



NCSEJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. August 11, 2017

Why the Case Against Arming Ukraine Doesn't Hold Water

By John Herbst

Atlantic Council, August 8, 2017

<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/arm-ukraine-now-2>

Armchair strategists have come out of the woodwork to explain why it would be a mistake for the United States to arm Ukraine. They argue that Russia is stronger than Ukraine and can outmatch any escalation, Moscow has a greater interest in Ukraine than Washington, and Ukraine's government is corrupt and undeserving of such support.

These arguments are based on hoary myths, outdated analyses, and an incomplete understanding of Kremlin policy and American interests.

In "Don't Arm Ukraine," Michael Brendan Dougherty claims that "Ukraine is a deeply divided country," echoing the infamous CIA National Intelligence Estimate from the 1990s that said Ukraine might split in two. But that prediction proved false and, while differences between east and west Ukraine have not disappeared, they have lessened considerably since 2014.

Dougherty wrongly asserts that "Russian-speaking Ukrainians see the United States as complicit in overturning a democratic result in 2015." First, he probably meant 2014, when President Viktor Yanukovich fled following massive protests. Second, the vast majority of Ukrainians speak Russian and the vast majority of Ukrainians welcomed Yanukovich's departure after he either ordered or permitted the use of snipers against demonstrators. It is true that the Kremlin is peddling the falsehood that the United States was responsible for Yanukovich's ouster, but it has gained little traction even in the parts of the country where sympathy toward Moscow was once substantial. That sympathy is much reduced because of the Kremlin's ongoing war in Ukraine.

Dougherty observes that "successive governments in Kyiv have turned out to be ineffective and/or hopelessly corrupt." While there is much truth in this statement, it is incomplete and ultimately misleading. Under Poroshenko, reform in Ukraine has been impressive. The government has cleaned up the banking sector, introduced a transparent system for government procurement, and moved toward a single, market price for natural gas. This last measure cleaned up the country's most corrupt sector, removed its dependence on Russia for natural gas, and reduced its budget deficit by 80 percent. While corruption remains a major problem, the IMF and EBRD give Ukraine good marks overall for reform, especially since these efforts are taking place in the midst of a war.

Former NSC Senior Director Charles Kupchan joins Dougherty in claiming that the United States has no major interests in Ukraine. But as Secretary of Defense James Mattis has pointed out, Russia is "resurgent and more aggressive" and has placed the "international order under assault." Moscow is the world's other nuclear superpower with the second or third most powerful conventional military. Russian President Vladimir Putin claims the right to intervene on behalf of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers wherever they live and wants a sphere of influence within the former Soviet Union, if not beyond. To achieve these aims, he went to war with Georgia in 2008 and has been at war with Ukraine since 2014. His ambitions go far beyond Ukraine.

The United States has a vital interest in keeping the peace in Europe, and a vital interest in the strength and viability of NATO and the European Union. The Kremlin seeks to weaken both institutions and the ties binding the United States to Europe. The most cost efficient way to counter the Kremlin's revisionist policies is to

increase the cost of its aggression in Ukraine. Thanks to Congress, we are raising the economic costs on Moscow through sanctions. But that is not sufficient.

Another error in Dougherty's article is the suggestion that the Russian public, like the Putin government, is "willing to lose troops in battle." Kupchan shares this view, claiming that the master public manipulator Putin "would hardly fold his hand if Russian casualties were to increase." In fact, numerous polls by the Levada Center, the premier Russian polling institution, show that Russians do not want their soldiers fighting in Ukraine. For that reason, Putin hides his casualties from the public. Providing defensive arms to Ukraine—specifically Javelin missiles that destroy tanks—would make it harder for the Kremlin to conduct additional offensives because it would mean more Russian casualties.

Leonid Bershidsky argues that it is futile to send anti-tank weapons to Ukraine because Moscow has 20,000 tanks and can always provide more. In addition, he asserts, there have been few changes in territory around the contact line over the past two years and, therefore, anti-tank weapons would be used in a Ukrainian effort to take back the territories currently occupied by Moscow. This is simply wrong.

Ukrainians have fought the Kremlin to a standstill, but there are casualties every day, and since the Minsk II ceasefire, Moscow has taken hundreds of additional square kilometers of Ukrainian territory. Providing anti-tank missiles will help deter Moscow from taking more.

Kupchan also claims that sending arms would "cause a rift between the United States and its main European allies." While Germany and France oppose the move, Chancellor Angela Merkel has said and German officials have told me privately that if the United States provided arms, they would still cooperate with Washington on seeking peace in Ukraine.

The United States made a commitment to guarantee Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity when it gave up its nuclear weapons in 1994. Providing defensive weapons to Ukraine will honor that commitment and raise the cost of the war for Moscow. Over time, that may help persuade the Kremlin to withdraw from the Donbas. Even if it does not, it will force Moscow to waste additional resources in Ukraine and make them think twice about challenging us in the Baltics, where our NATO commitments would compel us to respond more forcefully. Providing defensive weapons to Ukraine actually decreases the odds of a dangerous US-Russian confrontation.

Why giving Ukraine lethal weapons would be a massive mistake

By Charles Kupchan

Washington Post, August 7, 2017

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/08/07/why-giving-ukraine-lethal-weapons-would-be-a-massive-mistake/?utm_term=.04c1b09672e9

The Trump administration is in the midst of making a decision on whether to transfer lethal weaponry to Ukraine. This potential move is intended to give Ukraine's military the ability to impose new costs on the Russians and their proxies engaged in a separatist revolt in the country's eastern region of Donbass, thereby persuading the Kremlin to give up the fight.

But the result would likely be the opposite — an escalation in the conflict that would lead to further losses of Ukraine's territory and compromise its political stability. Russia enjoys insurmountable military superiority over Ukraine. The United States should not encourage Ukraine to engage in an escalatory confrontation with Russia. Washington knows full well that Ukraine cannot prevail.

The urge to give Ukraine lethal arms — most likely in the form of anti-tank weapons — is understandable. Since 2014, the Russians have occupied and illegally annexed Crimea and sustained a separatist rebellion in Donbass that has claimed more than 10,000 lives. Moreover, Russia has engaged in these acts of aggression in order to block Ukraine's desire to leave Moscow's sphere of influence and join the community of Western democracies.

Under these circumstances, the United States should continue helping Ukrainians defend themselves by assisting with defense reforms and training Ukrainian forces. So why not take the next step and give Ukraine lethal weapons?

For starters, the notion that Russian President Vladimir Putin would give up his hold on Donbass if a few more Russians come home in body bags is to dramatically misread the Kremlin. Putin is a master at manipulating the Russian public, especially when it comes to the Ukraine conflict and would hardly fold his hand if Russian casualties were to increase.

On the contrary, he would likely double down, blaming the United States and Ukraine for the intensified fighting and taking steps to offset the improvement in Ukraine's military capability. The Russians have so far effectively countered Ukrainian military successes — in some instances, retaliating with devastating effect. When Ukrainian forces in the summer of 2014 advanced into Donbass and took the strategically located city of Ilovaisk, Putin promptly called in his own crack troops, which quickly decimated the Ukrainian unit that had taken the town.

Should Putin decide to escalate in response to a U.S. decision to transfer lethal weapons to Ukraine, Washington would have few arrows in its quiver. Even if the Trump administration were to take another step up the ladder of escalation, Russia would go at least one step further. Russia shares a 1500-mile land/sea border with Ukraine, making the Kremlin far more invested in the fate of Ukraine than Washington. Russia has greater interest in putting skin in the game.

Rather than playing to Russia's principal strength — its military advantage over Ukraine — the United States should continue to play to Russia's main vulnerability — its economic weakness. On this front, the United States and its European allies, not the Kremlin, hold the cards. The loss of income due to the low price of fossil fuels and the international sanctions imposed in response to its aggression in Ukraine have taken a serious toll on the Russian economy. Keeping sanctions in place and, if necessary, increasing them, is the West's best source of leverage for pushing Russia to a diplomatic solution. Congress seems to realize as much, having just imposed on the White House legislation tightening U.S. sanctions against Russia.

Sending lethal weapons to Ukraine has one further downside — it would cause a rift between the United States and its main European allies. Germany and France have been leading diplomatic efforts to find a diplomatic solution for Donbass — and both have long opposed sending lethal weapons to Ukraine because of its potential to escalate the conflict.

The United States and Europe have moved in lock step since the beginning of the conflict, closely coordinating non-lethal military assistance to Ukraine as well as economic sanctions against Russia. Transatlantic solidarity has arguably been the West's strongest suit, confronting Putin with a united front and keeping Russia in the penalty box despite pressure from parties on both sides of the Atlantic to drop sanctions and reap the accompanying commercial benefits.

Europeans are already on edge due to Congress's recent sanctions legislation, which imposes measures not coordinated with the European Union and that have the potential to cause undue harm to European companies. If Washington decides to head off on its own and send lethal weapons to Ukraine, solidarity on Ukraine may well come to end.

Putin has been working hard to achieve just this end. Washington would be making a serious strategic mistake if it hands to the Kremlin the transatlantic bust-up for which Moscow has long been hoping.

The conflict in Ukraine promises to poison Russia's relations with the West until a diplomatic resolution is reached. But sending lethal weapons to Ukraine is a recipe for military escalation and transatlantic discord. The best way to bring peace to Ukraine is through transatlantic unity aimed at maintaining Russia's political and economic isolation until it makes a deal at the negotiating table.

On the Front Line with Ukraine's 'Band of Brothers'

By Seth J. Frantzman

Jerusalem Post, August 8, 2017

<http://www.jpost.com/International/On-the-front-line-with-Ukraines-band-of-brothers-501850>

Ukraine – Casper, Sniper, Hammer, Owl. These are just some of the nicknames of Ukrainians who volunteered to serve in the Donbass Battalion, a unit formed in 2014 to fight pro-Russian separatists in the east of the country.

On the front line they call each other “friend” in lieu of the old Soviet-style “comrade.” And each goes by his nickname. It’s not just for fraternal reasons. There are many common first names in Ukraine so an officer searching for “Sasha” might find several men in each unit with the same name.

Over several days on the front line of Ukraine’s “frozen” war – being fought in the east of the country against pro-Russian separatist republics that broke away in 2014 – these fighters detailed the challenges they face daily.

This corner of the world seems forgotten, even in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev. And except for a few recruitment posters for the armed forces, there are few reminders that a simmering conflict, which takes up to two dozen lives a month, is still ongoing. Yet along hundreds of kilometers of what is called the cease-fire line, the Ukrainian Army is tasked with supervising a 2015 agreement which was supposed to lead to a cease-fire.

“The ‘frozen’ conflict freezes in the morning, melts during the day and at night there is firing,” said a sergeant who commands a position in Avdivka, one of the closest positions to the separatists.

Peering through a concrete wall pierced by tank shells, he says his men not only face volunteers from the separatist area around Donetsk, but also face Russian soldiers.

“There are Chechen war junkies and Russian mercenaries,” among the separatists as well, according to Vyacheslav Vlasenko, commander of the Donbass Battalion.

For men in his battalion, this war is personal. Many volunteered in 2014 after the Maidan protests in Kiev forced Viktor Yanukovich, then Ukraine’s pro-Russian president, to step down and flee the country. When a rebellion broke out in the mostly Russian-speaking part of eastern Ukraine, volunteers streamed to fight on both sides.

It’s not a conflict split along linguistic lines though. Most of the men from the Donbass region who chose to fight on the Ukrainian government side are Russian speakers.

In 2014, with the Ukrainian army struggling to cope, these volunteers made up with spirit what many of them lacked in military training.

Sitting in their local base, a former civilian home near the front, the men showed videos and shared stories of tough battles in 2014 and 2015 at places like Ilovaisk and Debaltseve. Casper, one of the unit’s marksmen who looks to be in his 40s, says the enemy is only 200 meters from their position on the cease-fire line. “We spent the last campaign [rotation] here – 160 days in this area – and we definitely can confirm we killed 52 [separatists].”

“Separatists know Donbass Battalion, and they know if they challenge us it will be heavy fighting,” he said.

At the end of what was once a quiet civilian street of small homes with corrugated metal roofs, a human-like scarecrow figure that looks like the Grim Reaper marks the front line. Sandbags have been filled to create a covered trench, with several rooms and sniper positions.

Such positions are equipped with DShK’s – a Soviet-era heavy machine gun – rocket-propelled grenades and grenade launchers. Heavier weapons were supposed to be withdrawn from the line after the Minsk II

agreement signed in February 2015 between Russia, Ukraine and the two self-proclaimed separatist states Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. So no armored vehicles or artillery are visible.

The Donbass men stress they could re-take this part of Ukraine if they had orders. But for now their job is just to man the position and respond when fired upon. For some of them that task is a bit boring.

They have lost friends over the years and they want to fight.

"Barmaley," a man nicknamed after a fictional pirate and cannibal, has affixed his 1964-era AK-47 with a home-made silencer. When there is fighting to be done, those monitoring the cease-fire won't hear it. Down the road, a position manned by men from a volunteer unit named Pravy Sektor (Right Sector), regularly get in gunfights at night. This is the "rhythm" of the front line, some shooting at nightfall, and then off and on until dawn.

In early August, one volunteer was wounded during clashes in Marinka.

According to a website named liveuamap that tracks the conflict, 24 Ukrainian soldiers were killed in July and 71 wounded. The numbers killed on the other side during this same period have not been made public.

Part of this personal war also involves propaganda on both sides.

Russian separatists call the Ukrainians "fascists" and "NATO punishers," and the Ukrainian volunteers respond in kind. Each seems to adopt the motif of the Cold War, with Ukrainians seeing themselves as still throwing off the Soviet era and their opponents seeing them as collaborators with the West.

On the wall of an officer's room in the Donbass local headquarters, a piece of artwork sent by a Ukrainian child shows the Kremlin painted in the colors of the Ukrainian flag. It reads: "Putin's nightmare."

Although some of these men may not always articulate it, they are on the front line of a geopolitical conflict that is watched closely in chanceries in Europe, Moscow and the US.

Researchers find Jewish headstones at the Nazi killing site of Babi Yar

JTA, August 11, 2017

<http://www.jta.org/2017/08/11/news-opinion/world/researchers-find-jewish-headstones-at-the-nazi-killing-site-of-babi-yar>

Before murdering tens of thousands of Jews at Babi Yar near Kiev, Nazi troops dumped at the killing site dozens of Jewish headstones they had stolen from Jewish cemetery, researchers in Ukraine discovered.

"The tombstones were removed from a local Jewish cemetery during the Holocaust and thrown into the same ravines where over 150,000 Jews, Roma people and Ukrainians were murdered during the Holocaust," Marek Siwec, a former Polish politician and current head of the Babi Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, said in a statement earlier this week about the discovery.

Siwec's organization extracted last month 50 headstones from the Babi Yar ravine, where Nazis and local collaborators murdered more than 50,000 Jews starting in September 1941.

Enjoying a mandate from the Ukrainian government, Siwec's organization, which was set up last year, is heading international efforts to commemorate the Babi Yar tragedy in a manner befitting its scale. Despite many failed initiatives to do so, Jewish victims are memorialized at the site only by an unfenced 6-foot menorah, which is situated near a dumping ground for industrial waste and is vandalized regularly.

"The significance of Babi Yar is of upmost importance, at this horrendously difficult site, the largest single act mass murder of Jews took place during the Holocaust, with 37,771 brutally murdered during a 2 day period, it is our duty not just to remember this site but also proactively learn from the darkest days of human history to build a better future," Siwec said in the statement about the discovery.

Additional headstones from Jewish graves are scattered in the ravine but they require careful excavations to be extracted intact, according to Jonny Daniels, founder of the From the Depths organization, which promotes the commemoration of the Holocaust in Poland. Daniels visited the site earlier this week to see how From the Depths, which has focused on restoring pillaged headstones in Poland, could assist the Babi Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, Daniels said.

Polish Jews call out leading politicians for not fighting anti-Semitism

JTA, August 10, 2017

<https://www.jta.org/2017/08/10/news-opinion/world/polish-jewish-leader-says-community-at-a-low-point-due-to-anti-semitism>

Flagging a what she called a “low point” for Polish Jews’ feeling of security, a leader of that community urged the country’s right-wing ruling party to help fight anti-Semitism.

The unusual appeal came in an open letter sent last week by Leslaw Piszewski, president of the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland, and Anna Chipczynska, who heads the Warsaw community, to a founder of the Law and Justice Party. It was the first of its kind in Poland in recent decades, Polish Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich said.

In the letter to Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the co-authors wrote that they are “appalled by recent events and fearful for our security as the situation in our country is becoming more dangerous.”

The letter came amid growing expenditure by the community on security; right-wing incitement against Jews and perceived inaction by authorities on a string of high-profile incidents featuring anti-Semitic rhetoric – including by people affiliated with the ruling Law and Justice party, Chipczynska told JTA Thursday.

Earlier this month, a lawmaker for the anti-immigration conservative Law and Justice Party, Bogdan Rzonca, wrote on Twitter: “I wonder why there are so many Jews among those performing abortions, despite the Holocaust.”

Schudrich in an interview for JTA called this an “outrageous statement that smells of anti-Semitism.” He noted Rzonca was not reprimanded for the statement. Schudrich said that this “deafening silence by the government on specific acts or statements on anti-Semitism is disappointing and disconcerting.” In that regard, he added, “the letter is criticism” of the government.

The Anti-Defamation League has protested the nomination of Poland’s defense minister, Antoni Macierewicz, to his post in 2015 shortly after Law and Justice’s rise to power, citing his defense of the anti-Semitic forgery “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.” Last year he said Russian were behind the killing of Jews whom mainstream historians assert were murdered by Poles during and after the Holocaust.

Much of the rhetoric against Jews is made up of “Fascist words, and we hear them more and more often,” Chipczynska told JTA. “They are being tolerated and this is a threat to us. We need a clear voice from the leadership.”

Also in recent weeks Israeli soccer fans who visited Poland for a match between their teams and locals ones were attacked by hooligans. Chipczynska said the incidents were anti-Semitic.

The current reality “is a low point in terms of our situation as Polish Jews,” she told JTA. And the letter “is a call for the government to help.”

Under Law and Justice, the Polish state has celebrated the actions of Poles who saved Jews during the Holocaust. And President Andrzej Duda last year said that Poles who attacked Jews excluded themselves with their actions from the rest of the Polish people.

Chipczynska conceded that the letter she coauthored was a departure from the themes that leaders of Polish Jews have chosen to highlight publically.

“We have been talking for years about the revival of Jewish life in Poland, and now that community is a fact, of which we are very proud,” she said. “But there is another fact: There is a security problem going on.”

Schudrich, who has been a spiritual leader of Polish Jews for more than 20 years, said that while the letter reflect “growing concern” among his congregants, it is also “a sign of maturity of the kind that exists in many self-confident Jewish communities, who feel comfortable to speak out when they identify negative or dangerous trends.”

But, he added, “Poland is still a good place to be Jewish, safer than many other places in Europe.” He also said that being Jewish in Poland is no less comfortable today than it was before Law and Justice’s election as the ruling party.

Soaking Up the Jewish Culture in Krakow

By Ruth Schwetizer

Canadian Jewish News, August 9, 2017

<http://www.cjnews.com/culture/travel/soaking-up-the-jewish-culture-in-krakow>

Watching Shye Ben Tzur and the Rajasthan Express performing Sufi devotional music with lyrics in Hebrew and Urdu at the Tempel Synagogue in Kazimierz, Krakow’s Jewish quarter, it was hard not to think about the Jews who would have filled the ornate shul even eight decades ago.

Just before the Second World War, 60,000 Jews lived in Krakow, making up about a quarter of the city’s population. Today, it is estimated that there are around 1,000 Jews living in the city, with only a fraction of those identifying themselves as part of the Jewish community.

I felt as if I had entered a twilight zone as the intense Middle East rhythms performed by Ben Tzur, an Israeli, and an Indian ensemble filled the shul and ecstatic dancers crowded the front of the stage.

Tempel – which features a magnificent, gilded interior that was restored in 2000 – is a Reform synagogue that dates back to 1862. Today, occasional services are held there, but it’s mainly used as a concert hall year round. Each year Tempel becomes musical headquarters for the nine-day Jewish Culture Festival, which brought Ben Tzur and his band to town for the event this past June. The festival’s theme this year was Jerusalem.

The culture festival, founded in 1988, a year before the fall of communism in Poland, was a precursor of the Polish movement to revive Jewish culture. The festival’s founder, Janusz Makuch, a Polish gentile, has called the interest young Poles showed in Jewish culture in the 1980s, a syndrome of searching for the sunken Atlantis – for Makuch, Jewish music was the thread that connected him to a newly discovered world.

The first Jews moved to Krakow’s Jewish quarter in 1495 and it was an independent Jewish town until the end of the 18th century. Krakow wasn’t bombed during the Second World War, so Kazimierz, while neglected during the communist era, was largely intact. Postwar, the quarter’s seven synagogues were restored with help from philanthropists and organizations, such as the Joint Distribution Committee.

In Krakow, the tourism industry and the revival of Jewish culture have gone hand in hand. The 1993 release of the movie Schindler’s List, the story of how Oskar Schindler saved more than 1,000 Jews by employing them in his enamel-ware factory in Krakow, brought thousands of tourists to the city. The film’s director, Steven Spielberg, shot scenes in Kazimierz, because unlike Podgorze, the site of Krakow’s former Jewish ghetto, the Jewish quarter still looked much like it did in the 1940s. After the film’s release, guided tours of the quarter began to include places where Spielberg shot the movie.

The Schindler Museum opened in 2010 with the permanent multimedia exhibit, Krakow During Nazi Occupation, 1939-1945, which documents the experiences of both Poles and Jews during those years. Also on

permanent display is Schindler's office. A small section of the museum is devoted to his workers. There was a long lineup to get into the museum the morning I was there and my guide recommended that tourists purchase tickets online in advance.

Before Schindler's List came out, few of Krakow's Poles had heard of Schindler, said Jakub Nowakowski, the director of the Galicia Jewish Museum in Kazimierz. "For us, the Poles, it was absolutely shocking to see the story of our hometown being presented in cinemas and the shock was, we had new information. We had never heard of Oskar Schindler."

After the film's release, with Jewish tourists coming to Krakow to search for traces of the past, Nowakowski said it was possible for a heritage tourist industry to take root. "Because of the huge interest of outsiders, Krakow realized very quickly what a treasure is here, in terms of heritage, history and also in terms of money – that those places can generate income for the city," he said.

Many of Kazimierz's crumbling buildings, some of which date back to the Middle Ages, have undergone renovations, but gentrification hasn't spoiled the atmosphere there and the Jewish quarter has mushroomed into a lively bohemian district of clubs, cafés and art galleries.

Nowakowski, a graduate of the Jewish studies program at Krakow's Jagiellonian University, grew up in Kazimierz in the 1980s and '90s. "When I discovered the (two) Jewish cemeteries that were so close to my home, I realized I had no idea what happened to those people," he said.

Beginning in 1967 and '68, the communist government was determined to erase any aspects of Jewish culture or religious life in Poland. Many Jews emigrated and most of those who stayed hid their Jewishness. "If you were a child of Holocaust survivors, the last thing (your parents) would do to you was to raise you in a visible Jewish way. They wanted a 'normal' life. They wanted to blend in," he said, adding that Jews used to meet "underground."

He said that after the collapse of communism, the Polish government "understood it was important to establish a positive relationship with the Jewish community. And that hasn't changed, whether the government is right or left."

Nowakowski has been the director of the Galicia Museum since 2010. Galicia – a region created at the end of the 18th century, when Poland was divided between Prussia, Austria-Hungary and Russia – included parts of modern-day northwest Ukraine and southern Poland.

The museum's core exhibit, Traces of Memory, documents Jewish life in Poland with photographs that were taken by the late Chris Schwarz, a British photojournalist. Schwarz was the first photographer to take colour pictures of Jewish sites in Poland, Nowakowski said. "All the other photographers would take these photographs in black and white, as a symbol of the simple fact that they considered those places belonged to the Book of Death, the past, the Jews that are not any longer in Poland. We look at this as something that belongs to us today, that is a part of the present-day landscape of Poland."

The Girl in the Diary: Searching for Rywka from the Lodz Ghetto, a temporary exhibit at the museum, includes excerpts from Rywka Lipszy's diary, along with expert commentary and photographs. Rywka, a teenager, wrote the diary in the Lodz Ghetto between October 1943 and April 1944. The Girl in the Diary runs until March 31, 2018.

The Galicia Museum is a space where people can interact with living Jewish culture, Nowakowski said. While the Jewish Culture Festival takes over the museum each June, activities continue year-round, including weekly Shabbat services and concerts. Nowakowski said Krakow is the perfect place to learn about the continuity of Jewish life in Europe: "Here, the will to survive is visible also through our activities in the museum."

Polish villagers hold Jewish wedding without Jews

By Cnaan Lipshiz

JTA, August 9, 2017

<http://www.jta.org/2017/08/09/news-opinion/world/polish-villagers-hold-jewish-wedding-without-jews>

Nostalgia for Jews is a well-documented phenomenon in Eastern Europe, with cultural and even substantial commercial aspects.

In Ukraine, so-called Jewish-themed restaurants with pork-heavy menus compete for tourists, while figurines of Jews are sold at markets as good luck charms. In Poland, graffiti reading “I miss you, Jew” have become a common sight.

Beyond the kitsch, Jewish cultural festivals draw large non-Jewish audiences in Krakow, Warsaw and Budapest.

Some credit this trend to a feeling of loss over the near annihilation of once-vibrant Jewish communities. Others trace it a desire to reconnect with the pre-Soviet past.

But even against this backdrop, the fake Jewish wedding that was held Saturday in the village of Radzanów, 80 miles northeast of Warsaw, stands out as a remarkable affair.

Make-believe Jewish weddings — a regular educational event in Spain and Portugal, where nostalgia for nearly-extinct Jewish communities is also prevalent — are rare in Poland (locals in the village of Bobowa organized one in 2013). Even rarer are enactments as well-produced as the one in Radzanow.

Organized by the Radzanovia Association, a cultural group promoting Polish heritage, the event featured a few dozen non-Jewish volunteers, men and women, dressed in traditional haredi costumes. Some men wore fake beards and side curls – including ones that didn’t match their natural hair color.

Portraying the groom was Piotr Czaplicki, a journalist for the Radia dla Ciebie station. Czaplicki, who is not Jewish, got under a chuppah – the canopy used in traditional Jewish weddings — together with his make-believe bride, Julia Brzezińska, a local resident. They were “wed” by a fake rabbi in a show before villagers, whom the event’s organizers sought to teach about Jewish traditions.

To Jonny Daniels, the London-born founder of From the Depths, which promotes Holocaust commemoration in Poland, events like the one in Radzanów are “some kind of therapy taking place all over the country.”

But the event’s producer, Agnieszka Rychcik-Nowakowska, sees it as a way of commemorating the hundreds of Jews who had accounted for approximately half of her village’s population before the Holocaust.

“We want to remember all those homes of all pre-war Jews, who lived a peaceful life punctuated by the rhythm of holidays, family celebrations and more mundane events,” she told the news site Nasza Mława.

Jews first settled in Radzanów in 1710, and at their peak numbered about 500. By September 1939, when the Germans took over, the population had dipped below 300. Nearly all who remained would be sent to the Mława ghetto, never to return.

“We remember those who lived here before us and entered the memory of our grandmothers and grandparents. It was so recently,” said Rychcik-Nowakowska.

Elsewhere in Europe, Jewish-themed festivals are more common, bringing together hundreds of participants. There too, Jewish-themed events are held in the absence of a living, breathing Jewish community thanks to nostalgia and a desire to generate tourism revenue.

But in Spain and Portugal, for example, where hundreds of thousands of Jews were oppressed 500 years ago during the Inquisition, the passage of time has made goodwill gestures toward Jews less complicated than in

the east. In 2013, Spain and Portugal even passed laws granting citizenship to descendants of Sephardic Jews – a move whose generosity contrasts sharply with the refusal by Poland and other East European countries to offer even partial restitution for property that was stolen from Jewish communities.

At the fake wedding in Radzanów, organizers turned to Teresa Wrońska, an actress from the Jewish Theater in Warsaw, to assure the wedding's authenticity. She choreographed the entire affair — from the signing of the ketubah (the Jewish marriage contract) to the traditional Jewish music played by a band of locals and musicians from the capital.

Even the POLIN Jewish museum of Warsaw was consulted in staging the event, according to Nasza Mława.

The wedding is not the only attempt by Radzanów locals to reconnect with their village's lost Jewish heritage. Last year, a high school student from the region, Cuba Balinski, initiated a project aimed at rededicating and reopening the village's abandoned synagogue – a small but beautiful Moorish-style building that miraculously survived the Nazi occupation.

Balinski, who has secured the cooperation of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland for his project but is still looking for investors, is adamant about restoring the synagogue to a house of worship rather than having it turn into museum.

“If there is no Torah in the synagogue, than it is still just a building,” he told the news site Gosc Plocki. “But if we bring the holy book back, it will come back to life.”

JDC Sees Jewish Volunteering Bloom in Europe and FSU

By Tamara Zieve

Jerusalem Post, August 9, 2017

<http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/JDC-sees-Jewish-volunteering-bloom-in-Europe-and-FSU-502019>

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee has noted a significant rise in Jewish volunteering efforts throughout Europe and the former Soviet Union this summer, with an increase in camping activities geared toward contributing to community life and helping those in need.

It noted that this is reflective of trends in the US, where the American Camp Association reported that half of American-based summer camps now offer community service activities.

“One of the most promising developments among the Jews of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union is their enthusiastic desire to give back to the neediest and build Jewish communities through volunteerism,” JDC CEO David Schizer said on Tuesday.

In Odessa, Ukraine, for instance, the local Hesed social welfare center's summer project Wings of Kindness deploys more than 100 youth volunteers to assist 3,000 homebound elderly.

The volunteers deliver groceries, engage in arts and crafts and Jewish activities, and even provide haircuts to boost the self-esteem of the seniors.

In Kishinev, Moldova, the volunteer camp project Be.Do.Have: Improve Yourself brings together 100 multigenerational volunteers to develop projects that will help to improve their community.

This summer, volunteers will visit lonely, homebound seniors to help them celebrate Shabbat, volunteer with young cancer patients at a local hospital, and prep a Jewish school for the upcoming school year. Volunteers learn about management and project administration, Jewish traditions, how to set goals and objectives correctly, and the best tools to build community.

In Bulgaria, the JDC-supported Bereshit family summer camp brings together 350 people, parents and children to engage in service at local orphanages, a center for people with disabilities, as well as cleaning local nature

preserves and repainting park benches. Similar volunteer activities are held at Limmud Bulgaria and at Olameinu Mishpacha, a family summer camp in the Baltics.

“We’re proud that our summer experiences for children, young adults, and families are harnessing that passion and integrating it in a way that strengthens Jewish identity and society overall,” said Schizer.

Russian Jewish Congress marks 75 years since largest Holocaust massacre in Russia World Jewish Congress, August 8, 2017

<http://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/russian-jewish-congress-marks-75-years-since-largest-holocaust-massacre-in-russia-8-2-2017>

The Russian Jewish Congress will hold a March of the Living symbolic funeral procession on Friday in Zmievskaia Balka (Rostov-on-Don) to mark the 75th anniversary of the August 1942 extermination of the town’s Jewish population at the hand of the Nazis and their accomplices. The commemoration is a joint initiative of the RJC (the Russian affiliate of the World Jewish Congress) and the local Rostov government, and is part of a series of events being held across the country this week to remember the victims of the Holocaust.

The symbolic march in Rostov-on-Don is the largest of the events being held this week, and is the first March of the Living to be dedicated to victims at Zmievskaia Balka, the largest Holocaust massacre in Russia. Additional marches will be held on August 13 in Arzgir (Stavropol Krai), Kaliningrad, Kislovodsk, (Stavropol Krai), Mineralniye Vody (Stavropol Krai), Novozibkov (Bryansk Oblast), Orel, Stavropol, and other cities across Russia.

To commemorate the Zmievskaia Balka massacre, participants will follow the route taken by the Nazi-led Rostovchani who marched 27,000 victims - more than half of them Jewish - to execution by gunfire.

Marchers will wear black armbands with the yellow Star of David forced upon Jews during the occupation. Posters have been hung across the city informing residents of the upcoming march, to simulate the signs that were posted in 1942 ordering local Jews to assemble for the execution march.

The formal program will take place at the end of the march at the foot of the memorial complex at Zmievskaia Balka, with a memorial ceremony encompassing both Jewish and Christian prayers.

“Zmievskaia Balka was the biggest execution site of Holocaust victims in Russia, it is ‘the Russian Babi Yar’, and a terrible symbol of the Holocaust throughout our national territory,” said Russian Jewish Congress President and WJC Vice President Yuri Kanner. “We called our procession the March of the Living because we are alive, we remember, and should never forget what has happened.”

Kanner will preside over the ceremony, and Russian officials, both local and federal, are also expected to take part, including representatives of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s office and the Federal Agency on Nationalities, as well as Rostov Governor Vasili Golubev, and representatives of the Rostov Regional Government and Legislative Assembly and Rostov-on-Don Municipal Administration. Leading diplomats, foreign officials, representative of veteran organizations and youth groups have also been invited.

The Rostov-on-Don March of the Living is a joint initiative of the Russia Jewish Congress, the Rostov Regional Administration, Rostov-on-Don Municipal Administration, and the RRE Holocaust Center, with the assistance Office of the Russian President, Federal Agency on Nationalities and the Rostov Jewish Religious Community.

On 11-12 August 1942, Nazis orchestrated a marching massacre in Zmievskaia Balka, a former settlement that today is part of Rostov-on-Don City. An estimate 15,000-18,000 of these victims were Jewish, along with Soviet prisoners of war, participants of clandestine anti-fascist organizations, and the gravely ill.

The memorial events dedicated to 75th anniversary of the tragedy at Zmievskaia Balka in Rostov-on-Don will last through 14 August, and will include meetings of veteran organizations and film screenings. A conference on the Preservation of Holocaust Memory is also scheduled. A joint Russian-German-British historical-

documentary exhibition, “Rostov during the occupation and the Holocaust era,” will open at the Donskaya State Library for the occasion.

Russian Jews Decry Official’s ‘Humiliating’ Holocaust Comments **The Moscow Times, August 9, 2017**

<https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-jews-decry-official-humiliating-holocaust-comments-58607>

A spokesperson for Russia’s Jewish community has described claims that Jews are profiting from their past suffering as “humiliating.”

The director of the Russian-Polish Center, Yury Bondarenko, told the E-Vesti news outlet last week that Jews held the “sweetest and most lucrative” place, along with Armenians, in capitalizing on their historical tragedies.

Borukh Gorin, a spokesperson for the Federation of Jewish Organizations in Russia (FEOR), responded to the comments saying, “It is regrettable that the head of a state-sponsored organization in charge of building bridges between nations has argued that Jews and Armenians attempt to monetize their tragedy.”

“Those words are humiliating for the two nations which have suffered from hideous prosecutions,” Gorin added in a written statement in the LeHaim magazine.

The spokesperson added that comments like Bondarenko's "undermine multinational and multi-religious peace in Russia and gives its opponents a reason to claim there's a supposed rise in xenophobia in Russia at a state level."

Bondarenko’s comments were in reference to the Holocaust, which claimed the lives of over six million Jews, and to the Turkish massacres in 1915 when 1.5 million Armenians were killed.

Property stolen during the Holocaust made some communities richer, even 70 years later **By Evgeny Finkel and Volha Chernysh** **The Washington Post, August 8, 2017**

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/07/holocaust-plunder-left-some-communities-richer-even-70-years-later-what-does-that-mean-for-mosul/?utm_term=.b0849f4ec465

One month ago, on July 9, Iraq’s prime minister announced the liberation of Mosul after three years of Islamic State rule. The violence displaced almost 800,000 civilians; more than 40,000 died, and large tracts of the city were turned to rubble during the battle that had lasted since October 2016. Beyond those dramatic losses, the war also fundamentally reshaped local communities — as the remaining houses, land and other assets changed owners.

Of the Iraqi refugees interviewed by the International Organization for Migration, 89 percent said they had their dwellings confiscated; some 35 percent lost farmland, and 13 percent lost businesses. In Syria, Eastern Ukraine and other conflict zones, the victors and survivors are also taking property from those who have fled or died.

Do communities experiencing such wartime plunder change their economic status and political views?

Our research examines how communities were affected by property transfers during the Holocaust, one of the largest and best-documented cases of mass violence and plunder. During this time, some non-Jewish Europeans took over the homes, businesses and other property of the Nazis’ victims.

We study the effects of plunder at the Treblinka death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland, where 850,000 to 900,000 Jews were murdered between 1942 and 1943. Believing Nazi assurances that they were sent to perform agricultural labor in Ukraine, many Jews took valuables with them. After they were gassed, their property — jewelry, golden dental work, money, clothing, tools and even hair — was collected, sorted and sent to Germany. At Treblinka, plunder occurred at a gargantuan scale: the camp’s Nazi commandant Franz Stangl spoke of stepping “knee-deep into money” and “wad[ing] in notes, currency, precious stones, jewelry, clothes.”

Even though the Nazis worked hard to secure all the loot, some Jewish valuables ended up in the hands of the local population. At first, some locals traded with the camp guards, who amassed considerable wealth and paid “without even counting the bills.” When the camp closed in October 1943, some people began digging through graves at the camp site to find valuables missed by the Nazis. In accounts from the area, observers often described the scene with terms like “Eldorado,” “Klondike,” and “gold rush.”

Treblinka is important for this research, because the precise placement of the camp was chosen by a mid-level German official, and had nothing to do with the local population’s pre-Holocaust wealth or political views. The locals were not involved in the killing or in the camp’s day-to-day operations. Before the war, few Jews lived in this predominantly agricultural area. Thus we are able to measure the impact of the Jewish property stolen at Treblinka by comparing communities closer to the camp with communities farther away.

Of course, not all Treblinka-area residents benefited from the Nazi plunder; some even risked their lives to help Jews. But for those who did want to trade with the guards or dig for valuables, shorter distance to Treblinka meant greater access to Jewish property.

As we did not know who benefited from Treblinka and who did not, we decided to analyze the differences between communities situated up to 70 kilometers (or about 40 miles) away from Treblinka. We collected demographic, economic and voting data from both pre- and post-World War II periods to test whether distance to the death camp is correlated with economic and political characteristics.

We found that proximity to Treblinka is associated with newer and better housing stock. The closer to the death camp, the higher the share of homes built in the post-World War II period and of roofs made of sheet metal, a more expensive material than other roof options, as measured by the 1988 Census. For example, in communities within 15 km of Treblinka, 45 percent of dwellings on average had metal roofs; in communities 16-35 km away, that was 38 percent of dwellings; and in communities 35-50 km away, just 25 percent. All these communities were economically similar before the war, and wartime destruction cannot explain these patterns.

However, proximity to Treblinka is not associated with higher levels of economic activity, education or income in the 1980s or 1990s. To the extent that some locals benefited from Jewish goods, they invested this wealth in real estate.

Communities closer to the camp exhibited higher support for the League of Polish Families (LPR) — an extreme right, anti-Semitic party — in the 2001 parliamentary election. During that election, Poles debated both Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust and whether property should be restored to long-ago owners. In the community closest to Treblinka, the LPR vote share was 14 percent, or almost twice its national average of 8 percent.

However, we found no relationship between proximity to Treblinka and support for non-xenophobic right-wing parties or support for the LPR in the elections in which the Holocaust and restitution of property were not discussed.

As societies transition from war to reconstruction and reconciliation, wartime property transfers create legal, political and social dilemmas. The perpetrators of the violence may be punished, but that does not prevent cleavages from emerging between those who lost and gained property because of the violence.

Our analysis suggests that raising the issue of restitution — while necessary to do justice to the victims — can strengthen support for extremist parties. Even today, more than seven decades after the Holocaust, when most direct beneficiaries and victims of wartime plunder are no longer alive, restitution debates across Europe sow anger and frustration and apparently stirred up some anti-Semitic backlash.

While it is too early to evaluate the consequences of ISIS rule in Iraq, we can expect disputes over property between the returning refugees and their former neighbors in the liberated areas. Unless handled very carefully, those may destabilize this ethnically diverse society.

On the Trail of Books Stolen by the Nazis

By Lucette Lagnado

Wall Street Journal, August 2, 2017

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/on-the-trail-of-books-stolen-by-the-nazis-1501687602>

Françoise Basch still remembers her grandfather's "massive" library at his home in the heart of Paris.

Her grandfather, Victor Basch, a French Jewish intellectual and professor, loved his books, she recalls. But during World War II, the Nazis seized the entire collection after he fled Paris.

Professor Basch and his wife were shot to death by members of the Vichy regime and the Gestapo in Lyon, where they had sought refuge. But some of his books recently surfaced in—of all places—Minsk, the capital of Belarus.

According to Holocaust experts, the Nazis stole tens of millions of books from Jews and other victims. Recently, scholars have focused on 1.2 million volumes the Nazis plundered—including 500,000 taken largely from French Jewish families and institutions. The books went from France to Germany to Silesia, where they were scooped up by the Red Army as spoils of war.

In 1945, the Soviets sent the books in 54 railcars to Minsk, where they have remained for 72 years, known to almost no one but a handful of researchers and professors. The mystery of how half a million French books ended up 1,300 miles from Paris in Minsk—and what to do with them—has captivated Holocaust scholars and historians.

The Nazis also looted art, grabbing paintings by Monet, Renoir, Picasso and others. This sparked a campaign in recent years to trace the works and return them to the owners or their heirs.

Now, the curtain is being lifted on the books the Nazis stole in France. Many belonged to prominent Jews such as the Rothschilds and Professor Basch, along with other "enemies" of the Reich, including Communists and Freemasons. Experts say that most Hebrew books or volumes on Judaism went to Frankfurt. There, the Germans created a research institute "on the Jewish question." When Frankfurt came under American control after the war, there were efforts to return the books. But most owners were dead, so the U.S. turned the volumes over to a Jewish organization which distributed them to America, Israel and elsewhere; these in turn placed them in libraries and other institutions.

A large quantity of books ended up in Soviet hands. These were mostly secular works that went to Berlin, instead, and included novels by Victor Hugo, Marcel Proust, Emile Zola and Jean-Paul Sartre. There also were books on politics and philosophy, as well as volumes by Salvador Dalí and Marc Chagall. These were found after the war by the so-called Trophy Brigades of the Red Army—special divisions that picked up cultural property in occupied countries.

The French books were stored alongside hundreds of thousands of volumes the Nazis plundered from Belarus. Some experts say that—and the fact that Belarus longed to replenish what they had lost—is why so many of the books ended up in Minsk.

Devastated by the war, the Soviets were in no mood for restitution. While they eventually gave back some cultural treasures, including some French archives, the books remained in Minsk and were barely discussed until the 1990s, after the fall of Communism.

Only in recent years have there been serious efforts to track and document the books that ended up there. One problem that slows the quest: Books typically don't have the material value or sizzle that great paintings do.

"In many cases books are not unique," says Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, senior research associate at Harvard's Ukrainian Research Institute in Cambridge, Mass. "But," she points out, "many of these are unique."

Dr. Grimsted, who tracked the books' journey from Paris to Minsk, says "they do have financial value—but not in the millions like the art." Dr. Grimsted's research received support from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, a New York-based organization tasked since 1951 with compensating Holocaust survivors using German funds. The organization, also known as the Claims Conference, has sought restitution for those who lost property or art. The Claims Conference is leading many of the efforts to examine the Minsk collection.

The books, taken from the private libraries of the Rothschilds and other prominent Jewish families in Paris, include first editions and volumes inscribed by French authors. A copy of "Sodom and Gomorrah," part of Marcel Proust's seven-volume "In Search of Lost Time," bears the inscription: "This book is to take the place of all the phone calls I never answered, and the letter I never had the strength to send." It is signed, "With great affection, your Marcel Proust."

The books would also have value to victims' relatives, such as Ms. Basch, who was very attached to her grandfather, a historian who taught aesthetics at the Sorbonne. According to Nazi records, a squad descended on Professor Basch's Paris apartment in January 1941 and took 17 cases of books. The professor had already left, and ended up in Lyon, where he and his wife were executed in 1944.

Ms. Basch, who is herself a historian, says she was moved to learn about her grandfather's books. "I am terribly excited that his books are somewhere and within reach and I might someday look at them," she says. "But there isn't much time," she added, "I am 87. I mean this is such a slow process and these books are in Minsk."

"Why don't those books come back to France?" she asked.

France and Belarus have held conferences on the books, including one in Paris in March titled, "What became of the books plundered by the Nazis?"

In September 2016, a group of scholars from France, Belgium and America went to the National Library of Belarus and other Minsk libraries to meet experts and go over the books' tortured history.

Wesley Fisher, director of research for the Claims Conference, helped organize the Minsk gathering. He recalled having to promise to the organizers that the meeting wouldn't involve restitution, "which it did not," Dr. Fisher says. "Do we specifically think these books should be returned? The answer in a perfect world is yes but it is not a perfect world," Dr. Fisher says. The Claims Conference created a website on the looted books and the Minsk collection.

Vladimir Makarov, a scholar and retired professor in Minsk, penned an essay about the French trove and its tragic origins. "These libraries had their own holocaust," he wrote. "They suffered as suffered many thousands of people who on political, racial or other grounds were considered enemies of the Reich."

At the Paris conference in March, Anatol Stseburaka, an assistant professor at the School of Business and Management of Technology of the Belarusian State University in Minsk, said for years the books were decaying in an old church because there was no room for them in the library. After a new library building opened in 2006, the books were moved. Now, he says, they are well cared for. While he thinks researchers would be welcome, he worries about talk of restitution.

"Restitution is a bit of a taboo for us," Mr. Stseburaka says, "We lost nearly all we had in the war." But he feels "optimistic" there could be joint projects with Western scholars.

Aliaksandr Susha, deputy director of the National Library of Belarus, echoed that the country's libraries lost most of their collections in World War II. He expressed a willingness for more exchanges. "We are ready for cooperation and interaction," Dr. Susha noted, adding that his library welcomes foreign visitors and its collections are open to all. He also expressed willingness to discuss "the possibilities of the transfer and exchanges of publications," including books. He labeled the notion of restitution "a very very difficult question" and added: "we are ready for such discussions."

In France, François Croquette, roving ambassador for human rights and Holocaust issues, said he and his government were trying to “gather information about books looted by the Nazis and allow their lawful owners to get them back after such a long wait.” Mr. Croquette said France shall “keep insisting” on the issue with the Belarus government.

At the Journal’s request, Mr. Stseburaka searched for books belonging to Victor Basch in Minsk. He found five works inscribed to Professor Basch, including a book about Leonardo da Vinci and one about the world economic crisis.

Those books, says his granddaughter, “belonged to a French citizen, to someone who was assassinated because he was French and a Jew. So, why aren’t they restituted to France or to his family?”

“Who knows?” she says, “I may set off to Minsk.”

Holocaust education in Moldova is about to get (slightly) better

By Julie Masis

Times of Israel, August 4, 2017

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/holocaust-education-in-moldova-is-about-to-get-slightly-better/>

In a Moldovan secondary school history textbook, seven pages are devoted to the crimes of communist leader Joseph Stalin — an entire chapter with numerous photos illustrating the horrors of the gulag.

The Holocaust, on the other hand, gets a page and a half in the chapter on World War II, right after the section entitled “The Liberation of Bessarabia,” which covers the occupation of Moldova by Romanian fascists. During that time, the dictatorship deported to concentration camps about 10 percent of the country’s population — including more than 110,000 Jews and approximately 25,000 Gypsies. Less than half returned.

But Holocaust education in Moldova is about to improve. Earlier this month, the country’s Ministry of Education signed an agreement of cooperation with the Jewish community, committing to teach the Holocaust “as the ultimate form of genocide.” The July 14 agreement also stipulates that the Ministry of Education will develop new training programs for educators to help them address this difficult subject in school.

“Taking into account the increase in cases of vandalism at Moldova’s Jewish cemeteries in recent years, we cannot underscore the importance of educating the young generation in the spirit of tolerance, mutual respect, fairness and social unity in order to prevent and fight anti-Semitism, xenophobia and extremism,” said Alexandr Bilinkis, the Jewish community’s president and signatory to the agreement.

In addition to special training for history teachers, the Jewish community would like Moldovan schools to organize competitions for the best research papers on the Holocaust and to offer field trips to places connected to the Holocaust, said Elena Tsurcan, the manager at the Jewish Community of Moldova. The Jewish community would like all the schools in the country to observe International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, a commemoration which was officially adopted by the Moldovan government in 2015.

“We really hope there will be research paper competitions that will allow students to study the Holocaust right here in Moldova, so that, for example, in Balti they could research more about what happened in the north of Moldova,” Tsurcan said. “Also we want more days dedicated to the Holocaust [in the curriculum], so that it’s not only on January 27.”

Currently, Moldovan schools devote about a day to the Holocaust in 9th grade and a second day in 12th grade, according to Irina Shihova, the curator of Moldova’s Jewish Heritage Museum.

“If someone missed that day, they wouldn’t know anything about the Holocaust at all,” Shihova said.

But the official from the Moldovan Ministry of Education who signed the agreement did not agree that the amount of time given to the Holocaust needs to be increased.

“We signed an agreement with the Jewish community on the measures we will take together to integrate the Holocaust in the educational process. We will teach about the Holocaust the same way that we teach all historical events,” said Corina Lungu, a senior consultant at the Ministry of Education who is responsible for secondary education. “I wouldn’t say that we need to pay ‘more attention’ to the Holocaust. We have a curriculum and every subject has a few hours.”

Lungu did confirm that steps will be taken to better train teachers on how to address the Holocaust because it’s a topic that is emotionally difficult for children. She also said that an extracurricular competition on research papers dealing with the Holocaust will take place in high school as well as at the universities.

“We hope that all the schools interested in participating will be able to do so. We will start in September,” said Lungu.

The agreement between the Moldovan Ministry of Education and the Jewish Community was signed just days after a roundtable event announcing the results of a survey conducted by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on what Moldovan high school students think about the Holocaust and about ethnic tolerance. The survey suggested that Moldovan teachers need extra training to address the Holocaust in the classroom, said Shihova, who attended the event.

“I understood that teachers want to teach this subject, but it’s very hard for them because they don’t know how to teach it from the psychological standpoint,” she said.

The Holocaust is a touchy subject in Moldova because the crimes were committed by Romanian soldiers during the fascist occupation, and Romanians are of the same ethnic group as most Moldovans. Romanian soldiers executed thousands of Jews, and ordered Jews and Gypsies on death marches and into the concentration camps.

“If they acknowledge the Holocaust, they’ll have to acknowledge that there were collaborators among the local people — not mythological fascists, but real people,” said Victor Reider, deputy director of the Jewish community of Moldova. “It’s very inconvenient to tell your citizens that their ancestors participated in this tragedy.”

Another controversial issue is whether Ion Antonescu, who was Romania’s leader during WWII and executed for war crimes, only deported the Jews and Gypsies at Hitler’s orders, but ultimately refused to carry out the Final Solution by murdering all the people in the camps — or if he actually was responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent people.

“For some, Antonescu is a hero,” Shihova said. “One time, a teacher brought children here for a Holocaust program and the teacher told me that Jews were very happy under Romanian rule and that Antonescu tried to save the Jews.”

But, Moldova’s attitude toward the Holocaust has been changing and textbooks have already been improving over time, said Ion Duminica, an ethnic Roma and the head of the ethnic minorities department at Moldova’s Academy of Sciences.

Despite its limitations, the latest textbook, published in 2013, is the first of its kind where the Holocaust is discussed as something that happened under Romanian occupation in Moldova, rather than something from Poland and Germany, said Duminica.

“There was nothing at all about the Holocaust until 2005. In 2005, they put a photo of Auschwitz,” he said. “Now there is a page and a half, but it still doesn’t say that Antonescu was put on trial [because of the part he played in the Holocaust] and that it was his fault.”

The reason that Moldova is finally coming to terms with the Holocaust is because Romania itself has done so, Duminica said. Romania changed its attitude toward the Holocaust when it entered the European Union, he explained.

“Romanian historians were invited to train our teachers, and only then our teachers understood the Holocaust. They were shocked that in Romania they teach about the Holocaust, because in our textbooks Antonescu did it at Hitler’s orders,” Duminica said. “Until then, Antonescu was a martyr who was sentenced to death by a Bolshevik court.”

It is crucially important to teach about the Holocaust because attitudes toward ethnic minorities such as the Gypsies have not changed much since World War II, Dumnica said. His biggest fear is that if a new government orders to deport the Gypsies again, the people of Moldova might simply accept this order, he said.

To fight prejudice, Shihova is taking matters into her own hands.

She will train about 50 teenagers from Chisinau’s Jewish schools to explain a bit about Judaism to their peers, as well as the events of the Holocaust. The teens will travel in pairs to speak in front of classrooms all around Moldova.

The project, which starts in September, is part of the Likrat (Hebrew for “Approach”) initiative that is already in place in Switzerland, Germany in Austria. This is the first time it will be tried in Eastern Europe.

“I don’t know how it will work out,” Shihova admitted. “I really hope that the children will be polite, that at least they won’t whistle at us.”

Israel and Kazakhstan’s Futurist Vision for Eurasia

By Michael Tanchum

Jerusalem Post, August 7, 2017

<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Israel-and-Kazakhstans-futurist-vision-for-Eurasia-501841>

Israel and its Eastern Mediterranean neighbors find themselves in a new geopolitical reality as the Atlantic Order ceases to be the predominant framework in which the region’s relations are conducted. With the weakening bloc led by the United States and its European allies ceding ground in the region to an emerging Eurasian order led by China and Russia, Eastern Mediterranean nations could benefit from examining how Kazakhstan attempts to constructively influence the developing economic and strategic contours of the new Eurasia.

Spanning the western border of China and the eastern borders of European Russia and the Caspian Sea, Kazakhstan – like the Eastern Mediterranean – forms a vital geo-economic link between Europe and Asia. However, in contrast to the Eastern Mediterranean nations, a central feature of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy is the consistent promotion of a futurist vision for Eurasia based on consensus-building, multi-lateral cooperation and sustainable development. To this end, Kazakhstan has hosted four major international events in 2017 – The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit, Expo 2017, the Astana Economic Forum and the Eurasian Media Forum.

This author participated as a delegate to the 14th Eurasian Media Forum in late June and witnessed the impressive array of high government officials and leading figures from the fields of business, hi-tech and media that were gathered to examine the challenges for Eurasia and the opportunities for creating a more prosperous, stable and sustainable future. Reflective of the strong Kazakh-Israeli relationship, the agenda of the Eurasian Media Forum treated Israel as an important Eurasian actor whose voice should be heard.

The forum was initiated by Dr. Dariga Nazarbayeva, a political scientist and the daughter of Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who himself is the architect of Kazakhstan’s “multi-vectored” foreign policy – a careful three-way balancing among Russia, China, and the Western powers, mainly the European Union and the United States – that has contributed to maintaining a certain great-power equilibrium in Central Asia and helped foster Kazakhstan’s economic rise to the ranks of an upper middle income nation.

Held in the Kazakhstani capital Astana with more than 600 delegates participating from over 60 nations, the Eurasian Media Forum brought together persons from varying ethnic, religious and political perspectives, modeling a process for civil and rational dialogue among actors with conflicting interests. Conducted in the style of the Davos World Economic Forum, the opening plenary session addressed the macro political trends affecting the future of the Eurasian landmass.

The composition of the panel itself was indicative of the importance which Kazakhstan places on Israel's role in Eurasia. Sharing the panel with former Turkish president Abdullah Gul, Jose Manuel Barroso, the previous president of the EU's governing body, the European Commission and former US ambassador to the UN Governor Bill Richardson was Gilead Sher, chief of staff and policy coordinator for the government of prime minister Ehud Barak, known for his role as a senior peace negotiator, including during the Taba talks.

The panel's major theme, as framed by Turkey's former president, was the dangers posed by various forms of populism and the need for governments as well as multi-lateral organizations to be more responsive to the needs and concerns of local populations.

Sher's contribution highlighted the need to better understand the growing disruptive role of non-state actors and was well received.

The panel at the forum that focused specifically on the Syrian crisis, while including an Iranian speaker did not include an Israeli speaker. However, through his participation as a delegate, Sher put forward an Israeli position on the crisis. When one of the participating delegates responded to Sher's comments on Israel's provision of humanitarian aid in Syria by attempting to impugn Israel's role with a disingenuous narrative, one of the panel's speakers, investigative journalist Shahida Tulaganova, effectively countered the delegate's propagandistic grandstanding, which itself was something out of character for the forum.

Known for her eyewitness documenting of the Syrian civil war in the recent award-winning film Cries from Syria, Tulaganova provided her own personal testimony about Israel's constructive humanitarian role. The panel's ability to stay on track with a rigorous debate was reflective of the conference organizers' overall effort to promote balanced dialogue.

Beyond the factor of geopolitics, the forum considered the future of Eurasia from a variety of analytical vantage points including: the sustainability of the Asian Economic Miracle and the prospect of greater commercial integration between Europe and Asia; how green energy may be effectively harnessed for sustainable economic development; the impact of emerging trends in digital technology on international commerce, intellectual property, global media and the security of the international financial system.

Just as Israel's exhibition at Expo 2017, held concurrently in Astana, proved to be one of the most well received exhibitions, Israel was regarded in the panels and the delegate discussions as a leading-edge innovator, contributing solutions in several of these fields.

The importance for Israel of developing a robust Eurasian policy perspective cannot be overemphasized. Already the EU's trade with Asia has surpassed the volume of trade conducted between EU and North America. China's Belt and Road Initiative – from Beijing's ownership and operation of the EU's fastest growing port in Piraeus, Greece to its construction of Egypt's new capital – is serving to integrate the Eastern Mediterranean region into an economically rational Eurasian order. Similarly, through its new military and energy partnerships, Russia has re-emerged as a major actor in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

To this end, Kazakhstan can serve both as an exemplar and partner. Astana is one of Beijing's key partners in developing road and high-speed rail routes to create overland commercial connectivity with Europe (the "belt" in the Belt and Road Initiative). Likewise, the former Soviet republic maintains a strong relationship with Moscow. Nonetheless, Kazakhstan has successfully "rebalanced Westwards," offsetting the threat of Russian hard power and of Chinese soft power by deepening its security cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and economic cooperation with the EU. In 2017, Kazakhstan became one the 10 non-permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Israel was one of the first nations to recognize Kazakhstan's independence in 1991. On the occasion of the country's 25th anniversary as an independent state, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu became the first acting Israeli prime minister to visit Kazakhstan. Netanyahu's visit reflected the importance of the bilateral relations that have developed between the two nations. However, there is much more work to be done. As Israel's ambassador to Kazakhstan, Michael Brodsky, has pointed out there is great potential for Israel and Kazakhstan to expand their cooperation in the fields of agriculture, healthcare, telecommunications, security and renewable energy to reach a level of strategic partnership.

Israel needs to craft a strategic vision for securing its place in the emerging Eurasian order. With a population of only 18 million, Kazakhstan has managed to use its strategic assets to become an active player in setting the agenda along with the major powers. As was abundantly clear from Kazakhstan's 14th Eurasian Media Forum, Israel's has an important place in Kazakhstan's futurist vision of Eurasia. Israel should engage Kazakhstan's vision as well as learn lessons from that vision as Israel starts to develop its own discourse on Eurasia.

Uzbek Authorities Say Visa Reform to Simplify Travel Abroad
Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 8, 2017

<https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-exit-visas-abolished/28665778.html>

Uzbekistan's government says its plan to abandon a requirement for Uzbek citizens to seek the authorities' permission to leave the country will make it much easier for them to travel abroad.

In an August 8 statement, the Foreign Ministry said that a draft presidential decree on the abolition of exit visas is being reviewed by government agencies.

The proposal is one of a number of initiatives that appear aimed at opening up the country under President Shavkat Mirziyoev, who was elected after the death of longtime autocrat Islam Karimov last year.

The Foreign Ministry said that the draft presidential decree would also make it easier for Uzbek nationals to relinquish their citizenships or to obtain official documents when they reside abroad.

In January, a draft presidential decree posted on a government website included a clause that would scrap the long-standing requirement that Uzbeks seeking to travel abroad receive an exit visa.

However, some Uzbek officials have played down expectations that the tightly controlled Central Asian nation will abolish exit visas anytime soon.

The exit-visa system inherited from the Soviet era has been a major barrier for Uzbeks seeking to leave the country. It has also become a source of illegal income for officials who expedite the process in exchange for bribes.