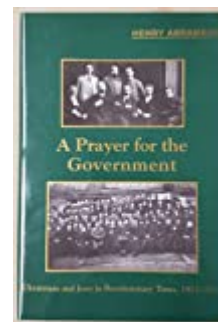


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Henry Abramson.** *A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999. 255 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-916458-87-4; \$36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-916458-88-1.



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Following Czar Nicholas II's abdication in February 1917, the Russian Empire endured several years of revolutionary conflict and civil war. In numerous parts of the country, nationalist movements emerged which tried to establish independent governments in the wake of the empire's collapse. The Baltic states, for example, gained their independence, which lasted for two decades until the Nazi-Soviet pact led to their forceful incorporation into Stalin's Soviet Union. In Georgia, a Menshevik government enjoyed a short-lived existence before succumbing to pressure from Moscow in 1921.

As Henry Abramson, Assistant Professor at Florida Atlantic University, recalls in his book *A Prayer for the Government, Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920*, the political and military struggles in Ukraine were among the most complex during those years. As many as 3.5 million Jews lived there, constituting about 8% of the population. Relations between Jews and the bulk of the Ukrainian population, most of whom were peasants, had often been tense. As far back as 1648, the Ukrainian peasant leader Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi had led a rebellion against Polish rule that left hundreds of thousands of Jews dead because they were perceived as agents of Polish economic domination. This was only the first of several notorious pogroms.

For the Jews, in particular, World War I and the ensuing years of civil war turned into an extended nightmare. German and Austrian authorities were hostile to Jews during their occupation of large parts of Ukraine. The Russian Imperial Army also dealt harshly with them, expelling a half million from their homes in 1915.

But the worst was yet to come. For several years, Ukraine endured a period of unparalleled political turmoil, collapsing into "a state of complete anarchy, in which no party ever exercised complete control over the nation." From the time of the czar's abdication until February 1919, "Kyiv had ten different governments." The town of Proskuriv experienced even greater turmoil; sixteen governments played political leap-frog in the period between February 1917 and January 1921, when the Bolsheviks took control.

It was during these years, particularly from 1918 to 1920, that a series of vicious pogroms were carried out by various military units and peasant gangs, overwhelming Jewish towns and villages, killing tens of thousands, and further poisoning Ukrainian-Jewish relations. But this violence is not at the center of Abramson's book. His aim instead is to illuminate an often overlooked, brief, and ultimately doomed experiment in political rapprochement when a small group of idealistic Ukrainian nationalists

tried to establish a government of their own – the Central Rada – in the midst of the region’s chaos.

The Central Rada lasted from March 1917 until April 1918, when a German puppet state began its own brief existence. At first, its leaders sought a degree of autonomy from the Provisional Government that had come to power after the czar’s abdication. Then, after the Bolshevik takeover, they declared full independence. At the same time, Ukrainian leaders worked with several Jewish political parties in an attempt to create a society in which Ukrainians and Jews could live together. Under the banner of Autonomism, Ukrainian intellectuals like Mykhailo Hrushevs’kyi championed the idea of “harmonious cooperation with national minorities, especially Jews.” This meant the “recognition of nationality rights as well as personal rights,” a move designed to reassure Jews and others that as individuals and as distinct communities, they would have a secure place in an independent Ukraine.

For a time, the Central Rada took concrete and useful initiatives. A Ministry of Jewish Affairs was established, a step no other government had taken before. Headed by the socialist activist Moshe Zilberfarb, the ministry tried to nurture a more coherent infrastructure for the Jewish community and respond to individual appeals for assistance. The Central Rada also authorized the revitalization of the *kehiles*, or local units of Jewish self-government, which Czar Nicholas I had virtually banned in 1844. But Abramson can cite only one concrete and consequential achievement of the ministry: in response to the Bolshevik advance on Kyiv, the Ukrainian military declared martial law and “issued a decree expelling all inhabitants who had not been registered before January 1, 1915.” This would have affected nearly three out of every four Jews in the city. Happily, Zilberfarb was able to persuade the military to rescind this decree. Nonetheless, during its brief existence, as Abramson sadly notes, it “does not seem that the ministry had a tremendous impact on the lives of ordinary Jews in Ukraine.” Yiddish was made an official language; this was a thoughtful gesture, but the Central Rada was not in a position to give substance to this status. According to Abramson, Yiddish-only speakers could not converse with government officials and the telephone service had no Yiddish-speaking operators. Callers were asked to speak in Russian or Ukrainian.

The good intentions of political leaders could not outweigh the terrible conditions inside the country. World War I had introduced an unprecedented level of violence

and dislocation, leaving a desperate and impoverished population that was more likely to follow leaders of more extreme political views. And among the Jews themselves, there were mixed feelings about supporting Ukrainian independence.

Most did not even regard themselves as Ukrainian Jews; they saw themselves as Russian Jews, a self-identification that Abramson is right to emphasize. In addition, as a vulnerable minority, the Jews looked to the broader majority power – the Russians – to protect their minority rights and status in a multinational state. The very first decree of Alexander Kerensky’s Provisional Government was to abolish the Pale of Settlement, where most Jews had been confined, and grant them equal rights under law. Jews with a secular education were also more attracted to Russian language and culture than to Ukrainian culture. Finally, Jews associated Ukrainian peasants with anti-Semitism.

Such attitudes, however, aggravated their position in Ukraine, especially when the Russian Civil War brought the Ukrainian independence movement into conflict with the Bolsheviks. The Jews were universally perceived as pro-Bolshevik, making them natural targets for anti-Semites and extreme Ukrainian nationalists. Ukrainian political leaders either encouraged the attacks or failed to do enough to stop them. Even the most prominent Ukrainian of that time, Symon Petliura, who became head of the independent government (called the Directory) and commander of the army in early 1919, has long been the center of controversy over his own role in the pogroms.

Abramson handles Petliura’s career with balance and caution. In Jewish eyes, Petliura has been held responsible for many of the most vicious pogroms. His subsequent assassination in Paris in 1926 by Simon Schwartzbard, a Ukrainian Jew who had fifteen relatives perish in pogroms, remains a watershed event. For many Ukrainians, the assassination elevated Petliura to the status of a martyr and reinforced tensions between Ukrainians and Jews. Schwartzbard, moreover, was acquitted of the crime after his attorney turned the trial into a full-scale indictment of Petliura and his complicity in the violence.

After a close review of the documentary record, Abramson rejects the accusation that Petliura was the architect of the pogroms or that he initiated the infamous attacks in Proskurov (where 1,500 Jews were slaughtered) by his subordinate Semesenko in 1919, an incident that rumor and accusation have long linked to Petliura. (For

a full-scale discussion of this controversy, see the articles in *Jewish Social Studies*, 31:3 [1969] by two scholars – Taras Hunczak and Zosa Szjakowski – with diametrically opposite opinions.) At the same time, Abramson accepts the view that Petliura's hands were tied, and that if he had "chastised his troops adequately," he would have lost the loyalty of his already disintegrating army at a time when the Red Army was able to field many more soldiers. Petliura was desperate to preserve Ukrainian independence. As Abramson implies, he could not hope to do this and protect Jews in far-flung towns and villages. In the end, though, Petliura's failure to act decisively against the pogroms did not save Ukraine.

As Abramson concludes, the attempted rapprochement between Ukrainians and Jews could not bridge "the chasm that separated the Ukrainian political leadership from the peasants." Assailed as pro-Bolshevik, suspicious of Ukrainian claims for independence, and trapped in a civil war in which political authorities had little ability to control their own troops or population, the Jews were too vulnerable and easy a target. At one point Abramson accuses Jewish leaders of proving "incapable of taking

concrete steps to control the burgeoning pogrom wave." Here he is too harsh. The Jews had no means to defend isolated towns, no allies to call on, and no nearby government with the will or the power to intervene. Neither the Central Rada of Hrushevs'kyi in 1917 or the Directory government of Petliura in 1919 ever amounted to a viable state.

This is not easy history to explore. The years of revolution and civil war in Ukraine remain difficult for Ukrainians and Jews to understand. *A Prayer for the Government* makes us wonder if events could have turned out differently. The severe shifts in political authority, continuous violence, and lingering resentments between Ukrainians and Jews make it imperative for any historian to approach the material with clear-headed and sober judgment. Abramson reaches this standard, providing a distinct service to scholarship and to memory.

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