CHAPTER ONE

THE JEWS OF UKRAINE AND MOLDOVA

by
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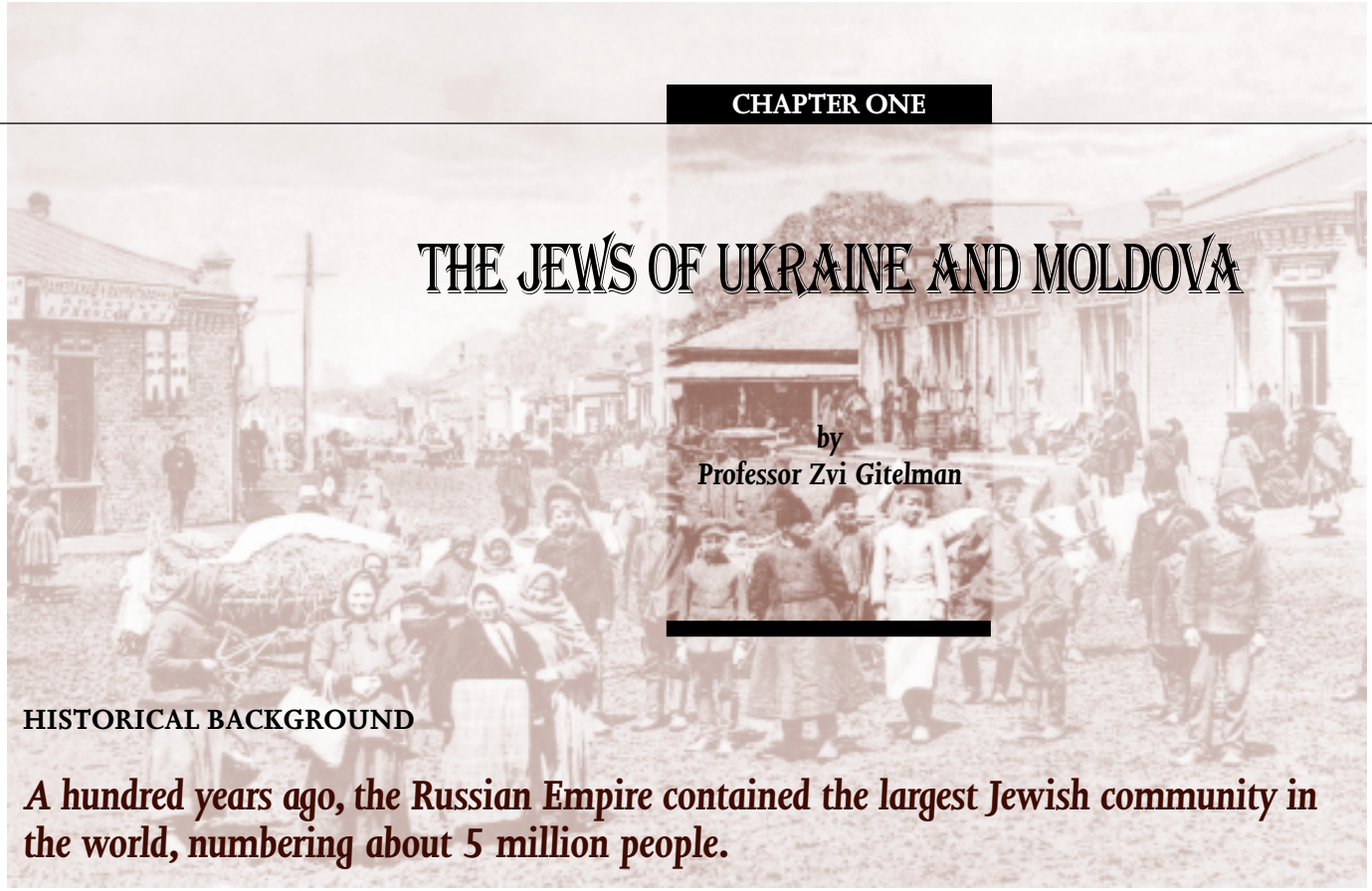

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A hundred years ago, the Russian Empire contained the largest Jewish community in the world, numbering about 5 million people.

More than 40 percent—2 million of them—lived in Ukraine and Bessarabia (the latter territory was subsequently divided between the present-day Ukraine and Moldova; here, for ease of discussion, we use the terms "Bessarabia" and "Moldova" interchangeably). Some 1.8 million lived in Ukraine (west of the Dniepr River) and in Bessarabia, and 387,000 made their homes in Ukraine (east of the Dniepr), including Crimea. Thousands of others lived in what was called Eastern Galicia—now Western Ukraine.

Today the Jewish population of those areas is much reduced, due to the cumulative and devastating impacts of World War I, the 1917 Russian Revolution, World War II and the Holocaust, massive emigration since the 1970s, and a natural decrease resulting from a very low birth rate and a high mortality rate.

When World War II began, there were about 1.5 million Jews in Ukraine—which had been made a constituent republic of the Soviet Union in 1922. In 1970, the Soviet census counted about 777,000 Jews in Ukraine and 98,000 in Moldavia (now independent Moldova, but then also a part of the Soviet Union). By January 1989, when the Soviet Union conducted its last census, Ukraine was home to only about 486,000 Jews (constituting 35 percent of Soviet Jewry), and Moldavia had 65,800 (4.5 percent of Soviet Jewry).

In 1989, a new wave of massive Jewish emigration began. From 1989 to 1998, more than 222,000 Ukrainian Jews went to Israel, and about 96,700 to the United States. Some 44,000 Jews left Moldavia for Israel during that period, while a far smaller number went to the United States. According to some demographers, today about 200,000 Jews reside in Ukraine and 35,000 to 40,000 in Moldova. (Estimates vary considerably, however, depending upon the definition of the word *Jew*.)

SHIFTING SOVEREIGNTIES

Nearly a thousand years ago, Moldova was populated by a Romanian-speaking people, descended from Romans, who intermarried with the indigenous Dacians. A principality was established in the territory in the fourteenth century, but it did not last long. Moldova then became a tributary state of the Ottoman Empire, which lost parts of it to the Russian Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

After the 1917 Russian Revolution, part of Moldova lay within the borders of Romania. Eventually part of it became the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Moldavia, a unit within the larger Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. In August 1940, as Eastern Europe was being carved up between the Germans and the Soviets, Bessarabia—the historic designation of the region between the Prut and Dniester Rivers—was seized by the Soviet Union and was joined with the Autonomous SSR of Moldavia to form the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldavia. That republic, occupied by Nazi Germany and its allies from July 1941 until August 1944, was one of the smallest republics in the Soviet Union. When the latter collapsed in late 1991, the Soviet Moldavia became independent Moldova.

JEWS IN BESSARABIA/MOLDOVA

Jews have been living in Bessarabia/Moldova since the end of the fourteenth century. Sephardi merchants traded there in the fifteenth century, and later, Polish-Jewish merchants were also active in the region. About 20,000 Jews lived in Moldova by 1812, many engaged in commerce and liquor distilling. By 1897, the Jewish population had expanded to 228,620, constituting about one-third of the urban population. Yet,

unlike in other regions of the Russian Empire, thousands of Jews in Bessarabia were engaged in agriculture.

Bessarabian Jews were subjected to pogroms in 1870, in 1903 and again in 1905–1906, but they nevertheless were culturally and religiously active. The major religious, intellectual and political movements of modern Jewry made their mark in Bessarabia, as they did in Ukraine. Among the Hasidic groups in Bessarabia were the Ruzhin dynasty and various branches of the Twersky Hasidic family, which originated in Ukraine. The Hovevei Zion ("Lovers of Zion") were active in Bessarabia in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as were Hebrew and Yiddish poets and playwrights. By 1920, when the area was under Romanian rule, it was estimated that there were 267,000 Jews in Bessarabia. In the mid-1930s, about 3,000 Jewish families were still farming, although they were hard hit by droughts, the European (and worldwide) economic depression and separation from Russian markets.

Thus, at various times the Jews of Bessarabia have been Moldavian, Ottoman, Russian, Romanian, Soviet, and Moldovan subjects. Yet, since the Jews mostly have conceived of themselves as ethnically neither Russian, Romanian nor Moldavian—and non-Jews have shared this perception—they have at all times been outsiders in some sense.

Bessarabia in 1897, Showing Total Jewish Population According to Districts ***Map 2***

Bessarabia has at times been ethnically very mixed. Its inhabitants have included Russians, Romanians, Turks, Roma (Gypsies), Ukrainians, Jews, Greeks, Bulgarians and others. Most Jews have been loyal to the state in which they lived, whatever its name and character, but they have been acutely aware of the ethnic diversity surrounding them and of competing claims to the region.

JEWS IN MULTIETHNIC UKRAINE

As in Bessarabia/Moldova, Jews in Ukraine have been citizens of different states over the centuries. A Jew born in Lemberg in 1915 would have been a citizen of Austro-Hungary. However, he or she would have been a Polish citizen in Lwów after 1918, a Soviet citizen in Lvov after 1939, and a resident of Lviv and a citizen of Ukraine after 1991.

While most of Ukraine historically was not as ethnically complicated as Bessarabia, the territory itself was divided between Tsarist Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and later between Poland and the Soviet Union. Ukrainians and Russians were the major ethnic groups, but there were also substantial numbers of Poles, Germans, Magyars, Greeks, Armenians, Romanians and others. While in Bessarabia conflicts among states were compounded by overt social, cultural and political tensions among Romanians, Russians, Ukrainians and others, in Ukraine the political struggle was mainly among Russians, Poles and Ukrainians. There were other ethnic tensions in the region as well. Some of these crystallized into well-organized political movements and parties. Jews thus found themselves in a familiar situation, tugged in different directions by contending nationalities—each competing for Jewish support but also suspecting that the Jews' allegiance lay with its competitors. As in the Czech lands (Bohemia and Moravia), Transylvania, and the Baltic region, Jews in Ukraine have historically tended to identify more with the ruling power and the culturally dominant nation.

THE JEWISH POPULATION IN UKRAINE

Jews have lived in the territory of Ukraine probably since around the tenth century, long before a Ukrainian nation emerged. By the end of the 1500s, there were about 45,000 Jews in the regions now constituting Ukraine. Despite pogroms such as the massacres of 1648 (discussed below), the Jewish population grew rapidly. By the mid-1800s, there were almost 600,000 Jews in the parts of Ukraine under Russian rule.

At the turn of the twentieth century, more than one-third of the Jews in western and central Ukraine lived in towns and shtetlach where they formed an absolute majority. Another fifth or so lived in places where they comprised nearly half of the population. Jews constituted nearly one-third of Ukraine's urban population, putting them in close contact with the largely Russian city dwellers but also, as traders and merchants, with the overwhelmingly Ukrainian peasantry. Though Jews were generally barred from owning land in Ukraine, there were Jewish farmers in some areas, as from time to time the tsars would give Jews lands in territories they wanted to colonize.

In the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Revolution, Ukraine was divided between independent Poland and the emerging Soviet Union. A substantial number of Ukrainian Jews came under Polish rule in 1918, but a far larger group, more than 1.5 million, lived in what would become the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Soviet government encouraged Jewish agricultural settlement in the 1920s. Some Jewish collective farms survived in Ukraine and Crimea, as well as in Belorussia (now the Republic of Belarus), until the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

ECONOMICS AND ETHNICITY

Beginning in the sixteenth century, Jews managed estates worked by Ukrainian peasants for Polish landowners. Jews were also heavily involved in producing and selling alcoholic beverages, small-scale manufacturing, the sugar-beet industry, crafts and commerce. As managers of estates, Jews became the immediate objects of peasant resentment of landowners. When peasants rose against the often-absentee landowners, Jews were massacred, as in 1648–1649, when perhaps 100,000 were killed, and in the eighteenth century, during the Haidamak uprisings. The 1648 rebellion against the Polish landlords set a pattern to be repeated over the course of the following centuries: Ukrainians rebelled against their non-Ukrainian oppressors and attacked the Jews as well, because they saw Jews as allies of their oppressors.

The statue of Bohdan Khmelnitsky (the leader of the 1648 uprising) in one of Kiev's main squares represents to Ukrainians national pride and the struggle for independence. To Jews, it stands for Ukrainian anti-Semitism and the massacre of perhaps as many as 100,000 of their brethren. To the Soviets, it symbolized the rising of exploited masses against their class enemies.

THE FLOURISHING OF JEWISH CULTURE

Despite—or perhaps because of—these travails, Jews in Ukraine were remarkably creative. Hasidism first appeared in the eighteenth century in the Podolia Province of Ukraine. Several cities in Ukraine—Slavuta, Zhitomir and, later, Kiev—became important centers of Jewish publishing. The Hibat Zion ("Lovers of Zion") movement and the Bilu group (the first to emigrate to Palestine for Zionist political reasons), emerged in Ukraine. Odessa, a Black Sea port city that developed rapidly and attracted people of many nationalities, became a center of Haskalah ("Enlightenment"), Zionism, Hebrew and Yiddish literature, and traditional Jewish learning, as well as Jewish commerce and industry. Yiddish theater and modernist Yiddish literature flourished in Ukraine well into the Soviet period, and many early Israeli writers in Hebrew were born and educated in Ukraine.

POGROMS

The pogroms of 1881–1882 were carried out mainly in Ukraine. In 1903, there was an infamous pogrom in Kishinev, the capital of contemporary Moldova, and there were more pogroms in 1905–1906, during the Russo–Japanese War and an abortive Russian revolution. However, it was in 1918–1921, during the Civil War between the Bolsheviks and their opponents, that the most massive pogroms since the seventeenth century were perpetrated. Conservative estimates are that 35,000 Jews were killed and 100,000 left homeless when the White (anti-Bolshevik) and Ukrainian nationalist armies, as well as local bands, attacked Jews, whom they saw as favoring the Bolsheviks or the Poles and Russians over the Ukrainians. Though the short-lived Ukrainian government (Central Rada) granted Jews national autonomy and a ministry for Jewish affairs, the pogroms put an end to Ukrainian–Jewish political cooperation and reinforced the

Postcard view of a Jewish cemetery in Russia following a pogrom where tombstones were toppled and destroyed, c. 1917 22

image of Ukrainians as anti-Semitic. The pattern of the 1648 uprising was repeated as Jews were caught among the Whites, Reds, Ukrainian nationalists, anarchists and roving bands (whose ideology was largely to plunder).

Though Jews were accused of being Bolshevik sympathizers, hostile to Ukrainian independence, it was precisely the pogroms that drove them into the Red Army in self-defense, and then into Soviet posts and the Communist Party. Contrary to popular belief, Bolshevism was unpopular among Jews until the pogroms began—there were fewer than 1,000 Jewish Bolsheviks at the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution. The pogroms left the Jews with no alternative but the Soviet government, because most of its opponents attacked them.

Tragically, within 20 years, the pattern was repeated. The myth of "Judaeo-Communism" was widely believed in Poland, which ruled Western Ukraine until 1939. When some Western Ukrainians perceived Jews as welcoming the Soviet takeover from Poland in 1939, they took murderous revenge in Lwów (later Lvov and now Lviv) and other places when Soviet forces retreated in 1941. The extent and nature of collaboration by some Ukrainians with the Nazis in the mass murder of Jews is still a contentious and highly sensitive issue, and only in recent years has it begun to be aired, though mostly outside Ukraine.

THE EMERGENCE OF A UKRAINIAN-JEWISH IDENTITY

Most Jews seem not to have been highly conscious of Ukraine as a distinct political entity and of Ukrainians as a distinct people. The Jews' tendency to identify with rulers and upper classes more than with the peasantry may explain why Ukraine is absent from Yiddish rhetoric and "Jewish geography" until after the 1917 Russian Revolution. Sholom Aleichem, the great Yiddish writer born in Ukraine in 1859, uses a good deal of Ukrainian in his works and portrays clearly Ukrainian characters, but my impression is that he does not refer explicitly to "Ukraine" or "Ukrainians." Ukrainians themselves did not generally refer to themselves as such—they used the term "Ruthenians"—and Russians referred to them contemptuously or patronizingly as "Little Russians" until well into the nineteenth century. So it is not surprising that the "Jewish map" of Eastern Europe includes Poland, "Liteh" (roughly, present-day Lithuania, northeastern Poland and Belarus) and

Torahs defiled and destroyed in the Kishinev Pogrom, April 6–7, 1903

Galicia, but not "Ukraine." Prayer books describe their contents as being "according to the rituals of Polin, Liteh, Reisin [roughly, parts of Belarus and Western Ukraine] and Zamut [an area in Lithuania]." But no prayer book or other religious text mentions the "rituals of Ukraine."

Even "Ukrainian Jewish history" as such began to be written only recently. Since Ukraine was independent only very briefly and was for most of its history part of Polish-Lithuanian, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Polish or Soviet states, Jews treated Ukraine as a vague entity with no defining characteristics. The history of Jews in Ukraine was generally treated as part of the history of Russian or Polish Jewry. Jews who lived in Ukraine were regarded as *Rusishe Yidn*, not as *Ukrainishe Yidn*, and they so regarded themselves. When Jews emigrated to the United States from Ukraine before 1918, they were classified as "Russian."

A second reason why a Ukrainian-Jewish identity did not emerge until recently is that Jews felt no strong affinity to Ukrainians, a people who defined themselves rather late in history in any case. What exactly constituted Ukraine was by no means clear even to Ukrainians. Novorossiya (south-central/southeastern Ukraine) was not included in their mental map until quite late. Russians and Poles, though largely peasants like Ukrainians, had urban populations and high, literary cultures. Ukrainians were seen as exclusively peasants, quite an accurate perception until after World War I. Of course, most Jews were not concerned with whether Ukrainians had their Tolstoys and Pushkins, Mickiewiczes and Slowackis, though this might have been important to the *maskilim* ("enlightened" Jews), but all could appreciate the fact that Russians and Poles owned the land and wielded political power, whereas Ukrainians did not.

The Ukrainian language was generally referred to by Jews as *goyish* (Gentile), as were languages like Lithuanian and Belorussian. Dominant languages such as Polish, German and Russian were called by their proper names, but languages spoken by peasants were almost never systematically studied by Jews (and until relatively recently not even by their native speakers). Jews picked up these languages in the marketplace or on the street and thought of them simply as *goyish*, or "peasant talk." (It might also be noted that until little over a century ago, Jews commonly referred to their own language not as Yiddish but as *zhargon*.)

THE JEWS OF UKRAINE TODAY

Today, Jews in Ukraine still identify more with Russians and Russian culture than with Ukrainians and their culture. In the 1989 Soviet census, only 2 percent of Jews living in Ukraine named Ukrainian as their mother tongue, whereas 91 percent named Russian, and the rest, Yiddish. (Many Jews understand and speak Ukrainian but consider Russian their mother tongue.) Emigration from Ukraine has been proportionally greater than from Russia, but this may be primarily because the economic situation in Ukraine has been perceived as worse—at least until the collapse of the Russian economy in 1998.

Ukrainian Jews do not perceive themselves to be in a dangerous, hostile environment, but Russian Jews are far more closely tied to Russians and their culture than Ukrainian Jews are to Ukrainians and their culture. In a survey of 3,300 Jews taken in 1997, whereas 41 percent of Russian Jews said that the culture of "another" (not Jewish) people was closest to them—they presumably meant Russian culture for the most part—only 27 percent of Ukrainian Jews said so, and they seemed to have in mind Russian rather than Ukrainian culture. Ukrainian Jews see themselves as part of the Russian cultural community in Ukraine and seem to have weaker attachments to a Ukrainian state, though many profess to love the land and its peoples. They have been more willing to leave than their compatriots in Russia, who have actually viewed their situation more pessimistically but have found it more difficult to tear themselves away from a people and a culture to which they are closely tied.

Emigration from Ukraine is being driven not by anti-Semitism but by strong family ties with a substantial Ukrainian-Jewish emigrant community and by an economic situation that, at least until 1998, has been perceived as worse than that in Russia, where more people saw positive future prospects. In a 1993 survey, nearly twice as many Ukrainian as Russian respondents said that "we live from payday to payday, often have to borrow in order to buy essential goods, and can save nothing." In 1997, only 19 percent of Russian respondents placed themselves in this category, whereas 44 percent of Ukrainians did. Future emigration will be determined, in part, by economic developments in Russia and Ukraine as well as by the situations in the potential host countries.

JEWISH CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONS IN UKRAINE AND MOLDOVA TODAY

At the end of the twentieth century in both Moldova and Ukraine, Jewish institutions have been re-created and Jewish communal life has been revived. Synagogue buildings have been returned to Jewish communities by governments; Jewish schools—full day, supplementary and Sunday—have been opened; Jewish newspapers and magazines are being published; and there are Jewish Studies programs in universities in Kiev, Lvov, Donetsk and other places in Ukraine and Moldova. Thousands of Jewish youngsters attend camps sponsored by local Jewish communities and by the Jewish Agency, foreign religious organizations and others. None of this activity was possible before 1989.

Yet while this re-creation of Jewish public life and renaissance of Jewish activities go on, thousands "vote with their feet" and leave Ukraine and Moldova, thereby weakening the revival of Jewish communities. Those who are most committed to some form of Jewish expression, and the youngest and perhaps most energetic people, are most heavily represented in the ongoing emigration. They take enormous talents as well as educational, vocational and demographic assets to Israel, the United States, Germany and other host

countries, but in so doing they deprive their native lands of those very same assets. Reasonable people can differ over whether the paradox of Jewish revival coexisting with massive Jewish emigration is "good for the Jews" or not, but clearly the emigration has a direct and profound impact on prospects for the future of Jewish life in Ukraine and Moldova.

OPTIONS FOR JEWS WHO CHOOSE TO REMAIN

Four options seem to be available to those who will stay in Ukraine and Moldova. They can remain as permanent sojourners—that is, residents with a mixed, ill-defined Russian/Jewish/Ukrainian or Moldovan identity, however contradictory and uncomfortable that status might be. Or they can build on their acculturation into Russian culture and become part of the russophone, and perhaps even Russian, communities, themselves marginalized in some of the successor states to the Soviet Union. (Russians and russophones, the ruling class in the Soviet Union, now see themselves as second-class citizens in the successor states.) Third, Jews can acculturate again, but this time to Ukrainian or Moldovan culture. Finally, they can preserve what was a state-imposed Jewish identity but fill that empty form with positive cultural and/or religious content and "integrate" as a national minority into a multiethnic, "civic" Ukrainian or Moldovan state. Jews' choices will be influenced by geography (in which part of the country they live), age, friendships, attitudes regarding members of other nationalities and their cultures, the attitudes of others toward Jews and other variables.

The Jews of Ukraine and Moldova, along with others in the successor states to the old Russian Empire, have been at the center of some of the most dramatic events of modern history: two world wars, the Holocaust, revolutions, pogroms, political liberation, repression, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the establishment of independent states. Jews in these countries have gone through dizzyingly rapid changes in economic and social mobility. In just one century, Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet Jews have expanded the literature of Hebrew and Yiddish and made major contributions to Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian literature as well as to some of the other cultures of the area. When given the chance, they have contributed greatly to science and technology, scholarship and arts, industry, commerce, politics and popular culture. For these achievements, they have been applauded and cursed, praised and envied. Jews themselves have disagreed profoundly about where and how to make their contributions.

Throughout most of the period, Jews have felt that their situation was abnormal, in need of improvement. While some have believed that this condition could not be changed, others have been determined to find ways of improving their situation, whether by finding a comprehensive solution to the problems of their countries or by devising a particular one for the problems of the Jews. Throughout the twentieth century, some Jews have sought to merge themselves into the larger society completely, either because they have seen little value in Jewish culture or because they have concluded that Jewishness is mostly a burden and the only way to escape from it is to cease being Jewish. Others have taken the opposite tack, affirming their Jewishness and rejecting societies and states that, in their view, have rejected them. Some have dedicated their lives to the countries of their birth, while others have rejected them and sought to build up other lands or simply to build better lives there. Whether in their native lands or in those to which they have emigrated, Jews have made enormous contributions to the economies, cultures and politics of many countries. Yet Jews and the peoples among whom they have lived have been locked into a tempestuous, intense relationship from which none of the parties has been able to free itself completely, nor, in many cases, resolve their differences. Thus the modern history of the Jews in Ukraine, Moldova and the other successor states to the Soviet Union is streaked with light and shadow. It is a story still unfolding, one likely to continue to evolve from multiple ambiguities and complex ambivalences on the part of everyone involved.

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