

## Judaism After Communism

*Jewish life flourishes both in and outside the former Soviet Union.*

Save

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On October 7, 1991, the first direct flight from Moscow to Tel Aviv landed at Ben Gurion Airport with 150 new immigrants aboard. Two months later the Soviet Union was officially dissolved by the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia. In its place rose independent nations known as the Commonwealth of Independent States, each of which developed its own relationship to its Jewish population.

### Maintaining a Jewish Identity



The end of the Soviet Union

marked a new era in global and Jewish history. Like their turn of the 20th century counterparts whose mass migration transformed global Jewry, Russian Jews were once again marked by mass migration and experimentations in Jewish identity. Post-Soviet Jews were now free to migrate around the world, but they were also free to build public Jewish life in their post-Communist homes. After all, despite emigration, the former Soviet Union had one of the largest Jewish populations in Europe with, depending on statistics, anywhere from about 400,000 to 1,000,000 Jews.

It only made sense that places such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kiev would become centers of Jewish life again. Although more than a million Russian-speaking Jews left the post-Soviet world, nearly the same number stayed and Russia and the Ukraine continued to be major Jewish population centers.

Despite the Soviet Union's troubled relationship with public Jewish life after World War II, Soviet Jews had maintained Jewish culture and identity in their own ways. Although they spoke Russian, not Yiddish, and

nearly all their synagogues had been closed down, Soviet Jews continued to identify as Jews. They did this through food, humor, literature, social patterns, and other cultural ways of being and doing Jewish. After 1967 especially, Soviet Jews became some of the most ardent Zionists globally. They connected with Israel, Hebrew culture, and Jewish nationalism.

Religion, ritual, and traditional Jewish practice was not absent in the Soviet period. Judaism could be found in underground prayer houses or in the few public synagogues that remained open. Chabad (Lubavitch Hasidism) had a permanent presence in the Soviet Union despite arrests and repression.

## Growth of Jewish Life

By the late 1980s, as a result of the government policies of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness), Jews throughout the Soviet Union began finding new ways of self-identifying ethnically and religiously. They read Jewish newspapers, socialized primarily with other Jews, and began exploring more traditional forms of Jewish ritual and observance.

By 1991, 55 different Jewish newspapers, magazines, and other publications circulated in the nearly defunct USSR. In the years that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow alone saw the establishment of several schools, institutes of higher education, cultural and social groups, as well as several religious congregations. By 1994 there were four yeshivas, four Jewish teachers' seminaries, and four religious day schools in Moscow alone. Russia's capital emerged as the largest Jewish center in Europe, with a population of about 200,000 Jews.

In the last 10 years, the number of Jewish institutions, publications, and other markers of community has continued to increase. By the mid-2000s, post-Soviet Russia was back on the global Jewish map. Russia hosts international Jewish conferences. Russian bookstores have dozens of Jewish-themed books on the shelves. Moscow is host to two Jewish Community Centers, with a third in the planning stage, and more than a dozen synagogues or prayer houses. Moscow and St. Petersburg have dozens of rabbis, primarily Orthodox but also some progressive/Reform. There are also more than 25 Hillels in the major urban centers catering to young Jews.

The community has also spawned avant-garde Jewish arts, literature, and music for young Russian Jews, who see culture—rather than religion and ritual—as their primary means of being Jewish. A culture organization, Eshkol, brings edgy Jewish culture from Israel and around the world to Moscow, packing popular nightclubs with 20- and 30-something Jews. Rabinovitch, an online community, hosts Jewish parties at the hottest dance clubs in town on different Jewish holidays, giving young Jewish Muscovites an opportunity to meet peers through social networking.

The most significant institutional player on the post-Soviet scene has been Chabad, whose presence, however controversial, remains central to the reestablishment of public Jewish life. There is a Chabad presence in nearly 100 cities throughout Russia. They can be found in schools in most large cities,

kosher  kitchens, nursing homes, and other institutions. Some criticize the organization for using its

close relationships to political power to expand its influence on Russian Jewry. Nonetheless, with growing Jewish resources and a booming economy, Russia is becoming a place where Jews want to live, and a place with a vibrant Jewish future.

## In Search of Opportunity Through Immigration

If some post-Soviet Jews began building public Jewish lives at home, millions of others left for better economic and social opportunities. Between 1989 and 2003 more than 930,000 Jews and their non-Jewish relatives from the former Soviet Union settled in Israel. Another 378,000 immigrated to the United States, and 200,000 went to Germany.

By far, the largest Russian Jewish population in the States, and in fact, the largest Russian Jewish urban population center in the world is New York. (Moscow has at the high estimate 200,000 Russian-speaking Jews; New York at least that many if not more.) Brighton Beach is the heartland of Russian Jewish New York, though more Russian Jews are becoming visible in segments of the mainstream organized Jewish community. Some, like Gary Shteingart and Lara Vapnyar, are recognized as elite Jewish writers on the New York literary scene and have developed international reputations for being on the cutting edge of American literature.

Beyond the New York area, most American cities with a significant Russian population have their own forms of Russian Jewish presence. In some places, Russian Jews establish independent clubs and organizations. In others, they develop closer ties with mainstream institutional Jewish organizations. With Russian Jews making up more than 25% of New York Jewry, and a significant number of Jews throughout the United States, they will undoubtedly continue to have an impact on communal life.

## Russian Jews in Israel

The first Soviet-era immigrants to Israel in the 1970s were political activists who migrated because of ideological and Zionist motivations. The immigration wave of the 1990s—almost a million people—was much more diverse. In the 1990s, after the United States placed new restrictions on immigration for Russian Jews, Russian émigrés had fewer options, so most went to Israel. This meant that the new wave was much larger than the first, and less ideologically committed to Zionism.

“The Russians,” as they are known in Israel, transformed Israel as much as Israel transformed them. Russian suddenly became a *de facto* language of the Jewish state, with its own radio and television stations, newspapers, theaters, and film. Russian Jews established political parties to advocate for their needs in an Israeli socio-economic climate that forced many educated migrants to take menial jobs.

The presence of a large number of non-Jews who came with their Jewish relatives forced Israel to ask new questions about its national identity and that of its citizens. The question of who is a Jew took center stage. Israel became deeply tied to Russia, the birthplace of one million of its citizens. As a result, Russia and Israel have developed tight cultural, social, and economic relations—a huge change from the Soviet era.

## Russian Jews in Germany

For the past 20 years, Germany's Jewish community has been the fastest growing in the world. In 1990-91, a newly unified Germany offered post-Soviet Jewry easy access to German residency and generous social benefits. Today, Russian-speaking immigrants constitute a majority of German Jewry, and their presence in the country—initially hailed as a demographic salvation—now threatens the very identity of the German Jewish establishment. Post-Soviet Jews are less traditional than the established German Jewish community in terms of Jewish practices, and generally do not join Germany's official state-sponsored Jewish community, known as the *Gemeinde*.

One thing is clear—the new Russian migration is going to transform Jewry throughout Europe. In June 2007, the European Jewish Congress elected a new president, Moshe ★ Kantor, who is also the president of the Moscow-based Russian Jewish Congress. Some European Jews are worried about having a Jew from Moscow run the Congress. Indeed, Kantor has already called for a significant shift in funding away from political action around Israel and toward culture and education, reflecting the concerns of most Russian Jews.

The fall of Communism, like the decline of the tsars 100 years earlier, has sent Russian Jews on a global migration that is having profound impacts on the places where they settle. It has also meant a new vision of Russian and European Jewish life in places that many had written off.