

Testimony of Izabella Tabarovsky

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Before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

U.S. Helsinki Commission

**Hearing:** *Antisemitism as a Terminal Conspiracy Theory and Its Threat to Democracies*

**Testimony:** *Russia's Weaponization of Antisemitic Propaganda: From Soviet Global Campaigns to Putin's War on Ukraine and Democracy Today*

September 17, 2025

Good afternoon.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the U.S. Helsinki Commission. I am grateful to the Commission and its staff for convening this important discussion.

Antisemitism is an unquestionable evil, and combating it must remain a bipartisan endeavor.

Today, I will address how Russia has contributed to antisemitic discourse worldwide and how this propaganda has been weaponized to undermine democratic societies.

I would like to begin with the words of Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, the renowned Holocaust scholar who served as the State Department's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism.

Ambassador Lipstadt has repeatedly warned that antisemitism is a "threat to democracy and national stability." Speaking at the 2024 Munich Security Conference, she said: "Once you

believe that the Jews control the banks... you've given up on democracy." Authoritarian regimes, she explained, love antisemitism because it serves as a "spoon with which to stir up the pot."

By injecting conspiracy theories into public discourse, politically weaponized antisemitism undermines citizens' trust in democratic institutions, stokes rage, and invites extremist ideologies into the political mainstream. By demonizing one group, it facilitates the demonization of others, pitting racial and religious minorities against each other.

As Lipstadt also cautions, however, authoritarians cannot create problems where none exist. If a society is healthy and vices such as antisemitism are kept in check, there is little to exploit. But when the flames of antisemitism are already burning, they will do everything possible to "add fuel to the fire"—and to turn those flames against democracy itself.<sup>1</sup>

### What Is Antisemitism?

Before I turn to Russia, it is important to clarify definitions. My assessment of what is and is not antisemitic follows the non-legally binding working definition adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).<sup>2</sup> This is the most widely recognized definition worldwide, including by US government agencies, and the vast majority of scholars of antisemitism support its validity and practical use.

The IHRA definition refers to antisemitism as "a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

The IHRA definition acknowledges the complexity of determining whether speech is antisemitic and is careful to preserve freedom of expression. It emphasizes the importance of context and provides examples to guide analysis.

Broadly, rhetoric that reproduces classic antisemitic conspiracy tropes is considered antisemitic: claims about Jewish control of finance, media, or politics; or depictions of Jews as wily, greedy, deceitful, or perfidious. These have been staples of anti-Jewish demonology for millennia.

When these same tropes are applied to Jewish collectives—such as the Jewish state or the Jewish national movement, Zionism—the rhetoric is likewise antisemitic. At the same time, the IHRA definition makes clear that “criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.”

It is important to note, however, that conspiracy theories about Israel’s power and inherent evil are not criticism. There is a difference between demonization and critique, and that distinction is essential.

### Russia’s Historic Role in Propagating Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories

Russia has historically played an outsized role in manufacturing and spreading antisemitic conspiracy theories worldwide.

Understanding that legacy is critical, because some of the fundamental tropes permeating contemporary antisemitic discourse originated from Russia.

Russian leaders who today shape the country's foreign policy—President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov—came of age professionally in a system steeped in antisemitism, and their rhetoric and policies continue to reflect that background.

### *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*

*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—the foundational text of modern antisemitic conspiracy theory—was first published in the Russian Empire in 1903. From there, it spread to Europe and by the mid-1920s had been translated into English, French, German, Japanese, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish, Polish, and Arabic.<sup>3</sup> It became a core text of Nazi antisemitic propaganda. British historian Norman Cohn famously called it a “warrant for genocide.”<sup>4</sup>

In the United States, Henry Ford became one of its most enthusiastic promoters. In the Middle East, it circulated widely and remains profoundly influential today. Its tropes are embedded in the Hamas charter and in the propaganda of Iran, which openly seeks the elimination of Jews.

In many ways, the *Protocols* may be Russia's most enduring cultural export.

### Soviet Antisemitism on the World Stage

Under its Marxist-Leninist ideology, the USSR systematically discriminated against Jews, stripping them of religious, cultural and national identity. Stalin's purges in the late 1940s decimated the remaining Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia and generated toxic conspiratorial narratives about Jews and Zionism.

But it was in 1967 that Soviet antisemitism went global. Israel's defeat of Soviet-backed Arab allies in the Six-Day War led the Kremlin to declare Zionism its primary ideological enemy. The USSR unleashed a massive, multi-lingual propaganda and "active measures" campaign targeting Western democracies, the global left, and the post-colonial Third World.

Robert Wistrich, a renowned scholar of antisemitism, observed in 1985 that since 1967 the Soviet Union had been "flooding the world with a never-ending flow" of antisemitic propaganda "whose intensity far exceeds" all its past propaganda campaigns against other ideological enemies. "Only the Nazis in their twelve years of power," he wrote, "succeeded in producing a similarly sustained campaign of antisemitism and using it in a comparable way as a major ideological tool of domestic and foreign policy."<sup>5</sup>

Ideologically, Soviet propagandists did something remarkable: they effectively "rewrote" the *Protocols*, substituting "Zionists" for "Jews," adapting far-right antisemitic tropes for progressive global audiences, and disseminating these ideas through diplomatic, media, and UN channels.<sup>6</sup> The infamous 1975 UN resolution equating Zionism with racism was one result. It was strongly condemned by US Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Though repealed in 1991, it continues to provide legitimacy to antisemitic prejudice and defamation.

By weaponizing antisemitism in this way, the Soviet foreign policy establishment sought to cement its alliances with Arab states, discredit the United States—Israel's staunchest ally—in the international arena, and strengthen the Soviet position worldwide.

Putin and Lavrov—products of the KGB and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—have inherited this tradition and the practice of exploiting antisemitism for foreign policy gain.

### Targeting President Zelensky's Jewish identity

When the USSR fell apart, state-driven antisemitic propaganda receded for a while. But in the last decade—and in particular after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack—Moscow has once again openly embraced antisemitism as a tool of foreign policy.

Russia justified its 2022 invasion with the claim that it sought to “denazify” Ukraine. State media depicted President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is Jewish, as leading a country run by neo-Nazis—and therefore being one himself.

Russia's leadership began attacking Zelensky's Jewish identity directly. Lavrov infamously told Italian television that Zelensky's being a Jew did not preclude him from being a Nazi: “I believe that Hitler also had Jewish blood,” he said, invoking a long-debunked conspiracy theory used to claim that Jews had perpetrated the Holocaust on themselves. “Some of the worst antisemites are Jews,” he added.<sup>7</sup>

Similar dog whistles emanated from Putin, who, in one case, quoted unnamed Jewish acquaintances as allegedly calling Zelensky “a disgrace to the Jewish people.”<sup>8</sup>

Russian state media and nationalist blogs amplified these slanders, which drew on long-standing antisemitic tropes portraying Jews as both Nazi collaborators and perpetrators of genocide against their own people.<sup>9</sup> Antisemitic acts were also on display, often targeting critics of Putin's policies and Putin's invasion of Ukraine. In one case, a pig's head was left at the door of a well-

known independent journalist, marked with Ukraine's coat of arms and the slur *Jdensau* ("Jewish swine").<sup>10</sup>

Holocaust distortion, Holocaust denial, and appropriation of Holocaust history also became part of the new discourse. Lavrov claimed the West's policy toward Russia amounted to an attempt at a final solution of the Russian question," equating it with Hitler's genocidal policy toward the Jews."<sup>11</sup>

### Exploiting October 7

Hamas's October 7 massacre provided Moscow with an opportunity. It diverted the world's attention from Russia's disastrous war in Ukraine and allowed Putin to reposition himself from a global pariah to leader of the anti-Western bloc opposing American policy in the Middle East.<sup>12</sup>

Putin equated Israel's response to the attack with Nazi actions during the Leningrad blockade—pointedly without condemning Hamas.<sup>13</sup> Russia's UN ambassador circulated a resolution that likewise failed to condemn Hamas, prompting US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield to accuse Moscow of "giving cover to a terrorist group that brutalizes innocent civilians."<sup>14</sup> Hamas, for its part, publicly thanked Putin for his support.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Russian propagandists gloated over Israel's tragedy.<sup>16</sup> Equations of Israel and Nazi Germany proliferated.

Equating the Jewish state with Nazi Germany is a longstanding antisemitic tactic—one that Moscow honed in Soviet times and has resurrected since October 7. Ambassador Lipstadt has described this comparison as a "soft-core" form of Holocaust denial—one that inflates "by a

factor of zillion any wrongdoings Israel might have done” while diminishing German actions by the same measure.<sup>17</sup>

Notably, Putin also applied classic antisemitic imagery to the United States, calling it “the root of evil” and “a spider that is trying to envelop the entire planet, the whole world in its web and wants to achieve our strategic defeat on the battlefield.”<sup>18</sup>

Antisemitic conspiracy theories further surfaced in Russian public discourse after the Crocus City Hall in March of 2024, when Alexander Dugin, the influential Russian ultranationalist ideologue, blamed it on “the Zionists” rather than ISIS, which had claimed responsibility. He suggested the attack could have been “Zionists’ revenge” for Russia’s position on Gaza and urged followers to look for the fingerprints of the Mossad—an appeal to a conspiracy theory portraying ISIS as a creation of Israeli intelligence.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of Russia Today who is widely viewed as Russia’s chief propagandist, shared a Telegram post blaming Zelensky for the attack and referring to him with a revolting antisemitic slur.<sup>20</sup>

### Exploiting Antisemitism in Influence Operations

The crisis that erupted in the West in the wake of October 7 opened opportunities for Russia to exploit rifts in public opinion in the US and elsewhere. The *New York Times* reported that, together with its allies Iran and China, Russian influence networks promoted online content “seeking to inflame partisan tensions, denigrate democracy and promote isolationism.” Together, they “unleashed a deluge of propaganda and disinformation,” aiming “to undercut



Israel and, as its principal ally, the United States,” while shifting public opinion in favor of Hamas.<sup>21</sup>

Russian influence operations also sought to exploit campus protests. Bot networks and pro-Kremlin media sought to incite anger at law enforcement while accusing the government of hypocrisy on civil liberties.

Similar influence operations were reported abroad. For example, in May 2024, the Holocaust memorial in Paris was vandalized with red handprints. French intelligence services viewed this incident—as well as a previous vandalism incident—as having been orchestrated from Moscow.<sup>22</sup>

As Israeli scholar and career diplomat Yaron Gamburg wrote, “the goal and strategy of Russian influence operations in the United States and Europe” remain the same: “increasing the polarization of public opinion, stoking an atmosphere of tension and fear, discrediting democracy and liberalism, and undermining stability and order.”<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

Today, Russia is no longer the leading exporter of antisemitism it was in Soviet times—but it does not need to be. The ideas it produced in the 20th century live on, amplified and readily accessible online. They remain part of the ideological arsenal Russia and its allies deploy against democracies.

The constant disparagement of President Zelensky’s Jewishness serves as a dog whistle to audiences the Kremlin values—from its own neo-Nazis fighting to “denazify” Ukraine,<sup>24</sup> to their

American and European counterparts who have long admired Russia as “the sole white power in the world” and “the key to white survival.”<sup>25</sup>

The Kremlin has worked to proactively “cultivate neo-Nazism in the West” as part of its “broader project to sow discord in Western democracies,” wrote scholars Elizabeth Grimm Arsenault and Joseph Stabile in 2020.<sup>26</sup> Russia’s support for “right-wing violence in the West” should be viewed as an element of Putin’s “broader destabilization campaign” against Western societies, they observed. By vilifying Zelensky in antisemitic terms, Moscow seeks to cultivate sympathy among antisemitic segments of Western societies as part of its effort to weaken support for Ukraine.

A parallel trend can be seen on the opposite side of the spectrum, where parts of the hard left share Russia’s anti-Western outlook. After October 7, this overlap grew stronger, as the Kremlin’s anti-Israel stance echoed positions already taken by segments of the Western left.

Russia’s anti-Israel posture also helps strengthen its strategic relationship with Iran, whose foreign policy is explicitly shaped by an antisemitic worldview.

Unlike during the Cold War, the Kremlin today cultivates both extremes of the political spectrum. What matters is not ideological alignment but the sowing of discord. Nothing is more gratifying to Moscow than watching Western democracies tear themselves apart over the Israel-Hamas war as antisemitism skyrockets. Stirring the antisemitism pot—to return to Ambassador Lipstadt’s metaphor—combined with an overtly anti-Israel and anti-American stance, is paying off for Russia in multiple ways.

This matters for many reasons, but I'll underscore one. Antisemitism is never only about Jews. It is a sign of decay—a toxin that corrodes democracies from within. By weaponizing antisemitic propaganda and disinformation, Russia seeks to undermine trust in democratic systems, create internal divisions, break up allies, and strengthen authoritarian forces. Addressing this threat is not only about protecting Jewish communities—though that is mostly certainly a worthy goal. It is also about defending democracy itself.

## Endnotes

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<sup>4</sup> Norman Cohn. *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of Elders of Zion*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Wistrich, *Hitler's Apocalypse: Jews and the Nazi Legacy* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985), 204.

<sup>6</sup> Izabella Tabarovsky, "Demonization Blueprints: Soviet Conspiracist Antizionism in Contemporary Left-Wing Discourse," *Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism* 5, no. 1 (August 11, 2022), <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.26613/jca/5.1.97/html?lang=en>.

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