

Four Years of War: The Jewish Community of Ukraine

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Introduction

As Ukraine enters the fifth year since Russia launched its full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, the country's Jewish community sits at the intersection of a thousand-year Jewish story and one of Europe's most consequential modern wars. The invasion triggered mass displacement on a continental scale and has brought sustained harm to civilians, repeated attacks on critical infrastructure, and severe economic and psychological strain. Within this national crisis, Ukrainian Jewish institutions, Jewish Federations and our partners, and other global groups, initially shifted priorities from long-term renewal to immediate protection, evacuation and Aliyah support, welfare assistance, and trauma care—while still sustaining religious and communal continuity wherever possible.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Jewish Federations and our partners – particularly the [Jewish Agency for Israel](#), [JDC](#) and [World ORT](#) – have worked with Jewish Ukrainians to create a thriving and resilient Jewish community. Chabad has also established a significant presence in the country, and contributed considerably to the community's strength. The building of a very strong communal infrastructure on the ground, coupled with decades of global Jewish experience in crisis management, significantly boosted abilities to survive the very difficult war with Russia.

Jewish Federations' emergency campaign for Ukraine has raised around \$100 million for many of these efforts. With intensified attacks over recent months, and the extended duration of the war, the need for additional assistance has grown significantly.

History of Ukrainian Jewry

Jewish communities have existed in the territories of present-day Ukraine since at least the medieval period. Over centuries, Jewish settlement expanded across the region's towns and cities and became deeply intertwined with Ashkenazi cultural and religious

development. Ukraine became a major center of Jewish creativity and learning and is closely associated with the rise of Hasidism, linked in communal memory to Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760).

This rich history was repeatedly punctured by persecution. Early modern conflicts in the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth left deep scars, and later, in the nineteenth century, the incorporation of much of Ukraine into the Russian Empire’s Pale of Settlement created a setting in which Jews played prominent economic roles while also facing discriminatory policy and violence. Pogroms and restrictions helped drive large-scale emigration and contributed to the emergence of competing Jewish political responses, including socialism, Zionism and assimilation.

The Holocaust was a defining catastrophe for Ukrainian Jewry. Kyiv’s prewar Jewish population was about 160,000. But in German-occupied Ukraine, mass shootings—often conducted near victims’ homes—became a hallmark of Nazi genocide. Babyn Yar (Babi Yar) outside Kyiv, was the site of one of the largest mass shootings of Jews in German-occupied Europe, occurring on September 29–30, 1941. Close to 35,000 Jews were killed in just two days.

In the Soviet era, overt Jewish religious and communal expression was severely constrained by official policy. After the fall of the Soviet Union, and Ukraine’s independence in 1991, Jewish communal rebuilding accelerated, aided by local initiatives and sustained engagement from international Jewish organizations, including Jewish Federations. At the same time, demographic decline continued as emigration and assimilation reduced the number of Jews who self-identified as Jewish inside the country.

The Post-Soviet Community

Any discussion of the ‘size’ of Ukrainian Jewry depends on many factors. The World Jewish Congress reported that, in 2023, Ukraine was home to only 45,000 Jews. The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) uses multiple definitions and estimates a ‘core’ Jewish population of 32,000 and an ‘enlarged’ Jewish population (including non-Jewish household members) of 83,840. However, people of Jewish ancestry (many of whom may identify as Jewish, even if they are not involved in the community or Jewish practice) substantially outnumber those in the “core” population. In Ukraine’s last available census (2001) it was estimated that the Jewish population was 103,600.

Significantly, the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities (VAAD) of Ukraine (a major, long-standing umbrella organization representing Jewish life in the country) reported approximately 300,000 persons of Jewish ancestry as of mid-2019, and in 2025, the Jewish Agency for Israel announced that the count was 150,000.

In post-Soviet Ukraine, Jewish communal life is organized through multiple umbrella bodies and networks that span religion, culture, education, advocacy, and welfare. The broad Jewish Confederation of Ukraine and VAAD are recognized by the World Jewish Congress as its Ukrainian affiliates. Other major representative organizations include the United Jewish Community of Ukraine and the Federation of Jewish Communities of Ukraine (both affiliated with Chabad), and representative structures for Progressive Jewish congregations. Chabad, whose historic roots are also tied to the region, has emerged as the most geographically widespread religious framework in Ukraine.

Chabad rabbis serve a large number of communities, frequently acting as chief rabbis of cities and regions, and providing a wide array of religious, educational, and welfare services. Their institutions often function as the primary address for Jewish religious life in locations with limited infrastructure. The JDC-established network of Hesed centers today serve some 30,000 clients across Ukraine.

The war with Russia and its consequences for the Jewish community

Russia's full-scale invasion has produced enormous civilian and humanitarian consequences. The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine documented the cumulative toll of hostilities, recording at least 15,172 civilian deaths and 41,378 civilian injuries in Ukraine since February 24, 2022, and noting that in 2025 overall civilian harm increased compared to 2024 and 2023. This sustained level of violence and insecurity has created daily operational challenges for communal institutions—particularly in regions exposed to missile and drone attacks and in frontline areas where movement is limited and basic services are frequently disrupted.

The displacement impact has been equally profound. UNHCR (the UN refugee agency) recorded more than 5.3 million refugees from Ukraine across Europe as of January 2026. For Jewish communal life, displacement has meant the loss of stable membership in some communities, the emergence of new concentrations of need in other areas, and the urgent requirement to support people in transit, including the elderly and the medically vulnerable.

Since the war began, Ukraine's system of nationwide mobilization has placed an extraordinary burden on men of fighting age, many of whom have faced repeated call-ups, extended deployments, and long separations from their families and livelihoods. The strain is felt across society — economically, psychologically, and demographically — as businesses lose key workers and communities adapt to years of uncertainty. Within the Jewish community, the challenge is no less difficult: Jewish men have served throughout the armed forces while families simultaneously work to sustain communal life, maintain religious institutions, and care for the elderly and displaced. Despite these pressures, communal organizations and volunteers continue to provide humanitarian

relief and spiritual support, reflecting both deep patriotism and a determination to preserve Jewish life in the midst of prolonged national sacrifice.

Jewish community needs during the war are shaped by broader Ukrainian demographics as well as by the community's particular profile. With so many escaping the country, the Jewish community now includes substantial numbers of the elderly and weaker members. Wartime assessments have emphasized that communal institutions have had to focus heavily on welfare support, emergency cash and food assistance, medical access, and psychosocial care.

The war in Ukraine has also had a significant impact on the Jewish community in Russia. Since the invasion, there has been an increase in emigration of Jews from Russia, with tens of thousands leaving for Israel and other countries, driven by fears about political repression, rising antisemitism, the draft of many to the Russian military, and the isolating effects of Russia's international stance, which some community leaders say has made life harder for Jews who are perceived with suspicion or questioned about their loyalty to the state. This movement has even led to concerns about the future vitality of Jewish life in Russia, with some predictions that the community could shrink significantly in the coming years and face challenges sustaining its institutions, leadership, and cultural life.

Antisemitism

Ukraine, led today by a Jewish president, has come very far from the days of pogroms, and Soviet hostility towards Jews. The country's current legal framework includes explicit legislation addressing antisemitism. In September 2021, the Ukrainian Parliament passed the "Prevention and Counteraction to Anti-Semitism in Ukraine Law," designed to define and prohibit antisemitism and establish responsibility for violations. The law also allows victims to claim compensation for material and moral damage resulting from antisemitic actions.

Data provides one measure of the broader environment. In its May 2023 Global 100 report (the latest available on Ukraine), which surveyed ten European countries and fielded interviews between November 2022 and January 2023, ADL reported an antisemitism index score of 29% for Ukraine, surprisingly good, and considerably lower than many other countries. ADL's index methodology classifies respondents as holding "antisemitic attitudes" if they endorse at least six of eleven stereotype statements.

In recent years, there have also been concerns about antisemitic content spreading online in Ukraine, especially in the context of the ongoing war and related disinformation campaigns. Analyses of social media around the Russian invasion have shown that online

hate, including antisemitic rhetoric and conspiracy theories, surged early in the conflict and was amplified through platforms like Telegram and Twitter, often tied to broader narratives about the war. Some postings falsely blamed Jews for geopolitical events or used antisemitic tropes as part of information warfare.

Since the Russian invasion, antisemitic narratives linked to Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's Jewish background have appeared in propaganda and disinformation campaigns, especially connected to the ongoing war. Some Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin and state media figures, have repeatedly tried to undermine Ukraine's image by attacking Zelenskyy's Jewishness — for example, dismissing his Jewish identity or calling him “a disgrace to the Jewish people” while claiming he protects neo-Nazis, in an effort to reinforce false narratives about “denazification.” These kinds of remarks have been widely condemned as antisemitic, as they exploit historic prejudice to justify political aggression and discredit Ukraine's leadership.

Ukraine and Israel

Ukraine and Israel established diplomatic relations in December 1991. Over subsequent decades, bilateral ties have combined political dialogue with extensive people-to-people connections, including widespread travel related to family links and Jewish heritage sites.

Formal economic cooperation deepened through a Free Trade Agreement between the two countries, which was signed in Jerusalem in January 2019.

Mobility between the two societies has also been shaped by visa arrangements. In July 2010 Israel and Ukraine signed a reciprocal visa cancellation agreement enabling visa-free travel between the two countries.

Since February 2022, the war has added major diplomatic, humanitarian and consular dimensions to Ukraine-Israel engagement. For Ukrainian Jewry, Israel remains central as a destination of family connection and potential migration, and as a focal point for transnational Jewish solidarity and assistance, even as the immediate priorities inside Ukraine are defined primarily by safety, welfare support, and the preservation of communal continuity. Diplomatically, the government of Israel has tried to steer a careful path between Ukraine and Russia, expressing sympathy for Ukraine and opposition to the Russian invasion on the one hand; yet still trying to not antagonize Russia which plays an important role in the Middle East, and is also home to a large – and sometimes vulnerable – Jewish population.

Jewish Federation Partners in Ukraine

The Jewish Agency for Israel

The Jewish Agency for Israel has permanent offices in Kyiv, Dnipro, Cherkasy, Odesa, Lviv and Vinnytsia providing Jewish identity and Israel education, leadership programming, community events and pre-Aliyah services.

The Jewish Agency regularly holds a series of **Aliyah** events and fairs across Ukraine, bringing Israeli specialists to multiple regions—both in person and online—to provide practical guidance for those considering immigration to Israel. Follow-up data indicate that more than 80% of participants continue engaging in Jewish Agency programming, and over half begin actively preparing for Aliyah. The Agency offers both one-day seminars and overnight Family Aliyah Seminars in western Ukraine. While the one-day seminars focus on core practical steps and direct consultation with Israeli ministries and municipal partners, the Family Seminars provide a weekend framework that combines in-depth preparation with emotional and psychological support. Led by professional facilitators and psychologists, sessions address major life transitions, family resilience, and coping with uncertainty, alongside detailed orientation to life in Israel.

The recent Fall 2025 Aliyah Fair in Kyiv – held in cooperation with the Ministry of Aliyah and Absorption and the Ofek Israeli organization – took place in a car park that doubled as a bomb shelter, to make sure the space could hold all 780 participants safely. In 2025, six weekend seminars served nearly 320 participants, and 11 one-day seminars served over 480 participants. An additional five virtual seminars served approximately 400 participants. Over 900 individuals made Aliyah from Ukraine in 2025.

Established in 2012 at the request of the Government of Israel, The Jewish Agency **Security Assistance Fund** provides grants to Jewish institutions worldwide to strengthen physical security in response to antisemitic threats. The Fund supports one-time security infrastructure upgrades, including controlled entry systems, surveillance cameras, reinforced doors and windows, and other protective measures, prioritized through professional risk assessments led by the Jewish Agency’s Security Division. In 2025, the Security Fund provided grants to nine Ukrainian organizations for a total of \$150,000.

JReady is the Jewish Agency’s global platform for **community resilience**, emergency preparedness, and crisis response, established in partnership with Israel’s Ministry of Diaspora Affairs. In 2025, JReady delivered five resilience seminars and training initiatives across western Ukraine and online, in partnership with the Israel Trauma Coalition. The programs reached approximately 200 participants, including young leaders from Hillel Case Ukraine, Jewish Agency Aliyah staff, winter camp staff in Chernivtsi, and more than 60 Ukrainian psychologists. An additional two-day seminar

was held in Warsaw providing resilience training to 35 Polish- and Ukrainian-speaking community members.

The Jewish Agency's **summer and seasonal camps** in Ukraine offer children and teens a place to learn, connect, and celebrate Jewish life—even amid the realities of war. Many campers come from cities under threat, and counselors often support children dealing with anxiety or loss. In the summer of 2025, Jewish Agency camps served 245 participants with 37 local and Israeli counsellors; and seasonal day camps served 264 campers with 48 counsellors. Through partner summer camps in Ukraine, numbers included an additional 352 participants with 42 counsellors. The Jewish Agency also provided specialized training to informal educational staff in Ukraine, equipping them to address mental health and trauma-related needs. During 2025, six training sessions were held for over 50 camp counsellors and staff working at the summer and seasonal camps.

The Agency's **Jewish Family Learning Initiative** (JFLI) offers immersive experiences of Jewish learning to parents and children in Ukraine, many of whom previously lacked opportunities to learn about Jewish heritage, Jewish tradition, and Israel. Trained educators offer weekly activities for youth, as well as monthly lectures for adults that are followed by interactive parent-child sessions. Some 688 students studied at the Agency's Hebrew-language Ulpan across Ukraine in 2025. That year, the Agency's Parents Groups served 10-20 parents per meeting and included lectures and workshops on Aliyah and life in Israel. The JFLI program also opened a new location in Lviv in March 2025, which primarily serves families displaced from other communities within Ukraine due to the war. In total, JFLI served 121 children and 60 parents in four locations in Ukraine.

In addition, across Ukraine, the Agency sustained year-round **Jewish informal education** providing children, teens and families with a framework of learning and connection, including weekly and bi-weekly youth programming for both children and teens.

[American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee \(JDC\)](#)

With the support of Jewish Federations, JDC has partnered with Ukraine's Jewish community over many years to develop a strong and resilient welfare network. With the Russian invasion, JDC mobilized this network to provide an immediate response bringing assistance to tens of thousands of Jews since the start of the war.

In the first weeks of the crisis, JDC distributed aid, organized evacuations, met refugees at the borders, helped them resettle, and set up an emergency hotline for Jews seeking help. In the Fall of 2022, JDC transformed its annual "Winter Relief" program into one of

“Winter Survival,” organizing “Warm Hubs,” significantly increasing utility subsidies, and organizing Winter respite retreats.

JDC opened its first **Trauma Support Center** in Ukraine in November 2022 and expanded this network to eight centers in 2023. Today, centers also include 14 branches offering tailored individual and group therapy to Ukrainian Jews of all ages. Services now reach more than 4,000 people.

With schooling disrupted, JDC piloted an **education program** in the 2023-2024 school year, offering academic enrichment and emotional support. The program now operates in 16 in-person and 80 virtual locations.

In 2023 and 2024, JDC significantly expanded its **JOINTECH platform**, connecting 157% more isolated elderly to care and community, compared to the beginning of the crisis. In 2025, as attacks and need increased, JDC redoubled efforts to provide **critical humanitarian aid**, including food, medicine and homecare, and enhanced trauma support. At the same time, JDC focused its material assistance on the most vulnerable, so that those who had nowhere else to turn, could still eat, afford medicine, and heat their homes. Some 36,000 received lifesaving material aid and homecare.

In 2025, more than 18,000 people joined JDC’s **community-building programs**, which included holiday celebrations, youth programs, Shabbat retreats, and Volunteer Center activities.

World ORT

In the 2025–2026 school year, ORT Ukraine is serving 8,258 students across 20 institutions. Of these, 3,906 students attend five Jewish ORT schools in Kyiv (2), Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, and Chernivtsi, as well as two ORT–affiliated schools in Bila Tserkva and Dnipro. Some 4,352 students study in 12 non–Jewish schools and one college affiliated with ORT Ukraine, supporting extremely underserved communities across the Kyiv region.

ORT aims to provide safe learning environments – despite constant disruption – as well as psychological support, energy resilience, and essential assistance to students, teachers, and families—while also ensuring that Jewish education and community life remain possible even under sustained wartime conditions.

In the ORT Odesa school, maintaining continuous in-person learning has proved to be difficult due to the combined impact of air-raid alerts, shelter constraints, and severe energy disruptions. During peak disruption periods, the school has had little

uninterrupted in-person learning, with only around two weeks per month on site since November, as lessons repeatedly shift online during extended power outages.

In frontline-adjacent Zaporizhzhia, lessons are also repeatedly disrupted by frequent alarms and nearby strikes, with explosions sometimes occurring even before sirens sound. The ORT school continues to use a neighboring school's underground shelter to learn. Due to space constraints, grades 1–5 learn daily in the shelter, while grades 6–11 alternate weekly between online instruction and shelter-based learning.

In Chernivtsi, safety limitations also shape the learning schedule. There, the shelter cannot accommodate all students at once, requiring each grade to study online at least one day per week.

In the capital, nearly 50% of ORT Kyiv students live in the most heavily affected districts, where families are more likely to experience prolonged outages and lack reliable access to heat, water, and electricity. Under these conditions, educators prioritize reopening schools as quickly as possible, and parents increasingly seek in-person learning because the school can be safer and more stable for children than remaining at home. At Kyiv ORT Lyceum, the main building's well-equipped shelter and energy-generating equipment provide a warmer, safer environment than many students' homes. However, the kindergarten building remains a critical vulnerability: it has been among the addresses left without heating—at times classroom temperatures do not exceed 57°F and are often significantly lower—and it lacks an on-site bomb shelter.

Across all ORT Ukraine schools, 54% of students are learning fully in person; 32% follow a blended model (attending onsite when possible and shifting online during air-raid alerts, emergency blackouts, or heating failures); 14% are studying fully remotely (9% online-only and 5% home-schooled with school-based assessments), representing students most affected by displacement and insecurity. Overall, 92% of students remain in Ukraine, while 8% are currently abroad.

ORT aims to provide schools that remain functional, safe, and emotionally supportive environments for students, teachers, and families alike. As such, the schools also provide mental health support (2,100 annual beneficiaries); teacher support (324 teachers received supplemental payments over the past year); food and community support through the provision of lunches and challah for Shabbat for over 300 students in Chernivtsi, one of the poorest regions of the country; energy and infrastructure through continuing generator maintenance and diesel supply to keep classrooms warm and operational during winter; student support (nearly 1,000 new students and staff received fleece jackets for winter, and school shelters were equipped with fleece blankets to stay warm); education support (269 first graders were provided with

backpacks and school supplies to start the academic year); Jewish education for more than 3,300 students.

Ukraine’s Jewish future will be shaped by the war’s duration and by the pace and geography of eventual recovery. Current assessments emphasize three simultaneous imperatives: sustaining life-saving welfare services for those who remain inside Ukraine; maintaining institutional continuity so that communities can function even in a reduced demographic reality; and preparing for eventual post-war rebuilding that will require renewed investment in education, culture, and leadership development.

Even under present conditions, Ukrainian Jewish life continues to be sustained by a combination of local leadership and international support from Jewish Federations and its partners, and others. The war has imposed immense costs, but it has also placed Jewish communal institutions at the center of humanitarian response networks and strengthened their role as trusted civic actors.

For more information

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