



From Historical Myths to Modern Narratives: Antisemitism in the Context of the Russian-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

This paper examines the adaptation and proliferation of antisemitic narratives on Telegram during the Russian-Ukrainian war, tracing their evolution from historical myths to digital propaganda. Through a qualitative analysis of Telegram channels in Russian and Ukrainian, we explore how classical antisemitic tropes such as conspiracy theories about Jewish global control, Holocaust denial, and accusations of dual loyalty are repurposed to shift blame for the war onto Jews. Our findings reveal a multilayered process of blame-shifting operating across historical, social, national, and global levels, positioning Jews as instigators of conflict to deflect civic and political responsibility from Russians and Ukrainians. We argue that this antisemitic rhetoric serves as a tool of social manipulation and political deflection, embedded in diverse nationalist and conspiratorial digital environments. By embedding these narratives within Telegram's unregulated and virally oriented ecosystem, content creators amplify prejudice, erode social cohesion, and perpetuate cycles of mistrust and scapegoating. This study highlights the enduring power of antisemitic myths in contemporary digital conflict narratives and calls for further research into the structural mechanisms enabling their spread.

Keywords Antisemitism · Telegram · Ukraine · Russia · Eastern Europe · Historical memory · Propaganda

Introduction

The Russian-Ukrainian war has become more than a battlefield for competing geopolitical interests. It has also become a potent arena for the resurgence and adaptation of old prejudices, most notably antisemitism. While antisemitic narratives have long shaped collective memory and social imaginaries in Eastern Europe, the digital ecosystem, particularly the encrypted messaging app Telegram, has created new pathways for their amplification. In this study, we investigate how antisemitic discourse has evolved during the war, focusing on how actors across different nationalist, conspiratorial, and political environments deploy these

narratives to shift blame and frame Jews as destabilizing agents in a time of national crisis.

Antisemitism has historically surged during periods of social and political instability, when societal actors seek scapegoats for hardship, disorder, and war. From religiously based discrimination and medieval accusations of ritual murder to pseudo-scientific Nazi hierarchies and Soviet-era conspiracies about “Zionist” sabotage, Jews have been positioned as convenient targets for blame in Eastern European historical narratives (Beller, 2015). The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict offers a compelling context for analyzing how these tropes are reactivated and reshaped in the digital age. Recent scholarship has highlighted the extent to which the war is fought not only on the battlefield but also through competing narratives about history, identity, and political legitimacy (Plokhly, 2023). At the same time, monitoring organizations such as StopFake (StopFake, n.d.), Detector Media (Detector Media, n.d.), and the Institute of Mass Information (Institute of Mass Information, n.d.) have documented the sustained circulation of disinformation aimed at undermining Ukrainian statehood, institutions, and national identity. While much of the existing literature has focused on geopolitical propaganda, disinformation campaigns, and

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information warfare on digital platforms (Gentile, 2023; Trzun, Lucić, and Gracin, 2024), less attention has been devoted to the role of antisemitic narratives within these broader discursive struggles. This omission is particularly important given the historical adaptability of antisemitic tropes and their capacity to provide simplified explanations, identify external enemies, and redirect responsibility during periods of conflict and uncertainty.

This paper contributes to that gap by examining several Telegram channels, ranging from overtly antisemitic platforms to those that embed antisemitic content within broader nationalist or conspiratorial rhetoric. Drawing on qualitative discourse analysis of textual posts, memes, visual materials, and comment threads published between March 2022 and September 2025, the study traces the adaptation of historical antisemitic myths, such as the Khazarian hypothesis, accusations of disloyalty, and Jewish world domination, to the specific conditions of war. It also interrogates the extent to which such narratives function not only to incite hatred but also to redirect civic and political accountability from Russians and Ukrainians onto Jewish individuals and communities.

The findings demonstrate that while some channels propagate antisemitism as a core ideological mission, others incorporate it more subtly, interweaving anti-Jewish rhetoric with appeals to Slavic unity, anti-globalism, historical revisionism, or nationalist grievance. This diffusion complicates straightforward assessments of influence and raises broader questions about the role of antisemitism in contemporary digital propaganda. Rather than claiming a uniform rise in antisemitism across all sectors of society, this study examines how antisemitic discourse circulates within specific digital environments, how it is framed, and what political and communicative functions it performs in the context of war.

By situating contemporary online narratives within a broader historical and theoretical framework spanning the politics of memory, invented traditions, conspiracy narratives, and social media virality, the paper illuminates the enduring power of antisemitism as both a political instrument and a cultural logic. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how historical prejudice is repackaged for contemporary audiences and how digital platforms function not only as channels of information, but also as arenas in which blame, identity, legitimacy, and collective memory are actively contested during periods of crisis.

Methodology

The research focuses on five Telegram channels operating in Russian and Ukrainian languages. Channel selection was guided by a multi-stage purposive sampling strategy designed to identify digital environments in which

antisemitic narratives were articulated, circulated, and adapted within the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Telegram channels were identified through keyword-based searches conducted in Russian and Ukrainian using terms associated with antisemitic discourse and conspiracy narratives, including “евреи” (Jews), “жид” (antisemitic slur), “Хазария” (Khazaria), “сионисты” (Zionists), “антисемитизм” (antisemitism), and Holocaust-related terminology. The initial search yielded 56 potentially relevant public Telegram channels.

These channels were subsequently screened according to five inclusion criteria: (1) sustained engagement with issues related to the Russian-Ukrainian war; (2) recurring rather than isolated manifestations of antisemitic discourse; (3) public accessibility of channel content; (4) continued activity during the period under examination; and (5) evidence of audience engagement or discursive relevance, assessed through subscriber numbers, average post views, repost activity, or integration into wider Telegram discussion networks.

During the screening process, 49 channels were excluded because they contained only isolated references to antisemitism without sustained or recurring narrative patterns related to the Russian-Ukrainian war or otherwise failed to satisfy the inclusion criteria. The remaining five channels constituted the final analytical sample.

Following the screening process, the remaining five channels constituted the final analytical sample. The sample was selected to maximize variation in language, ideological orientation, audience size, and intensity of antisemitic discourse. It included Russian- and Ukrainian-language channels representing pro-Russian, Ukrainian nationalist, pan-Slavic, conspiratorial, and far-right discursive environments, encompassing both explicitly antisemitic communities and channels in which antisemitic narratives appeared episodically within broader political, nationalist, or conspiratorial discussions. The inclusion of ideologically diverse channels was consistent with the study’s comparative focus, as antisemitic narratives may emerge from different political and ideological environments and perform distinct communicative functions. The diversity of the sample enabled a comparative examination of how similar antisemitic motifs were articulated, adapted, and mobilized across different ideological environments and communicative contexts.

Posts published between March 2022 and September 2025 were examined in order to focus on wartime discourse. More than 500 posts were initially reviewed across the five selected Telegram channels. Of these, more than 200 posts containing explicit or implicit references to Jews, Jewish identity, Zionism, Holocaust-related themes, or antisemitic conspiracy narratives were included in the final analytical corpus. The corpus consisted of textual posts, memes, visual materials, and other communicative artifacts. Materials

from the selected channels were systematically collected, archived, and organized using digital data-management tools and manual qualitative coding procedures. In order to ensure transparency and traceability, materials from the selected Telegram channels were downloaded and preserved as digital archives. For each item included in the analytical corpus, the channel source, publication date, and original post link were recorded where available. Ethical and safety considerations informed decisions regarding the reproduction of content and the identification of individual users.

All posts included in the analytical corpus were coded manually. The coding procedure combined deductive and inductive approaches. An initial coding framework was developed on the basis of existing scholarship on antisemitism and included categories such as conspiracy theories, Holocaust distortion, the Khazar hypothesis, accusations of Jewish disloyalty, anti-Zionist framings with antisemitic content, and globalist narratives. Additional thematic sub-categories emerged through the iterative analysis of the collected material. To enhance analytical transparency and rigor, the dataset was reviewed in multiple coding rounds. Following the initial coding stage, the corpus was re-examined to refine category boundaries, assess the coherence of emerging themes, and ensure the systematic interpretation of recurrent narrative patterns. Coding decisions and thematic refinements were documented throughout the research process, creating an audit trail that supported methodological transparency and the consistent application of the coding framework across all five case-study channels.

Telegram was chosen for this study due to its unique combination of features that make it a fertile ground for unregulated hate speech and extremist discourse, including anonymous user identities, channel-based broadcasting, rapid forwarding mechanisms, and minimal content moderation. Its popularity in Eastern Europe and extensive use by both Russian and Ukrainian actors during the war further amplify its role as a key platform for the circulation and normalization of antisemitic narratives (Topor, 2023).

The analysis was structured around two key dimensions:

1. **Narrative Functionality:** What role does antisemitic discourse play within each channel — for example, scapegoating, historical revisionism, political delegitimization, symbolic boundary-marking, or blame-shifting?
2. **Rhetorical Form:** How are these messages communicated — through memes, textual commentaries, pseudo-academic references, slurs, coded language, visual symbolism, or conspiratorial framing?

Building upon the coding framework described above, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns across the collected corpus. These motifs included conspiracy theories, Holocaust distortion, the Khazar

hypothesis, accusations of Jewish disloyalty, globalist narratives, anti-Zionist framings with antisemitic content, and claims of Jewish responsibility for contemporary political developments. Posts were categorized according to these thematic clusters, and their recurrence was tracked across the five case-study channels. Selected examples were translated and contextualized in order to illustrate narrative structures, rhetorical strategies, and ideological framing.

In terms of limitations and scope, the study is exploratory in nature and does not claim to represent all antisemitic discourse on Telegram or across Russian and Ukrainian digital ecosystems. Its findings are limited to five case-study channels and should be interpreted within that context. Moreover, while the study highlights thematic patterns and discursive mechanisms, it does not include sentiment analysis or psychological profiling of content consumers, who largely remain anonymous on Telegram. Nor does it attempt to quantify the impact of antisemitic content on broader public opinion. However, by linking the historical evolution of antisemitic tropes with their contemporary digital manifestations, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how antisemitism is mobilized, adapted, and instrumentalized in wartime narratives.

Historical Roots of Antisemitism in Eastern Europe

Antisemitic narratives in Eastern Europe are deeply embedded in the region's political, cultural, and religious history. For centuries before the digital age, these narratives functioned as tools of social control, identity construction, and blame allocation, resurfacing with renewed intensity during periods of upheaval. Understanding their historical foundations is essential to grasp how such tropes have been revived and adapted within contemporary digital platforms like Telegram during the Russian-Ukrainian war (Govrin, 2003; Gheorghe, 2020; Reisigl and Wodak, 2005).

From the medieval period onward, antisemitic myths became central features of Christian-majority societies across Eastern Europe. The most notorious among them was the blood libel — the false accusation that Jews murdered Christian children for ritual purposes. With well-documented cases emerging in twelfth-century England, this narrative found persistent resonance in Eastern Europe from the fifteenth century onward, fueling discrimination, pogroms, expulsion orders, and popular hostility. Over time, the blood libel became a flexible accusation, invoked during plagues, famines, or political crises to justify collective violence against Jewish communities (Avrutin et al., 2017; Fox & Topor, 2021; Johnson, 2012).

By the nineteenth century, these religiously motivated myths were supplemented by modern political conspiracy

theories, particularly the idea of Jewish world domination. This theory, often underpinned by fabricated texts such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*¹, cast Jews as omnipotent actors controlling banking systems, media networks, and revolutionary movements. In the Russian Empire, such narratives were institutionalized in official policy and state-sanctioned press and propaganda. The 1881–1882 pogroms in Ukraine and southern Russia, sparked in part by rumors that Jews orchestrated the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, marked a shift from spontaneous violence to organized and tacitly endorsed persecution (Aronson, 2010).

This fusion of religious demonization and secular conspiracy would shape antisemitic violence for decades. During the Russian Civil War (1917–1923), for example, Jews were scapegoated from both the left and the right: demonized as “bourgeois exploiters” by radical anarchists and accused of Bolshevik treachery by counterrevolutionary forces. Antisemitism in Eastern Europe thus evolved not as a single ideology but as a malleable discourse, adaptable to divergent political contexts (Gitelman, 2001; Budnitskii, 2012).

The Soviet period added further layers of complexity. Although state antisemitism was rarely overt, anti-Zionist campaigns in the postwar decades often blurred into thinly veiled antisemitism, particularly during Stalin’s “rootless cosmopolitan” purges and later in official rhetoric about Jewish “dual loyalty.” At the same time, memory of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, where millions of Jews were murdered, was repressed, distorted, or selectively remembered to fit national myths of victimhood or resistance (Apor et al., 2019; Tabarovsky, 2022). Such processes are closely related to what the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 2013) defines as Holocaust denial and distortion, including attempts to minimize, misrepresent, or obscure the historical reality of the Holocaust and the responsibility of its perpetrators. As Bauer has argued, Holocaust distortion should be understood not merely as a factual error but as a broader manipulation of historical memory that reshapes public understandings of the past and its contemporary significance (IHRA, 2022). This perspective is consistent with a broader body of scholarship on Holocaust remembrance emphasizing that collective memory is continually contested, reinterpreted, and mobilized within contemporary political and cultural debates (Lipstadt, 1993; Rothberg, 2009; Assmann, 2011a, b).

These debates have also given rise to scholarship on what has been termed “secondary antisemitism,” namely forms

of antisemitic discourse that emerge not despite Holocaust remembrance but in reaction to it. Rather than denying the Holocaust outright, such narratives question the legitimacy of its commemoration or portray references to antisemitism, historical persecution, and Jewish victimhood as instruments of political influence, moral privilege, or historical manipulation (Heni, 2008). In Eastern Europe, where public debates over wartime collaboration, national responsibility, and the legacy of the Holocaust remain deeply contested, accusations that Jews “exploit” historical suffering or derive political advantage from collective memory have become recurring elements of nationalist and revisionist discourse (Stoegner, 2018). Within such narratives, remembrance itself becomes the object of suspicion, while claims about antisemitism are reframed as attempts to silence criticism, delegitimize national communities, or secure symbolic and political benefits (Rensmann, 2017).

In post-Soviet contexts, antisemitic myths persisted in collective memory, reinforced by historical realities, folklore, and nationalist revisionism. As scholars such as Paul Hanebrink (2018) and Jeffrey Veidlinger (2024) have shown, antisemitism has historically reemerged during moments of economic volatility, regime change, or national redefinition, precisely the conditions present in Ukraine since 2014 (Bagno-Moldavski, 2020). Hanebrink’s notion of “Judeo-Bolshevism,” the belief that Jews are responsible for Communist oppression, has been especially influential in far-right narratives across the region, allowing antisemitic tropes to fuse with broader anxieties about identity, sovereignty, and historical justice.

These historical narratives persist today in digital form, reconfigured into memes, coded language, and pseudo-historical claims circulating on platforms like Telegram. Myths such as the *Khazar hypothesis*², the idea that Ashkenazi Jews descend from a Turkic tribe rather than biblical Israel, are now used to delegitimize Jewish identity and territorial claims of modern Israel. This digital reincarnation demonstrates how long-standing antisemitic tropes are selectively revived, modernized, and weaponized in today’s information wars, echoing familiar patterns of scapegoating while leveraging the affordances of online anonymity, virality, and ideological echo chambers (Rosenfeld, 2019).

In sum, the historical legacy of antisemitism in Eastern Europe provides the symbolic and rhetorical reservoir from

¹ The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a fabricated antisemitic text, first published in Russia in the early twentieth century, falsely purporting to reveal a Jewish conspiracy for global domination (De Michelis, 2004).

² The *Khazar hypothesis* is a fringe historical theory claiming that Ashkenazi Jews are predominantly descended from the Khazars — a Turkic people who established a powerful kingdom in the Caucasus region and converted to Judaism during the eighth or ninth century CE. Although this notion was popularized by Arthur Koestler’s book *The Thirteenth Tribe* (1976), it has been extensively refuted by both historical scholarship and genetic research. It nonetheless continues to be invoked by some as a means to question Jewish historical and territorial claims.

which contemporary narratives of blame are drawn. These myths are not simply inherited but deliberately reactivated, particularly during moments of national crisis, making them a central component of digital conflict discourse in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Conceptual Framework: Historical Memory, Crisis Narratives, and Social Media

To understand how antisemitic narratives have been used and adapted during the Russian-Ukrainian war, this study draws on a conceptual framework that combines the sociology of historical memory, the politics of crisis narratives, and the affordances of digital communication. This interdisciplinary lens allows for an analysis of not only what is being said in online spaces, but how, why, and through which mechanisms certain forms of prejudice are mobilized and made resonant in wartime discourse.

Historical memory is not simply a record of the past, but a dynamic process through which societies construct, transmit, and reshape their collective understanding of history. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) conceptualized memory as inherently social, maintained within groups and institutions that interpret past events in line with present concerns. Jan Assmann (2011a, b) distinguishes between “communicative memory,” based on lived, interpersonal recollections, and “cultural memory,” which is codified in texts, symbols, and rituals. These frameworks underscore the role of historical memory in shaping group identity, intergroup boundaries, and political legitimacy.

The selective remembrance of history becomes especially potent in times of crisis. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s (1983) notion of “invented traditions” describes how societies construct idealized pasts to respond to contemporary instability. These traditions often rely on mythologized narratives: heroic resistance, collective victimhood, or historical betrayal, that serve as moral reference points. Such narratives are transmitted and ritualized through institutions like education, media, and political discourse, producing forms of “chronopolitics”: the strategic manipulation of time and politics, to link the present to an idealized or vilified past (Olick & Robinson, 1998; Esposito & Becker, 2023).

In Eastern Europe, antisemitism is tightly intertwined with these processes. Myths such as “Judeo-Bolshevism,” “Zionist betrayal,” or the Khazarian hypothesis are not merely remnants of outdated ideology; they are discursive tools embedded in long-standing traditions of historical distortion. These tropes are periodically reactivated to explain contemporary crises, assign blame, and police the boundaries of national identity (Nelson, 2014; Hanebrink, 2018).

Periods of societal upheaval—war, economic collapse, regime change—are fertile ground for what this paper terms crisis narratives: explanatory frameworks that reduce complex events to moralized, simplified stories of cause, victimhood, and betrayal. Antisemitism frequently operates within such frameworks, offering a ready-made scapegoat whose historical “guilt” can be repurposed for current anxieties (Beller, 2015).

Research on conspiracy theories suggests that such narratives become particularly appealing under conditions of uncertainty and perceived lack of control, as they offer explanatory frameworks that help individuals make sense of complex, unpredictable, or unsettling events (Barkun, 2013; Cichocka et al., 2016). According to Douglas, conspiracy beliefs are often driven by epistemic motives, including the desire for understanding and certainty, as well as existential motives related to control and security (Douglas et al., 2019). In periods of war and political instability, conspiracy narratives can therefore provide seemingly coherent explanations for rapidly changing realities while simultaneously identifying specific actors as responsible for collective hardship. This dynamic helps explain the persistence and appeal of antisemitic conspiracy narratives during the Russian-Ukrainian war, where Jews are frequently portrayed as hidden beneficiaries, manipulators, or instigators of political and military developments.

Scholars have long observed that blame-shifting onto Jews emerges most forcefully during structural breakdowns. In such moments, Jews are cast not merely as an ethnic or religious minority, but as an omnipresent “other” who allegedly undermines social cohesion, profits from war, or manipulates national outcomes from behind the scenes (Fox & Topor, 2021; Bartov, 1998). These narratives operate across multiple levels, with the historical myths acting as the base—local, national, and global—and are characterized by internal contradictions that make them highly adaptable.

A recurring feature of antisemitic discourse is its ability to assign contradictory roles to Jews depending on the political and ideological demands of a particular context. As scholars have noted, Jews have historically been portrayed simultaneously as proponents of communism and agents of global capitalism, as politically rootless cosmopolitans and as members of tightly coordinated national or ethnic networks (Johnson, 2021; Hanebrink, 2018). Similar contradictions are evident in contemporary narratives surrounding the Russian-Ukrainian war. On the one hand, Russian official rhetoric justifies the invasion through claims of “denazification,” portraying Ukraine as a state allegedly dominated by extremist nationalism. On the other hand, antisemitic narratives depict Ukraine’s Jewish president as evidence of hidden Jewish influence or control. Rather than undermining these narratives, such contradictions increase their adaptability by allowing different actors to mobilize antisemitic tropes for distinct political purposes. The coexistence of

these claims demonstrates that antisemitic narratives function less as coherent explanations of reality than as flexible frameworks for assigning blame, delegitimizing opponents, and interpreting political conflict.

In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, these logics have been reactivated. President Volodymyr Zelensky's Jewish identity, for example, has been exploited both to deny the existence of Ukrainian nationalism by pro-Kremlin voices and to affirm claims of Jewish betrayal by far-right Ukrainian groups (Fedorenko, 2023). Such paradoxes are not errors in logic but features of the scapegoating process, designed to accommodate shifting political needs while preserving a consistent enemy image.

Social Media as a Memory Machine and Ideological Amplifier

Digital platforms like Telegram have dramatically altered how historical memory and crisis narratives are constructed and disseminated. Unlike traditional institutions of memory, such as museums, schools, and archives, social media operate as real-time, decentralized, and largely unmoderated spaces where historical claims and ideological content circulate with little accountability (Topor, 2023). This transformation is central to what Andrew Hoskins calls the “new memory ecology,” in which the boundary between past and present collapses under the pressures of virality, emotion, and algorithmic amplification (Hoskins, 2016). Telegram is particularly significant in this context because its communicative architecture combines visibility, persistence, and limited accountability. Unlike more heavily moderated platforms, Telegram allows public channels to function as broadcast infrastructures while also enabling semi-closed communities, anonymous participation, and rapid cross-channel forwarding. These affordances are especially conducive to the circulation of antisemitic and conspiratorial content because they allow narratives to move quickly across ideological networks while remaining embedded in communities where they are rarely challenged (Beinart, 2024). The persistence of channel archives further enables older antisemitic tropes, pseudo-historical claims, and visual materials to be repeatedly retrieved, reposted, and recontextualized in response to new wartime developments. In this sense, Telegram does not merely host antisemitic discourse; it helps structure the conditions under which such discourse becomes durable, repeatable, and socially resonant (Weimann, 2024).

On digital platforms, antisemitic narratives are repackaged as memes, pseudo-historical infographics, and conspiratorial rants, formats that are short, evocative, and easily shareable. They draw on existing historical myths while adapting their language and symbolism for contemporary audiences, often blending global conspiracy theories with regionally specific tropes (Topor, 2023). Drawing on the concept

of “transnational memory” (Rigney, 2014), one can trace how antisemitic content moves fluidly across linguistic and national frontiers, synthesizing anti-Zionist, anti-Western, and ultranationalist themes into a shared discursive pattern.

Moreover, the architectural affordances of contemporary digital platforms, including but not limited to Telegram, facilitate the proliferation of such content. Platform-specific features, such as user anonymity, closed or semi-closed communicative environments, mechanisms for frictionless content dissemination, and minimal algorithmic content moderation, contribute to ideological insularity and the formation of narrative echo chambers. Within these digital contexts, antisemitism functions simultaneously as a marker of collective identity and as a flexible explanatory framework for interpreting wartime disruptions and sociopolitical uncertainty.

Jewish Identity in Ukraine: National Belonging and External Blame

Jewish identity in Ukraine has long existed at the intersection of integration and exclusion, loyalty and suspicion. Historically shaped by imperial rule, forced assimilation, revolution, genocide, and migration, Ukrainian Jewish life reflects both the resilience of minority existence and the vulnerabilities of being a frequent target of nationalist scapegoating. The Russian-Ukrainian war has made this intersection newly visible, transforming Jewish identity into a symbolic terrain over which both domestic and foreign narratives compete, often in contradictory ways (Iermakov et al., 2024).

Jews have been part of the Ukrainian landscape for over a millennium, with thriving communities in Kyiv, Odessa, Lviv, and Dnipro long before the emergence of a modern Ukrainian state (Magocsi, 2010). In the tsarist period, they were restricted to the Pale of Settlement and subjected to regular pogroms; under Soviet rule, they were both elevated as internationalist symbols and persecuted as “rootless cosmopolitans” (Grüner, 2016). Despite this, Jewish Ukrainians contributed significantly to national culture, science, and politics, while grappling with the challenges of dual identification in a society often marked by shifting ideological boundaries and ethnic tensions (Magocsi and Petrovskiĭ-Shtern, 2016; Gitelman, 2001).

In independent Ukraine, Jewish identity has undergone a process of redefinition. Since the 1990s, and especially after the 2014 *Euromaidan protests*³, Jewish communities

³ The *Euromaidan protests* refer to a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in Ukraine (November 2013 – February 2014), triggered by the government's suspension of the EU Association Agreement and escalating into a broader movement for democracy, anti-corruption, and alignment with Europe (Wilson, 2014).

have become increasingly visible participants in Ukraine's democratic project. The election of Volodymyr Zelensky, a president with Jewish roots, in 2019 marked a watershed moment. His overwhelming electoral victory (73% of the national vote) was broadly viewed as reflecting reduced antisemitic sentiment within Ukrainian society and a societal openness toward Jewish political leadership (Nyquist et al., 2020; Marchenko, 2020). In this context, Jewish identity has increasingly aligned with Ukrainian national identity, particularly among secular Jews who embrace pro-European, anti-authoritarian values.

At the same time, this identification remains precarious. Surveys and community reports indicate that while overt antisemitism in Ukraine is comparatively marginal, latent stereotypes persist. These include lingering associations between Jews and Soviet repression or cosmopolitan disloyalty—narratives that remain available for political mobilization, particularly among the far right (Paulovičová and Soroka, 2024). Jewish Ukrainians often find themselves navigating a delicate balance between historical trauma and national solidarity, especially as war once again reshapes the meanings of citizenship, loyalty, and belonging.

Externally, Jewish identity in Ukraine has become a rhetorical tool for Russian state propaganda and nationalist activists, both to undermine Ukraine's legitimacy and to deflect criticism of Russian aggression. The most prominent example is the Kremlin's invocation of "denazification" as a justification for its invasion—an inherently contradictory claim, given that Ukraine's head of state is of Jewish origin. Russian officials, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, have attempted to resolve this contradiction by advancing antisemitic theories that suggest Zelensky's identity is irrelevant, or even proves his complicity, because, as Lavrov stated, "Hitler also had Jewish blood" (TOI, 2022). This grotesque distortion of history reflects a broader strategy which is to exploit Jewish identity not to protect Jews, but to cast suspicion on them and the Ukrainian state alike.

This rhetorical maneuver serves multiple functions. Internationally, it aims to sow confusion about Ukrainian nationalism by implying an overlap between Ukrainian resistance and fascist ideology. Internally, it plays into long-standing antisemitic tropes within Russian political culture, where Jews are alternately portrayed as oligarchic elites exerting hidden control or subversive agents. These strategies reveal a persistent ambivalence toward Jews in Russian official discourse, in which Jewish identity is alternately marginalized, instrumentalized, or portrayed as a threat, depending on the demands of political expediency (Gershovich, 2023).

The apparent contradiction between portraying Ukraine as a "Nazi" state while simultaneously depicting its Jewish president as part of a Jewish conspiracy is not necessarily a weakness of these narratives but one of their defining features. As studies of Russian wartime propaganda have

noted, references to the "denazification" of Ukraine coexist with attempts to frame Zelensky's Jewish identity through antisemitic stereotypes and conspiracy narratives (Detector Media, 2023; Rose, 2022). These seemingly contradictory claims often operate within different discursive registers and address different political objectives. While the "Nazi Ukraine" narrative seeks to legitimize Russian military action and delegitimize Ukrainian statehood, antisemitic portrayals of Zelensky position him as evidence of hidden external influence or elite manipulation. More broadly, this paradox reflects a characteristic feature of conspiratorial and antisemitic thinking, in which internal consistency is less important than the ability to explain complex political realities through personalized and symbolically powerful enemies. In this framework, Zelensky's Jewish identity can be mobilized simultaneously as evidence of alleged Jewish control and as part of broader narratives depicting Ukraine as politically illegitimate.

Within Ukraine itself, fringe far-right movements have continued to engage in antisemitic scapegoating, especially in digital spaces. On social media platforms, Ukrainian nationalist channels such as *Banderivska Kytsia* (Бандерівська Киця) on Telegram circulate subtle forms of antisemitism, often framed as rebuttals to Jewish historical accusations, particularly those involving Ukrainian complicity in the Holocaust. This strategy recasts Jews as instigators of division and dishonor, accusing them of unfairly maligning the Ukrainian nation and weaponizing history for foreign interests. While such views are not representative of mainstream Ukrainian politics or society, their presence on social media platforms demonstrates how Jewish identity can be leveraged as a foil in narratives of national victimhood or purity.

At the same time, many Jewish Ukrainians are actively participating in Ukraine's resistance, both symbolically and literally. Jewish soldiers serve in the armed forces; Jewish organizations support displaced persons and civil society initiatives; and Jewish public figures contribute to the national conversation. This active engagement reinforces the narrative, widely held within Ukraine, that Jewishness and Ukrainianness are not in opposition, but mutually reinforcing identities (Iermakov et al., 2024).

Antisemitism on Telegram During the Russian-Ukrainian War

Social media platforms have become influential tools for communication during the Russian-Ukrainian war. Telegram, in particular, due to its relative anonymity, minimal content moderation, and channel-based broadcast system, offers a uniquely permissive environment for both nationalist propaganda and extremist rhetoric, including

Table 1 Telegram channels disseminating antisemitic narratives (sampled channels)

Channel	Orientation	Primary language	Subscribers (September 2025)	Antisemitism level	Link
<i>New Khazar Khaganate</i>	Pro-Russian/anti-Zionist	Russian	248	Central theme	https://t.me/newkhasarkhaganat
<i>Za Slavian</i>	Pan-Slavic/conspiratorial	Russian	20,881	Recurrent motif	https://t.me/Za_Slavian
<i>Banderivska Kytsia</i>	Ukrainian nationalist	Ukrainian	2214	Subtle/deflective	https://t.me/banderakitty
<i>National Kuchmizm</i>	Far-right/neo-Nazi	Ukrainian	7200	Frequent and explicit	https://t.me/hitler777
<i>DUX_Europe</i>	Ultra-nationalist	Ukrainian	1245	Occasional, coded	https://t.me/DUX_Europe

antisemitism. This section examines how antisemitic discourse operates across selected Telegram channels, focusing on its thematic patterns, rhetorical strategies, and overall prominence within broader wartime narratives (Afanasiev et al., 2023).

Thus, this study analyzes five Telegram channels identified through keyword-based searches in Russian and Ukrainian using terms such as “Jews,” *zhyd* (a slur), “Khazaria,” and “Holocaust.” Selected through purposive sampling, these channels vary in orientation, language, audience size, and degree of antisemitic focus, as presented in Table 1.

Although similar antisemitic motifs appeared across all five channels, their discursive functions varied considerably. In pro-Russian conspiratorial environments, antisemitic narratives primarily served to externalize responsibility for the war and to portray Ukraine as subject to hidden external control. In Ukrainian nationalist and far-right channels, antisemitic themes were more frequently linked to historical

revisionism, identity boundary-making, and contestation over collective memory. Pan-Slavic and conspiratorial communities, by contrast, tended to integrate antisemitic tropes into broader anti-globalist and anti-Western explanatory frameworks. These findings suggest that antisemitism on Telegram operates less as a single ideological phenomenon than as a flexible repertoire of narratives adapted to different political and communicative contexts. Taken together, these findings distinguish between the empirical recurrence of antisemitic motifs across the sampled channels and the broader theoretical implication that such motifs function as adaptable frameworks of blame.

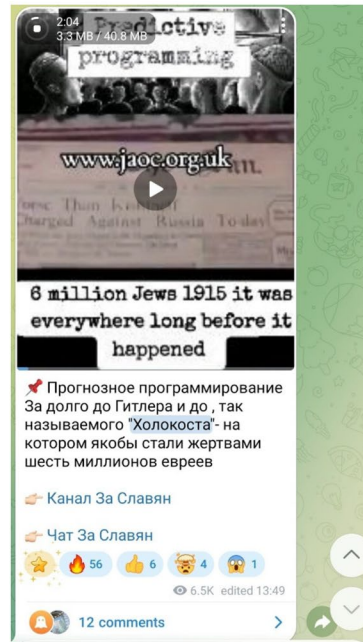
While only New Khazar Khaganate is explicitly and consistently antisemitic, the remaining channels incorporate antisemitic tropes to varying degrees within broader political, nationalist, or conspiratorial narratives. Common tropes identified across the corpus included the Khazar theory, Holocaust denial, globalist plots, blame-shifting, anti-Zionism,

Fig. 1 Screenshot from Za Slavian Channel (April 6, 2025): Antisemitic conspiracy narrative portraying the Russian-Ukrainian War as orchestrated by Jewish actors. Translation from Russian: Putin and Zelensky belong to the same sect—Chabad. Any normal and sane person should be ashamed to follow the wishes and orders of these two Chabad adherents



Translation from Russian: Putin and Zelensky belong to the same sect – Chabad. Any normal and sane person should be ashamed to follow the wishes and orders of these two Chabad adherents.

Fig. 2 Screenshot of a Telegram post in *Za Slavian* promoting Holocaust denial narratives (September 12, 2023). Translation from Russian: Predictive programming. Long before Hitler and before the so-called Holocaust—in which six million Jews allegedly became victims



Translation from Russian: Predictive programming. Long before Hitler and before the so-called “Holocaust” – in which six million Jews allegedly became victims.

Jewish power, victim reversal, and historical deflection. Analysis of the final corpus of more than 200 antisemitic posts collected across these channels between March 2022 and September 2025 reveals four recurring themes:

1. Global Jewish Conspiracy Theories

Channels such as *Za Slavian* and *New Khazar Khaganate* portray Jews as orchestrators of international conflicts, financial collapses, and civil wars. For instance, a June 7, 2023, post on *Za Slavian* asserts:

Jews started the war in Ukraine to clear the land for their state on the territory of modern Ukraine.

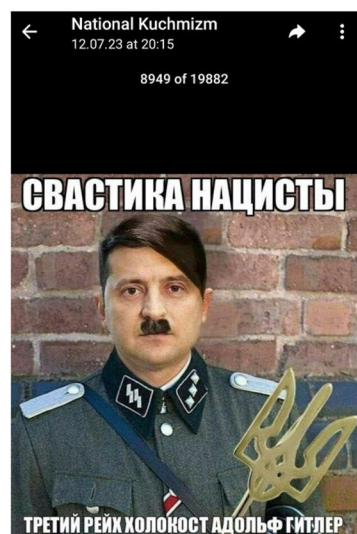
This aligns with the revived Khazarian myth, suggesting that modern Jews seek to reclaim territory in Ukraine based on pseudo-historical claims of medieval Jewish rule.

2. Scapegoating and Blame-Shifting

In multiple channels, Jews are framed not merely as conspirators but as the true instigators of Slavic discord, thereby deflecting blame for the war from Russians or Ukrainians. *Za Slavian* posted on October 6, 2024:

Jews do not divide us into Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians; for them, we are all Russians! They created a game where we kill each other.

Fig. 3 Screenshot: Meme depicting Volodymyr Zelenskyy as Adolf Hitler, published on the Telegram channel *National Kuchmizm* (July 12, 2023). Translation from Russian: Swastika Nazis. Third Reich Holocaust Adolf Hitler



Translation from Russian: Swastika Nazis. Third Reich Holocaust Adolf Hitler

An example of this narrative is presented in Fig. 1, which illustrates a conspiratorial depiction of Jewish actors as orchestrators of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

3. Historical Revisionism and Holocaust Distortion

National Kuchmizm channel frequently references the Holocaust in revisionist tones, downplaying Ukrainian complicity or mocking Jewish suffering. A September 8, 2024, post includes:

First came the nail. Then Jews with Russian names took over. Then came the war.

Such language blends Holocaust distortion with tropes of Jewish infiltration and betrayal. Furthermore, the actual name on the channel link is: <https://t.me/hitler777>—referring to Hitler. Holocaust denial narratives also appear in visual form, as illustrated in Fig. 2, which presents a Telegram post questioning the historical reality of the Holocaust.

A further example of Holocaust-related revisionism and antisemitic framing is presented in Fig. 3. The meme depicts Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as Adolf Hitler, combining references to Nazism, the Holocaust, and Jewish identity within a single visual frame. Such representations serve to delegitimize Ukrainian political leadership while simultaneously reinforcing antisemitic conspiracy narratives

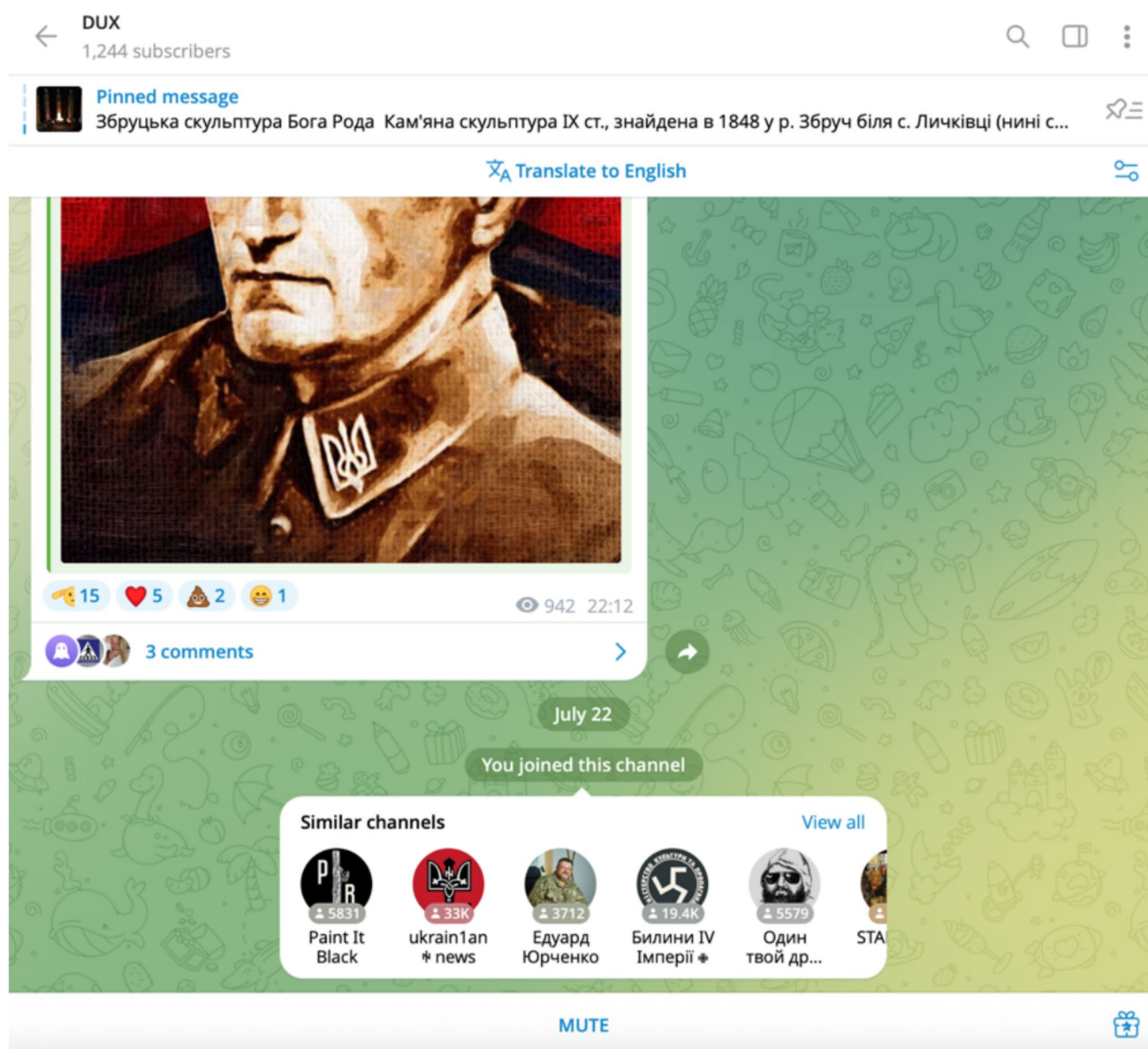


Fig. 4 Algorithmic suggestions of conspiratorial channels of Telegram (July 22, 2025)

that portray Jewish actors as responsible for political conflict and societal decline.

4. Victim Reversal and Accusation Inversion

Banderivska Kytsia channel shifts the narrative by portraying Jews as aggressors who “accuse Ukrainians of antisemitism” to evade their own historical guilt. While less overtly antisemitic, this discursive reversal feeds into nationalist defensiveness and normalizes suspicion toward Jewish actors.

Antisemitic narratives circulated through a variety of textual and visual formats, including memes, historical reinterpretations, and conspiracy-oriented commentary. Several memes depicted President Zelensky with exaggerated Jewish features or combined Jewish symbols with images of war and geopolitical conflict, blending antisemitic, anti-Western, and conspiratorial themes into a single communicative frame. The recurrence of similar motifs across multiple channels suggests that antisemitic narratives are not confined to explicitly antisemitic communities but circulate more broadly within interconnected nationalist and conspiratorial environments. In addition, Telegram’s channel

recommendation features may facilitate users’ exposure to ideologically similar content, as illustrated in Fig. 4.

Telegram’s affordances are not merely incidental to the spread of antisemitism; they are central to how hate narratives evolve, circulate, and entrench themselves in online communities. Unlike platforms such as X or Facebook, Telegram enables channel-based broadcasting where messages can reach tens of thousands with no meaningful oversight. Forwarding content across channels, linking to affiliated conspiratorial groups, and engaging users in semi-private forums creates a networked propaganda infrastructure. In such an environment, antisemitic content is rarely challenged, and ideological boundaries between nationalism, conspiracy, and racial hatred blur. This creates a potent ecosystem where fringe beliefs can rapidly become normalized and emotionally resonant (Topor, 2023; Alrhoun et al., 2024).

Antisemitic narratives observed on Telegram during the Russian-Ukrainian war operate across four interconnected levels: historical, local, state, and global, each reinforcing and amplifying the others. At the historical level, long-standing myths such as the Khazar theory and Holocaust distortion provide a foundation for legitimizing contemporary hostility. The local level features accusations of Jewish

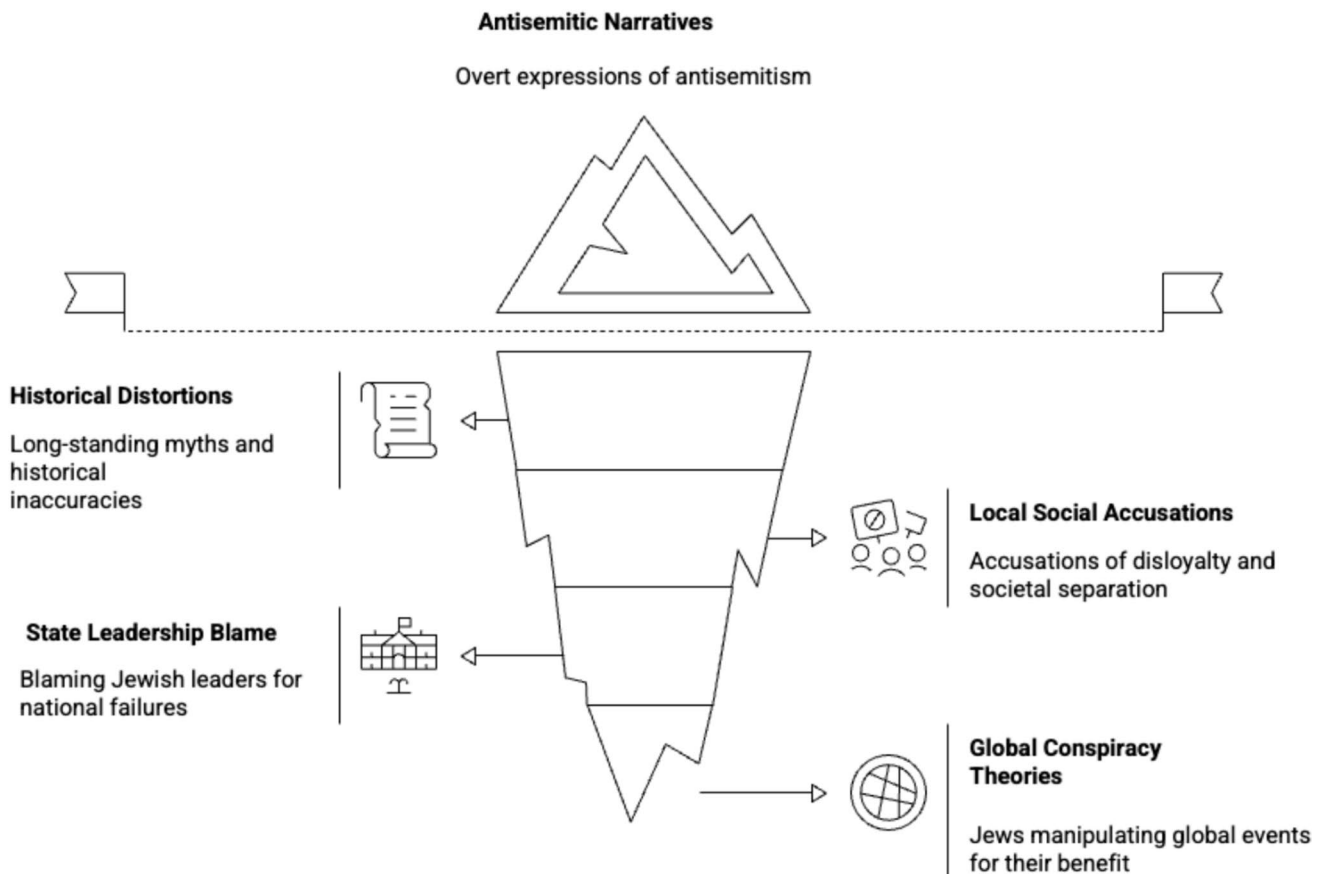


Fig. 5 Layers of blame: historical, local, state, and global antisemitic narratives

disloyalty, evasion of military service, or cultural separateness within Ukrainian or Russian society. At the state level, leaders like President Zelensky are targeted as symbols of Jewish influence, allegedly steering national policy toward disaster. Finally, the global level invokes conspiracy theories portraying Jews as masterminds behind international conflicts, financial manipulation, and Western intervention. Together, these layers construct a multi-scalar model of blame that shifts responsibility away from internal actors and toward a demonized Jewish “other.” Figure 5 visualizes this layered structure.

Conclusion

This study reveals how deeply rooted antisemitic tropes have been reanimated and digitally recalibrated in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, demonstrating a troubling continuity between historical prejudices and contemporary online propaganda. Through the analysis of anonymous Telegram channels promoting nationalist and conspiratorial agendas, we show that antisemitism is not merely a residual cultural bias but a strategic rhetorical device used to deflect responsibility, reinforce identity politics, and deepen social polarization in times of war.

At the heart of this dynamic lies a layered mechanism of blame-shifting in which Jewish communities are portrayed as instigators of conflict, corruption, and betrayal. This narrative operates across multiple levels: historically, through the revival of myths such as the Khazar myth and Holocaust distortion; socially, by portraying Jews as disloyal citizens; politically, by targeting leaders such as President Zelensky; and globally, through conspiratorial claims of Jewish control over Western institutions. These layers reinforce one another, framing Jews simultaneously as internal subversives and external manipulators and thereby reproducing longstanding patterns of scapegoating during periods of crisis (Fig. 5).

Telegram’s platform design, marked by anonymity, forwarding mechanisms, and limited moderation, makes it an effective vehicle for such narratives. Its architecture enables the rapid dissemination of antisemitic memes, pseudo-historical claims, and emotionally charged conspiracy theories. Crucially, many channels do not frame antisemitism as their primary objective; instead, they embed it within broader ideological frameworks such as ultranationalism, anti-Westernism, or anti-globalism. This implicit embedding normalizes antisemitic ideas by integrating them into wider political discourse, making them both less visible and more socially acceptable.

The study further demonstrates that similar antisemitic tropes may perform different political and discursive functions across distinct ideological environments. In pro-Russian conspiratorial contexts, antisemitic narratives primarily

serve to externalize responsibility for the war, delegitimize Ukrainian leadership, and portray political developments as the result of hidden external influence. In Ukrainian nationalist and far-right environments, antisemitic themes are more frequently associated with historical revisionism, identity boundary-making, and contestation over collective memory. The recurrence of similar motifs across these settings should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of political equivalence or direct coordination, but rather as an indication of the adaptability of antisemitic narratives across different communicative and ideological contexts. Given the anonymity of Telegram, the study does not attempt to determine the identities of channel administrators or establish direct organizational links between the examined channels.

The case of President Volodymyr Zelensky further illustrates how antisemitic narratives can accommodate seemingly contradictory claims. Depending on the discursive context, the same symbolic figure may be mobilized either to support allegations of Ukrainian “Nazism” or to advance conspiratorial narratives of Jewish influence and control. This flexibility highlights the adaptive character of antisemitic discourse and its capacity to serve different political and ideological functions across distinct communicative environments. The findings also indicate that some wartime narratives reflect patterns associated with secondary antisemitism. Rather than denying the Holocaust outright, these narratives portray references to antisemitism, Holocaust memory, and Jewish victimhood as instruments of political influence or historical manipulation. In this way, hostility is directed not only toward Jews themselves but also toward the memory frameworks through which historical persecution is publicly remembered and interpreted.

Importantly, this research demonstrates that contemporary antisemitism cannot be understood solely as a fringe phenomenon. It is deeply woven into digital information ecosystems that shape public memory, identity, and accountability. By mapping how antisemitic discourse operates from historical myths to geopolitical blame, this study offers a framework for understanding the rhetorical function of antisemitism in wartime propaganda.

In conclusion, confronting the digital resurgence of antisemitism requires more than algorithmic filters or content moderation. It demands a broader reckoning with the historical narratives, cultural memories, and ideological infrastructures that make such discourse persuasive and persistent. Future research should expand beyond Telegram to trace how antisemitic narratives move across platforms, languages, and regions. Interdisciplinary efforts bridging history, media studies, political science, and digital forensics will be essential for understanding the evolving logics of digital hate and for developing responses grounded in historical literacy, ethical accountability, and democratic resilience.

Author Contribution N.I. and L.T. jointly conceptualized the study and designed the research framework. N.I. collected and analyzed primary data and drafted the initial manuscript text. L.T. contributed to the literature review, contextual analysis, and critical revisions of the manuscript. All authors discussed the results, contributed to the interpretation, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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