaust, including using Holocaust distortion, to justify their aggression. The US State Department issued a media release stating that this well-orchestrated campaign of misinformation is meant to 'delegitimize and demonize Ukraine in the eyes of the Russian public and the world.'⁶³ The claims about Ukraine being controlled by a Nazi regime are factually wrong and are offensive to the millions who fought the Nazis, and those that were victims of the Second World War and the Holocaust.⁶⁴ Despite this, Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, went even further, by claiming that Adolf Hitler had Jewish blood.⁶⁵

This propaganda campaign included the Kremlin claiming that 'the worst Nazis were actually Jews.'⁶⁶ This relates to the aforementioned conspiracy theory, that Jews initiated the Second World War, and that the event facilitated the establishment a Jewish State.⁶⁷ Proponents of this conspiracy theory often also claim that the Holocaust never happened or that the scope of Jewish deaths is much smaller than claimed. The conspiracy theory is rooted in much older tropes, about Jews seeking world domination through advancing wars and instability. It is one of the main themes in the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*.⁶⁸

57 <https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1512834235937267716?t=Col7V4KCbl6fUOF13WX6wQ&s=08>

58 The Azov Regiment is a volunteer grouping of fighters, many with far-right, and even Neo-Nazi, antisemitic views. It was formed in 2014, has since expanded and integrated into the Ukrainian National Guard. Its fighters have been taking an active role in the war against Russia. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/azov-battalion>

59 <https://unherd.com/2022/06/the-truth-about-ukraines-nazi-militias/>

60 <https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2022/08/19/1384992/much-azov-about-nothing-how-the-ukrainian-neo-nazis-canard-fooled-the-world>

61 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2017-08-01/how-ukraine-reined-its-militias>

62 <https://unherd.com/2022/06/the-truth-about-ukraines-nazi-militias/>

63 <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/to-vilify-ukraine-the-kremlin-resorts-to-antisemitism/>

64 <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/to-vilify-ukraine-the-kremlin-resorts-to-antisemitism/>

65 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-61296682>

66 <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/to-vilify-ukraine-the-kremlin-resorts-to-antisemitism/>

67 <https://jewishunpacked.com/hitler-also-had-jewish-blood-why-do-people-believe-false-conspiracy-theories/>

68 <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/APT-Protocols-Report.pdf>

Some Russian sources of these conspiracies have in fact contradicted themselves, by sometimes claiming that Zelenskyy is not really Jewish, and he may therefore be a Nazi, then claiming that he is Jewish, but so was Hitler, and he is therefore still able to be a Nazi. These narratives on the one hand, minimise the Holocaust, and at the same time use the horrors committed by the Nazis as a justification for the war in Ukraine and the extreme violence employed by Russia. The aforementioned Russian think tank, the Strategic Culture Foundation, published an article claiming that it was US Presidents Barak Obama and Joe Biden who in fact installed Nazis in Ukraine.⁶⁹ The article describes a violent, bloody coup in Ukraine, backed by American Presidents. The article claims that the US and its allies want to start 'World War III' while Russia prays for 'peace and diplomacy.'⁷⁰ Considering the many conspiracy theories about Jewish control over finance and politics – especially American politics – and Russia advancing antisemitic conspiracy theories that blame Jews for the war, it is not impossible (in fact, quite likely) that conspiracies about Jewish control over US presidents, and Jews pulling the strings and exerting control, will be espoused by far-right and Russian conspirators.

Contrary to Russia's claims, the Ukrainian government has no members affiliated with Neo-Nazi parties, and the far-right parties gained only 2% of the votes in the 2019 elections⁷¹ – this is much less than the support received by far-right parties in Poland, Hungary, France, Italy and Sweden, for example. In fact, Russia, and Putin personally, have enjoyed the support of far-right movements by promoting conservative Christian values and populist, and sometimes racist, ideas that are shared by many on the extreme right. Russia has also been a supporter of extreme right-wing elements, such

as the Wagner Group. The Wagner Group, founded by the neo-Nazi Dmitry Utkin, is a Russian paramilitary organisation of mercenaries, who have been involved in a number of conflicts worldwide.⁷² Some commentators even pointed out the irony of Russia's claim to fight Nazism, while employing some of the same tactics used by the Nazis, such as using forced labour, forced migration, enslavement, targeting civilian infrastructure⁷³ and invading a neighbouring country 'under the pretext that their borders are irrelevant.'⁷⁴

Russia's claims not only distort the past and cause harm to Jews by reinforcing and spreading antisemitic conspiracy theories, but they also aim to justify Russian aggression and possible war crimes committed by Russian forces.⁷⁵

69 <https://strategic-culture.org/news/2022/10/14/how-obama-and-biden-installed-neo-nazis-in-ukraine/>

70 <https://strategic-culture.org/news/2022/10/14/how-obama-and-biden-installed-neo-nazis-in-ukraine/>

71 <https://bylinetimes.com/2022/05/11/putin-at-war-claiming-de-nazification-reviving-antisemitism/>

72 <https://en.respublica.lt/signs-of-neo-nazi-ideology-amongst-russian-mercenaries>

73 <https://bylinetimes.com/2022/05/11/putin-at-war-claiming-de-nazification-reviving-antisemitism/>

74 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/24/putin-denazify-ukraine/>

75 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/23/russia-has-committed-war-crimes-in-ukraine-say-un-investigators>



RUSSIAN USE OF ANTISEMITIC TROPES

The rhetoric used by Putin and other government officials, state media and the other channels of propaganda used by Russian authorities, conjures an array of antisemitic tropes. Earlier examples include blaming Jews for Russia's difficulties, painting Jews as foreign agents, and blaming a powerful Jewish cabal – or powerful individual Jews – for funding and advancing the war with Ukraine either for personal gain or for promoting the killing of the white race and strengthening Israel/Jews. The trope about wanting to eliminate the white race is linked to the antisemitic, white-supremacist conspiracy theory known as 'The Great Replacement.' According to it, Jews are planning a 'white genocide' but promoting non-white immigration.⁷⁶

Although antisemitism is clearly present in Russian propaganda, the vast majority of these tropes are repurposed and used in a way that is primarily anti-Western.⁷⁷ Specifically, there are repeated claims, including those made by Putin in his 'annexation speech'⁷⁸ given on 30 September 2022, that the West is heading for a moral decay by becoming 'overly liberal.' In the speech, Putin claimed that American and European leaders are promoting 'satanism'⁷⁹ which supposedly includes the promotion of LGBTQ+ rights. He argued that it is a part of a master plan to degrade and weaken Christian values.⁸⁰

Putin's rhetoric relies heavily on, and bares striking resemblance to, antisemitic tropes that have been used for centuries in order to dehumanise Jews, incite hatred and prejudice against them, and justify violence against Jews. Jews were blamed for worshipping the devil and practicing Satanic rituals, which is where many of the blood libels⁸¹ against Jews emanated from. Jews have

also been accused of promoting liberal values that undermine white, Christian culture and values, in order to gain control over all other races and religions (this bears a remarkable similarity to charges of so-called 'Cultural Marxism',⁸² a phrase which has been used as an antisemitic dog whistle). Even Putin's claim, in the annexation speech, that Western nations are responsible for the global slave trade, can be linked to an old antisemitic trope that blames Jews for the slave trade.⁸³

These conspiracy theories have a proven record of being highly effective in mobilising the masses against Jews, and have a long-lasting effect. It is no wonder that Putin and his government have chosen to use a similar rhetoric and claims albeit with a different frame. Through the use of this rhetoric, Putin has sought to turn his designs on Ukraine into a religious war – a crusade against a plot to destroy Christian values.

There is a danger that far-right extremists and white supremacists will connect these anti-Western ideas with antisemitic tropes. It is a line easily drawn, between antisemitic conspiracy theories that Jews exert control over Western governments, and are therefore responsible for this Western 'Satanism' that seeks to undermine the White race. As mentioned earlier, White supremacists, whether they support Russia or Ukraine, have in fact already been claiming that Jews have orchestrated the war between 'White Russian' and 'White Ukrainians.'⁸⁴ The use of antisemitic tropes, even if they are not openly anti-Jewish, could therefore lead to an increase in antisemitic attitudes in Russia and anywhere else where right-wing, populist attitudes preside.

76 <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/myths-and-misconceptions-may-2020-1-1.pdf>, p.16

77 <https://gnet-research.org/2022/04/14/how-the-european-far-right-is-using-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-to-radicalise-its-audience/>

78 In the speech, Putin announced the formal annexation of four regions of Ukraine by Russia.

79 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/desperate-putin-portrays-ukraine-and-the-west-as-satanic-5dsdt66m2>

80 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/desperate-putin-portrays-ukraine-and-the-west-as-satanic-5dsdt66m2>

81 Blood libels are antisemitic tropes that have accused Jews of ritual killing and drinking the blood of non-Jewish children. <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/myths-and-misconceptions-may-2020-1-1.pdf>, p.4

82 <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Cultural-Marxism-October-2020.pdf>

83 <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/myths-and-misconceptions-may-2020-1-1.pdf>, p.13

84 <https://www.adl.org/blog/antisemitic-conspiracy-theories-abound-around-russian-assault-on-ukraine>

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a dark beanie and a fur-lined hood, is speaking into a microphone. In the background, a large yellow protest sign is visible with the text "STOP WAR RUSSIANS ≠ PUTIN MAY THE PEACE BE WITH US". The entire image has a yellow overlay.

THE EFFECTS OF ANTISEMITIC PROPAGANDA BY RUSSIA ON JEWS

The resurgence of antisemitic propaganda in Russia, with its long history of bloody pogroms, has made Russian Jews fear a wave of violence against them.⁸⁵ As a result of this, roughly 20,000 Jews (out of about 165,000 Jews living in Russia) have left Russia, mostly to emigrate to Israel. It should be noted, that concern about antisemitism has not been the only reason Russian Jews have left. Contributing factors include objection to the war, unwillingness to be enlisted to the Russian army to fight in Ukraine, and the international sanctions imposed on Russia.

Even though public opinion polls show that antisemitism has been in decline in Russia since 2010,⁸⁶ it has by no means disappeared. It has been argued that 'anti-Jewish xenophobia could flare up at any moment if the Kremlin wants it to.'⁸⁷ This was

apparent during the 'brutal antisemitism of politicians' during the 1980s and 1990s in Russia.⁸⁸

Russia's antisemitism does not only impact Jews in Russia. The Community Security Trust's report on antisemitic incidents in the UK between January and June 2022 found that 12 incidents in this period were linked to the war in Ukraine.⁸⁹ These included blaming Jews for bankrolling the war, and pulling strings behind Russia or Ukraine, praising Putin for attacking 'Zionist' Zelenskyy, and other antisemitic conspiracy theories.⁹⁰ This is a concern for the Jewish community, who have been facing a growing threat of violence and terrorism from far-right elements in the UK, as detailed in the UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee report on Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism, published in 2022.⁹¹

Conclusion

Antisemitic conspiracy theories have been used by Russia as a propaganda tool to justify aggression towards Ukraine. Russian authorities and pro-Russian organisations and individuals in Russia and internationally, have been invoking anti-Jewish tropes, used either directly against Jews or against the West. These are exactly the same tropes that have existed for centuries and are being used in order to dehumanise and vilify Jews, Ukraine, Israel, the U.S. and any other nations that are perceived to be Russia's enemy. For the Russian government, it is a powerful tool for gaining its public's support in an attempt to unify Russians against a common external enemy, as well as an internal one that can be used as a scapegoat.

Antisemitism is not only used by Russia and its supporters – some antisemitic conspiracy theories are also used by far-right extremists who support Ukraine.

Figures from the Community Security Trust show that antisemitism has been on the rise in the UK.⁹² As the war continues to fuel antisemitic conspiracy theories, particularly among far-right extremists and Islamists, the effect may continue to spill out of Russia as Jews everywhere will continue to be targeted with accusations relating to the war. This is already affecting the safety of Jews in the UK and elsewhere. Russia's antisemitism should be called out and faced down at every opportunity.

85 <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-ukraine-war-forces-russia-jews-adapt-new-life-home-abroad/>

86 This statement relies on public opinion polls carried out by Russian-based Levada Centre. Although it is considered reliable in Western academic circles, it is also possible that its figures may not be accurate, and that antisemitism in Russia is under-reported: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/01/28/xenophobia-and-migrants/>

87 <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-ukraine-war-forces-russia-jews-adapt-new-life-home-abroad/>

88 <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-ukraine-war-forces-russia-jews-adapt-new-life-home-abroad/>

89 <https://cst.org.uk/data/file/3/b/Incidents%20Report%20Jan-Jun%202022.1659023930.pdf>, p.3

90 <https://cst.org.uk/data/file/3/b/Incidents%20Report%20Jan-Jun%202022.1659023930.pdf>, p.3

91 https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/E02710035-HCP-Extreme-Right-Wing-Terrorism_Accessible.pdf

92 <https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2022/08/04/antisemitic-incidents-report-january-june-2022>

The Antisemitism Policy Trust's mission is to educate and empower parliamentarians, policy makers and opinion formers to address antisemitism. It provides the secretariat to the British All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism and works internationally with parliamentarians and others to address antisemitism. The Antisemitism Policy Trust is focussed on educating and empowering decision makers in the UK and across the world to effectively address antisemitism.

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