

## **Skinheads in Ukraine : first symptoms?**

No. 16/264, April 22, 2002

On April 13, the main synagogue of the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, came under attack. That Saturday evening a group of youths, who left a football match between Kyiv Dynamo and Donetsk Metallurg at a nearby stadium, set upon worshippers, smashing windows and throwing stones. The injured included the rector of Kyiv's yeshiva (a Jewish school), Tsvi Kaplan.

Investigation was launched immediately after the incident. The law enforcement agencies said the attack was not motivated by anti-Semitism or planned in advance, but was an act of brutal hooliganism. Investigators questioned almost 150 fans present at the stadium. Police detained a number of drunken hooligans, who were breaking synagogue windows after the football match. Arrested fans expressed deep regret for the incident. Following the raid on central synagogue in Kyiv, the Interior Ministry instituted proceedings against hooligans charged with brutal hooliganism committed by a group of persons (Article 296 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine).

However, some members of the Jewish community do not believe police interpretations of the events as mere hooliganism and are convinced that the attack was a pogrom thoroughly planned by the Neo-Nazis. According to Rabbi Moshe-Reuven Azman, Chief Rabbi of Kyiv and Kyiv region, the police arrived at the incident site some 20-30 minutes after the pogrom. He said the attack was carried out by almost 50 persons, who neared the synagogue as worshippers were leaving evening prayers. Rabbi Azman pointed to the fact that the mob was shouting fascist slogans «Death to the kikes» and «Heil Hitler». Among those injured were the 13-year-old son of Rabbi Azman and a security guard. Vadim Rabinovitch, president of the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress and United Jewish Community of Ukraine, does not believe that the raid was spontaneous and unplanned, as there are witnesses, who saw the attackers walking from the Khreschatik St. and heard them speaking about the forthcoming attack (the UNIAN, April 15, 2002).

State authorities and law enforcement agencies cannot be accused of lack of attention to the above events. Right after the incident, the police started to deny any possible link to Anti-Semitic feelings. Only several days later and, perhaps, under pressure of ethnic communities, the law enforcement agencies did institute legal proceedings on instigation of inter-ethnic discord. President of Ukraine decided to personally control the course of investigation and charged minister of interior and head of the national security service with prevention of identical illegal actions in the future. In particular, Yuri Smirnov and Volodymyr Radchenko have to ensure detection and liquidation of any paramilitary, armed and other organizations that could stir up inter-ethnic or inter-religious discord.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Anatolii Zlenko has assured Israeli Ambassador to Ukraine Anna Azari that law enforcement agencies will do everything to investigate into the disgraceful raid on the synagogue and that the people responsible for the attack will be held accountable for their actions (UNIAN, April 16, 2002).

The April 13 incident evoked a wide public response. Ukrainian politicians and members of different ethnic communities condemned forces behind the attack and voiced their desire to prevent such incidents in the future. For example, on April 16, the Congress of Ethnic Communities of Ukraine promulgated the statement, reading, «there are only two ways of fighting extremism: punishment of actual organizers of the attack and joint efforts of state authorities and public organizations that should always clearly and unambiguously oppose any cases of inter-ethnic intolerance in the society» (the UNIAN, April, 16, 2002).

Socialist party of Ukraine issued a statement calling for timely and unbiased investigation of the raid on Kyiv's main synagogue. Socialists believe that numerous police officers and representatives of other law enforcement agencies should work better to ensure efficient investigation of the «pogrom, which is a shame for Ukraine». Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc also promulgated a statement denouncing the «act of vandalism» described as a preplanned attack designed to stir up anti-Semitic feelings and inter-ethnic discord in Ukraine. Authors of the statement accentuated that «law enforcement agencies did nothing to establish actual motives and people behind this provocative attack, which means lack of professionalism, criminal negligence and unwillingness of high police officials to find the truth and punish the guilty» (UNIAN, April 16, 2002). The People's Rukh of Ukraine assessed the pogrom in the center of the capital as a provocation giving those, who dislike Ukraine a reason to blame our country of anti-Semitism. According to the leader of the Rukh, the law-enforcement agencies did not do their best to ensure adequate protection of citizens.

The April 13 events once again raised the issue of anti-Semitism in Ukraine. Another closely related and little discussed problem is possible dissemination of neo-nazism and, in particular, skinhead culture. As the above issues are very complicated, we will only make an attempt to outline some of their important aspects.

According to the data of the 1989 census (data of the 2001 census are not yet available), there are 486.3 thousand Jews in Ukraine (482.2 thousand live in urban areas and 4.1 thousand - in rural districts). The city of Kyiv is home to almost 100.6 thousand Jews representing the largest Jewish diaspora in Ukraine. According to Kyiv mayor Olexandr Omelchenko, we should be grateful to Jewish community of Kyiv that there are 5 Jewish schools in the city and the capital of Ukraine is called «Jerusalem of Eastern Europe» (the Stolichnie Novosti, October 30, 2001). The number of Jewish educational establishment in Ukraine is constantly growing. For example, the number of students of all types of Jewish educational establishment increased more than twice within 1991-1996, and this trend is maintained. International Solomon University in Kyiv, two teachers' training colleges and Jewish People's University in Dnipropetrovsk were founded in 1993, faculties of Judaica were established by Lviv and Donetsk Universities. According to the

data of the State Committee for Religion, there are 8 Jewish religious denominations and 248 religious communities in Ukraine. United Jewish Religious Communities incorporates 72 communities, Congress of Jewish Religious Communities – 7, Hasidic Union of Chabad Lubavich – 85, progressive Judaism communities – 41, Messianic Judaism communities – 13 and Judaic Christians – 14. Jewish communities are quite evenly distributed throughout Ukraine. The number of Jewish communities is somewhat larger than on the average in Vinnytsya (19), Cherkassy (12) and Khmelnytsky (12) regions and in the city of Kyiv (12). 19 Jewish newspapers and magazines are published and synagogues are restored.

It is no secret that Ukraine's government does not support anti-Semitism in the country. Ukrainian leaders openly condemned this vicious phenomenon. For example, on November 20, 1994, President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma addressed leaders of the Jewish communities of America. According to him, Ukraine put an end to anti-Semitism that had been state policy of the USSR and condemned «intellectual anti-Semitism» still prospering in some countries. He also assured the audience that despite economic difficulties Ukrainians would do their best to foster social, religious and cultural revival of Jewish life in Ukraine (the New York Times, the Washington Post, April 3, 1995). Later on, President Kuchma repeatedly declared the intention to «uproot anti-Semitism and put an end to any anti-Semitic actions in Ukraine» (the Uriadoviy Kurrier, January 11, 2000). Other Ukrainian leaders often address the Jewish community with identical statements and declarations as well as congratulations with holidays.

Not only Ukrainian high-ranking officials are confident that anti-Semitism is denied at the national level. In the opinion of Israeli Ambassador to Ukraine Anna Azari, at the state level, there is no anti-Semitism in Ukraine, on the contrary, there is desire to revive Jewish organizations and Jewish community and respective steps are taken (the Kyivskiy Telegraph, April 9, 2001). At the same time, she believes that the so-called «everyday anti-Semitism» does exist in Ukraine though its scales could hardly be determined. Commenting on the attack against the synagogue, Anna Azari stated that it is necessary to prosecute not the boys, who took part in the raid, but those, who taught the youngsters to do it. (the Fakty i Komentarii, April 19, 2002). Many other people also commented on the impact of the attack against the central synagogue in Kyiv in the context of anti-Semitic feelings among Ukrainians. Chief Rabbi of Ukraine Yaakov Dov Bleich said, «The incident occurred is quite unnatural for Ukraine. I lived here for almost 13 years...» (the TV channel UT-1, April 18, 2002).

Generally speaking, the major manifestations of anti-Semitism in Ukraine are publications in a number of newspapers with limited circulation and leaflets of ultra right political parties. For instance, in the mid-90s, little known ultra right and anti-Semitic Organization of Ukrainian Idealists made clearly anti-Semitic and xenophobic public statements. In general, various chauvinistic and anti-Semitic articles are also published in the Neskorena Natsia, Holos Natsii and Ukrainski Obrii. In the early 90s, similar articles were published even in large newspapers, e.g. «Za Vilnu Ukrainu» – one of the most popular newspapers in Western Ukraine. In 1994, for instance, this newspaper published about 70 anti-Semitic articles out of the total of 200 identical materials that appeared in

the Ukrainian press. The Vecherniy Kyiv published many anti-Semitic materials as well. Olexandr Naiman, chairman of the Association of National Cultural Unions of Ukraine (ANKTU), believes the Dnipro journal to be anti-Semitic, because in 1998 it published anti-Semitic opus by M. Shestopal «The Jews in Ukraine» (No. 5-6, 1998) (the Kievskiy Vydmosti, October 26, 2000). Analogous articles are also published in the Zvon Sevastopolya.

Those publications look like variations on the topic of accusation against the Jews of being the root of all evils of Ukrainians, whereas Jewish tragedies, including the Holocaust, pogroms and postwar anti-Jewish repressions, are negated. Respective periodicals often present «theories» of geopolitical power of the Jews, Jewish capital and Jewish press and accuse the Jews of carrying out anti-Ukrainian policy in the name of the United States, international financial institutions etc. There are a great number of such quasi-myths.

Legal proceedings against anti-Semitic press publications have already been instituted in contemporary history of Ukraine. In spring 2000, the ANKTU brought charges against the Kharkiv-based regional branch of the All-Ukrainian Prosvita Society for anti-Semitic and unconstitutional comments in its children's newspaper «Dzhereltse». The article in question, entitled «Seven Jews for Every Layman» (the title used the word «zhyd» for Jew) was published by the Kharkiv-based regional branch of the Prosvita in the September 1999 issue of a newspaper for extracurricular (after-school) reading. Fedir Slobodaniuk, author of the «masterpiece», traced the historical relations between Ukrainians and Jews, explaining why Jews were to blame for all misfortunes of the Ukrainian people. For instance, he writes that Jews made Ukrainians drink vodka, aided Bolsheviks to usurp power and were guilty of the Great Famine of 1933. He argues that today's politicians in Ukraine, Russia and even the United States are funded from Jewish money (the Day, August 30, 2000).

Finally, in December 2000, the court sentenced the Kharkiv-based regional branch of the Prosvita to close the newspaper Dzhereltse and ordered the offender to pay the ANKTU compensation for moral damage in the amount of UAH 1 million. According to the court verdict, «The Kharkiv-based regional department of the Prosvita illegally used the newspaper Dzhereltse for stirring up national hatred ... thereby committing offence against human and civil rights and Jewish national dignity» (the Day, December 16, 2000).

Notwithstanding the above incidents and other manifestations of anti-Semitism, it is possible to argue that in general, this vicious phenomenon is not widely proliferated. However, the developments of April 13, 2002 drew attention to yet another problem, namely, existence of neo-fascist organizations in Ukraine. Ukrainian police authorities and the National Security Service of Ukraine are confident that there are no neo-fascist organizations in the country. Petro Kravchenko, representative of the National Security Service of Ukraine, said, «For the time being, we do not have information about any possible actions on the part of neo-fascists or existence of such groups» (the Novy Kanal, the Reporter, April 17, 2002). Petro Opanasenko, chief of the Kyiv police, shares the

above viewpoint. He was categorical, «There are no anti-Semitic or fascist organizations in Ukraine at all» (the TV channels 1+1 and TSN, April 17, 2002). Without overestimating scales and impact of the above phenomena in Ukraine, it should be mentioned that August 2001 marked the first real skinhead pogrom. The incident evoked wide response and numerous publications in the press, which was certainly well known to law-enforcement agencies. The mass media reported that officers of the Ministry of Interior and the National Security Service of Ukraine detained leaders and active members of the skinhead movement in Sevastopol on the eve of celebration of Russia's Navy Day. On August 10, 2001, the Sevastopol Public Relations Center of the Ministry of Interior announced that according to data of law-enforcement agencies, members of this gang intended «to beat non-Slavic people, organize pogroms and damage public property.» Members of the Skinhead organization were to come to Sevastopol from Yalta, Kharkiv and St. Petersburg. According to the announcement, 54 skins were detained and a 22 years old man was even charged with possession of TNT and gunpowder. Leaflets calling for violence against ethnic minorities and containing fascist symbols were also confiscated from young extremists. On the whole, press publications reported some 50 members of the skinhead movement aging from 16 to 30 in Sevastopol alone. So, the Sevastopol incident, especially, involvement of persons from Kharkiv and Yalta, to certain extent runs counter to police chiefs' point-blank statements about total absence of neo-fascist organizations in Ukraine.

Today, it is difficult to discuss the issue of proliferation of this specific sub-culture in the country, though the Ukrainian social climate is potentially favorable for growth in the number of skinheads. Such a conclusion can be made on the basis of reasons behind growth of teenage neo-Nazi movement in Russia. In the Russian Federation, the skinhead movement has become a movement of radical chauvinism characterized by threats and intimidation towards people who think differently. Analysis of the Russian press publications proves that the skins are especially active during football matches and urge other fans to commit massacres or similar actions. Hence, the incident after the football match in Kyiv calls for close attention. Time and again, the media inform about premeditated assaults carried out by the Russian skinheads in Volgograd, Ekaterinburg and other Russia's regions. Skinheads are intolerable to Gypsies, «native-born Caucasians» and Blacks. The skinhead phenomenon is already evolving into a very serious problem not only in Russia but also at the international level. It is no longer a question of a few scattered extremists who every now and then drink too much and get a little out of hand. For instance, diplomats from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Georgia have recently voiced their «concern over growing activity of skinheads and asked the Russian Foreign Ministry to reinforce safeguards so that to tackle this problem» (report of the main Russian TV channel, April 15, 2002).

The underlying reasons for proliferation of a specific skinhead sub-culture include social uncertainty, marginality, constantly increasing poverty and general climate of social tolerance to such incidents. Frequently, low living standards of population, especially of the young, give rise to manifestations of xenophobia and social intolerance to other people. Moreover, aggravation of social problems in Ukraine is attended with substantial

Russian influences, such as, say, negative attitude to «native-born Caucasians». Despite the fact that the African diaspora already consists of nearly 5,000 people, the issues of their official status and protection of their rights still remain unsettled. In the future, such problems can lead to dramatic increase of intolerance to «other people» in Ukraine's society. Without overestimating a threat of proliferation of such movements in Ukraine, existent problems that have been flatly denied must be analyzed and openly discussed. This is the only way to uproot those vicious phenomena and cure our society in the early stage of disease.