Pictured: Dmitry, Michael, and Larisa Beinus on August 31, 1974, in Saint Petersburg, a year before they immigrated to the United States.

The Experience and Emigration of Soviet Union Jews: 1970-2000

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Introduction

The story of why the Soviet Jews emigrated cannot be told by one person. Some might tell you stories about the horrible anti-semitism they experienced in the Soviet Union. Others might tell you that they were rarely targeted for being Jewish and felt mostly integrated into Soviet society. Not surprisingly, the extent to which Soviet Jews experienced discrimination affected their opinions towards emigrating from the Soviet Union. Some became influenced by the Zionist movement and reconnected with their Jewish faith, while others wanted to go to the United States in pursuit of the American Dream. Even if Soviet Jews had differing experiences while living in the Soviet Union and immigrated at various times towards the end of the 20th century, they shared a common thread: *Nationality, rather not religion, was their main association to their shared Jewish ancestry.*

This paper does not intend to discredit past literature on the subject matter, but rather highlight the validity of the differing angles past scholars have taken about the Soviet Jews. In *Let My People Go: The Transnational Politics of Soviet Jewish Emigration during the Cold War* (2015), Pauline Peretz, a French historian, used data on immigration patterns to write that Israel was an important factor in American Jews becoming involved in trying to free the Soviet Jewry.[1] Elie Weisel wrote the *Jews of Silence* (1966), in which he reported his observations of the Soviet Jewry whom he encountered during the Jewish High Holidays in 1965. He rhetorically asked the Jews in the West why they were still silent when the condition of this group of people wanted to be noticed.[2] The documentary *Refusenik* (2007) by Laura Bialis, an American-Israeli filmmaker, tells the story of Jews struggling to emigrate from the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s

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[1] Pauline Peretz, *Let My People Go: the Transnational Politics of Soviet Jewish Emigration During the Cold War* (Routledge, 2017).
[2] Elie Wiesel, *The Jews of Silence: a Personal Report on Soviet Jewry* (Random House Digital, Inc., 1987).

through interviews with Soviet Jews, many of whom were active in the movement to free Soviet Jews.[3] This documentary provides a powerful image of the hardships faced by Soviet Jews, but many of those interviewed were individuals who were so passionate about the fight to free Soviet Jewry that they did time in Soviet prison, no doubt shaping their views. As important of a perspective that is, which is why it is included, my paper hopes to balance the documentary's slant on the Soviet Jewry story by elaborating on the experience of Soviet Jews who were not enthralled with extreme measures of protest or Zionism.

Larissa Remennick, who immigrated to Israel from Moscow in 1991, writes in her book *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict* and an article "The Two Waves of Russian-Jewish Migration from the USSR/FSU to Israel: Dissidents of the 1970s and Pragmatics of the 1990s" about differing experiences of Soviet Jewry once they immigrated across the globe. Remennick's accounts reiterate that the Soviet Jewish narrative is multidimensional.[45] Zvi Gitelman, a professor of political science and Judaic studies, wrote about the growing anti-semitism that occured in the Soviet Union leading up to its collapse, which sparked a massive immigration wave in "Glasnost, Perestroika and Antisemitism" (1991).[6] Alanna E. Cooper, an anthropologist, researched in-depth about the Bukharan Jews, a group often excluded from the literature regarding Soviet Jewish immigration. She wrote *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism* (2012) to share the unique Soviet Central Asian experience that shaped this group of people's Jewish identity in different ways than other Soviet

[3] Laura Bialis, *Refusenik* (IMDb, 2007).
[4] Larissa Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict* (Transaction Publishers, 2012).
[5] Remennick, Larissa, "The Two Waves of Russian-Jewish Migration from the USSR/FSU to Israel: Dissidents of the 1970s and Pragmatics of the 1990s," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, (2009).
[6] Zvi Gitelman, "Glasnost, Perestroika and Antisemitism," *Foreign Affairs*, (1991).

Jews.[7] Although they are less written about in mainstream writings about the Soviet Jewry, they also have a distinct history that makes their involvement in the Soviet Union important to discuss.

One should note that although the paper uses primary sources from my own family, neither the interview questions nor the essay's objective was directed to the interviewee in a pointed or directed manner; as such, family quotes should be treated under the same critical lens as any other piece. In addition to some personal family narratives, this paper ties together autobiographies written by Soviet Jews themselves in order to better understand and appreciate their unique experiences. Therefore, this paper tries to paint the picture of life for Soviet Jews that goes beyond just numbers and statistics.

The first chapter explores what it meant to be a Jew in the Soviet Union. The answer, it turns out, is not so simple. Through exploring the narratives of numerous Soviet Jews, the only shared experience was that Jewishness was much more a matter of national identity, not religious ideology. The multitude of various geographical regions, educational levels, exposures to anti-semitism, and political regimes of the Soviet Union made these Jewish stories so disparate.

The struggle and eventual ability to leave the Soviet Union follows in the second chapter. After World War II up until the 1970s, it was nearly impossible to emigrate from the Soviet Union. After a long battle to gain the right to leave the Soviet Union permanently, many Soviet Jews immigrated to Israel, some with hopes for a better life, others to reconnect with their Jewish roots. The United States opening up its borders to Soviet Jews with its promise of economic opportunity further incited the exodus from the Soviet Union. The majority of Jews left the

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[7] Alanna E. Cooper, *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism* (Indiana University Press, 2012).

authoritarian regime not because it endorsed atheism and limited religious practices but rather to flee economic and professional limitations.

The final chapter focuses on the Jews who emigrated from the Soviet Union from the late 1980s into the 1990s, a time that coincides with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Communist leader Mikhail Gorbachev's policies, which sparked a rise in anti-semitism among the general public, were a stronger influence on this "fourth wave" of immigration as opposed to the "third wave" of immigration of the 1970s. Soviet Jews were less worried about being denied visas now, but their options were more limited. The United States temporarily halted immigration for Soviet Jews during this mass exodus movement and no longer considered them refugees. As a result, some Soviet Jews settled for the next best thing in their eyes, Israel. Just like in the previous movement, Soviet Jews were motivated more for social and economic reasons than for religious freedom. My conclusion synthesizes the three individual chapters into coherent stories, stories that have a personal meaning to me.

What Was the Soviet Jewish Experience?

"Some of them were devoted loyalists of the regime, others cynical collaborators, still others—convinced dissidents, overt or covert; yet all carried for life a stigma of their "ethnic disability" vis-à-vis the surrounding Slavic majority."[8]

During the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, Jews fled poverty and persecution in the Russian Empire to North America. A small portion of Russian Jews, though, were ideologically-driven settlers who went to Palestine and became key figures in the Zionist movement.[9] In Palestine, they founded new towns and *kibbutzim*, Hebrew for communal homes.[10] Initially, the Russian Jews who settled in Palestine held a strong cultural and political influence there. Many pre- and post-statehood Israeli politicians spoke Russian, Yiddish, and Polish; they even founded two major political establishments: the Labor Party and the Revisionist (later Likud) Party. However, once the Soviet Union was formed, immigration to Palestine decreased immensely. Soviet Jews did not have freedom to emigrate or travel abroad as tourists. Instead, the initial three decades of Soviet rule (1917-1947) saw large segments of the Jewish population moving toward secularization, urbanization, upward social mobility, and

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[8] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 3.

[9] The Zionist Organization (ZO) was established in August 1897 by two hundred Jews. This organization defined Zionism as a movement that wanted to "create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law". Beginning in the 1890s, Zionists encouraged Jews from different parts of the world to settle close to Jerusalem, which at the time, the region was called Palestine. On May 14, 1948, the Zionist movement proclaimed an establishment of a Jewish state within Palestine, which would be known as the State of Israel. When the Zionist representatives wrote Israel's Declaration of Independence (1948), they stated the mission of Zionism was not new, but a mission dating back thousands of years. "The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious, and national identity was formed… Here they wrote and gave the Bible to the world. Exiled from the Land of Israel, the Jewish people remained faithful to it in all the countries of their dispersion, never ceasing to pray and hope for their return and the restoration of their national freedom. Impelled by this historic association, Jews strove throughout the centuries to go back to the land of their fathers and regain their statehood." David Engel, *Zionism* (Routledge, 2013), 1-4.

[10] In *kibbutzim,* people gather together in order to create a community based on mutual responsibility, fairness, and solidarity. As a result of having an "open door" ideology, many new immigrants (*olim* which means those who ascend*)* would live in kibbutzim. Tamar Rapoport and Edna Lomsky-Feder, "Reflections on Strangeness in Context: The Case of Russian–Jewish Immigrants in the Kibbutz," *Qualitative Sociology*, (December 1, 2001), 483–488.

assimilation with the Slavic mainstream.[11] After World War II, though, Jews experienced

growing institutional anti-Semitism, as well as less opportunities for higher education and

upward professional mobility. Moreover, anti-Jewish and anti-Israel media campaigns enforced

anti-semitism on a social level. Under the Soviet regime of the second half of the 20th century,

Jews were understood as a special ethnic minority, not a religious one; they were persecuted yet

privileged, but always mistrusted.[12]

The Jewish population of the Soviet Union mostly lived in Ukraine, Belorussia, Moldova,

Latvia, Lithuania, and other European parts of Russia. A small Jewish minority also resided in

the Caucasus, which include Georgia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Southern Kazakhstan.[13] While

Soviet Union Jews mostly trace their lineage back to several generations of Yiddish-speaking

Ashkenazi ancestry, the Jewish identity underwent significant changes once the Soviet regime

took over.[14] The now Russified Jews under the communist regime grew to understand their

Jewish identity differently than Jews who lived in isolated regions with less Soviet control.[15]

Faith was not necessarily part of what it meant to be a Jew in the Soviet Union. Although many

Soviet Jews did believe in the existence of God despite their Russian education which taught

them to be atheists, most did not identify as religious. Rather than just sharing religious ties, as in

the past, Russified Jews began sharing common cultural ties too. The Holocaust was an

identity-shaping event because many Russian Jewish families had suffered loss from the atrocity.

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[11] Remennick, "The Two Waves of Russian-Jewish Migration from the USSR/FSU to Israel," 47-49.

[12] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 3.

[13] Barbara Dietz, Uwe Lebok, and Pavel Polian, "The Jewish Emigration from the Former Soviet Union to Germany," *International Migration*, (June 2002), 32.

[14] Yiddish is the language of the Ashkenazi Jews, those who can trace their heritage back to the Middle Ages in non-Mediterrananean Europe: the Rhineland, Czech lands, and the land that is known today as modern day Ukraine and Belarus. Yiddish culture, literature, music, and humor can all be associated with Jews from the original *Yiddishland*, which include Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova, and Russia. Some might even extend *Yiddishland* to cover Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Alexander Beider, *Origins of Yiddish Dialects* (Oxford University Press, 2015), xxx-1.

[15] Remennick, "The Two Waves of Russian-Jewish Migration," 50.

This helped contribute to the "social" component to their identity, as it became more important for them to maintain friendships and marriages with other fellow Jews. Thus, Russified Soviet Jews saw their identity more through cultural, rather than religious, lenses.[16]

Yuri Tarnoposky was a product of this growing social identity among Jews. Yuri Tarnoposky was born in Kharkov, Ukraine in 1936. He went on to become a very educated man and obtain a master's degree in chemical engineering and a Ph.D. in organic chemistry. He moved to Siberia to be a professor, but made his return to Kharkov in 1977.[17] In his memoir, Yuri emphasized that his Jewish identity was defined as a nationality, not as a religion in the Soviet Union. Moreover, Yuri recalled that on any Soviet questionnaire, nationality was prioritized after name and date of birth. Nationality was understood to be a more important identifier than party membership, education, marital status, place of birth, or even address. Jews called nationality a "fifth space."[18] Sometimes Jews called nationality "disability," since it impaired the ability for Jews to advance professionally. Even if he wanted to change his identity on all of his forms and documents or become a believer of another religion, he could not do so because being Jewish was a permanent national identity in the Soviet Union. What shaped his generation's Jewish identity was the memory of the Holocaust, not the actual religious practices of Judaism. When Yuri was ten-years-old, he read a small book about the Treblinka extermination camp. This book taught him that his Jewish identity meant being different. The first time he read the New Testament was when he was a postgraduate in Moscow. He had found an abandoned copy of the text and read the gospel for the first time. Having been raised only with a secular education in a

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[16] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 192.

[17] Tarnopolsky, Yuri, *Memoirs of 1984* (University Press of America, 1993), 241.

[18] Jews called the nationality label of passports and Soviet questionnaires the "fifth space" because it was the fifth identifier. Every Soviet resident listed their first name, a patronymic middle name, last name, date of birth, and then nationality. Tarnopolsky, *Memoirs of 1984*, 175.

regime that taught him that being Jewish was important solely as a matter of national identity, he

was confused by the story of Jesus.

> I had no idea why the Jews ignored Christianity and the Christians rejected Judaism.. So,
> if Jesus Christ was a Jew, why did the Christians hate the Jews? It was incomprehensible
> to me. To be a Jew meant to have a Jewish nationality, Jewish blood.[19]

For most of Yuri's life in Russia, the only access he had to knowledge about Jewish

people was from commentaries to the Russian edition of *Collected Works* by Sholem Aleichem.[20]

The first time Yuri read the Old Testament was when he was over forty-years-old. Reading this

text had a profound impact on him because he was able to trace his roots to the beginning of

everything, as well as God himself. "I felt new pride in being a Jew. I had been chosen not only

for persecution but also for glory."[21] The Old Testsament opened Yuri's eyes to the possibility of

Jewish "glory", eyes which only percieved Jewish nationality as a disability that had been

"chosen" for persecution as brought on by the Holocaust. This new-found hopeful attitude

towards Judaism that this religious text provided was otherwise hidden from him due to the lack

of information made available in the Soviet Union.

Starting in the 1920s, Jews became the most educated ethnic minority in the Soviet

Union. Soviet Jews were typically immersed in the Russian language and very well read; they

even knew Russian history and literature better than many ethnic Russians.[22] Many took on

professions in the fields of medicine, science, education, law, culture and the arts. Jewish

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[19] Tarnopolsky, *Memoirs of 1984*, 185.
[20] *Collected Works* can be thought of as a small Jewish encyclopedia. In these commentaries, explanations
are given for Jewish terms, religious services, parts of clothing, holidays, prayers, quotations from the
Torah, historical figures and events, etc. The actual *Jewish Encyclopedia* had been published prior to the
Russian Revolution, but it became inaccessible after the revolution and special permission was needed to
gain access to it. No other resources about Jews were available except antireligious literature.
Tarnopolsky, *Memoirs of 1984*, 185.
[21] Tarnopolsky, *Memoirs of 1984*, 186.
[22] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 32.

professionals had been an important part of the Soviet technological and cultural elite[23], which

helped them maintain their strong status throughout the 20th century, despite waves of

anti-Semitism.[24] Jews who grew up in urban areas of Russia and Ukraine had opportunities to

study in academically rigorous schools and be exposed to Russian culture. Moscow and

Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) became centers for a small Jewish professional and intellectual elite

population.[25][26] Soviet Jews were also the most Russified of the Soviet ethnic minorities. They

had moved far away from Yiddish, which previous generations had spoken, and understood

Russian as their mother tongue. Yiddish was so distant to the youth that it became the language

that elders used to keep secrets from their children.[27] During the 1940s, Joseph Stalin further

relegated Yiddish culture by destroying many Jewish communal-cultural institutions. Rabbinical

training schools and classes about Jewish history and culture were no longer allowed. The Soviet

government also wanted to close all remaining synagogues. As a result of these measures, very

few Yiddish books since 1948 can be found.[28] Thus, Yiddish became a language associated with

older Jews, and Russian became the language of the newly educated Russified Jewish generation

in the Soviet Union.

  One example of a Jew caught in the transition from Yiddish to Russian culture during this

era is my grandmother, Larisa Beinus (formerly Brandman). She was born on October 5, 1950 in

Zhmerinka, Ukraine to two highly educated Jewish doctors. With her parents and maternal

grandmother, she spoke Russian. She graduated with top honors and went on to become a

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[23] Some notable members include Nobel Laureates, Leonid Kantarovich, and Vitaly Ginzburg, an economist and physicist, respectively.

[24] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 3.

[25] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 192.

[26] Although the city is known as Saint Petersburg today, Leningrad is how it was known during the Soviet years. Therefore, Leningrad will be the name I use to refer to this city.

[27] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 32.

[28] William W. Orbach, *The American Movement to Aid Soviet Jews* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press., 1979), 1-2.

pediatrician in Leningrad with a degree from the top pediatric medical school. Her paternal

grandparents spoke Yiddish, though, and did not speak Russian well. As a child, she disliked

when her dad's side of the family would come over and speak Yiddish as it showed that they had

a lower education level and it felt improper to her. She would tell them to speak Russian instead.

Larisa grew up with both Jewish and non-Jewish friends. Her Jewishness was a part of her

national identity; after all, it was stated on her passport as her listed nationality.[29] She also was

familiar with some Jewish customs because of her grandparents who would partake in certain

cultural Jewish practices. She knew the importance of having to marry someone who was also

Jewish but lacked knowledge about Judaism and her own family's history with the religion.[30]

> If you asked me honestly if my dad had a Bar Mitzvah, I would be unsure. We didn't
> have religion. They were raising us, atheists, in the Soviet Union. Our grandparents did
> those holidays. We knew because of my grandma and traditional food she would make.
> She wouldn't eat any pork. She wasn't sitting with the bible and praying, though. When I
> was about seven to eight years old, they closed Jewish synagogues. My great-grandma
> took me a few times before. Women sat separately from men. My grandfather, Melich,
> knew how to pray and was religious. When he died, he was dressed under his suit. Jews
> aren't supposed to be, but because my dad was a part of the Communist Party, he had to
> do so to keep his job.[31]

Larisa had a convoluted understanding of her Jewish identity because she was raised

without religion, as she was brought up knowing about her Jewishness moreso in a nationalistic

context. Moreover, her family could be divided into two groups. She had her paternal

grandparents, whose upbringing took place prior to the formation of the Soviet Union; they were

less educated and Russified, but more religious. In contrast, Larisa, along with her sister, parents,

and maternal grandmother were all educated at the university level, had Russian as their primary

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[29] Beginning in the mid-1930s, passports of all Soviet Union citizens listed their nationality to highlight people's ethnic origin. Thus, all Soviet Union Jews had their Jewish nationality labeled on their passports. Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 19.
[30] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Larisa Beinus, April 21, 2020, New York, NY.
[31] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Larisa Beinus.

language, and were doctors and dentists. Therefore, Larisa's family demonstrated the different

types of Soviet Jews; some were more educated and Russified than others. Moreover, in her

family, more Russification, emphasis on education, and less religious beliefs came with each new

generation of Jews under the Soviet Union.

Polina Gelman shows how national identity in the Soviet Union often overshadowed

Jewishness and the Yiddish culture spanning several generations. She was born in the small

Ukrainian town of Berdichev in October 1919. Her parents, Vladimir and Yelya, had both been

professional revolutionaries.[32] Polina excelled in school and finished with top honors in 1938.

She then attended Moscow University to study history. In 1940, she was accepted to join the

Party by the Communists of the University. When she was a third-year student at Moscow

University, she wanted to enlist in the frontlines of World War II; however, she was seen as too

small and frail by military men and told to return to her studies. After trying to offer her services

in different forms and continuously being denied, she found her way to a women's air force unit

because of her connection to an existing female pilot. Polina was the child of professional

revolutionaries, a member of the Communist Party, and a World War II veteran. However,

mention of her Jewish identity rarely came up in a comprehensive narrative written about her. In

one of the few times it appears, she visits Uruguay and recalls a newspaper editor, who was also

a Zionist, calling her a "bad Jew". She angrily questioned his reason for calling her that. He

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[32] As reported in L. Staroselsky, "The Heart Cannot Forget." in *Truth: Profiles of Soviet Jews*, trans. by Miriam Katz (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1986), 135-147, Polina's parents met in the spring of 1917. Vladimir, a tailor, served as the treasurer for the local Bolshevik organisation. Yelya, a worker, organized aid for comrades who were in prisons. In January 1918, Soviet power was established in Ukraine. However, it took until 1920 for the Ukrainian people to band together alongside the Red Army to defeat the whiteguards and foreign invaders. Vladimir was elected to become a member of the gubernia delegation to the Third Congress of Soviets and the Ninth Congress of the Party of Moscow. As many members of the entire delegation returned, they were betrayed by an agent who gave them to a whiteguard unit, which attacked the town. This led to the arrested Bolsheviks being tortured and shot at the station building. Her father was tortured to death by the whiteguard bandits; thus, Polina grew up without knowing her father.

responded, "If you are Jewish, you should publish your works in your native language!"[33]

Although this man was a hypocrite as he published his paper in Spanish, this interaction drew

attention to her lack of Jewishness in the atheistic Soviet Union. He still saw her as a Jew, but did

not look at her with high regards due to her distance from the native Jewish culture. Polina was

born around the same time that Larisa's parents were in Ukrainian towns. These people are not

outliers in the data but instead exemplify the growing trend of Jews who grew up after the

Russian Revolution in the European part of the Soviet Union becoming more Russified and

educated.

In contrast to the Jewish population that became more Russified in the twentieth century,

Jews living in Central Asia (Bukharan Jews) and the Caucasus (Georgia, Mountain Jews, and

Krymchaks) understood their Jewish identity differently.[34] In 1926, only 3.5% of Soviet Jews

resided in the Caucasus or Asia.[35] Bukharan Jews almost all lived in Central Asian cities where

they spoke their own language. They had some knowledge of Hebrew and some spoke various

Turkic dialects. However, the literacy rate was extremely low. Russian Jews were 72.3% literate

at this point in comparison to the Russian national average of 39.6%. Bukharan Jews only had a

24.2% literacy rate. Boys often only attended school up until the age of eight-years-old, and girls

rarely received any sort of schooling.[36]

Since Soviet power and the push for Russification were not as dominant in these regions,

these Jews did not assimilate into mainstream Russian culture. Most spoke Russian as a second

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[33] Staroselsky, *The Real truth: Profiles of Soviet Jew*, 137-147.

[34] Until the end of the 18th century, Bukharan Jews had been in complete isolation; Jewish communities in Europe and the Middle East had no knowledge of their existence. During the later half of the 19th century, Russians began to infringe on the border of Bukhara. The region would not be fully absorbed until the formation of the Soviet Union. Cooper, *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism*, 18, 69-80.

[35] Benjamin Pikus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: the history of a national minority* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 90.

[36] Rudolf Loewenthal, "The Jews of Bukhara," *Revue des études juives*, (1961), 345-351.

language and lived in Jewish communities. Formal education was not as prominent, and most Jews worked as tradesmen and artisans.[37] Many Bukharan Jews worked to keep their Jewish practices alive during the Stalin era, a time of great religious oppression -- so bad in fact that only a single synagogue in Samarkand was able to remain open during Stalin's reign. The Soviets wanted to limit and eventually eliminate Judaism, so they thought by allowing only this one public space for Jews to worship would be a way to control Jews' practice of their own religion. Jews in Samarkand were not constrained to this one place of worship, though. Jews would gather secretly and run daily prayer services within the safety of their private homes. Judaism was taught in these homes by the elderly, so the younger generation continued to be educated about their religion. Shlomo Haye Niyazov, one of the religious leaders who upheld Judaism in Uzbekistan until he emigrated in 1979, would teach students about Judaism. He eventually ran a large school, and in his own words, "I would teach ten kids and each of those ten had ten students that they taught… That's how it was".[38]

By the 1970s, most Bukharan Jews spoke Russian fluently. Throughout the Soviet era, though, they lived in accordance to Jewish law, continued to observe important Jewish holidays, and rarely intermarried. To them, a Bukharan Jew was a committed Jew. They also continued to speak their native language at home.[39] Therefore, although the Soviet census lumped all Jews residing in the Soviet Union into one group in 1939, regional, educational, cultural, and religious differences made this group of Soviet Jews different from the rest. Despite having a shared nationality of being Jewish, Bukharan Jews and Ashkenazi Jews in the Soviet Union struggled to relate with one another.

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[37] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 17-18.
[38] Cooper, *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism*, 216-218.
[39] Cooper, *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism*, 216-218.

Anti-semitism has a long history in Russia. Searching for better economic opportunities and fleeing *pogroms* (organized massacres which often targeted Jews), about two million Russian Jews immigrated to the United States from the late 19th century up until the end of the First World War.[40] The Bolshevik Revolution and Lenin's leadership led to the nationalization of Jews, but they were continuously scapegoated. Their leading roles in socialist enterprises, such as the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committe and the Bund, made them easier for Stalin to target and therefore purge in the 1930s.[41] Stalin initially supported the creation of Israel, but once Israel turned towards the United States for support, he treated Jews as if they were the enemy.[42] Many Soviet Jews interviewed in the documentary *Refusenik* recall their own experiences with anti-semitism and their families' fears of being sent away to concentration camps or exiled. Aba Taratuta was born in Leningrad in 1935.[43] He first learned about anti-semitism through violence."In the street, I found out what nationality I am. A gang of kids confronted me. They explained to me with their fists what a Jew is and how he ought to be treated."[44]

The period of time from 1948-1953 became known as the "Black Years" for Soviet Jewry. It began with the murder of a famous Yiddish actor and Jewish public figure, Solomon Mikhoels. What followed were the arrests of many Yiddish writers, poets, and playwrights, culminating in August 1952 when many were summarily tried and shot. A year later, a number

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[40] In 1871, the term *pogrom* was first used to describe an anti-Jewish riot that occured in Odessa. *Pogroms* occurred in dozens of cities and towns in the Russian Empire from 1881-1884, 1903-1906, 1917-1920. Jeffrey S. Kopstein, "Pogroms," in *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism*,(Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 216.

[41] Marc Morjé Howard, and James L. Gibson, "Russian anti-Semitism and the scapegoating of Jews." (*British Journal of Political, Science* 2007), 198.

[42] Stalin supported Israel by illegally selling them old British planes. In the first anti-Israel war, these eight planes were used by Jews to fight against Arab forces. Initially, the Arab forces were shocked and did not know where these planes came from, according to Sergei Khruschev, Professor of Political Science at Brown University and the son of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Bialis, *Refusenik*, 4:23-5:03.

[43] Laura Bialis, Interview with Aba Taratuta, 2004, Haifa, Israel, University of Toronto Libraries, Toronto, Canada.

[44] Bialis, *Refusenik*, 4:23-5:36.

of Jewish doctors who served in the Kremlin were accused of being "doctor-killers" and arrested

in what is now known as the Doctor's Plot of 1953. When Masha Slepak was about to graduate

from medical school around this time, she would hear daily in the hall, "A Jewish conspiracy has

fallen over Russia. The Jews are poisoners. Enemies in white lab coats."[45]

Natan Sharansky experienced anti-semitism early on. Born in 1948 in Donetsk, Ukraine,

he grew up in a city with approximately fifty thousand Jews but no synagogues. He was raised

by a Zionist, journalist father, from Odessa, Ukraine who had dreams of moving to Palestine like

his brother did. However, he chose to stay like many Jews from his generation because he

wrongfully thought that the Revolution would solve the Jewish problems and help them unite

with others to create paradise on earth. Natan's dad read him stories from the Bible and taught

him that his Jewishness was nothing of which to be ashamed. However, like many Russian Jews,

Natan knew very little about the Jewish religion, language, culture, and history. His main

association with the word *Yevrei*, or Jew in Russian, was through filling out the "fifth space" on

national forms. Officially Jewishness came with no barriers, but he grew up hearing about Jews

being denied certain jobs or acceptances to prestigious universities because of the "disability"

that came with the "fifth space". Natan remembers the city of Donetsk filled with solemn music

and people wearing black armbands on the day of Stalin's death; his school stopped operating for

a few days in order to mourn the loss. He remembered his mother crying in fear of a return of

pogroms as she told Natan about seeing a man slap an elderly Jewish woman in the face in the

town square that day. He shouted, "Damn k*kes, you killed Stalin and now you're crying?"[46]

No one came to the defense of this woman. Natan's father made sure to teach his sons

about the truth about anti-semitism. He taught Natan about Stalin's persecution of many Jews

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[45] Bialis, *Refusenik*, 4:23-10:46.
[46] Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil* (Public Affairs, 1998), ix-x.

and that he should feel fortunate now that Stalin was dead. His father warned him, though, not to repeat these sort of comments to anyone. In order to survive in the Soviet Union, Natan learned that he had to function with two modes of thinking–what he really thought and what he could tell other people. He lived with this mentality up until 1973, when he became involved in the *aliyah* (meaning "ascent" in Hebrew) movement that sought to help Jews immigrate to Israel.[47] Therefore, not only did Natan understand his Jewishness as a nationality, but anti-semitism shaped his perception of his Jewish identity.

After the death of Stalin in 1953, the now communist leader Nikita Khruschev enforced the notion of a partial "return to Leninist norms", which benefited Jews in a limited capacity. They no longer feared physical threats to their survival. Cultural leaders who had been imprisoned or exiled were given the opportunity to be "rehabilitated"; their homes and jobs/pensions were returned to them, as well as clear records. Despite the progress made, cultural Jewish institutions did not reopen.[48] Khruschev began an antireligious campaign throughout Russia: baking matzah was banned and more synagogues were closed. Jews were victims of propaganda and accusations of crimes they did not commit. For supposed "economic crimes," many Jews received the death sentence. Jews were perceived as capitalists who were disloyal to the Soviet regime.[49] During the Kruschev era, there was no effort to openly discuss and combat anti-semitism. Considering the violent anti-semitism that had occured at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, many Jews were content and focused on creating the best possible life for themselves within the bounds that they could. Others, though, feared that there could one day be

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[47] Sharansky, *Fear no evil*, x.
[48] Yiddish schools did not resume, nor did theaters for quite some time. Amateur and semi professional troupes were allowed much later to reopen. The first published Yiddish book since 1948 did not appear until 1959. Until the end of the Khrushchev's regime in 1964, only six other Yiddish books were published. Zvi Gitelman, "The Black Years And the Gray, 1948–1967," (*A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present*, (Indiana University Press, 2001), 157.
[49]Peretz, *Let my people go*, 66.

a return to the terror that had occured before due to the lack of institutional or legal protection.

Despite being considered a privileged ethnic minority, they were severely underrepresented in

the local councils and experience separate treatment in comparison to other ethnic minority

groups.[50] From 1957 to the end of Kruschev's reign in 1964, a huge campaign against religion

took place. Propaganda insinuated that Judaism was reactionary. Jews were claimed to be tied to

Zionism and "bourgeois nationalism".[51] Of the 117 people who were officially sentenced to death

during this period, 91, or 78% of them, were Jews.[52] Jews were considered a tolerated marginal

group rather than as actual equal members of society. "Jewish traits" were seen as harmful to the

Soviet system; however, they were seen as useful in science and technology.[53]

In 1965 in the United States, Eli Wiesel published his book *The Jews of Silence: a*

Personal Report on Soviet Jewry to illustrate to the Western world the kind of treatment Jews in the

Soviet Union were facing that was going unnoticed.[54] Weisel visited Moscow, Kiev, Lenigrad,

Vilna, Minsk, and Tbilisi during the High Holidays. He wanted to understand if future generations

of Jews wanted to continue being Jewish and if Soviet Jews desired help from the West. He observed

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[50] In Kazakhstan for example, one fourth of German children went to German schools in the 1960s, but Jewish schools were not allowed to open. Yiddish publications and the Hebrew language were barely allowed publishing, yet 2,417 books were published in German, 1,287 in Polish, and 719 in Hungarian. Russian literature also rarely touched on Jewish themes. On this, see Gitelman, "The Black Years And the Gray,1948–1967," 160.

[51] Over 300 articles were written attacking Jews from 1960-1964. Moreover, over 54 books were published in Russian alone that made attacks against Jews. Other anti-Semitic books were published in Moldavian, Ukrainian, as well as other languages. Gitelman, "The Black Years And the Gray," 164.

[52] Jews who were prosecuted had their Jewish last names stressed so everyone knew their nationality. Moreover, stereotypical messages about Jews being involved in economic gains for others got promoted. Many Jews did work in bookkeeping, retail trade, and the service sector, which are jobs where economic crimes do occur. Defense attorney Evgeniia Evel'son, though, when looking at how the cases were mostly embezzlement, bribery, and currency speculation and seeing that so many Jews ended up shot or imprisoned for a long time, she concluded, "The principle of equality in all citizens before the law was violated… The law punished Jews and non-Jews differently." (Gitelman, "The Black Years And the Gray, 1948–1967, 168).

[53]Gitelman, "The Black Years And the Gray, 1948–1967," 157-173.

[54] Elie Weisel (1928-2016) was born in Sighet, Romania in a Hassidic Jewish community. He survived the concentration camp Auschwitz and made a living off of teaching, journalism, and writing books in the United States. (Colin Davis, *Elie Wiesel's Secretive Texts* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994).

that Soviet Jews did not have "unbearable" lives; they were not endangered in the ways Jews had

previously been in the era of pogroms or by the Nazi regime. However, he noted that conditions

could be improved for Soviet Jews. Weisel wanted to understand why Soviet Jews were afraid of

overstepping their undefined yet very real boundaries.[55] By the late 1960s, concern grew amongst

non-Jewish professionals and public servants regarding the strong representation of Jews in the

sciences, education, technology, and culture. A mentality that became popular amongst young

Jews to combat institutional anti-Semitism was, "You can make it, just be ten times as good as

any Russian, and they will have to give in".[56] In her interview with me, Larisa Beinus recalled

having to get up in her military studies class at medical school and say her nationality just like

everyone else in the class did. "I'm Larissa Brandman, Jewish." She also described minor ways

in which her family's Jewishness presented as an obstacle.

> My dad would never become the head of a whole large hospital because he was Jewish,
> but he could be for a smaller hospital. A bit harder to get into colleges with a Jewish last
> name. But it was never really said openly. Even with going to medical school, someone
> told my father about me that they couldn't help because of my last name. But then again
> you needed connections more and to be a very good student. But we took it as okay and
> that's the way it is. We never were like we hate Russia.[57]

Larisa's family accepted the obstacles and did not classify their lives as particularly

terrible. Her family wanted to make the best of what they could within the limitations they had as

Jews. Moreover, her best friend at university, Louisa, was from Georgia. Larisa recalled more

people making fun of Louisa than her. Russian was the second language for many people from

Georgia and Armenia because both places were very nationalistic. When people from those

regions spoke, it was apparent they were not Russians like Larisa, who spoke Russian perfectly.[58]

Thus, some suggest that, on balance, Soviet Jews in the mid-20th century were content with their

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[55] Wiesel, *The Jews of Silence*, 59-61.
[56] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 26.
[57] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Larisa Beinus.
[58] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Larisa Beinus.

lives in the Soviet Union; some obstacles due to Jewishness existed, but not enough to where they were truly oppressed.

Maxim D. Shrayer was born on June 5, 1967 in Moscow, Russia. In his autobiography, *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story*, he writes that his father originally wanted to name him Israel to honor Israel's Six-Day War victory, but he did not want to make his son the target for antisemitism. Both his parents had been raised in the Russian capitals. His grandparents, along with his great-grandmother, spoke Yiddish and had a past life in the former Pale of Settlement, Ukraine and Lithuania. As a result of growing up in a Russified metropolis like Moscow and with the Soviet regime in place, the promise of a culturally rich Jewish life where he could embrace Yiddish and his Pale of Settlement roots was inaccessible to him. He wrote about a memory of hearing a Yiddish folk song and feeling embarrassed that he was not moved by it. He also felt his otherness throughout his Soviet education. In kindergarten, he experienced an elderly aide make an antisemitic comment towards his choice of food. This came along with Jewish slurs from Russian boys. By the time he was six-years-old, he had learned the importance of being self-aware as a Jew. His dad told him that there were people out there who not only disliked but also sought harm upon Jews. Despite involvement in many activities at school, Maxim always felt he was alone. He described an incident where his classmates laughed at the word "Jew" because it had a dirty and humorous connotation to it. One boy liked to egg him on by calling him a Jewish slur and watch him become angered. Still, for many Jews, growing up in the Soviet Union meant you were a regular kid, too. Even though he was bullied, he was able to make jokes about Brezhnev with his classmates or talk about how his grandparents had fought in the war to defeat Nazism just like the other kids' families. Nevertheless, when he graduated high school, he felt liberated. "Through ten years of almost daily contact I never felt that I was one of them, I never felt accepted as one of their own. What I didn't have in common with my classmates was

my Jewishness".[59] Shrayer's childhood depicts a life where a Jewish child felt like an outsider in both his Jewish identity and his Soviet life, but also on some level, he was a part of the Soviet culture.

Not every Jew experienced anti-semitism, though, in the Soviet Union. Dmitry Beinus, my grandfather, was born to a Jewish family in Leningrad, Russia in 1952.[60] He described his childhood positively, claiming he did not experience any anti-semitism. His family was not religious, but he had pleasant memories of visiting his grandmother's apartment for dinner on Jewish holidays. In his school of about a thousand kids, there were the only two Jews in the class. Although the shared Jewish bond began a close friendship between himself and the other Jewish classmate, Dmitry spent much time with non-Jewish friends as well; he became accustomed to the lack of Jewishness at his school and being in spaces where he was the only Jew. He always felt included amongst all the boys at school. Moreover, he never thought of himself as different; afterall, all Russian children were brought up to be atheists in schooling, creating an even playing field. Although he felt included amongst his non-Jewish peers, he still had moments where he understood that he was Jewish. One day, after bringing home Easter eggs from a friend's home, his dad told him to throw them away. He also mentioned that the expectation to marry someone Jewish was an unwritten rule that he grew up understanding.[61] "So all I knew was that I was a Jew, and Jews stick together. I can really say I didn't experience anti-semitism in Russia. I never really felt out of place". Maxim and Dmitry are two examples of Jews who were both raised in major metropolises irreligiously but were conscious of their Jewish identities. They had different experiences, though, with regards to anti-semitism in school. Dmitry felt like he belonged at his school and did not experience anti-semitism wheras Maxim

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[59] Maxim D. Shrayer, *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story* (Syracuse University Press, 2013), 4-23.
[60] Dmitry married Larisa in 1972, and they later immigrated together to the United States.
[61] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Dmitry, April 21, 2020, New York, NY.

described multiple antisemitic incidents and his feeling of otherness amongst his peers. Their two different experiences demonstrate that two Jews can have similar upbringings yet have different understandings of what life was like for Jews in the Soviet Union in the latter half of the Soviet Union post-Stalin.

Samuel Zivs, the first assistant to the Chairman of the Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Public, wrote the foward for and edited *The Real truth: Profiles of Soviet Jews*.[62] The positions he expressed in this book, published in 1987, should be considered in light of his prominent place within the Soviet bureaucracy. The book consists of 15 profiles of Soviet Jews (one being the story about Polina mentioned above) who all identified as Jews by birth, but consider the Soviet Union their only homeland. Many of these subjects could not claim the "Jewish question" as having a major effect on their lives and would identify as Soviets.[63] According to Zivs, "No two people are alike, and naturally, the subjects of these true stories lead dissimilar lives. But each, in his own way, considers himself happy..."Zivs painted the picture of how Zionist propaganda can be dangerous. He believes that the Soviet people knew the truth that pieces written about "soviet anti-Semitism" were designed to divide the Soviet Union amongst different nationalities. He wrote that the people seen on Western media who claim to be victims

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[62]*The Real truth: Profiles of Soviet Jews* was originally put together in the Soviet Union in 1985 and was then translated into English. The stories in this collection hold great importance because they go against a common narrative that anti-semitism was an issue within the Soviet Union that later motivated mass Jewish emigration to occur. However, the perspective of Zivs may be biased due to his strong anti-Zionist beliefs and strong allegience to the Soviet Union; thus, this source lacks stories about those who did decide to leave who may have felt differently with regards to antisemtism being a prevalent problem in the Soviet Union and may not present a comprehensive picture of differing opinions Soviet Jews had regarding the anti-semitism issue.

[63] The term *Judenfrage*, which translates to "Jewish Question", originated in Germany around 1840, but it soon spread to other countries. In 1842, Bruno Baur referred to the "Jewish Question" in his pamphlet *Die Judenfrage* as an issue of integrating Jews within predominantly Christian nations and societies. Jews also found their own ways to address the problem. The Zionist movement thought the answer to the problem was to reestablish the Jewish homeland in Israel. Anti-Semites, though, began using the "Jewish Question" as a mechanism to intensify the anti-semitic movement that arose around 1880. On this, see Alex Bein, *The Jewish Question: Biography of a World Problem*. (Fairleigh Dickinson Univ Press, 1990),18-24, 318.

of anti-Semitism broke Soviet laws and were not attacked for their Jewishness. "Victims of anti-semitism" in his mind were not real in the Soviet Union.[64]

Jews in the Soviet Union were not a homogenous group of people; moreover, the identity of a Soviet Jew differed depending upon a multitude of factors: Russification, education levels, religiousness, personal experience with anti-semitism, and place of residence. Bukharan Jews were considered to be Soviet Jews, but they had a completely different experience under the Soviet Union as a result of their delay to education and Russification, as well as their more geographically isolated existence. While Jewish religious practices mostly disappeared elsewhere in the Soviet Union, Bukharan Jews were committed to practicing Judaism despite the communist ways of trying to dispel religion. They were, however, a distinct minority. The majority of Soviet Jews were overall the most educated and Russified ethnic minority, which gave them status in the Soviet Union. Even so, anti-semitism undoubtedly limited some of their ability to advance in society, obtain high status positions, and become completely accepted in the Soviet Union. Some Jewish narratives overlap, others contradict one another. What was the Soviet Jewish experience? The answer depends on who you ask.

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[64]Samuel Zivs, "Foreword" in *The Real truth: Profiles of Soviet Jew*, translated by Ethyl Yeoman (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1986), 7-10.

Let My People Go: The Emergence of a "Third Wave"

"All the Jewish people did was talk about it. "Are you going?" No, I'm not going."
"Why, are you going?" "Oh, I have a cousin there, and he's doing great."... Another year
went by, and people are still talking about it. "We're going. We're going."[65]

The Jewish population in the Soviet Union began to drastically decline over the course of

the second half of the 20th century. Before World War II began, the 1939 census reported that

about 3 million Jews resided in the USSR. Due to the consequences of the war and the

Holocaust, the Jewish population sharply dcreased to around 2.2 million in the 1959 census. The

number stayed around the same throughout the 1960's. The 1979 census recorded only 1.7

million Jews living in the Soviet Union and the 1989 census saw about 1.4 million Jews.[66] The

shrinking Jewish population in the Soviet Union can be attributed to emigration, low fertility

rates, and intermarriages. Many Jews left the Soviet Union during the third (1948-1986) and

fourth emigration waves (1987 onwards).[67] In fact, 52% of emigrants from the Soviet Union

between 1948 and 1990 were Jews. During the "third wave", Soviet authorities maintained strict

control over emigration. Family reunification was a prominent acceptable reason for Soviet

authorities to allow Jews to emigrate. However, due to the USSR's restrictive immigration

policy, intervention from foreign nations played an important role in giving Jews opportunities to

emigrate. Once Soviet Jews were allowed to immigrate, Israel and the United States became the

top destination points for Soviet Jews.[68]

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[65] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Dmitry Beinus.
[66] A note on the Soviet census data states that Mountain Jews, Georgian Jews, Central Asian Jews, Krymchaks, and Ttas are not included in this number. Dietz, et. al. "The Jewish emigration from the former Soviet Union to Germany," 32.
[67] Emigration from the Soviet Union can be divided into four waves. The first wave took place right after the 1917 Revolution; an estimated number of 1.5-3.5 million people, many of whom were anticommunists, military personnel, and ordinary citizens, left to escape the new Soviet regime. From 1941-1947, the second wave comprised about 500,000 people who were emitters and refugees. Dietz, Lebok, and Polian, "The Jewish emigration from the former Soviet Union to Germany", 32-33).
[68] Dietz, Lebok, and Polian, "The Jewish Emigration from the Former Soviet Union to Germany", 32-34.

Israel prioritized supporting diaspora Jews by providing them a new homeland to escape to. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion said in a speech to parliament on May 23, 1950 that Israel was committed to fighting for Soviet Jews' right to emigrate to Israel. Two weeks later came the Law of Return, which stated that every Jew has the right to immigrate to Israel. As a nation with only seven hundred thousand Jews living there in its inaugural year of 1948, Israel wanted to grow its population to have enough resources to grow economically and combat any potential regional conflicts. The large Jewish population in the Soviet Union became of great interest to Israel. The Soviet Jewry could be utilized to populate Israel, and with the aid of Israel, they could be saved from anti-semitism and assimiliation to a growing atheistic nation. Unfortunately, by 1950, the Soviets banned its citizens from leaving the country. In 1952, Israel chose to ally with the West in order to receive aid, hurting Soviet Jews' chances of gaining their freedom to emigrate to Israel. Even after Stalin's death, the relationship between Israel and the Soviet Union continued to be tumultuous. At times, the nations seemed to be working towards relations, but Israel's alliance with the West and the Soviet Union's pro-Arab stance made correspondence difficult. Therefore, if Israel wanted to help Soviet Jewry emigrate, they would have to do so in secrecy.[69]

An small underground organization founded in 1952 with the code name "Nativ", meaning "path" in Hebrew, worked under the direct authority of the prime minister to spread Jewish religious and Zionist education throughout the Soviet Union, without endangering Israel's fragile relationship with the Soviet Union. Through their dress and insignia, members of Nativ would signal to Jews they were representatives of Israel. At synagogues, infrequent Yiddish music concerts, and Israeli film screenings, Nativ members would spread Zionist propoganda and provide objects for Jewish religious practices in Soviet cities with large Jewish populations.

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[69] Peretz, *Let my people go*, 49-54.

As time went on, Hebrew textbooks, Jewish calendars, and books written about Israel in the Russian language were distributed to Soviet Jews. Israel's goal was strictly to inspire a connection to Israel amongst Soviet Jews that would spark a desire to make their trip to Israel (known as *aliyah*), not to make life more Jewish for them in the Soviet Union.[70]

There needed to be a spark that drew Soviet Jew's attention to Israel, and for many, The Six-Day War (1967) marked a turning point in interest in Israel.[71] For several days, a fear of the destruction of Israel and the memory of the Jewish lives lost in the Holocaust came to the forefront.[72] On the evening prior to the war breaking out, Soviet anti-semites were happy, thinking that Israel would be annihilated.[73] Soviet, British, and American radio depicted the conflict as one where Israel would be destroyed. Alex Ioffe, a Soviet Jew from Moscow, recalled the state Russian radio reporting for the first five days of the war that Arab forces were claiming victory in the conflict. This report turned out to not be true in the end with Israel ending up victorious.[74] Like many Jews, Yuli Kosharovsky from Sverdlovsk found Israel's victory to be particularly impactful on his Jewish identity and made him question the Soviet Union's intent with the Jewish people. Moreover, Yosef Begun, a Soviet Jew from Moscow, said, "The Six-Day War opened our eyes about the state of Israel of which we had heard only very negative things. We understood it was a country that could defend itself."[75]

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[70] Peretz, *Let my people go*, 57-58.
[71] The Six Day War was sparked due to the blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba. The war began on June 5, 1967 between Israel and Egypt along the Gaza Strip and the Sinai border. Bialis, *Refusenik*, 21:30-22:00.
[72] Peretz, *Let my people go*, 145.
[73] Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, xiv.
[74] Bialis, *Refusenik*, 21:30-22.28.
[75] Bialis, *Refusenik*, 22-22:41.

Natan echoed a similar sentiment. Most Soviet Jews now felt a stronger connection with

Israel, who in their eyes had defended their dignity. Natan came to a new realization that freedom

came from returning to one's historical roots.[76]

> A basic eternal truth was returning to the Jews of Russia—that personal freedom wasn't
> something you could achieve through assimilation. It was available only by reclaiming
> your historical roots… In the hot discussions of those days [about the Soviet invasion of
> Czechoslovakia], I discovered a fundamental difference between my own mentality and
> that of the loyal Soviet citizen. His self-respect derived from being part of the Soviet
> system, and the more powerful the system, the stronger he felt...The authorities *were* the
> law, and the system knew best. And if in this framework, the individual was left with
> some fragments of freedom, he ought to be grateful to the leaders of the land and not
> make further demands.[77]

The appeal of Zionism began to strengthen amongst Soviet Jews like Natan. The Soviet

regime tried to combat the growing strength of the Zionist movement by propelling an anti-Israel

campaign. Despite Soviet efforts, though, Zionism continued to reach more and more Jewish

households. Natan's friends and family were also becoming more passionate about Zionism. In

fact, his friends began giving him books about Israel. When it was time for Natan to graduate

from university, he was ready to make aliyah.[78]

Once Soviet Jews joined the Zionist movement and wanted to make aliyah, the next step

was to find a way to exit the Soviet Union. Due to international pressure, particularly from the

United States, religious and culture oppressive measures began to be lifted.[79] In 1965, 891 Jews

applied for exit visas, and the number doubled in 1966 with 2,047 Jews applying for exit visas.

The Soviet Union used this as an opportunity to put pressure on Israel to uphold peace by

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[76] Sharansky, *Fear no evil*, xiv.
[77] Sharansky, *Fear no evil*, xiv.
[78]Sharansky, *Fear no evil*, xiv-xv.
[79] In 1963, Trofim Kichko wrote the pamphlet *Judaism without Embellishment*, which supplied a theoretical foundation to anti-semitism. In 1965, the Soviets broke away from the anti-Jewish measures that had been previously instituted. Baking matzah was once again legal, synagogues were no longer being closed, and Trofim Kichko's *Judaism without Embellishment* was banned. Peretz, *Let My People Go*, 66.

threatening to end emigration if it were to instigate disputes with neighboring nations.[80][81] The

authorities and Soviet public treated the desire to leave as if it were an act of treason, which left

many Soviet Jews feeling like social outcasts while they awaited approval for their exit visas.[82]

Many Soviet Jews were denied permission to emigrate to Israel because the Soviet Union did not

want qualified specialists who knew state secrets to depart. Soviet Jews who were denied the

right to emigrate as a result of knowing government secrets or without clear reason began calling

themselves "Refuseniks," or "refusals" in Russian. They did not know what would happen to

them because applications for exit visas were public knowledge and difficult to put together. For

example, in order to exit the Soviet Union, Jews had to get permission from their landlords and

bosses. As a result, many Jews lost their jobs the day they applied to immigrate to Israel. Yosef

was a research scientist who lost his job once he applied to emigrate; no one would hire him

because they knew he was trying to leave the Soviet Union. "The government was playing a

double game. On one hand they were arresting people. On the other hand they let people out. To

show that they were arresting criminals, they also were letting Jews go.[83]

     After much frustration, some Soviet Jews turned to more extreme measures to draw

attention to their cause. In 1970, the Dymshits-Kuznetsov hijacking affair, also known as

Operation Wedding, was a plot to board and hijack an empty plane to Sweden with a group of

twelve Jews from Riga and Leningrad, most of whom had been denied visas to emigrate. The

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[80] The Soviet Union also promised the Arab nations to stop immigration to Israel because Israel gaining numbers meant stronger Israeli armed forces, postponement of a return of Arab refugees, and the possibility of Israel expanding its territory. The Soviet Union took on the role of being a mediator between the Israelis and Arabs in a way since it was playing both sides of the conflict. Peretz, *Let My People Go*, 129.
[81] Peretz, *Let My People Go*, 129.
[82] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 38.
[83] Bialis, *Refusenik*, 40:25-42-11.

Soviet government exploited the plot and made many arrests.[84] They were all given long

sentences of forced labor, with two even being sentenced to death. The Soviets wanted to

discourage Jewish emigration and show its Arab allies that harsh punishment was given to

Zionists. However, the trial did the opposite; extensive international press led to outrage from the

West. The international pressure resulted in the two death sentences being changed to fifteen

years of forced labor instead. Jews and non-Jews were both more passionate than ever before

about freeing the Soviet Jewry.[85] This trial provided United States momentum in the fight for the

Soviet Jewry's right to immigrate, as well as inspire more Soviet Jews to want to emigrate. Ben

Tzion wrote an article in the *New York Times* published in 1970 quoting an unnamed young

technician in Moscow.

> Wait and see, in 1959 we were still unsure and afraid–the memory of Stalin's last years was still close–and when the census takers didn't demand any proof of background, many of us played it safe and answered Russian or Ukrainian or Lithuanian. Today things are different. We know we're Jews and want to live openly as Jews and to have what the Soviet Government gives to every other nationality. After all, it's the Government which insists that we have our nationality registered on our identity cards.[86]

Between 1971 and 1977, many Jews began to have their exit visas approved, so they left

for Israel. At first, many Jews from the Baltic republics and western parts of Ukraine, Belorussia,

and Moldova were more drawn to the religious aspect of Judaism and Zionism. Due to their

regional location, which made them farther from central areas and cities, many of these Jews had

been less Russified and secularized. Georgian Jews, along with Tats and Mountain Jews from the

Caucuses, also were more interested in the traditional roots of Jewishness. They had an average

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[84]The trial gained large media attention and those arrested received their sentence in december 1970. Mark Dymshits and Eduard Kuznetsov were accused of "treason against the homeland" and "theft of state property", which led to them being sentenced to death.The Kremlin made sure make it look like a large-scale conspiracy and even arrested activists who had nothing to do with the hijacking. Peretz, *Let My People Go*, 143-144.
[85] Peretz, *Let My People Go*, 143-144
[86] Ben Tzion, "On the Jewish Question in the Soviet Union," *The New York Times*, May 3, 1970.

Soviet educational level and many were teachers, white-collar workers, and commercial traders.[87] Soviet immigrants were much more educated than the Israeli population at the time. Of the Soviet immigrants who came to Israel from 1970-1979, 30% of Soviet Jews had academic and science occupations compared to around 8% of Israelis.[88]

Once Soviet Jews were allowed to emigrate, they entered a society unfamiliar to them. Orthodox Judaism dominated religious institutions, not state-endorsed atheism. Nevertheless, to some, Russia and Israel were not too far apart since Israel too had little to no legal separation between state and religion. Some Jews, like Yuri, the professor of organic chemistry, were repelled by the social landscape of Israel.

> Socialism, on the other hand, actively repelled me. Although I knew little about them, the kibbutzim looked typically Communist to me, and the enthusiasm of the Israeli pioneers seemed too familiar from the rosy Soviet movies of the thirties. I was afraid of socialism and enthusiasm. I had had too much of both in Russia. Besides, I could not accept the idea of a state religion, whatever it was.[89]

Even though the American Jewish community knew that life for Soviet Jews was not optimal, up until the 1970s there had not been a serious campaign to liberate them.[90] Since the beginning of the 1960s, Soviet Jewry activist groups in the United States had struggled with gathering the financial resources to make a larger impact, especially due to the other movements such as the Vietnam War and Civil Rights movement occurring simultaneously. Many American Jewish students who were displeased with their parents' silence during the Holocaust era were motivated to take part in movements to aid Soviet Jewry. Jacob Birnbaum, who founded the Student Struggle for Soviet

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[87] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 38-40.

[88] Shoshana Newman, "Aliyah to Israel: Immigration Under Conditions of Adversity" in *European Migration: What Do We Know?* ed. Klaus F. Zimmermann (Oxford University Press on Demand, 2005), 477.

[89] Tarnopolsky, *Memoirs of 1984*,184.

[90] Murra Friedman, *A Second Exodus: The American Movement to Free Soviet Jews* (UPNE, 1999), 18.

Jews (SSSJ) in 1963, noted the trauma that many Jews felt for failing to save Jews under the Nazi regime.[91]

> Why protest?. . . Suffering the world over should command our immediate sympathy and stir us to action. Many young Jews today forget that if injustice cannot be condoned in Selma, U.S.A., neither must it be overlooked in Kiev, U.S.S.R. Though there are no gas chambers in the Soviet Union, our people there–the surviving remnants of Hitler's massacres–are being destroyed in their innermost humanity. . . Most of us are too young to bear any responsibility for the dearth of protest during the Nazi era. But our time has its own mighty challenge and it is up to us to make a full response.[92]

Up until the mid-1970s, Soviet Jewish immigrants primarily went to Israel.[93] The United States had not been an option. After a long fight from the American Jewish community to spur public commotion around the humanitarian crisis, the Jackson-Amendment (1974) provided certain economic advantages to the Soviet Union in return for minorities being able to immigrate.[94] After this passage, so many Jews prioritized the United States, in fact, that the number who immigrated to the United States and Israel were roughly the same during the entire decade, even with Israel's four year head-start.[95] The Yom Kippur War of 1973 made the world aware that Israel was destined to be in constant battle for its right to exist, and in doing so, made many reconsider Israel. Moreover, prior to the United States' opening, more isolated Jews with lower education levels and greater connections to their Jewishness had been the ones to emigrate. Now, professional and intellectual Jews wanted the freedom to economically prosper in

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[91] Orbach, *The American Movement to Aid Soviet Jews*, 3-5.

[92] Founder of the SSSJ, Jacob Birnbaum, stressed the theme of guilt in one of the earliest handbooks he wrote for the SSSJ. He did not want past guilt of parents not being involved in saving Jews from the Holocaust, which he referred to as the "sins of fathers" to be passed on to future generations. Orbach, *The American Movement to Aid Soviet Jews*, 5.

[93] Dietz, Lebok, and Polian, "The Jewish emigration from the former Soviet Union to Germany," 34.

[94] Peretz, *Let My People Go*, 3.

[95] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 18.

America.[96] Although some Soviet Jews still went to Israel, a growing number were repelled by Israel's economic socialism and its persistent battles.

The first time Larisa learned about Soviet Jews immigrating to Israel was when she met her future husband Dmitry. No one had gone to Israel that she knew of from her hometown of Saint Petersburg, Dmitry's cousin Misha, with whom he was very close, went to Israel at the beginning of 1972.[97] According to Larisa, "He didn't know why he left. He left because everyone was going." Misha's father-in-law wanted to emigrate. His family was wealthy but were constantly worried because they made their money through illegal means; they thought Israel would provide a better life with less concern. Misha eventually ran away to Germany after he was drafted to the Yom Kippur War. Misha ended up unable to leave Germany for some time before coming to the United States.[98] Previously, in the 1960s, Soviet Jews received information about Israel through contractitory outlets: either through the Nativ organization or the Soviet anti-Israel media. Now they were able to learn from their own people and form an educated opinion based on the experience of others like them.

Misha was of course not the only Jew left unfulfilled living in Israel. Life was often harder in Israel. There were horror stories about university professors cleaning toilets in Israel.[99] As a veteran of the air force, Polina visited Israel in May 1976. While there, she encountered many Soviet Union Jews who were dissatisfied with their lives in Israel. They felt they had made a mistake and wanted help to go back to the Soviet Union. An older man who had left the Soviet Union said to her:

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[96] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 40.
[97] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Dmitry Beinus.
[98] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Larisa Beinus.
[99] Suzanne D. Rutland, "Conflicting Visions: Debates Relating to Soviet Jewish Emigration in the Global Arena," *East European Jewish Affairs*, (2017), 228.

Dear Polina! If, when you go back home you see anyone who plans to come here–please say to them what I shall now say–or still better, shout as loud as you can: "Don't go! If you aren't complete idiots–don't go!"[100]

While Soviet Jews were passionate about making aliyah, others were determined to go to the West. A phenomenon of *neshira*, meaning "dropping out" in Hebrew, referred to Soviet Jews who would change their final destination point, often to the United States, while they were in transit to immigrate to Israel. Jews would plan to immigrate to Israel and take the train Vienna. While there, they would be approached by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), an American Jewish organization that helped immigrants. In 1974, 2,676 Soviet Jews were able to gain entry into the United States through this system. Economic opportunity, not reunification with families, allured these Jews to come to the United States.[101]

Larissa and Dmitry were Soviet Jews who received exit visas for Israel but changed their final destination point to the United States, the Land of Opportunity to them. Larissa understood that while some Jews sought out religious freedom, most wanted to leave for a better life. Although Dmitry's mother, Khaya Beinus, did mention the idea of going to Israel after hearing about other Jews going there, his father, Arkady Beinus, was adamant about not going there.[102] After all, Larisa and Dmitry both had childhoods where they felt comfortable with their Jewish identity, so a homeland designed to protect Jews was less appealing to them. Once the United States became an option, Dmitry and Larisa left the Soviet Union with their two-year-old son Michael – my father – on December 31, 1975 for the United States. Dmitry's parents immigrated with them as well with hopes for greater economic opportunities. Arkady's cousin had sent an invitation from Israel for them to come. They knew the process of deferring to the West and left the Soviet Union as if they were going to Israel for family reunification purposes, but changed to

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[100] Staroselsky, *The Real Truth: Profiles of Soviet Jew,* 147.
[101] Peretz, *Let My People Go*, 236-237.
[102] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Larisa Beinus.

go to the United States instead. Larisa's family had been against her leaving as they felt that they had a good life in the Soviet Union. In fact, while dating Dmitry, she had kept Dmitry's family's intent to emigrate secret from her family because she knew leaving would greatly saddened them. [103]

Dmitry described the immigration wave of the 1970s as a virus. Everyone seemed to be going because they were influenced by others; many Soviet Jews seemed to have little conviction as to why they were immigrating, including Dmitry and Larisa. Although the United States and Israel were both viable options for Soviet Jewry at this point, immigration to the United States was a much longer process. Dimitry and his family arrived in Austria from Saint Petersburg. There, they were met by an Israeli agent and a Jewish American organization. If he would have said he wanted to immigrate to Israel, he and his family would have boarded a plane quickly. However, their final destination was the United States, so they stayed in Austria for two weeks before living in Rome for four months to await their spot to journey to America.[104] They settled in Seattle because they thought Dmitry could work for The Boeing Company with his meteorology degree from the University of Leningrad. However, once he arrived with his family, non-citizens were not being hired for that sort of work. He instead went to work at Nordstroms as a salesman in the women's shoe department, while his wife with a medical degree from Leningrad Pediatric Medical University worked in delivery rooms of hospitals to help deliver babies. Khaya took any job she could and also worked as a cleaning lady in the hospital. Arkady was able to get his electrician license in the United States.[105] She never practiced medicine in the

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[103] Larisa's mother Raya and sister Mera would later immigrate to Israel in 1991 and take part in the "fourth wave" after the passing of her father Lazar in 1990.

[104] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Dmitry Beinus.

[105] Arkady had previously been an electrician during World War II and lived through the blockade of Leningrad. He helped his mother and sister leave Saint Petersburg while his father went to war. He hardly survived due to hunger. After the war, he married Khaya and had two children, Lena and Dmitry. He worked as an electrician for a train station for a few years. He then went on to work at a big

states due to the barriers like exams and residency as she needed to work to support her family.

Dmitry eventually went on to own a shoe store in 1979 that grew into the chain Shoe Pavilion

with 155 stores across the United States. According to Larisa, they found a better life, but that

did not occur for everyone.[106] Dmitry emphasized that immigration was difficult, and despite his

success, it would be something he wishes he had thought about in greater detail before doing.

> I thought to myself I am graduating from university and hadn't worked yet, I'll look for a job in America versus Saint Petersburg. I misread this situation bigtime, but to me not having a job was the same in both places. Everyone was writing letters that the streets were painted with gold. I don't know where they came up with this stuff. To be honest, our decision there was not one that had much thought put into it. If I had to do it all again, I'd really think about it. It was not as easy as a lot of people thought it would be, and it was actually extremely difficult.

In 1978, the Soviet Union began releasing larger numbers of Jews to emigrate. Now, 50

to 60 percent of Soviet Jews were choosing to immigrate somewhere other than Israel. In 1979,

51,320 Soviet Jews, the largest number yet, were allowed to emigrate. Shockingly, more than 66

percent of them went to the West, according to "The Soviet Jewry Research Bureau of the

National Conference on Soviet Jewry." When the Soviet government became aware of the

neshira phenomenon, it was embarrassed.[107] Jews were sneaking away to the Soviet Union's

foremost enemy, the United States. The Israeli government was also angry with the many

American Jewish organizations who had lured Soviet Jews to come to America instead of Israel

through financial aid stipends.[108] By 1980, the momentum behind the immigration wave was

stunted. The Soviet government put in place new emigration regulations which addressed Jews

switching their final destination point. For example, now one needed a certificate from an

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manufacturing place that made metals and became a manager there. Therefore, in the States, he could use his skills from the earlier part of his career working as an electrician, but technically he had a higher position in the Soviet Union. Eventually, with the help of Dmitry, he opened a small handbag store that was open for many years. Rachel Beinus, Interview with Larisa Beinus.

[106] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Larisa Beinus.
[107] Peretz, *Let my people go*, 236-237.
[108] Peretz, *Let my people go*, 238.

immediate family member living in Israel to leave. In comparison to the over 50,000 Jews who immigrated in 1979, less than 3,000 immigrated in 1982. Immigration would continue to decrease until a new movement arrived in 1987: the "fourth wave" of immigration.[109]

The "third wave" was the first major movement for immigration since the start of the Cold War. Between 1971 and 1981, around 300,000 Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union.[110] At first, Soviet Jews struggled to have the right to immigrate. The international press, Israeli agents, and American Jewish groups put pressure on the Kremlin to allow for Jews to leave for Israel. Many Jews, especially those living in remote areas with less education and Russification, felt reconnected with Judaism and Zionism. Other Jews emigrated to Israel to have a better life. Still, many Soviet Jews were not interested in moving to Israel at all. Due to rumors about Israel from past immigrants, a disconnect to their Judaism, and the numerous regional conflicts that surrounded Israel, many Soviet Jews believed that Israel was not fit for them. Moreover, once the United States began taking Soviet Jewish refugees, a significant number of Soviet Jews applied to Israel and later switched their final destination to the United States. More Soviet Jews were immigrating to the United States than Israel by the end of the "third wave". While some Soviet Jews did in fact reconnect with their Jewish identity, many left in hopes of economic prosperity. The differing Jewish experience across the Soviet Union resulted in a multitude of reasons and destinations for Soviet Jews. Therefore, although Israel is the official home of the Jewish people today, not all Soviet Jews thought they would find their home there too. Furthermore, as the "fourth wave" of immigration illustrates, Israel became a physical safe haven for Jews immigrating from the Soviet Union rather than a religious one.

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[109] Rutland, "Conflicting visions," 228.
[110] Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 4.

The Soviet Union's Collapse: The Mass Jewish Exodus of the 1990s

"Do you find yourself thinking well maybe we should stay, maybe things are going to change now" asked Dan Rather… "Oh no, the decision has been made eight years ago and now that's our purpose and only dream we have. We have done away with everything in this country. We no longer love it," answered Emilia Shrayer.[111]

The Soviet Union faced economic challenges as it could not keep pace with advanced modernization and social challenges from its citizens during the 1980s. As a result, Mikhail Gorbachev, who became General Secretary in 1985, was dissatisfied with the system in place and determined to address these issues.[112] In regard to economic reform, he initiated policies that permitted private cooperatives, individual economic activity, and a relaxed version of foreign trade monopoly, capitalistic features the Soviet Union had not seen thus far.[113] Gorbachev's ambitious goals changed the economic landscape.[114] By 1988, the Party members had been split into two wings, those like Gorbachev and Alexander Yakovlev who supported *perestroika,* a new political movement meaning restructuring, and those who opposed it.[115] However, the Soviet Union was too broken to salvage it. By the 1980s, few people saw the appeal in socialism, and the Communist Party had lost momentum in carrying out its ideology. Gorbachev's reforms were meant to fix the Soviet Union's economic deficiencies −instead they exacerbated them and created a deeper economic crisis. By 1990, millions began resigning from the Communist Party. By the summer of 1991, the Communist Party was officially banned from the Soviet Union.[116]

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[111] Dan Rather, an American journalist, interviewed Emilia Shrayer, a Soviet Jewish *refusenik*. She is also the mother of Maxim Shrayer, who is mentioned later in this chapter, as well as the first one. Dan Rather, "The Soviet Union-7 Days in May," CBS News, June 24, 1987, 37:01-37:48.
[112] Richard Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union* (Routledge), 410.
[113] Martin McCauley, *The rise and fall of the Soviet Union*, (Pearson Education, 2008), 398-400.
[114] Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union*, 410-411.
[115] McCauley, *The rise and fall of the Soviet Union*, 413-414.
[116] Robert Strayer, *Why did the Soviet Union Collapse?: Understanding Historical Change* (ME Sharpe, 1998), 6.

New restrictions limited Soviet Jewish emigration in the early 1980s. In 1981, 9,500 Soviet Jews were allowed to emigrate, but only 900 were allowed to leave by 1984. More than half of applications for emigration were denied and the growing number of refuseniks increased. More Jews were imprisoned, exiled, or sent to psychiatric hospitals than were allowed to leave. Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 provoked the Russian press to portray Israel as committing humanitarian crimes.[117] Maxim, a previously mentioned Soviet Jew who grew up in Moscow in the Brezhnev years, remembered being asked about his views of Israel for his Komsomol (Young Communist League) interview that same year, to which he replied with the anti-Israel answer that was expected in the Soviet Union; he referred to Israel's military "aggression" and the "freedom-loving, oppressed" Palestinian people.[118]

Some of Gorbachev's policies harmed Jews in the Soviet Union in particular. *Glasnost*, the new Soviet Union practice of government transparancy, placed certain antisemitic beliefs on public display. Jews were to become scapegoats for the economic and political instability of the 1980s. *Perestroika* allowed for new entrepreneurial opportunities, some of which were connected to Jews, which created distrust of the Jewish population. This type of economic restructuring also encouraged grassroot organizations to form, many of which had noticeably antisemitic platforms.[119] Yuri Stern, a Russian-born immigrant to Israel, said, "The situation in the Soviet Union is such that the fact we still have not witnessed large-scale pogroms is simply a miracle."[120] Anti-semitism had previously felt more remote and more targeted towards radicals and refuseniks. During the 1980s, Jews who had assimilated and conformed to the Soviet Union now experienced it, too.

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[117] Peretz, *Let My People Go*, 297-299.
[118] Shrayer, *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story*, 81-82.
[119] Gitelman, "Glasnost, Perestroika and Antisemitism," 154.
[120] "Soviet Jews Fear Violence, Look to Israel," *Austin American Statesman*, February 3, 1990.

Mera Shafir (formerly Brandman), Larisa's older sister, had previously felt adamant about staying in the Soviet Union during the "third wave" of immigration. She was born in 1946 in Zhmerinka, Ukraine and went on to attend dentistry school in Moscow. She lived well in Moscow and even had her own private practice because of *perestroika*. However, despite her success, the growing anti-semitism in the late 1980s changed her view about staying in the Soviet Union. Her husband, a pediatrician, began experiencing more anti-semitism at work as well. Moreover, Mera told Larisa about a specific anti-semitic incident she experienced on the subway that frightened her. A young man was keeping to himself when all of a sudden, a big man began yelling and beating him. Mera tried to interfere and told the man to stop the violence. He turned to her and yelled something along the lines of, "What are you doing here you k*ke? Why are you still here? You're not supposed to be here. You should go back to Israel." Mera was shaken by this incident as she, a highly respected, educated dentist in her early 40s, had never seen such violence or experienced such hate face-to-face in her life. As a mother of a son who was about to graduate university, she worried about his future in the Soviet Union if this anti-semitism were to continue to rise.[121] Mera eventually immigrated to Israel in 1991. Therefore, the rise of anti-semitism persuaded many to leave who were previously fixated on staying in the Soviet Union.

On December 12, 1987, President Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev met at a historical summit where a quarter of a million people gathered in Washington D.C to witness. People from all over the country came to press for Jews to be freed from the Soviet Union. George H.W. Bush was serving as Vice President, and there he echoed Reagan's famous speech about the Berlin Wall concerning Soviet Union Jewry. "Mr. Gorbachev, let my people go. Let them go." This summit was just one instance of the Reagan Bush administration working to obtain immigration

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[121] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Larisa Beinus.

rights for Soviet Union Jews who were still living in the USSR. Author Gal Beckerman, who wrote *When They Come For Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry*, talked about the interactions between Gorbachev and Reagan in an interview with the National Public Radio (NPR).[122]

> Every time Gorbachev would walk into meeting with Reagan by the mid-'80s, the first thing Reagan would do -- and we see this in memoirs and oral histories -- is Reagan would pull out a piece of paper with names of Soviet Jews who had been refused visas or had been somehow sent to prison for their activism and he said, 'Well if you want to talk, first we have to discuss these names."[123]

Although the momentum behind the "third wave" of immigration had simmered, the "fourth wave" began to pick up as immigration policies relaxed. In 1986, only 914 Jews had been allowed to emigrate. Over 8,000 Jews were then allowed to emigrate in 1987, 18,965 in 1988, and over 71,000 in 1989, beating the previous record set in 1979 by 20,000 Jews.[124] Immigrants who had previously been denied, like Maxim's family, gained permission to leave. His family had applied in 1979 to "reunite" with family in Israel, but they were denied due to association with state secrets. Finally, in 1987, after an eight year struggle, Maxim, along with his parents, gained permission to emigrate.[125]

 By 1989, though, Soviet Union Jews could come to the United States if they had immediate family with whom to reconnect. Only 50,000 Soviet minorities total were allowed to immigrate to the United States in 1990. Travel and relocation costs would be covered by the government for 40,000 immigrants, while private organizations helped pay for the other 10,000 new immigrants. Moreover, previous routes through Italy were no longer an option to enter the United States. Jews who wanted to immigrate to the United States would have to take the

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[122] Guy Raz, "How A Quest To Save Soviet Jews Changed The World," (NPR, October 30, 2010).
[123] Raz, "How A Quest To Save Soviet Jews Changed The World."
[124] Gitelman, "Glasnost, Perestroika and Antisemitism," 155.
[125] Shrayer, *Leaving Russia*, 38, 285-287

necessary steps through Moscow. As a result of the new difficulty to immigrate to the United

States, Soviet Jews began to immigrate to Israel in mass numbers.[126]

At a time when many Soviet Jews were ready to leave the USSR as its downward

trajectory continued, the United States closed its doors to a majority of applicants. According to

Louis Bernstein's article published in 1989 for the *Jerusalem Post*, "The timing could not have

been worse." Bernstein was a rabbi, professor of Jewish history, and a member of the Jewish

Agency Executive-American Section. He elaborated on some theories as to why American Jews

stopped fighting for Soviet Union Jews' refugee status and place in America. To him, American

philanthropy defined Israel as the place for where the oppressed went. Therefore, Israel would be

well equipped to take in more immigrants according to American Jews. He also emphasized a

political aspect to it, pointing out that America took interest in immigrants from nations that were

victims to previous American foreign policy such as Nicaraguans, Vietnamese, and Armenians.

The United States had continuously supported Israel through generous financial aid, so it was

less pressured to embrace Soviet Union Jews.[127] Thus, the sentiment that the Soviet Union Jews

were not America's problem returned by the 1990s. Despite the movement to free the Soviet

Union Jews that had taken form a couple decades earlier, the USSR/FSU (Former Soviet Union)

Jews were now considered to be mostly Israel's problem.

With the Soviet Union in disarray, Jews who had previously chosen to stay were left with

a major decision: remain in the former Soviet Union territories or immigrate. In 1990, over

184,000 Soviet Jews did the latter – they boarded planes and left for Israel, making it the largest

wave of immigration yet.[128] All of a sudden, Jews who were not religious or Zionists composed

the majority of Jews immigrating to Israel. Mera, Larisa's sister, lived a prosperous life in the

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[126] Peretz, *Let My People Go*, 323-324.
[127] Louis Bernstein, "Bringing Russian Jewry Home," *Jerusalem Post*, February 16, 1989.
[128] Peretz, *Let My People Go*, 155.

Soviet Union. When her husband suggested moving to Israel in 1974 because some of his family felt strongly about the Zionist movement and had resettled in Israel, she was adamantly against it. However, by 1990, the rise of anti-semitism created an unsafe atmosphere for her. Unlike in the United States, in Israel, dentists with at least twenty years of experience did not need to retake dentist examinations in order to keep their licenses, making Israel the practical choice for them to immigrate in 1991.[129] Mera provides an example of how basic feasibility became a leading cause of immigrating to Israel during this time. With the Soviet Union collapsing and anti-semitism rising, Jews who would otherwise not consider themselves particularly Zionist now began regarding Israel as a viable option.

Zionism was so removed as a calculus for leaving the Soviet Union that, as a survey conducted by Zvi Gitelman illustrates, only three percent of immigrants cited Zionism as a reason for emigration from the FSU. Fifteen percent did however prioritize living among other Jews, which may have been a response to Jewish hate on the rise in the Soviet Union. In fact, anti-semitism was among the most popular reasons to leave, along with having family in Israel and opportunity amidst the FSU's economic deterioration.[130] Thus, when looking at the motives for FSU immigration, Jews were not attracted to the country for what made Israel Israel; instead, the region gained a mass influx of immigrants due to a crumbling, anti-semitic FSU, close family ties, and the inability to migrate to other coutries, most notably the United States.

Meron Benvenisti wrote an article in 1990 in The *Washington Post* about FSU Jewish immigration to Israel. Meron was the former deputy mayor of Jerusalem and director of the West Bank Database Project in Jerusalem, which sought to survey Israeli citizens on their country's policies. He jokingly wrote at first that these FSU Jews ressemble the late founding fathers of

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[129] Rachel Beinus, Interview with Larisa Beinus.
[130] Zvi Gitelman, "Historical Perspective," in eds. Noah Lewin-Epstein, Paul Ritterband, and Yaacov Ro'i *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Migration and Resettlement* (Routledge, 2013), 30-35.

Israel, later shifting his tone to establish that these Jewish immigrants were very much not

interested in Zionism. He stated that a fraction of Jews settled in Israel during this time for

Zionist motives, but most of them came because of a fear of persecution or by chance. Moreover,

he wrote that both sides of the Isreaeli political spectrum preached the benefits of this influx of

people and therefore welcomed FSU Jewish immigration. While Israeli conservatives believed

FSU Jews would support their Zionist agenda, Israeli liberals hoped FSU Jews would strengthen

the Ashkenazi Jewish presence against the "Levantine" Jews in Israel to manifest Ashkenazi

dominance in Isreal.[131] But both movements failed to remember that most of these Jews would

have prefered to have immigrated elsewhere.[132] Thus, as the new nation incorporated FSU Jews

to propel its own agendas, these very immigrants lacked the same enthuaism for Israel as their

predecessors had possessed only a couple decades ago.

Natan, a Soviet Jew previously mentioned from Donetsk, fought for the rights to

immigrate in Russia, which resulted in his imprisonment in the Soviet Union for many years.

While in prison, he thought of two places in this world: the Evil Empire and the Promised Land.

His only goal was to survive the Evil Empire and go to the Promised Land.[133]

> I wanted to feel part of one Israel, one people. In the punishment cell, if somebody had asked, with whom do you feel more connection, with the religious, or the secular, or the Orthodox, it would have sounded stupid. What sustains you is the oneness of the people, it's what gives you so much strength, that you are part of one people which fought for thousands of years together.[134]

As a well known prisoner, Natan was able to gather support for his campaign for Jewish

immigration rights from all types of Jews: Ashkenazi and Sephardic, Israeli and American,

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[131] "Levantine" Jews originate from countries that border on the eastern half of the Mediterranean. Unlike Ashkenazi Jews, these Jews are the descendants of the exiles from Spain and Portugal. David de Sola Pool, "The Levantine Jews in the United States," (*The American Jewish Year Book*, 1913), 207-208.
[132] Meron Benvenisti, "Last Tribe Out of Bondage; Russian Jewish Immigrants Relegitimize an Exhausted Zionism," *The Washington Post,* March 11, 1990.
[133] Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, 421.
[134] Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, 421.

religious and secular. Therefore, each group wanted Natan to join their unique cause when he arrived in Israel. Soviet Jews envisioned Natan as the leader who could vocalize their need for jobs, housing, and respect. Secular Jews expected him to take charge in their fight to lessen the Orthodox Jews' grip on the government. Since it was impossible to please everyone, Natan was bound to disappoint some.[135] Despite Israel being the homeland of the Jewish people, the Soviet Jews entered a land that was ideologically fragmented.

Natan's dream of Jews coming together as one in Israel did not come to reality. Many Soviet Jews felt like outsiders in Israel. A 2001 study was conducted with twenty-one university students who lived in *kibbutzim* and immigrated to Israel between 1990-1994. All the students in the study had parents with post-secondary education. The subjects themselves had received secondary education in the former Soviet Union and had spent two years in an Israeli university. Ten of them came from Moscow and Saint Petersburg. As communal homes, *kibbutzim* had an "open door" policy over the years to different types of people –Israeli pioneers, volunteers from abroad, and immigrants. For many years, a *kibbutz* was perceived as the "identity card" of Israel and represented the Zionist dream. With the large FSU Jewish immigration wave of the 1990s, most kibbutzim committed themselves to this new group of people entering Israel. The students joined the *kibbutzim* not based on a choice, but rather by chance. They did not mention ideological motivation as a reason for living on a *kibbutz*. Students like those in the sample group had come to the kibbutzim for practical reasons; they could take advantage of the intensive Hebrew studies and take time to digest their new country. The majority of those surveyed were not close with most *kibbutz* members and indicated that they felt like outsiders; their major source of kinship came from the other FSU students in the *kibbutz*. According to Ira, a member of the study, the two worlds–that of Soviet Jews and the *Kibbutzim*–did not collide well.

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[135] Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, 421-423

Moreover, Ya'acov recalled having lots of Russian friends on the *kibbutz* and having little

contact with other *kibbutz* members. Furthermore, Ya'acov did not feel a need to leave his

Russian circle and assimilate into Israel society.[136] Albert, like other FSU Jews, felt excluded

from Israeli society. "It turns out that they [kibbutzniks] restrict and define you and you don't

belong to them. They're Israeli, you're Russian, as opposed to Jews and Jews."[137]

      Although the Bukharan Jews were more secluded than Ashkenazi Jews in the Soviet

Union, they were also a part of the massive immigration wave in the 1990s. A small number of

Bukharan Jews left the Soviet Union 1970s, but almost all of them who did immigrate did so

once the Soviet Union was dismantled. As a result of economic instability and the rise of Uzbek

nationalism, the Bukharan population in Central Asia began to diminish. In 1989, the Bukharan

Jewish population was 50,000. As of 2012, some 100 remain in Tajikistan and less than 1,000

remain in Uzbekistan. [138]

> When a man left with his wife, for example, her sister might soon follow, then that sister's parents-inlaw, then those in-laws' siblings, those siblings' children, and so the chain of migration continued. By the first time I [the author] visited Uzbekistan in 1993, everyone I met had a child, parent, sibling, or cousin in the United States or Israel.[139]

      Dina, a Bukharan Jew now living in Queens, New York, had parents living in Bukhara

who did not want to immigrate. Her mother was one of eight children, and many of her mother's

siblings began immigrating to Israel and the United States in the 1990s. Dina's mother felt lonely

as more and more relatives departed. She began to realize that her four children had no future in

Uzbekistan. No Jews would be left for her children to marry, and with nationalism and

anti-semitism on the rise, her children would have a difficult time building a life for themselves

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[136] Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder, "Reflections on Strangeness in Context," 483.
[137] Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder, "Reflections on Strangeness in Context," 495.
[138] Cooper, *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism,* 219.
[139] Cooper, *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism,* 219.

there. Dina needed to find a way out of Uzbekistan so she took advantage of an all-expenses-paid study-abroad program in Israel. She was at first placed in a welcoming dorm where she liked her peers. However, she and some other girls were moved to an ultra-Orthodox boarding school whereby she was separated from the boys with whom she had become friends. This school had no understanding of the Bukharan culture or its language. Once Dina was able to leave the school, she went to live with relatives, all of whom were recent immigrants, in Yehud and Tel Aviv. They worked long hours and resided in small apartments, making barely enough money to support their own children. They could not support Dina, so she went back to Uzbekistan.[140]

Despite excelling in school, Dina did not enroll in university or look for employment because she thought there was no point in trying to create a life for herself in Uzbekistan. She learned in 1999 that her aunt in New York had been paying an annual fee to keep Dina's family's entry visas alive, but that the visas would expire if they did not immigrate. Her family of seven then came to New York and spread themselves out among family members already residing there.[141] Dina's family serves as another example of FSU Jews who did not originally intend to leave but left due to the rise of anti-semitism and nationalism that came with the Soviet Union's collapse. Moreover, Dina no longer had a Jewish community as many Jews decided to immigrate earlier than her family. Although she did attempt to live in Israel, the circumstances restricted her from making a life for herself there. Therefore, Dina's family was motivated to leave in search of a better life post-Soviet Union, ending up where they could. For them, that was the United States.

The "fourth wave" of immigration complicated the concept of a Jewish nationality. The 1970s and 1990s were both decades where Jewish identity was challenged through immigration rules and availability, but in different ways: while in the former decade Jews struggled to

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[140] Cooper, *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism,* 219-224.
[141] Cooper, *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism,* 224-226.

immigrate at all, in the latter decade Jews immigrated to a nation whose Jewish identity was divided into subgroups. Although Gorbachev's policies of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* helped spark anti-semitism, it also helped give the right to emigrate to Soviet Union Jews. At the same time, though, the freedom to leave the Soviet Union with ease was complicated by the difficulty to enter the United States. Israel became the most prominent destination point because it was the most easily accessible. Once only the dream of Zionist Jews, it became a place for Soviet Jews to immigrate to because it was the best alternative for them. Moreover, Israel was not a nation of a homogenous Jewish population. Jews were divided based on how religious they were and from where they came. Jews from the USSR/FSU wanted to escape the land where they were considered the "other." Instead, they found themselves in another land where they felt like outsiders, right back to square one. Thus, the "fourth wave" illustrates that the image of Soviet Jews leaving a deteriorating nation for a perfect one is only half-true. While the USSR/FSU was in fact in economic shambles, Israel was not the idealized Promised Land that many had hoped. Instead, it was often the nation that worked best at the time.

Conclusion

No ethnic group has a clear narrative to tell in its story of immigration, and Soviet Jews are no exception. This paper was written with the intent to understand and bridge together the different types of accounts among Soviet Jews. First, the paper discovers the Jewish experience in different parts of the Soviet Union in order to later identify the interplay between identity and immigration motives. The Soviet Jewish experience revolved around more factors than simply religion, including Russification, education, and association with anti-semitism. The paper then ponders what made emigration so popular in the first place, and more specifically, why many Soviet Jews chose the United States over Israel, the so-called Promised Land, in the 1970s. Furthermore, it explores why Israel finally began seeing large numbers of Russian Jewish immigrants in the 1990s when the United States, the so-called Land of Opportunity, was largely preferred due to its superior resources.

On a personal aside, the first time I realized my family understood their Jewishness differently than most Jews had was in a synagogue. When my younger sister Liza and I attended a reformed Jewish elementary school together, my family would appear at certain events that took place during the High Holidays. At synagogue, I remember opening my prayer book and following along with the Rabbi, Cantor, and the rest of the congregation. Throughout the service, I would look over my shoulder at my family members only to observe them not fully following along, as if they were unsure of what to do at certain parts of the ceremony. This sparked my initial confusion: if everyone in the room was Jewish and so was my family, why didn't they know the prayers or rituals like everyone else in the room?

As I grew older, I began to have conversations with my grandparents about our religion. I learned about how Jewishness was mainly a nationality to them in the Soviet Union, not a

religion. They had lived in a country where they were not allowed to practice their faith. I grew up hearing their stories about life in the Soviet Union and the hardships that came with immigration. My questions regarding the Soviet experience grew on Birthright, a sponsored trip to Israel for Jewish youth; there, I heard a Soviet Jewish immigrant speak about her family's longtime dream to come to Israel. Her narrative contradicted the stories I had heard from my grandparents, who experienced disinterest in going to Israel. I then started to ponder about why my grandmother and her sister, Larisa and Mera, immigrated at different times and to different places. Why did a majority of my grandma's immediate and extended family members immigrate in the 1990s to Israel, not the United States like herself? During my junior-year, I took a class called *Jews in the City* with Professor Rebecca Kobrin, which explored Jewish life in a different city each week. In particular, comparison was made between Jews who lived in Saint Petersburg and those who resided in Odessa. Despite both cities being a part of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, the experiences of Jews were vastly dissimilar from one another.

Thus, through my observations and classes, I became interested in juxtaposing the unique narratives of the Soviet Jewish experience and exodus in order to appreciate my own family's history. Telling the stories of Soviet Jews grows more important with each passing generation as they give us an understanding of from where we came and where we are going. One all-too-familiar example is Yiddish, a language that is all but abandoned. However, stories about the Soviet Jewish experience can be passed on from each generation to the next, no matter the language. Thus, this paper not only intends to explore the experiences and emmigration of Soviet Jews, but to also preserve their distinct narratives; these stories remind us that, while history can seem so simple and obvious to those who learn it, in reality history is messy,

contradictory, and often leaves us with asking better questions about the past rather than

answering old ones.

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