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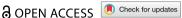[a]Department of Multidisciplinary Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ariel University, Ariel, Israel; [b]Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ariel University, Ariel, Israel

ABSTRACT

This article delves into the study of Jewish identity within the Ukrainian army, providing a detailed exploration of the experiences of soldiers with Jewish backgrounds fighting at the front lines of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Considering the historical complexities and contemporary challenges faced by the Jewish community in Ukraine, the study investigates how military service transforms the national and ethnic self-identification of Jewish soldiers. Through interviews and comprehensive contextual analysis, we illuminate their personal narratives, ways of expressing identity, common features, inclusivity, and the adaptation of diverse cultural backgrounds within the Ukrainian army. Our study contends that within the military landscape of the ongoing war, the perception of Jewish identity in Ukraine undergoes a significant shift, becoming more prominent and tangible. This transformation imbues the lives of Jewish soldiers with a profound sense of pride and uniqueness.

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This military aggression marked the latest and most brutal episode in a series of actions that began with the Russian occupation of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk in 2014. When the War started in 2022 many Ukrainian Jews, and Jewish Ukrainian expats joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces – as sergeants, rank-and-file soldiers, senior officers and civilian volunteers. They arrived to their barracks by their hundreds with or without prior military experience.[1]

The modern Jewish community of Ukraine numbers approximately 45,000 secular and religious Jews, making it the six-largest Jewish community in

Europe and the 13th-largest in the world.[2] These Ukrainian Jews embody a complex tapestry woven from some of the most tragic yet also propitious moments in Jewish history. For instance, the geographical birthplace of the Hasidic movement is within the boundaries of Ukraine.[3] Likewise, Ukrainian Jews played key roles in the nascent Zionist movement of the late 19th and early twentieth centuries.[4] At the same time Ukraine is often seen as the "bloodlands",[5] or the geographical heartland of what has been called the Holocaust by Bullets.[6] Similarly, the Soviet domination of Ukraine worked tirelessly to erase the remnants of particularistic Jewish identity in the region. As these Ukrainian Jewish military conscripts and volunteers donned their camouflage uniforms they were also forced to grapple (sometimes unconsciously) with these competing historical, political and religious legacies.

This article explores contemporary Jewish Ukrainian ethnic and national identity through the prism of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. Through in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis of newspaper articles, social media groups, and commonly worn military apparel this article argues that both Jewish and Ukrainian identities are being rethought and reworked – side by side – through the fog of the current war. Throughout this process, the experience of both Jewish and Ukrainian identity for these soldiers is becoming more prominent and viscerally tangible. This transformation of a dual Jewish and Ukrainian subjectivity through the tragedies and triumphs of war imbues the lives of these soldiers with a profound sense of existential ambiguity regarding the interactions between their Ukrainian and Jewish identities. As one of our Jewish military informants Alexey noted half in jest "identity in Ukraine is like a shadow. I am chasing Ukrainian and Jewish shadows". This article follows Alexey's pronouncement by demonstrating how war may have the unique capacity to add substance to these shadows of identity.

While scholars have begun to explore the role of long-term strategy,[7] geopolitical forces,[8] and economic global trade[9] on the fortunes of the war, few have examined the ways in which the current conflict has impacted the fates of minority national, ethnic, and religious identities in contemporary Ukraine. This is particularly so for Ukraine's Jewish community. This lacuna is critical because charges of antisemitism have become key propaganda components on both sides of the current war between Russia and Ukraine. In this way the ways in which Ukraine's Jewish community has responded to the current military conflict can tell a great deal about the future political prospects of Ukrainian nationalism.

Examining the modern Jewish community in Ukraine offers a clear illustration of the intersection between national and ethnic identities. Here, the enhancement of one identity invariably contributes to the fortification of the other. This dynamic relationship underscores the intricate connection between these dual aspects. In a similar vein, exploring the dual identity experience in the United States, Li Gong emphasizes: "When there is a large and

strong community socially sustaining such a compound identity, one's overall ethnic identity may provide a strong basis for supporting both ethnic and national identities".[10]

The realm of the global research world clearly reflects a growing theoretical and practical interest in the study of the intersection of national and ethnic identities, both in historical contexts and contemporary manifestations.[11] Examining these ties, Smith determines national identity as "the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation by the members of a national community of the pattern of symbols, values, myths, memories and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the variable identification of individual members of that community with that heritage and its cultural elements".[12] Thus, National identity refers to a shared sense of belonging and connection among individuals who associate themselves with a particular nation or country. It encompasses a set of cultural, historical, political, and sometimes linguistic elements that contribute to a collective identity.[13] It is the recognition and affirmation of being part of a larger community with a common national heritage.[14] The conception of national identity includes normative assumptions about how members of different ethnic and cultural groups should relate to one another.[15] A sense of ethnic identity is developed from the shared culture, religion, geography, and language of individuals who are often connected by strong loyalty and kinship as well as proximity.[16] Members of an ethnic group share a sense of kinship and common heritage, and their identity is shaped by a connection to a specific cultural lineage that may span across multiple nations.[17]

In the complex dynamic, the convergence of national identity with the distinct ethnic identities of various groups introduces intricate layers to conflicts, exerting a profound influence on the trajectory of history. Studying national identity in its interplay with ethnic identity is crucial for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the complexities that shape individuals and communities within a nation.[18] It provides insights into how individuals navigate their sense of self within the broader framework of the nation-state.[19] It allows researchers to explore how historical events, societal structures, and cultural influences contribute to the formation and evolution of these identities. This approach sheds light on the intricate relationships between individuals and the larger national community. It helps uncover the ways in which national and ethnic identities can either converge or diverge, influencing social cohesion, cultural diversity, and collective belonging. [20]

Historical instances vividly underscore how wars amplify and complicate the intersections between national and ethnic identities. For instance, the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913: Multiple states in the Balkan Peninsula sought territorial gains, and the conflict heightened ethnic rivalries among Serbs, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Ottomans.[21] This tumultuous period resulted in significant shifts in national borders and identities. Similarly, the Yugoslav Wars, 1991–2001,

offer a poignant example. The disintegration of Yugoslavia spawned brutal conflicts marked by heightened ethnic tensions. In Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, clashes unfolded among diverse ethnic groups, including Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians, each vying to assert their unique national and ethnic identities.[22] Another compelling illustration is the Rwandan Genocide, 1994: This tragic event had deep-seated ethnic dimensions, primarily between the Hutu and Tutsi communities. The conflict escalated into a brutal genocide, fuelled by historical ethnic divisions and political manipulation.[23] These historical examples collectively emphasize how the intersection of national and ethnic identities significantly shapes the complexity of conflicts, leaving an enduring impact on the course of history.

In the crucible of conflict, identities are often tested, reshaped, and reinforced.[24] Nowhere is this phenomenon more poignant than in the context of war, where individuals, driven by a deep sense of patriotism and duty, find themselves navigating complex landscapes of heritage, loyalty, and belonging.[25] In moments of upheaval, a crisis can have a dual impact, either strengthening a profound sense of national belonging or resulting in complete alienation, separation, and assimilation from the national group.[26]

National identity can evoke both pride and deep-seated fears for one's survival, influenced by a variety of factors. Religion, territorial affiliations, and state policies emerge as pivotal elements shaping these complex dynamics. [27] These interconnected elements, woven into the fabric of a nation's history and culture, form a complex tapestry that shapes the collective consciousness of its people. In this context, it is pertinent to mention research on Jewish identity within the historical framework of various wars – the American Civil War, World War I and World War II. In their research, scholars like Adam D. Mendelsohn,[28] Tim Grady,[29] David Fine,[30] Oleg Budnitskii,[31] and Deborah Moore[32] highlight that the issue of expressing their identity was pertinent for Jewish soldiers in all these wars, as the army "was as diverse as the embattled nation it sought to preserve, a unique mixture of ethnicities, religions, and identities".[33] Within this complex tapestry of identities, Jewish ethnic identity manifested itself in various ways – ranging from the emergence of new facets, such as a clear sense of roots and solidarity with the ethnic community, to the complete negation of this aspect of self-identification. For instance, David Fine emphasizes that Jewish soldiers in the German army did not perceive themselves as fundamentally different from their German counterparts:

> Jewish soldiers did not think of themselves as a distinct nationality. As a consequence of the integration of German Jewry in German Society and the reforms of German Judaism itself, Judaism, once a national identity became a matter of "religion" alone.[34]

Scholar Oleg Budnitskii, while analysing the diaries of Jewish soldiers who fought in the Soviet army during World War II, addresses the adjacent question:

> Was there a difference between "Abram's war" and "Ivan's war"? Not really. Death did not distinguish between a Hellene and an Israelite. That is, of course, if the Israelite did not become a prisoner of war. Life at war was always marked by death, and this death was as diverse as the soldiers themselves.[35]

Based on interviews with Jews who served in the American army during World War II, Deborah Moore points out that "A new type of Jew was being forged in the military" as "Jewishness became a part of being an American Soldier". [36]

Despite different historical periods, countries, and mentalities, one thing remained constant for Jewish soldiers – antisemitism, which they had to face during their service. Gennady Kostyrchenko extensively describes the everyday antisemitism in the Soviet Union and prevailing views that persisted despite any proactive stance of the Jewish community and Jewish soldiers in the army. Among the most common were: Jews do not fight in the war, world Jewry does not help enough to support the Soviet army, fascist Germany came only because of Jews and would not harm Soviet citizens.[37]

Issues of identity and contact during political and military conflicts continue to flare up around the world. The current war in Ukraine provides an emotional backdrop for exploring these intricate relationships, offering a compelling case study of how national identity, territorial disputes, and religious diversity converge in a region grappling with geopolitical tensions.[38]

Contemporary Jewish identity in Ukraine embodies a nuanced phenomenon moulded by the interplay of both Soviet and post-Soviet cultural elements, alongside the distinctive features characterizing the period following Ukraine's declaration of independence.[39] As Ukraine grapples with its historical legacy and ongoing challenges, understanding the nuances of Jewish identity within this context becomes an essential pursuit in elucidating the broader dynamics of national identity during moments of crisis.[40] What does it mean to be Jewish during the current war? How do the Jews of modern Ukraine confront the complicated dualities of the Holocaust and their current national identity as Ukrainian Jews? How has the war catalyzed the establishment of a unique kind Jewish identity within modern Ukraine? How has the war generated different – and perhaps competing – ethnic and political identities among Ukrainian Jewry, and what do these emerging identities bode for the future of the Ukrainian Jewish community as a whole? These and many other questions will be raised in this paper.

National identity and ethnic identity of Jews in Ukraine

The intersection between national and ethnic identities played a fundamental role in the formation of the modern Jewish Community of Ukraine.[41] Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian Jewish community was often characterized within the terms of Russian-speaking Jewry or the Jews of the Former Soviet Union.[42] Many programmes conducted by global Jewish

organizations were designed for all post-Soviet countries collectively, without paying attention to the specific national identity of each country: Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, etc.[43] This policy was common in the initiatives of prominent Jewish organizations such as Taglit, Hillel, the Jewish Agency for Israel and in the activities of local Jewish cultural centres.[44] The shared Russian-oriented cultural values and language were largely shared across the global community.

The prevailing approach to researching Jewish communities in the post-Soviet space was also common in the research literature.[45] The global identity of Russian-speaking Jewry was analysed both within the post-Soviet countries[46] themselves and through the example of immigrants from these communities who moved to Israel, the USA, and Europe.[47] When exploring the multi-faceted experience of Russian-speaking Jewry across different countries, researchers have underscored the community's ongoing search for self-identity.[48]

The landscape of the Russian-speaking Jewish Community has undergone significant shifts with Russia's invasion of the Ukrainian cities of Donetsk, Luhansk, and the territory of Crimea in 2014. Jews in these cities became hostages of the situation, being involved both in the geopolitical level and in media narratives.[49] The events that accompanied Russian invasion influenced significantly the Jewish Community of Ukraine, its identity in general, and Jewish soldiers in particular during this war. We will pinpoint two of the most noteworthy ones. The first turning point in the life of the Jewish community in the invaded territories happened in April 2014 with the distribution of provocative leaflets near the synagogue in Donetsk. Few unidentified individuals wearing balaclava masks and carrying a Russian Federation flag distributed flyers, which demanded that all Jews aged 16 and above register with the municipality of Donetsk by May 3.[50] Specifically, the leaflets stated:

> Dear Ukraine citizens of Jewish nationality, since the leaders of the Jewish community of Ukraine supported the Bendery Junta and opposed the pro-Slavic People's Republic of Donetsk, has decided that all citizens of Jewish descent, over 16 years of age and residing within the republic's territory are required to report to the Commissioner for Nationalities in the Donetsk Regional Administration building and register by May 3. ID and passport are required to register your Jewish religion, religious documents of family members, as well as documents establishing the rights to all real estate property that belongs to you, including vehicles. Evasion of registration will result in citizenship revoke and you will be forced outside the country with a confiscation of property.[51]

The style and the stipulated requirements in this leaflet bore striking similarities to the narrative employed by fascist Germany.[52] Despite the self-proclaimed Donetsk Republic authorities distancing themselves from the incident, both the local and global Jewish communities were shocked by the event.[53] The Jewish communities of separated Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea confronted

a faithful decision: whether to remain in their homes under the Russian regime or relocate to central or western Ukraine or emigrate to Israel.

In the broader social context of other Jewish communities in Ukraine, they distinguished themselves not merely by the city of their origin, but also through their proactive engagement in the country's defense. In this regard, the new Jewish movement of "Zhydo-Bandery" has garnered notable popularity among community members. [54] This movement emerged in response to the information policy of Russian media, which accused Euromaidan activists, particularly the Right Sector[55] – a notably radical nationalist faction in Ukraine – of antisemitism,[56] the main distinction of the movement was that Jews support Ukrainian nationalists.[57] Representatives of this group, predominantly emerging in the realm of social networks, started to creatively utilize symbolic consolidations of Ukrainian and Jewish traditions. Notably, they combined the emblem, the coat of arms, of Ukraine with the emblem menorah, the ancient Jewish seven-armed candelabrum,[58] as well as payot, Orthodox Jewish sidelocks[59] and the emblem, coat of arms of Ukraine.

Despite the fact that it was quite a small number of members[60] and widespread criticism from within the Jewish community, that considered the historical association of Stepan Bandera with anti-Semitism, as one of the Nazi collaborator,[61] the phenomenon of the Zhydo-Bandery movement in 2014 year attracted special attention among Ukrainian citizens to the willingness of Jews to show their commitment to Ukraine.[62] The interplay between national and ethnic Jewish identity, forged during the challenging conditions of wartime, held particular significance for the community and was a powerful motivation for community members to join the Military Forces of Ukraine.[63] The second turning point marks the ways in which Russian propaganda has employed the term "denazification" to justify its military actions in Ukraine. It was announced by Russian President Vladimir Putin on 24 February 2022, the day the invasion of Ukraine began, defining it as "the purpose of this special military operation".[64] It was to claim continuity between the struggle against Nazi Germany during World War II and the current invasion of Ukraine. Since then, this term has become the backbone of Russian propaganda and narratives within which action in Ukraine is conducted.[65] President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly highlighted the supposed collaboration between neo-Nazi groups and contemporary Ukrainian political movements and militias. As he noted in a speech he delivered in February of 2022:

> It is not surprising that Ukrainian society was faced with the rise of far-right nationalism, which rapidly developed into aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism. This resulted in the participation of Ukrainian nationalists and neo-Nazis in the terrorist groups in the North Caucasus and the increasingly loud territorial claims to Russia.[66]

Putin has likewise claimed that a Nazi-like genocide against the predominantly Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine necessitated immediate intervention by Russian forces.[67]

In such conditions, Ukraine's Jewish identity experienced a notable new direction,[68] prompting increased interest from academicians in its analysis.[69] Theoretically this manuscript explores the newly established Jewish identity of Ukraine in general and identity of Jewish soldiers in the Ukrainian army in particular, offering valuable insights into cultural, social, and organizational dynamics within the military context. This research not only fills a gap in the existing literature but also adds depth to our understanding of military identity in a diverse and complex geopolitical setting.

Methodological approach

This article is written based on qualitative phenomenological analysis through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The focus of this study was the personal narratives of soldiers and their vision of the integration of Jewish Identity in the current war. Throughout 2023, we interviewed 14 Jewish soldiers and five female volunteers, who during the interviews were on the front line of the war in Ukraine. An essential criterion for selecting interviewees was the acknowledgment of their deliberate and conscious self-identification as individuals who recognize themselves as part of the Jewish ethnic group. More detailed specifics of 19 respondents are outlined in Table 1.

Each respondent was interviewed using real-time internet platforms in Ukrainian and Russian languages, up to their willingness. Interviews were conducted and transcribed by the authors of the article.[70] Interviews were garnered through "snowball sampling" based on "contact networks"[71] of the Jewish Community of Ukraine. During our interview with a soldier or a volunteer, we inquired about his friends, all of whom emphasized their affiliation with the Jewish identity. It should be noted, that due to the diverse geographical origins

Table 1. Detailed information about respondents of the study.

Soldiers				
City/region of origin	Age	Military Rank	Unit	Jewish Religious Background
Donetsk 2	25–35	High 2	Intelligence Service 6	Secular 10
Crimea 1	35–45	Middle 4	Pedestrian troops 7	Religious 2
Kyiv 5	45–55	Low 8	Press service 1	Observe some traditions – Jewish holidays, etc. 2
Kharkiv 5				
Odessa 1				
Volunteers			
---	---	---	---
City/region of origin	Age	Kind of volunteering involvement	Jewish Religious Background
Donetsk 1	22- 40	Collecting army ammunition 2	Secular 3
Mariupol 2		Gathering warm clothing 1	Observe some traditions – Jewish holidays, etc. 2
Odessa 1		Providing humanitarian aid to the front lines 2	
Kyiv 1			

of these respondents from various cities, they often lack familiarity with one another. The interviews were structured around core questions, such as antisemitism, historical path (Holocaust and Jewish pogroms in Ukraine), the meaning of Jewish identity, and ways of its manifestations, as well as Jewish-Ukrainian heroism in the current war. This thematic organization allowed us to comprehensively analyse the soldiers' experiences, considering both their historical background and contemporary realities and to go deeply into the conflict between national and ethnic identities themselves. We sought to understand how this intersection played out in soldiers' and volunteers' lives before the war and how the focus may have shifted in the midst of the conflict.

The study was limited in size and scope. By its nature, this kind of small-scale qualitative research has difficulty in offering objective and comparative assessments across the military landscape of Ukraine's defense forces. As an interview mode we employed discourse analysis, paying special attention to the social context. In this regard, we examined responders' self-presentation on social networks, when it was accessible. In particular we were interested to overview, if the representation of their Jewish Identity is visible in their social network's profiles. This research is focused less on a theoretical (ethical, philosophical, legal, etc.) analysis of the military landscape and more on the empirical experiences of the fighters themselves.

The group of interviewed soldiers, as the Jewish representation in the Ukrainian army can be classified by the following scheme (Table 2).

Table 2. Representation of responders by joining military and volunteering service, relation to judaism, and country of origin.

| Soldiers and Volunteers by time of joining the military |
| From 2014 year | From 2022 year |

| Relation to Judaism |
| Secular | Religious | Cultural observants – celebrate Jewish Holidays |

| Country of origin and citizenship |
| Jews who were born in Ukraine and residents of Ukraine | Jews who were born in the FSU and residents of Israel | Jews who weren't born in the FSU and don't have any roots in Ukraine |

Jewish Ukrainian Soldiers on the frontline of the war

The number of Jewish soldiers serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine during the current war remains uncertain. Official resources from government organizations, such as the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as well as representatives of the Jewish community, do not provide this information. According to the respondents themselves, it is estimated that there are several hundreds of Jewish soldiers currently serving.

Nowadays, ethnic affiliation is not documented in birth certificates or passports in Ukraine,[72] making it challenging to compile objective statistics. According to soldiers and representatives of Jewish communities, such data holds less significance during times of war. On the deeper level this reticence to numerically classify the amount of actively serving Jews in the Ukrainian army points to a distinct tension regarding the post-war Ukrainian identity. As one of the interviewed soldiers noted:

> In the midst of war, a soldier is primarily recognized as a defender of the country, and distinctions based on ethnicity, whether he is Georgian, Jewish, or Armenian, become inconsequential. The focus is on collective defense efforts. Post-war, assessments for medals and military ranks will be made, highlighting the communities that demonstrated exceptional contributions. There is confidence that Ukrainian Jewish community will be acknowledged with pride.

As this solider implies in Post-War Ukraine, Jews will have to balance their desire to highlight their distinct military contributions set against a broader desire to be seen as equal Ukrainian citizens.

Motivation for joining the military services

Among the interviewed soldiers, a pervasive sense of strong motivation to serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine is evident. The key factors they consistently highlight in the majority of cases include (the criteria are arranged in descending order, commencing with the most impactful ones): countering the Russian invasion, love of the country (patriotism), sense of duty, protection of their families.

One of the strongest responses, highlighting the Jewish identity of respondents, was the desire to express opposition to the falsehoods about Nazism spread by Russian media resources. One of the soldiers addressed the issue, emphasizing that it causes re-traumatization of the Jewish community:

> The Russian government's manipulation of Nazism is a brutal humiliation for the Jewish community. I cannot discern whom they came to rescue, we did not call upon them. What I do know is that this manipulation forces us, the Jews, to fell the trauma of the Holocaust once again.

Gender in the military landscape

We interviewed 14 soldiers, All of them are men. Unfortunately, we were unable to engage in conversations with Jewish women currently serving in the Ukrainian army. Military service was not prevalent among Jewish Ukrainian women. However, these women did dedicate themselves to volunteer activities on behalf of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and we often found these volunteers on the front lines of the conflict. We interviewed five women. Our objective was to explore whether they held a distinct perspective on their roles as women in the ongoing war. One of the volunteers explained:

> I find my purpose in supporting the country, which is why I volunteer. However, I believe my role is at home, alongside my children. Additionally, it is not a common practice for us in Ukraine to provide firearms to women.

In the realm of volunteering, most women engage in tasks such as collecting army ammunition, gathering warm clothing, and providing humanitarian aid on the front lines. They also contribute to activities on the home front, offering assistance to displaced families, the elderly, and more. Many of the interviewed women recognize the significance of their role, especially in raising awareness by sharing informational updates on social media about the difficulties soldiers encounter during the war and the support they require. Out of the five interviewed women, two have husbands serving on the front lines. One of them expressed her perspective on her husband's situation as follows:

> He is unable to speak on his own behalf today. He represents not only himself but also the comrades alongside him in the trench. Frequently, they lack access to phones and the internet, and, understandably, documenting the ongoing events is not their priority. I serve as their voice today, organizing donations for their unit and personally visiting them.

It's important to note that in their narratives, women, like the soldiers, mention that they proudly manifest their Jewish identity, wearing necklaces with the Star of David, a traditional Jewish symbol. One of them wears the necklaces with the symbol of Zhydo-Bandery movement. We will provide more information about these symbols in the paragraph on manifestations of Jewish identity among soldiers. In their narratives we noticed instances highlighting the traditional approach embraced by women to express their Jewish identity. For instance, engaging in the baking challah, the festive Jewish bread. One of them elaborated on her perspective:

> On social media, I consistently make posts with photos, showcasing how I bake challah or celebrate Jewish holidays. In this way, I demonstrate that even during wartime, it is important for me to embrace my Jewish identity.

In addition to the conducted interviews with female volunteers, we also scrutinized the social media profiles of two women serving on the front line, who, as per the accounts of fellow soldiers, identify with the Jewish community.

Unfortunately, attempts to engage in conversation with these women went unanswered. Upon analysing the pictures and texts they share on their profiles, we observed that, much like other soldiers, they post content related to their Jewish identity, including patches with the Star of David on their uniforms, stories about family members who survived the Holocaust, and narratives about Jewish soldiers. On the analysed social media pages, we did not find any specific features that could indicate a distinction in the manifestation of Jewish identity between men and women.

The complexity of Jewish identity in modern day Ukraine as seen through the prism of the current war can be found through the variety of things that emerged from the interviews. These include their engagement with antisemitism, holocaust memory, and the conceptualized the parameters of Modern Ukrainian Jewish Identity. We've systematized the semi-structured interview's questions into two distinct sections, thoroughly exploring the lives of the soldiers – while one section addresses information regarding their background, the second one focused on their life during ongoing army service.

Antisemitism

All interviewed soldiers underscored that their identity emerged alongside a somewhat contradictory view of antisemitism. On the hand, soldiers were quick to note instances of antisemitism within their own lives, but at the very same time deny or downplay its importance. This contradictory perspective seemed to reflect their broader struggle with defining the contours of both Ukrainian and Jewish nationalism.

The historical and contemporary expressions of antisemitism have significantly contributed to shaping the identity of the present-day Jewish community in Ukraine.[73] Thus, in this thematic section of interviews, our focus was on understanding the impact of soldiers and their families grappling with antisemitism, gauging how it influenced the formation of their identity, their choice to enlist in the army, and whether it instilled fear or, on the contrary, emboldened the expression of their Jewish identity. In the majority of instances, soldiers opt to abstain from delving into discussions about anti-Semitism, underscoring that, in the midst of the ongoing war, addressing such matters is not their primary concern. While conducting the interviews, we realized that the soldiers do not articulate instances of local Ukrainian Jew hatred as direct manifestations of "domestic antisemitism" as direct manifestations of antisemitism. As one soldier stated:

> Various jokes about Jews circulate occasionally, but I choose not to react to them. For instance, a friend with whom I fought alongside recently called me and reassured me that if bombing begins in Kharkov, I can bring my family to him in Kyiv. He added, "Don't worry about being Jewish. It's those Jews who are stereotypically portrayed as greedy and bad, but you are one of us, our own."

Soldiers found it more comfortable to discuss instances of anti-Semitism in the past, delineating a clear distinction between historical occurrences and present-day Ukraine. This trend is particularly noticeable among soldiers who were born and raised in the Soviet Union. One of the unit commanders, at the age of 55, describes his story:

> In my childhood, I frequently returned home from school with blood on my uniform, the result of a broken nose. I was subject to beatings due to my Jewish appearance – my prominent nose, curly hair – everything seemingly inscribed on my face … However, in contemporary Ukraine, I take pride in my Jewish identity and do not hesitate to express it openly.

For this soldier Jewish pride in modern day Ukraine functions to rectify to ills of Soviet antisemitism. In this way, active service in the Ukrainian armed forces is at one and the same time both an expression of Jewish power as well of Ukrainian nationalism.

Jewish soldiers' perspectives on historical trauma: the Holocaust and Jewish pogroms in Ukraine

The Holocaust and Jewish pogroms in Ukraine stand as the somber chapters in the history of the Jewish community at large, and specifically, the Ukrainian community. There is scarcely a Jewish family untouched by the knowledge of these tragic events, and the passage of this awareness from one generation to the next is an indelible legacy.[74] Undoubtedly, this theme takes on a profound significance for Jewish soldiers actively involved in the current war. It is possible to say that they stand as defenders of a nation that, in the past, was unable to shield their forebears from mass extermination and pogroms.[75] Some of the soldiers have or had distant relatives who survived the Holocaust. Despite the weight of historical examples, most interviewees considered it inappropriate to draw parallels between the Jewish Genocide during the Holocaust in Ukraine and the current war. They justify this by pointing out that Ukraine was entirely different back then, whereas today they argue, there is a place for all ethnic groups here. Likewise, these soldiers rarely if ever brought up Ukraine's history of past collaboration with Nazism, nor did they ever really remark on the Neo Nazi symbology present within contemporary Ukraine.[76] When pushed on the subject they either denied its existence, or downplayed its relevance. As one soldier noted, "no we are in a war [for our lives], we'll deal with all that [neo-Nazism]". In this context, we were interested in whether it is significant for a Jewish soldier that, during the war, they may find themselves in the same trench as someone whose relatives may have participated in Jewish pogroms. One of the soldiers described his thoughts on the topic:

> I don't know the story of the soldiers who are with me in the trench today. And why should I know it? Today's soldiers are not responsible for their ancestors. Moreover, I don't believe that this particular soldier could be aware that their grandfather or grandmother participated in Jewish pogroms. Today, such things are kept quiet. It's not something that people would tell their children or grandchildren.

In other instances, soldiers either denied any knowledge of familial involvement during the Holocaust, or simply were unwilling to talk about it openly:

> In our family, it wasn't customary to talk about the Holocaust. Our parents simply avoided that topic. Perhaps, they didn't want us to fixate on that fear. Today, I wonder why I never questioned them about that part of our family history. Everything I knew was taught to me when I attended a Jewish school. Honestly, I don't particularly discuss it with my own children today.

The interviewees' treatment of Ukraine's Holocaust history was likewise contradictory. On the one hand the holocaust in Ukraine is the primary (and in some ways the only) physical marker of Jewish identity for these soldiers. On the other hand, all downplayed its importance, or denied any knowledge of its impact on their own families. This contradiction itself is one aspect of a Ukrainian-Jewish identity that is being formed in the shadow of the current war. In this way, the soldiers themselves are actively struggling the memory of the Holocaust and how that memory ought to impact modern day Ukraine.

If only to underscore the precarity of this developing Ukrainian-Jewish identity in the shadow of the Holocaust, most interviewees felt that current anti-Jewish pogroms in Ukraine were entirely within the realm of possibility. As Semen noted:

> No one knows what will happen after the war. Despite Jews defending Ukraine today, there still exists a significant number of people who believe that Jews are to blame for everything. Jewish pogroms may return to Ukraine, especially if something happens where Jews are unfairly implicated.

Of particular significance in this context is the Zhydo-bandery movement, which was named in name of Stepan Bandera. On the one hand, this movement is often viewed negatively by members of the Jewish community due to the controversial personality of Stepan Bandera, that was a leader of Ukrainian nationalists and a Nazi collaborator.[77] On the other hand, numerous soldiers perceive their involvement in this movement as a robust reaction from the Jewish community – an act of self-defense they believe was conspicuously absent during the Holocaust. As Lev explained:

> We will no longer stand idly by while facing annihilation. The Holocaust must never be repeated. Jews have the ability to defend themselves. The Zhydo-bandery movement stands as our strong response to those who doubt the strength of Jewish self-defense.

Navigating identity within the Jewish community in the former Soviet Union

In the realm of various educational and cultural initiatives within Jewish communities in the Former Soviet Union,[78] it is reasonable to assume that Ukrainian Jewish soldiers may have acquaintances or friends among Jews in Russia – individuals they might encounter on the battlefield as adversaries today. Within this context one wonders to what extent these soldiers would prioritize recognizing their counterpart as a fellow Jew or rather as an enemy Russian soldier. At stake in this question, is the relative weight these soldiers place on national of ethnic identity. Do these soldiers recognize their Russian adversary as primarily (ethnically) Jewish, or do they emphasize a new national Ukrainian Identity? Most respondents noted the importance of the question, yet attempted to sidestep its practical relevance. They noted how such an ethical dilemma was highly unlikely in current battlefield situations. For one, the war is conducted remotely, using missiles and snipers, making it almost impossible to come face to face with a soldier from the opposing army. Likewise identifying a Jewish person on the battlefield is nearly impossible as Alex noted:

> I don't come face to face with enemy soldiers. And even if I do, how will I know if he is Jewish? It's unlikely that he will be with peyot or wearing a kippah. I can assume that he might have a pendant with the Star of David, but to see it, I would have to get too close. In battle, I certainly won't be doing that.

However, when considering the possibility of such a situation, all respondents emphasized – such a soldier should be treated primarily as an enemy, and only secondarily as a fellow Jewish compatriot. As Dmytro argued unhesitatingly:

> This soldier from Russia came to my land to kill my family, rape our women, destroy everything around, so I should treat him as an enemy. And even to kill if it is necessary. It doesn't matter if he is a Jew or someone else.

These soldiers were exceedingly quick to highlight a strong vision of Ukrainian nationalism at the expense of notions of broader trans-national Jewish solidarity. In this way, the current war is helping to shape their perspectives on Jewish and Ukrainian identity.

The construction of Jewish and Ukrainian identities was further highlighted in the ways in which these soldiers talked about the combat deaths of their compatriots, both un interviews and on social media. Social networks and media resources in Ukraine widely publish stories of fallen soldiers.[79] Most interviewed soldiers refused to consider the possibility of their deaths in combat, and stated how they would prefer for their families to decide how they should be remembered, as either a Ukrainian or Jewish Hero:

> I didn't particularly dwell on it. Or perhaps, I just didn't want to think about it. It seems to me that it's more crucial for the family, what people will say about the soldier. For parents, spouses, and children. They have to live with this legacy, and it's up to them to decide. For the Jewish community, it's also important that Jews haven't stood aside and are fighting alongside everyone else.

For some religiously observant soldiers however, emphasized how fallen warriors should be buried as a Jew, as well as a citizen of Ukraine. As Moshe argued:

> I am, first and foremost, a Jew. It is important to me that in case something happens to me, it would be initially noted that I am a Jew, and then a citizen of Ukraine.

For these soldiers the shadow of a Ukrainian Jewish identity is just as complex and indistinct after death, as it is in life.

Public expressions of Jewish symbols in Ukrainian military units

Despite their protestations in favour of a Ukrainian national identity, it was extremely important for these interviewed soldiers to openly embrace and express a distinct Jewish presence while in uniform. All of the soldiers we spoke with emphasized that at the outset of their service, they made it a point to disclose their belonging to the Jewish ethnic group to their fellow soldiers. This manifestation of Jewish ethnic belonging was usually expressed in sartorial form as patches on uniforms or ritualistically on amulets or small pocket-sized Jewish prayer books, and even inscribed on their own skin in the form of tattoos.

Special patches on the uniform represent one of the most prevalent ways for soldiers to articulate their identity.[80] These patches come in diverse colours, ranging from ones that solely feature the flag of Ukraine to those combining the flags of Ukraine and Israel. They may be of a green hue, aligning with the uniform colour, or adopt a red-black colour scheme symbolizing the Zhydo-bandery movement – a meaningful element for soldiers hailing from Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea. Notably, inscriptions on these patches can be found in both Ukrainian and Hebrew. The use of Hebrew carries more of a symbolic resonance, considering the limited proficiency in Hebrew within the Ukrainian Jewish community.

The soldiers wear these patches proudly and view them as a unique symbol of their Jewish identity. Frequently, these patches are harmoniously integrated with insignias representing their military unit, special brigade, and other affiliations. At the end of each interview, we asked the soldiers to share pictures of the items they utilize in their service to express their Jewish identity. The subsequent table displays images of some of the patches on their uniforms that were submitted and the explanation of the soldiers about their meaning (Table 3).

Soldiers also took great pride in displaying Jewish ritual items, alongside Jewish themed jewellry, tattoos and other symbols. Both necklaces and bracelets commonly feature Jewish symbols, including the Star of David or the Hamsa.

Table 3. Uniform patches of Jewish soldiers in the armed forces of Ukraine.

Picture	Title	Explanation
	"Ukraine" – a patch in Hebrew	The most common patch among soldiers. Soldiers explain that it matches the colour of the military uniform, thus not conflicting with military regulations. Moreover, it encapsulates all the symbols important to them – the Jewish Star of David, the emblem of Ukraine, and the word "Ukraine" in Hebrew.
	"Ukraine" – a patch in English	The red and black colours symbolize the Zhydo-Bandery movement. In most cases, such patches are worn by Jewish soldiers originating from Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea.
	"Defense of Ukraine" – a patch in Hebrew and Ukrainian	Jewish soldiers born and residing in Ukraine wear these patches, symbolizing their national attachment to Ukraine through the flag and simultaneously expressing the significance of their ethnic identity through the emblem of the menorah, the spiritual Jewish seven-branch candelabrum.
	Flags of Ukraine and Israel	The patch combines the flags of Ukraine and Israel, thereby symbolizing the friendship between the two countries. Often, these patches are worn by soldiers who feel a special spiritual connection with Israel.
	"Jewish Self-Defense" – a patch in Hebrew and Ukrainian	Such patches are rare, worn by Jews that assist in the military defense of Ukrainian cities.

Those soldiers, who originating from Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea prefer amulets adorned with the emblem of Zhydo-bandery, depicting the Ukrainian coat of arms alongside the Star of David. Despite tattoos being prohibited from the perspective of the Jewish tradition,[81] many surveyed soldiers believe that tattoos written in Hebrew or depicting Jewish symbols constitute a vivid expression of identity. Several respondents have already adorned themselves with such tattoos, while others remain open to this possibility in the future.

The use of nicknames in the army is a significant aspect of the military landscape. Five out of 14 soldiers noted that they had Jewish nicknames in their units – for example, "Jew" or "Rabbi". These nicknames were invented by fellow soldiers who served with them. The Jewish soldiers themselves express

that the use of such nicknames brings them a sense of enjoyment, contributing to a heightened self-presentation of their Jewish identity.

The majority of soldiers highlighted the significance of celebrating Jewish holidays as a crucial facet of their identity. They expressed the importance of passing down these values to their families and present or future children, ensuring transmission of Jewish tradition. Many soldiers shared that before the battles, they said Jewish prayers acquired in school, courses, or within the family. Even amid the challenges of war, most of them make a concerted effort to uphold Jewish holiday observances on the front lines. This may involve celebrating with special food or merely informing fellow soldiers of the Jewish holiday, accompanied by an explanation of its significance.

The representation of Jewish identity on social media is a valuable tool to analyse how soldiers manifest their attachment to the Jewish community. After examining the online profiles of respondents, we noted an emerging pattern: the expression of Jewish identity across social media platforms is more vividly featured on the personal pages of religious soldiers. Their profiles showcase images capturing the celebration of traditional Jewish festivals, quotes extracted from Jewish literature, and the display of conventional religious symbols. In contrast, secular soldiers exhibit minimal openness regarding their ethnic identity on social media. Some respondent profiles didn't not express any signs of Jewish identity.

Conclusions

The research on Jewish soldiers' experiences within the historical framework of various historical periods, countries and wars, including the American Civil War, World War I, and World War II, sheds light on the complex dynamics of identity, integration, and discrimination faced by Jewish servicemen. This exploration into the multifaceted identities and experiences of Jewish soldiers reveals that, despite the common bond of military service, these individuals often grappled with the dual challenge of expressing their ethnic identity while assimilating into the broader military culture, representing their national identity.

The Jewish identity in Modern Ukraine is undergoing multifaceted changes propelled by the war. The ongoing conflict has heightened the intersection between national and ethnic identities, a phenomenon notably evident in the lives of soldiers serving on the front line. Through its in-depth analysis of interviews, this paper provides a framework for understanding how war and military service become a driving force for shifts in the self-identification of a person on the governmental and community levels.

The interplay between national and ethnic identities resulted in internal conflicts, highlighting the identification of previously unfilled voids. Thus, a detailed examination of the responses collected during the interviews

demonstrates how difficult it was for soldiers to clearly explain, define, and delineate the parameters and meanings of their own Jewish Identities. Their demonstrated familiarity with Jewish traditions and language often left the essence of their Jewish identity somewhat indistinct. For them Jewish identity was akin to a shadow that the war was constantly trying to reconstruct.

In her history of Jewish soldiers in the US army during WWII, Deborah Moore[82] notes how these soldiers used the war to internalize a more complex meaning for their Jewish identities. Similarly, Ukrainian Jewish soldiers articulate that the Jewish identity they once concealed during childhood and adolescence has taken on a particular significance for them amidst the challenges of the current war. They often wear special patches on their uniforms and pendants, which symbolically unite the Ukrainian and Jewish experience. Some of them note that they have become more religiously observant, and they all say that they began to feel proud Jews, being Ukrainian soldiers. Defending their country, the Ukrainian Jews are redefining both what it means to be Ukrainian and Jewish side by side. Thus, many of the soldiers we interviewed expressed strong indignation at what they saw as the manipulation of Holocaust history and the misappropriation of the term Nazism. Their initial reaction was a compelling urge to vocally oppose the false propaganda disseminated by Russia and defend Ukraine on national and international levels. At the same time some interviewees elided entirely Ukrainians' own collaboration with the Holocaust. As these Jewish fighters balanced between identity and history, they are actively reimagining the parameters of Jewish Identity withing Modern day Ukraine.

The war ushered in profound changes within Ukrainian Jewish life, and it will take time for Ukrainian Jews to fully grasp the depth and complexity of this transformation in their personal lives and within their communities. Some soldiers, upon joining the Armed Forces of Ukraine, openly proclaimed their Jewish roots for the first time. Others strengthened their devotion to Jewish religious practices. Following the history of the Jewish pogroms in Ukraine, the Holocaust and Soviet repression, the Jewish Community has shifted from perceiving themselves as victims to adopt to adopting a defender role, which allows soldiers to envision a vibrant and bright future for the Jewish community in a Post-War Ukraine.

Notes

1. The Ukrainian Armed Forces does not keep official records of the Jewish identities of their soldiers. Yet judging from anecdotal data from informant conversations and impressions, alongside evidence from Jewish social media administrators in the Ukrainian Army, the numbers range from hundreds to perhaps ten thousand.
2. DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population," 335.
3. Teller, *Hasidism and the Challenge of Geography*, 28.
4. Bertelsen, *GPU Repressions of Zionists*, 1085.

5. Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 325.

6. Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets*, 234.

7. Gioe and Manganello, *A Tale of Two Clocks*, 5.

8. Skladanowski, *The Myth of Russian Exceptionalism*, 423.

9. Orhan, *The Effects of the Russia-Ukraine War on Global Trade*, 141; Steinbach, *The Russia–Ukraine War and Global Trade Reallocations*, 226.

10. Gong, *Ethnic Identity and Identification with the Majority Group*, 503.

11. Ashmore, Jussim, and Wilder, *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*; Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*; Bochsler, Green, and Jenne, *Exchange on the Quantitative Measurement of Ethnic and National Identity*, 30.

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13. McCrone and Bechhofer. *Understanding National Identity*, 129.

14. Wodak et al. *Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 38.

15. Ashmore, Jussim, and Wilder. *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*, 22.

16. Clark and Caffarella, *An Update on Adult Development Theory*.

17. Chandra, *What is Ethnic Identity and Does It Matter?* 400.

18. Mastrotheodoros, Kornienko, and Umaña-Taylor, *Developmental Interplay between Ethnic, National, and Personal Identity in Immigrant Adolescents*, 1126.

19. Biswas, *W(h)ither the Nation-state? National and State Identity in the Face of Fragmentation and Globalisation*, 175.

20. Waechter, *Introduction to the Construction and the Interplay of European, National and Ethnic Identities in Central and Eastern Europe*, 635.

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22. Stokes, Lampe, and Rusinow, *Instant History*, 160.

23. Caplan and Torpey. *Documenting Individual Identity*.

24. Bonomi, Gennaioli, and Tabellini, *Identity, Beliefs, and Political Conflict*, 2371.

25. Gustavsson and Miller, *Liberal Nationalism and Its Critics*.

26. Rose, *Which People's War?*

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29. Grady, *The German-Jewish Soldiers of the First World War in History and Memory*.

30. Fine, *Jewish integration in the German army in the First World War*.

31. Budnitskii, *Soviet Jews in World War II*.

32. Moore, *GI Jews*.

33. Mendelsohn, *Jewish Soldiers in the Civil War*, 5.

34. Fine, *Jewish integration in the German army in the First World War*, 19.

35. Budnitskii, *Soviet Jews in World War II*, 66.

36. Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation*, 84.

37. Kostyrchenko, *Тайная политика Сталина: власть и антисемитизм* [Stalin's Secret Policy: Power and Antisemitism], 388.

38. Fomenko, *Brand New Ukraine? Cultural Icons and National Identity in Times of War*, 223.

39. Sapritsky, *Negotiating Traditions*, 54.

40. Yelenskyi, *The Resurrection of Jewish Religion at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries*, 54.

41. Gitelman, *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine: An Uncertain Ethnicity*, 56.

42. Khanin, *Between Eurasia and Europe*, 61.

43. DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population," 345–414.

44. Watenmaker, *Building Bridges, Creating Community*, 78.

45. Gitelman, Glants, and Goldman, *Jewish Life After the USSR*, 67.

46. Chernin, *Spiritual Potential of the Communal Revival*, 103.

47. Ro'I, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 34.

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53. "Донецкие евреи боятся Путина" [Donetsk Jews are Afraid of Putin]. *BBC News*, April 19, 2014.

54. Shchupak, "*Уроки Голокосту в українській історичній науці та освіті: від наративу до осмислення й постановки суспільного питання про покаяння (до 75-ї річниці трагедії Бабиного Яру)* [Lessons of the Holocaust in Ukrainian Historical Science and Education: From Narrative to Understanding and Posing the Question on Repentance (to the 75th Anniversary of the Babyn Yar Tragedy)], 176.

55. Shekhovtsov and Umland, The Maidan and Beyond, 58–63.

56. Gaufman, *Memory, Media, and Securitization*, 141.

57. Kulyk, *Ukrainian Nationalism Since the Outbreak of Euromaidan*, 94.

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59. Nelson, *Hebrew Payot, Hems, and Tassels*, 78.

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62. Radchenko, *How Does Jewish Identity Relate to Modern-Day Ukrainian Identity?* 37.

63. Chervenyak, *National Minorities and Indigenous Peoples of Ukraine in the Fight Against the Aggressor After 24.02.2022*, 213.

64. 'The Spectator. Putin's Declaration of War in Ukraine." February 24, 2022.

65. Dragas, *Russism – New Nazism. Denazifying Denazifier: Neo-Nazis as the Only International Support for Putin's Aggression on Ukraine*, 5.

66. Rossoliński-Liebe and Willems, *Putin's Abuse of History: Ukrainian "Nazis', 'Genocide", and a Fake Threat Scenario*, 15.

67. Kuzio, *Vladimir Putin's Ukrainian Genocide Is Proceeding in Plain View*, 90.

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69. Onuch, *European Ukrainians and Their Fight Against Russian Invasion*, 53.

70. The authors of the manuscript have applied for and obtained Institutional Review Board approval from the Ethics Committee of Ariel University to conduct the interviews.

71. Maffey and Smith, *Women's Participation in the Jordanian Military and Police: An Exploration of Perceptions and Aspirations*, 46.

72. Arel, *Interpreting 'Nationality' and 'Language' in the 2001 Ukrainian Census*, 215.

73. Grossman and Zavadivker, *Ukraine Without Jews*, 15.

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річниці трагедії Бабиного Яру) [Lessons of the Holocaust in Ukrainian Historical Science and Education: From Narrative to Understanding and Posing the Question on Repentance (to the 75th Anniversary of the Babyn Yar Tragedy)], 176.

75. Melamed, *Organized and Unsolicited Collaboration in the Holocaust*, 217.
76. Ripp, *Ukraine's Nazi Problem Is Real, Even If Putin's 'Denazification' Claim Isn't.*
77. Crstocea, *Stepan Bandera: The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist. Fascism, Genocide, and Cult*, 117.
78. Saxe, Shain, and Phillips, *Understanding the Jewish Identity and Experiences of Russian-Speaking Young Adults.*
79. "У них було багато планів, ідей та мрій. Історії ровесників Незалежності, які загинули за Україну" [They Had a Lot of Plans, Ideas and Dreams. Stories of Independence Peers Who Died for Ukraine]. *Ukrainian Truth of Life*, August 23, 2023.
80. Pfanner, *Military Uniforms and the Law of War*, 93.
81. Sokal, *Biblical Ban on Tattoos*, 82.
82. Moore, *GI Jews*, 38.

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