

January 2009

Anti-Semitism in the Former Soviet Region: 2008

Overview

Anti-Semitism in the former Soviet region continued at high levels in Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania in 2008, and at lower levels in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and elsewhere. As in previous years, anti-Semitic incidents spiked before, during, and after Hitler's birthday on April 20th, and around prominent Jewish holidays (i.e., Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Hanukkah) and Holocaust memorial events.

Anti-Semitic manifestations in the Region rose in the fourth quarter of 2008 due to: the harsh impact of the global economic crisis and the resultant rise in economic and political instability; the rise of nationalism among disaffected youth; and the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

The most commonly reported expression of anti-Semitism in the Region in 2008 remained attacks on property, especially vandalism of synagogues and other communal buildings, cemeteries, and Holocaust memorial sites, as well as the distribution of anti-Semitic materials in print and online. Some public demonstrations held to protest Israel's actions in Gaza in late 2008 included openly anti-Semitic rhetoric. Some observers also reported that online hate speech targeting Jews grew more common in electronic chat rooms, blogs, and discussion boards in late 2008. Physical attacks and assaults on Jews also took place in the Region during 2008 but were less common.

State-sanctioned anti-Semitism was rarer in the Region in 2008, due to the good relations between these governments and their local Jewish communities, and between Israel and most of the governments in the Region. Most governments in the Region openly condemned anti-Semitic acts when they occurred. However, some officials and other public figures continued to make openly anti-Semitic public comments.

The most disturbing anti-Semitic trend of 2008 in the Region was the persistence of high-visibility anti-Semitism in Ukraine and Lithuania, and the rise in the number of violent attacks by Ukrainian skinheads and neo-Nazis on Jews and other minorities. The Ukrainian government to date has failed to implement effective legislation to fight hate crimes, despite condemning anti-Semitism at the highest levels. And, although the Lithuanian government has prosecuted elderly Jewish anti-Nazi partisans for alleged crimes during World War II, it has been slow to act against indigenous hate groups. Both the Ukrainian and the Lithuanian governments to date also have failed to enact legislation to enable restitution of property to their native Jewish communities, in contrast to other states in Central and Eastern Europe.

A more positive development was the decline of the role of the Interregional Academy of Human Resources (better known by its Ukrainian

acronym MAUP) in anti-Semitic activity in Ukraine. The largest private university in Ukraine, with more than 50,000 students at over a dozen campuses, MAUP published and distributed the majority of anti-Semitic printed materials in Ukraine in the early and mid-2000s (up to 80%-90% by some estimates). However, starting in the second half of 2007 and continuing in 2008, MAUP's output of anti-Semitic materials declined dramatically (as much as tenfold by some estimates). The Ukrainian government has consistently denounced MAUP's anti-Semitic activities.

MAUP's president, Georgy Schokin, is also the founder of the Ukrainian National Conservative Party, a far-right nationalist anti-Semitic political movement. His party and other extremist nationalist parties polled extremely poorly in Ukrainian parliamentary elections in 2006 and 2007, at less than 1% of all votes.

The increasing frequency and visibility of hate crimes in Ukraine began to produce more frequent use of hate crime charges by Ukrainian law enforcement in 2008. However, instances of official denial or mitigation of hate group activity persisted. Many lower-level or regional Ukrainian law enforcement officials continued to dismiss hate crimes as low-level "hooliganism," reduced penalties to mere fines, or refused outright to register hate crimes; courts sometimes suspended sentences even when convictions were secured on hate crime charges.

Notable Developments

December 2008

Armenia - the Association of Armenian Nationalists was established, including the Armenian Aryan Order, an anti-Semitic ultranationalist group. The new organization stated its intent to cooperate with ideological allies in Russia and Europe.

Latvia - police detained, and then released a Latvian neo-Nazi who was posting anti-Semitic and anti-government messages on Latvian online discussion sites.

Rovno, Ukraine - a synagogue was vandalized.

November 2008

Cherkassy, Ukraine - anti-Semitic posters appeared near the state university.

Chernigov, Ukraine - extremists attacked an anti-fascist concert, screaming anti-Semitic slogans, injuring several and causing property damage.

October 2008

Pluskiai, Lithuania - a Holocaust memorial site was vandalized.

Chernigov, Ukraine - the Jewish Agency for Israel office was vandalized and damaged.

Feodosiya, Ukraine - a Holocaust memorial site was vandalized.

Kirovograd, Ukraine - law enforcement officials announced that they had uncovered plans by an extremist youth group, led by a former policeman, to blow up the main synagogue and attack Jews.

Pervomaysk, Ukraine - a Holocaust memorial was vandalized and a menorah was stolen from the site.

Zaporozhye, Ukraine - the Jewish community center was defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti.

September 2008

Klaipeda, Lithuania - an Israeli flag was burned outside the Jewish community center and the Jewish cemetery and community center were defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti.

Bendery, Moldova - a Holocaust memorial was defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti.

Kherson, Ukraine - Jewish community leaders accused a city councilman of spreading anti-Semitic propaganda on the radio and online.

Kyiv, Ukraine - the Jewish Agency office was vandalized.

Vinnitsa, Ukraine - the community's chief rabbi and two other Jews were assaulted by neo-Nazis, who were arrested by police.

August 2008

Vilnius, Lithuania - a participant in a March 2008 neo-Nazi march faced hate crime charges, in the first such application of hate crime statutes.

Vilnius, Lithuania - the Jewish community center was vandalized with anti-Semitic graffiti.

Vilnius, Lithuania - U.S. Members of Congress urged the Lithuanian government to end prosecution of anti-Nazi Jewish partisans.

Kamenets-Podolsky, Ukraine - anti-Semitic leaflets and posters were found inside and nearby a pro-Moscow Russian Orthodox church.

Lviv, Ukraine - a Holocaust memorial was vandalized.

Odessa, Ukraine - a local newspaper editor was tried on hate crimes charges after publishing anti-Semitic articles.

July 2008

Vilnius, Lithuania - Jewish community leaders published an open letter to the government urging an end to prosecution of surviving wartime Jewish anti-Nazi partisans.

Ukraine - a patriotic youth group newspaper referred to Jews as "satanic."

Ukraine - Amnesty International released a report documenting a rise in neo-Nazism and other violent racism, and growing anti-Semitic views across the country.

Kyiv, Ukraine - the Ukrainian Jewish Committee participated in a public rally against racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism.

Lviv, Ukraine - a local parliamentarian and nationalist party leader, previously expelled from the national parliament for anti-Semitism, called for a purge of Jews and Russians from Ukraine.

Lviv, Ukraine - anti-Semitic extremists attacked a Jewish religious study office and assaulted two teachers.

Lviv and Poltava, Ukraine - Holocaust memorials were vandalized.

Odessa, Ukraine - the remains of victims were stolen from a recently discovered Holocaust-era mass grave. Police were then ordered to guard the site.

June 2008

Borisov, Belarus - a synagogue and Jewish community center were defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti.

Berdichev, Ukraine - a vandal who defaced the grave of a famous rabbi with anti-Semitic graffiti was sentenced to over a year in prison, but was not charged with a hatecrime.

Feodosiya, Ukraine - a Jewish charity organization was defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti.

Kyiv, Ukraine - during a press conference, a group calling itself the Union of Young Orthodox Ukrainians made anti-Semitic and racist threats and statements.

Odessa, Ukraine - an Israeli Hassidic pilgrim was kidnapped and beaten (but not robbed) by local youths.

Dushanbe, Tajikistan - the country's only working synagogue was demolished by officials to make room for a new presidential palace and park, despite community protests, halting worship and food aid programs.

May 2008

Varnika, Lithuania - a Holocaust memorial was vandalized.

Kyiv, Ukraine - nationalists held an anti-Semitic and anti-Russian protest rally in front of the Russian Embassy. Billboards downtown were defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti.

Vinnitsa, Ukraine - a prominent Ukrainian-Jewish human rights lawyer was assaulted and beaten at his home in an attack the police described as "hooliganism."

April 2008

Belarus - a man was sentenced to over two years in prison for vandalizing a Jewish cemetery, in the first such application of hate crime statutes.

Slutsk, Belarus - a Holocaust memorial was vandalized with swastikas and graffiti.

Batumi, Georgia - a Jewish cemetery was vandalized.

Riga, Latvia - anti-Semitic literature was sold openly in a Riga bookstore, in violation of Latvian laws banning incitement of race hatred.

Bolgrad, Ukraine - a Jewish cemetery was vandalized.

Kirovograd, Ukraine - a court convicted a high school teacher who incited his students to anti-Semitic acts on hate crime charges, but then immediately amnestied him. The teacher reportedly continued to teach at the same school after his conviction.

Kyiv, Ukraine - law enforcement officials met with NGOs to discuss the struggle against violent racism and xenophobia in Ukraine.

Zhitomir, Ukraine - the grave of a famous rabbi was vandalized and seriously damaged by fire for the second time in six months, but authorities dismissed it as an accident and did not press charges.

March 2008

Latvia - a well-known neo-Nazi was sentenced to eighteen months in prison for incitement of racial hatred based on his 2007 online calls to exterminate Jews and Roma.

Vilnius, Lithuania - skinheads, under police escort, marched with swastika flags, shouting anti-Semitic slogans.

Berdichev, Ukraine - the grave of a famous rabbi was vandalized twice, despite police intervention.

Sumy, Ukraine - numerous posters appeared warning parents that Jews murder Christian children to make matzah for Passover.

February 2008

Brest, Belarus - a Holocaust memorial was vandalized for the fourth time in two years.

Rumbula, Latvia - the country's main Holocaust memorial was vandalized.

Ukraine - a cable channel broadcast two separate programs in which anti-Semitic statements were made by a political analyst and a Holocaust denier.

Kyiv, Ukraine - the dean of MAUP gave an interview in which he denied the existence of anti-Semitism and accused Chabad of being an extremist terrorist organization behind Ukraine's problems.

Kyiv, Ukraine - the newly appointed head of the State Committee on Nationalities and Religions said at a press conference that he would fight xenophobia and interethnic hatred.

Lviv, Ukraine - anti-Semitic and racist statements were made during a meeting of Ukrainian Cossacks.

January 2008

Tbilisi, Georgia - an anti-Semitic political newspaper was reportedly being distributed in the subway.

Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine - a Chabad-Lubavitch rabbi was severely beaten by four attackers, who shouted anti-Semitic slogans during the attack.

Krivoy Rog, Ukraine - a Jewish charity organization's office were vandalized with anti-Semitic graffiti.

Kyiv, Ukraine - a distributor of anti-Semitic leaflets was sentenced to four years in prison, but authorities did not press hate crime charges.

Kyiv, Ukraine - a synagogue and Jewish school were attacked by stone-throwers.

Kyiv, Ukraine - Georgy Schokin, President of MAUP, published a newspaper editorial that blamed the Chabad-Lubavitch movement for all of Ukraine's problems.