

The Assassination of Symon Petliura and the Trial of Scholem Schwarzbard 1926–1927

A selection of documents

Christopher Gilley

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The assassination of Symon Petliura and the trial of Scholem Schwarzbard 1926–1927: A selection of documents, edited by David Engel, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016, 482 pp., US \$112.92 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-525-31027-4

In 2016, the Kiev-based artist David Chichkan exhibited a series of works concerning the anarchist movement in Ukraine. One diptych was entitled “Revenge.” On the left-hand panel, it depicts the Ukrainian leader Symon Petliura above a row of Jews murdered in the pogroms committed by his troops during the 1917–1922 Civil War; on the right, it portrays the Jewish anarchist Scholem Schwarzbard above the body of Petliura. Schwarzbard had shot and killed Petliura in Paris in 1926 as revenge for the antisemitic violence. One might understand the piece as a critique of some Ukrainian attempts to present the killing of one man as a crime equivalent to the murder of tens of thousands of Jews and the mutilation, rape, and dispossession of many, many more. The assassination of Petliura does indeed continue to inspire some very questionable Ukrainian interpretations today. For example, Volodymr V’iatrovych, who as head of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance now plays a key role in shaping Ukraine’s state-steered history policy, charts the – to use his euphemistic terms – “complex and ambiguous” history of Jewish-Ukrainian relations in the twentieth century from Schwarzbard’s act, and not those of Petliura’s troops half a decade before.

David Engel’s collection of documents on the trial of Schwarzbard for the murder of Petliura, therefore, provides a welcome attempt to cut through many of the stereotypes and myths surrounding the event. The editor consciously does not address fraught questions such as Schwarzbard’s alleged links to the Soviet Union or the level of Petliura’s responsibility for the pogroms. Rather, he reconstructs the French, Jewish, and Ukrainian contexts for and narratives created in response to Petliura’s killing and Schwarzbard’s subsequent trial and acquittal.

Engel’s 90-page overview is an exemplary piece of succinct writing and sensitive historical reading based upon a profound knowledge of French, Jewish, and Ukrainian history. He shows how the killing took place at a time when debate raged in France over immigration and political violence, but also the leniency of the cour d’assises. This particular form of court encouraged the jury to look for circumstances that might mitigate the accused’s culpability. Conse-

quently, Schwarzbard's eventual acquittal as the perpetrator of a crime of passion was never certain. Petliura's supporters responded to his killing with a call for unity among Ukrainians. Without the least shred of evidence, they presented Schwarzbard as a Bolshevik agent whose violence was an attack on the desires for Ukrainian statehood. Schwarzbard's act and justification threatened the Ukrainian self-image as victims of national oppression – a great source of moral capital – by revealing their own history of oppressing others. Consequently, even Ukrainians who did not support Petliura accepted the narrative of the Bolshevik Schwarzbard and defended the Ukrainian leader. Many Ukrainians realized that this line threatened relations with the Jewish diaspora, whom they saw as an ally in the quest for a Ukrainian state. Like V'iatrovych 90 years later, they presented Moscow's supposed use of a Jewish assassin as a deliberately antisemitic act, aimed at causing discord between Ukrainians and Jews. They therefore did make attempts to heal the growing rifts between the two communities despite their defense of Petliura.

By looking at such calls for intercommunal understanding, Engel sets his account apart from previous treatments that study the killing and trial as moments of irreconcilable alienation. This theme is also evident in Engel's depiction of the conflict within the Jewish diaspora over whether to accept Schwarzbard as a Jewish hero. The background to this, argues Engel, was the development in the West of a Jewish community that created organizations to help their coreligionists facing persecution in the East. During the pogroms, these bodies had failed to halt the antisemitic violence by appealing to the international community. Many Jews, shocked by the sheer level of blood-letting and the Jewish organizations' powerlessness to prevent it, hailed Schwarzbard's willingness to take matters directly into his own hands. Indeed, the Jewish groups were disappointed by their failure during the Civil Wars and took the Schwarzbard case as an opportunity to redeem themselves: some opposed the heroization of the accused, others presented him as destabilized by the crimes he had witnessed, while yet others justified his act as a moral necessity and sought to turn his defense into a trial of the pogromists.

The last group was also aware of the attendant danger to Jewish-Ukrainian relations and the attempts to coordinate the two communities' joint efforts in securing minority rights under international law. Indeed, with these fears in mind, the Comité des délégations juives (Committee of Jewish Delegations) created a special committee for Schwarzbard's defense to control and channel the passions aroused. However, as publicity around the case forced the Schwarzbard Defense Committee to justify its stance, the organization increasingly adopted a more assertive defense, actually accusing Petliura of organizing the pogroms – a position they had initially avoided.

Thus, with Ukrainians rallying around Petliura and many Jews defending Schwarzbard, a rupture took place between the two communities, despite the attempts to avoid it. One result was the rise in popularity with many Ukrainians of an antisemitic ultranationalism, some advocates of which allied with Nazi Germany during World War II.

The 76 documents from several archives in Europe, Israel, and the United States are in English, French, German, Hebrew, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. Those in the first three languages appear in their original languages only, the rest as both the original and an English translation. Extensive notes accompany all the documents and the volume ends with very useful biographical notes and a bibliography. The materials included admirably underscore Engel's depiction of the Ukrainian and Jewish narratives generated around the killing and trial.

There is, however, one problem with the selection of documents. Engel has clearly made a conscious choice to reveal the little-known attempts at intercommunal understanding. This is

at the expense of the more widely appreciated picture of the increasing rift between the two communities. As Engel acknowledges, such a rift did indeed emerge. However, there are no documents depicting the antisemitic Ukrainian responses. Indeed, in general, there seem to be more materials relating to the Jewish narratives than the Ukrainian. In particular, it is unfortunate that there are no materials from the Ukrainian commission created to defend Petliura's image at the trial. These would have shown how some Ukrainians responded to the accusations against Petliura with a narrative that both sought to deny charges of antisemitism while also looking for materials that would support the pogromists' claims that the Jews opposed the Ukrainian state and supported Bolshevism.

Engel does pay particular attention to the correspondence of a group of Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionaries. He has included these documents for the very good reason that they reveal how a dispute within leftist émigré circles led to the "identification" of Mikhail Volodin as the Soviet service agent who supposedly was Schwarzbard's contact. For a historian of the Ukrainian Left in emigration (such as the current reviewer), the insight they give into the interaction between Ukrainian SRs and Russian and Jewish left-wing groups is fascinating. However, the Ukrainian SRs were a small, marginalized group in the Ukrainian emigration. Given the omission of documents on the response of the Ukrainian right, the collection ends up giving a somewhat imbalanced picture of the Ukrainian narratives.

In summary, this is a collection that undoubtedly advances our knowledge of Petliura's killing and Schwarzbard's trial in particular, and Ukrainian and Jewish history in general. Engel's revision of stereotypes is extremely refreshing. However, additional Ukrainian documents would have given a more comprehensive picture of the Ukrainian reactions to the event.

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