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ANTI-UKRAINIAN RHETORIC AND STEREOTYPES IN CONNECTION WITH THE ORANGE REVOLUTION

The electoral crisis in Ukraine, culminating in the Orange Revolution, attracted a great deal of international media attention in the last two months of 2004. Overwhelmingly the media were favorably disposed to the democratic opposition in Ukraine, and Ukrainians enjoyed their fifteen minutes of fame as champions of freedom. Even the Lebanese were watching the Ukrainians on “Al Jazeera”, and it has been reported that the Orange Revolution helped inspire the massive demonstrations that led to Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon¹. Yet in addition to the mainstream support for the movement in the Western media, there were also small bands of nay-sayers who took the other side. Reading and viewing some of these items, I thought I detected some moments that were not simply politically opposed to the Yushchenko camp, but also denigrated Ukrainians as such.

Without yet gathering a comprehensive collection of the negative articles, I began to speculate that it was only perfectly natural that all the timeworn stereotypes of East Europeans would reemerge here, with reference to Ukrainians. For one thing, much of what had been Eastern Europe had now been christened Central Europe. Most of Ukraine’s western neighbors – Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary – had joined the European Union on 1 May 2004, and now Eastern Europe, or perhaps Eurasia, began at the Ukrainian border. Crossing that border one moved from the delightful schnitzel-and-Freud world of Central Europe into Post-Soviet Space, where all the old tropes would be applicable. Furthermore, I thought, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians had just fanned out across Western Europe – to the UK, Portugal, Italy – in search of work, legal or illegal, as maids, nannies, farm hands, and prostitutes. That meant Europeans knew the Ukrainians in a subaltern capacity and were therefore likely to be constructing them in that peculiar way they like to construct subalterns.

Moved by these considerations, I decided to collect as many negative articles as I could and analyze their anti-Ukrainian content. I put out a call to scholars and friends that brought me dozens and dozens of articles that they thought fit my purposes², and I am confident that I have a comprehensive collection of what might be called the anti-Orange

¹ Michael Wines. Grass-Roots Effort to Upend Mugabe in Zimbabwe // *New York Time*. 2005. 27 March.

² In particular I want to thank Andrij Makuch, who sent me dozens of pieces, and Dominique Arel, who posted my research query on his Ukraine list. Others who helped me were Federigo Argentieri, Jars Balan, Chris Ford, Myrna Kostash, Michael Kulyk, Alan Rutkowski, Mykola Ryabchuk, Jaroslaw Sawka, Roman Senkus, Frank Sysyn, Myroslav Yurkevich (I hope I have not accidentally omitted anyone).

undercurrent in the Canadian, American, and British press. Originally I had hoped to encompass the French and Italian press, but what I found was too fragmentary, so I have excluded them from consideration. I also have a number of articles from the English-language Israeli press, and I will refer to some of them near the end of this paper.

To anticipate one of my conclusions, let me say that I was wrong in my original speculation about the anti-Ukrainian content of these articles. The overwhelming majority of the negative articles were politically opposed to the Yushchenko movement, for a variety of reasons, but did not contain a pejorative characterization of Ukrainians as such. This will require some modification and nuancing, but certainly I did not find what I was originally looking for.

Also, I gained the impression that the significance of the negative articles was blown out of proportion in the Ukrainian-diaspora and Ukrainian-studies electronic lists and newsletters, where some of them were reprinted many times. It's another issue altogether, which I will not be treating in this paper, but there is an unhealthy tendency in the Ukrainian community in North America to focus too much attention on slights and one-sided or misleading representations. The real news in the last two months of 2004 was that the Ukrainians became agents of their own liberation. This was not Ukraine emerging by default because of the collapse of the Russian empire or the Soviet Union – this was autonomous and independent action. And it was action for something good, decent, and universal that inspired millions of people around the world. A tasteless joke on Jay Leno's television show or a sour-grapes editorial in "The Nation" was really too petty in the larger scale of things to get exercised about. But the negative portrayals of Ukraine's revolution constitute nonetheless an interesting object for analysis and reflection.

The ideal piece for my original analysis might have been an article that appeared in "The New York Press" on 14 December 2004³. The author had been the editor of an American expatriate alternative newspaper in Moscow called the "eXile", so he had had some first-hand encounters with Ukrainians and had formed opinions about them, "not all of them generous", as he said. "These are people whose idea of a snack is a big lump of fat...a fiendish thing called salo". Ridiculing Ukrainians for their dietary habits has, as I have shown elsewhere⁴, a long pedigree, and peculiarities of diet often figure in ethnic stereotyping of any kind. The author ends by quoting one of his colleagues at the "eXile" who said Ukrainian coal miners should stay out of politics and instead "drink their Ukrainian vodka 'Gorilka', stay home and fuck their huge wives".

When I first read this I was deeply offended, personally and on behalf of all Ukrainians. Fortunately, I did a little research on the author, and that changed things. I previously had had no idea who the author, Matt Taibbi, was. I went on the internet and learned he's a gonzo journalist, the new Hunter S. Thompson, the fellow "Rolling Stone" sent to cover the 2004 Democratic convention. I also learned that he thrives on being offensive. He wrote a piece for "The New York Press" on 2 March 2005 entitled "The 52 Funniest Things about the Upcoming Death of the Pope"⁵. Here are

³ Matt Taibbi. Ukraine: Fifty Million People, One Soup // *The New York Press*. 2004. 14 December.

⁴ John-Paul Himka. Ukraine in a Grand Narrative of European History: A Review Article // *Journal of Ukrainian Studies*. 1998. Vol. 23. No. 1. Pp. 102-103.

⁵ <http://www.nypress.com/18/9/news&columns/taibbi.cf>

some of the things Taibbi thought were funny: “After beating for the last time, Pope’s heart sits there like a piece of hamburger”. “Beetles eating Pope’s dead brains”. So there is nothing to be offended about in Matt Taibbi’s remarks about salo, horilka, and fat women. Because Taibbi is like a dog who barks at you when you pass by. He doesn’t bark at you because you are you but because he’s a dog. Much the same can be said about Jay Leno’s joke at the expense of Yushchenko’s disfigured face. These phenomena have nothing to say about Ukraine; what they really tell us is about the evolution of popular taste in America.

What business humorist Stanley Bing wrote is of somewhat more relevance, since he placed Ukraine into a larger complex of prejudice, namely the East European context. Bing writes a fortnightly column for the magazine “Fortune”. In the issue of 24 January 2005⁶ he published a piece about Ukraine entitled “Drop that Spoon, Comrades!” He characterized the whole East European region as having an imagination fuelled by “vodka, xenophobia, and melancholy”. He wrote that Yushchenko as a “hobbled, pockmarked monster” is “so ugly that the only thing he’s fit for is the leadership of an Eastern European country”. So again, vodka and physical appearance are brought up, but as general East European tropes. He does have something specific to say about the Ukrainians who are “all in favor of freedom” now. “They’re very eager to become part of the European community and to put behind them the fact that in the last world war they were basically on the wrong side because they hated Stalin so much”. This is, to say the least, a peculiar take on the history of Ukraine during World War II as well as on the constitution of the European Community, which last time I checked still included Germany. Probably Bing is awkwardly referring to Ukrainian antisemitism during the war, a subject to which we will return near the end of this paper. If I am interpreting this passage correctly, then the antisemitism would be part and parcel of the “xenophobia” which he has already identified as a characteristic of the entire region.

Quite a few of the negative articles I collected had almost nothing to say about Ukrainians as such, but were opposed to the Orange Revolution because their authors felt that Russia had a legitimate claim to dominance in the region and that America, which was supporting Yushchenko and his movement, had no business being involved in this Russian sphere. These Russophiles came from all over the political spectrum.

William S. Lind, the director of the Center for Cultural Conservatism for the Free Congress Foundation, wrote an article for *Outside View*, United Press International, on 5 January 2005 entitled “America’s Ukraine Folly”. Lind thinks that America should work closely with Russia, which he calls “Christendom’s vast eastern flank”. “As the remnants of the Christian world begin to wake up to the reality that Islam has resumed the strategic offensive, that flank takes on renewed importance. It is already under pressure, as events in Chechnya show all too clearly. If it collapses, Christendom will have suffered an epic defeat”. The consequences of America’s support for the “anti-Russian candidate” in Ukraine could be dire: “The folly of ignoring Russia’s vital interests may lead to a worst possible outcome – namely, a renewed civil war within Christendom. Three previous such civil wars in the 20th century... have left our culture merely one contender

⁶ Dated 12 January on the internet version: www.fortune.com/fortune/bing/0,15704,1016593,00.html.

among many, whereas a century ago it dominated the world. A fourth such conflict, in the form of a revived cold war, would truly be a gift from Allah for the warriors of the Prophet. Christendom would spend what little energy it has left fighting itself". Not quite so extreme, but in agreement on essentials is prominent right-winger Patrick Buchanan. In a piece for LewRockwell.com, Center for Libertarian Studies (5 December 2004) Buchanan wrote that "to elect American vassals in Russia's backyard, even in former Soviet republics, seems an act of imperial arrogance and blind stupidity"⁷.

Related arguments have been advanced on the liberal left as well. (I will deal separately with the socialist left, whose views on Ukraine are formed less by pro-Russianism than anti-Americanism.) Stephen F. Cohen, a historian and political scientist with a fairly positive view of the Soviet experience, attacked the media's favorable coverage of the Ukrainian events in an article in "The Nation" entitled "The Media's New Cold War" (31 January 2005). This was an article principally directed against "The Washington Post", which Cohen accused of instigating a new cold war by applying democratic standards in a duplicitous way. In the course of the article he defended Russian President Vladimir Putin's reputation several times and also told the media not to rule out "the possibility that Russia may have a legitimate security or other national interest in Ukraine, to which it has been intimately, even familially, related for centuries by geography, traditions, language, religion, economics and intermarriage".

I am sure that in most cases these pro-Russian sentiments are genuine expressions of the authors' geopolitical thinking, but in some cases at least this thinking has been fortified by certain benefits. One of "Guardian" correspondent Jonathan Steele's reports on Ukrainian developments disclosed that he "was a guest of the Russian Club in Ukraine at an expenses-paid conference in Kiev last weekend"⁸.

In the pro-Russian articles, the Ukrainians per se become invisible; if they have any aspirations or agency of their own, they are irrelevant. The world is understood as a place where a few large powers determine everything, Metternich's world, not Foucault's. The same basic outlook characterizes those articles ill disposed to Yushchenko because of an overriding anti-Americanism. They see the entire Orange Revolution as manufactured in America.

Many in the socialist left were disturbed by America's support for Yushchenko. "People's Voice" characterized the Orange movement as "created and funded by imperialist powers"⁹. For "Workers World", "the political crisis in Ukraine is about Western imperialism, headed by the U.S. ruling class, manipulating the political process and maneuvering among the different factions of the Ukrainian bourgeoisie"¹⁰. Others took a more balanced line. "Workers' Liberty" noted that "Yushchenko is backed by the US and the European Union", but also said "it would be ridiculous

⁷ "What Are We up to – in Ukraine?" <http://www.lewrockwell.com/buchanan/buchanan15.html>

⁸ "Where the Cold War Never Died", 28 October 2004. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/ukraine/story/0,15569,1357745,00.html> For more on Steele's "Kremlin-sponsored junkets", see Jake Rudnitsky, "Russia's Fifth Column: What's in It for Yanukovich's Supporters in the West?" <http://www.exile.ru/2004-December-24/russias-fifth-column.html>

⁹ The truth behind the 'Orange Revolution' // *People's Voice*. 2005. 1–15 January.

¹⁰ Fred Goldstein. Imperialism Pushes to the East // *Workers World*. 2004. 9 December. <http://www.workers.org/ww/2004/ukraine1209.php>

to reduce the current protests in Ukraine to a US plot... The hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians who have taken to the streets have not done so because they support American and EU imperialism”¹¹.

Different language but similar points can be found outside the periodicals of the socialist left. A number of authors¹² elaborated the idea that the United States had for years been developing a method for the promotion of its version of democracy and that Ukraine was just the latest place for its application. The method was first successfully applied in Serbia in 2000 (or in the Philippines much earlier, according to some), then it worked again in Georgia, and it has also been tried, without success, in Belarus. These authors point to the excellent equipment and services enjoyed by the Orange Revolutionists in Kyiv and identify the United States as the revolution’s quartermaster.

An entirely different source of negativity during the Orange Revolution was the identification of Ukrainians as antisemites. Sometimes this was brought up in a clear attempt to smear the pro-democracy demonstrators. Read closely this sentence by Jonathan Steele: “Some protesters have been chanting nationalistic and secessionist songs from the anti-semitic years of the second world war”¹³. What he is saying is that the songs come from an era when antisemitism was rife in Ukraine, not that the songs were antisemitic. Here’s one of the most ham-fisted attempts to make the Orange Ukrainians look not only like dyed-in-the-wool antisemites, but cretins as well:

A few years ago, a friend of mine was sent to Kiev by the British government to teach Ukrainians about the Western democratic system. His pupils were young reformers from western Ukraine, affiliated to the Conservative party. When they produced a manifesto containing 15 pages of impenetrable waffle, he gently suggested boiling their electoral message down to one salient point. What was it, he wondered? A moment of furrowed brows produced the lapidary and nonchalant reply, “To expel all Jews from our country”.

It is in the west of Ukraine that support is strongest for the man who is being vigorously promoted by America as the country’s next president: the former prime minister Viktor Yushchenko¹⁴.

Let’s examine the structure of this. First of all, it is a piece of hearsay. Second, what is recounted here happened, if it happened, “a few years” before the Ukrainian electoral crisis. Third, the only link between the antisemites discussed here and the Yushchenko campaign is that the antisemites came from the same part of the country which today supports Yushchenko. The mind reels imagining the kind of original points one could make using the logic exemplified here. The author is John Laughland, who

¹¹ Revolt in Ukraine // *Workers’ Liberty*. 2004. 6 December. <http://www.workersliberty.org/node/view/3470>

¹² For example: Ian Traynor. US Campaign behind the Turmoil in Kiev // *The Guardian*. 2004. 26 November; K. Gajendra Singh. In Ukraine, a Franchised Revolution // *Asia Times*. 2004. 4 December; Mark Almond. The Price of People Power // *The Guardian*. 2004. 7 December ; Jonathan Steele. Ukraine’s Untold Story // *The Nation*. 2004. 20 December; William Engdahl. Ukraine: Oil Politics and a Mockery of Democracy // *Asia Times*. 2005. 20 January.

¹³ Jonathan Steele. Ukraine’s Postmodern Coup d’Etat // *The Guardian*. 2004. 26 November. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/ukraine/story/0,15569,1360297,00.html>

¹⁴ John Laughland. How the US and Britain are Intervening in Ukraine’s Elections // *The Spectator*. 2004. 5 November.

has been characterized as a right-wing anti-state libertarian and isolationist by David Aaronovitch¹⁵, but manages to publish in respectable outlets like “The Guardian” and “The Spectator” and appear as a talking head on BBC. There are more items like this one put out by the Laughland camp¹⁶. These particular accusations of antisemitism are emanations from the political fringe.

There is another level to this, however, and that is accusations or insinuations or fears of antisemitism in the Yushchenko camp voiced within Jewish media.

The first article to make a splash was Walter Ruby’s “Ukrainian Elections 2004” originally written for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) on 23 September 2004 and published on 3 October 2004 in Baltimore’s “Jewish Times”, an old Jewish paper with considerable influence in North America. Ruby is a Jewish liberal, liberal also on the Palestinian question. Writing from Kyiv, Ruby reported on Jews’ fears of antisemitism in the Yushchenko camp. He quoted Mikhail Gurvitz of Zhytomyr that “much of the opposition isn’t democratic either. What they really stand for is Ukrainian nationalism and anti-Semitism”. A student from Odessa feared that if Yushchenko won “anti-Semitism may come back with a vengeance”. Antisemitism, Ruby wrote, had been “a staple of Ukrainian life since the 17th century”. “Ukrainian Jews express fear of unnamed shadowy figures in the opposition coalition backing Yushchenko who were said to be ultranationalists and anti-Semites”. He reported on the murky “Sil’s’ki visti” incident, in which Vasyl Yaremenko published antisemitic articles in the paper, which supported Yushchenko, and the government wanted to close it down. Yushchenko asked for an apology from the paper, but he protested the government’s plans to shut it down. Ruby cited Yevhen Chervonenko, a close Jewish advisor of Yushchenko’s, that the whole business was engineered by the government itself. “Chervonenko accuses the Kuchma regime of ‘playing the anti-Semitic card’ during the election campaign by surreptitiously encouraging anti-Semitic journals with links to the opposition to publish anti-Semitic material that the regime can then self-righteously denounce”.

Much harsher was an opinion piece by the executive editor of “The Jerusalem Post”, Amotz Asa-El (not a liberal). The article appeared in his paper on 3 December 2004. Asa-El said that “the major force currently at play in the Ukraine is not idealism, as Western media suggests, but tribalism...” He, like Ruby, referred to a history of antisemitism in Ukraine, but gave a fuller version, the one that starts with Khmelnytsky, continues through the Haidamaka uprisings, to the Petliura pogroms and the destruction of Jews in Ukraine during World War II “in which the Ukrainian people played a crucial role”. He ended his editorial as follows: “...Whether or not a Ukrainian nation exists, insofar as Jewish history is concerned it will live forever, since no nation other than the Germans seems to have more Jewish blood on its hands. Now, considering that previous massacres of Jews were always preceded and fueled by other causes of

¹⁵ David Aaronovitch. PR Man to Europe’s Nastiest Regimes // *The Guardian*. 2004. 30 November. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/ukraine/story/0,15569,136216,00.html>

¹⁶ See “Shadow of Anti-Semitism over Ukraine’s Disputed Election”, posted to Free Republic on 25 November 2004 (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1288361/posts>). Again, pay attention to the logic: “In western Ukraine...there is an aging cohort of elderly veterans of the Waffen SS’s Galician division... Mr. Yushchenko scored well over 90% in western regions... Yushchenko... is also supported by Andrei Shkil’s ultra-nationalist UNSO... [Yushchenko is] a candidate with backing from neo-Nazis and Holocaust deniers”.

unrest, not unlike the current one, and bearing in mind the anti-Semitism with which the Yushchenko camp is associated, Middle Israelis have only one word to say to their 250,000 brethren in the Republic of Ukraine: leave”.

The third of the three major articles of this kind was by Eliahu Salpeter, a veteran Israeli journalist who writes for “Haaretz” and is a specialist in antisemitism. The entire gist of Salpeter’s article was well captured in its title: “Anti-Semitism or Corruption?”¹⁷ This is the choice that faced Jewish voters in the Ukrainian elections. The question was: “should they choose the pro-Russian candidate accused of corruption, or the pro-Western opposition candidate whose surroundings are tainted with the smell of anti-Semitism?” “...Most Jews – in both camps – are interested in closer ties with the West, in order to halt the anti-Semitic trends in the country. However, there is a certain contradiction in this because Yushchenko actually supports closer ties with the West, and he has some prominent anti-Semitic figures among his supporters”. Salpeter retold the “Sil’s’ki visti” story and also went over the history of Ukrainian antisemitism from Khmelnytsky through the active collaboration during the Holocaust. He included too an account of recent antisemitic incidents in Ukraine and quoted Ukraine’s chief rabbi Yaakov David Bleich: “When a Jew sees a street that has now been renamed after Stefan Bandera (a Ukrainian nationalist whose forces fought against the Russians during World War II and at the same time slaughtered the Jews), he is gripped with fear. He would have preferred the street be named again after Lenin”.

These articles produced a negative reaction in the Ukrainian diaspora in North America. “The Ukrainian Weekly’s” rightwing columnist Myron Kuropas, in response to Ruby’s article, linked Jewish support for Yanukovych to Jews’ historical behavior of siding with the Ukrainians’ oppressors: “During Ukraine’s Polish domination, Jews were tools of the Polish king; during Soviet times, they began as loyal members of the Soviet ruling elite. Later, Jews were especially well represented in the Soviet secret police...”¹⁸ When I protested against Kuropas’ statements in a letter to the paper’s editor, Bohdan Vitvitsky defended Kuropas and stated that “the problem today, as it has been for some time, is not purported Ukrainian anti-Semitism but rather actual Jewish Ukrainophobia”¹⁹. Kuropas later returned to the writing of “Jewish Ukrainophobes”, mentioning specifically Amotz Asa-El’s angry piece in “The Jerusalem Post”²⁰.

I will not attempt to untangle all the complicated issues that arise from these articles, since that would carry us far a field, but a few basic points are in order.

First, it is worth noting that Jewish opinion was divided²¹. There were also articles favorably disposed to Yushchenko in the Jewish press²². And individuals of

¹⁷ *Haaretz*. 2004. 15 December. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/514483.html>

¹⁸ Myron Kuropas. ‘Jews for Yanukovych’ // *The Ukrainian Weekly*. 2004. 31 October.

¹⁹ Bohdan Vitvitsky. The Real Problem is Ukrainophobia // *The Ukrainian Weekly*. 2004. 19 December.

²⁰ Myron Kuropas. Anti-Orange Oracles // *The Ukrainian Weekly*. 2005. 9 January.

²¹ “Haaretz” published a story on 29 November 2004 saying that “in Ukraine, most Jews supported the liberal Yushchenko”; “The Jerusalem Post” printed a story entitled “Ukraine’s Jews Split in Vote” on 23 November.

²² Vladimir Matveyev. Jews Know Ukraine’s Divide Well // *Jewish Times*. 6 December 2004. <http://www.jewishtimes.com/News/4369.stm>; Joseph Zisels. Ukraine’s President-Elect Appeals to a Higher Authority // *Jewish Weekly “Forward”*. 2004. 31 December.

Jewish origin were all over the spectrum when writing in the general Western press. For example, in his attack on pro-Ukrainian journalists, Stephen Cohen was especially upset by the writings of Anne Applebaum.

Second, one reason that Jews are sensitive about Ukrainian antisemitism is that it has existed and continues to exist. This is a fact that the Ukrainian diaspora has been slow to come to terms with.

Third, there is a problem with the idea of Ukrainians as inveterate antisemites. No nation is monolithic.

Fourth, unlike in the other cases discussed, the negative evaluation of Ukrainians in the Jewish press is something that can be addressed by more open dialog and patience.

In conclusion I would like to return to things I mentioned at the beginning. The corpus of truly anti-Ukrainian articles in connection with the Orange Revolution is miniscule. It is a small fraction of what was reported around the world in the press, radio, internet, and television. For the most part, the Western media was enthusiastic, which ironically was the source of some of the opposition to the revolution. The story of Ukraine as it was presented in the media was that the people peacefully overthrew a corrupt and undemocratic regime and that it gave many the hope that the world could be rebuilt into a better place. The negative reporting on the Ukrainian events was generally politically motivated, having to do with Russophilism, anti-Americanism, and antisemitism. Anti-East-European prejudices were rarely voiced, and then primarily by a type of humorist that seems to exist only in America. The exception is some of the Jewish pieces that treat Ukrainians in an essentialist manner, as antisemites. Personally, I was surprised how little Ukrainians as such were directly denigrated in this reporting. Perhaps my memory fails me, but it seems that there was more open hostility to Ukrainians expressed in the Western press back in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The integration of much of Eastern Europe into the rest of Europe and the existence of Ukraine as an independent state for well nigh fifteen years have perhaps changed perceptions. Let's hope so.