

Semen Charnyi

Integration and Self-Assertion

The Jewish Community of Russia

After decades of discrimination, it has been possible to observe a renaissance of Jewish life in Russia since Perestroika. Despite the large-scale emigration of Jews, there is an active community life with schools, media, cultural facilities, and associations that look after Jewish interests. State antisemitism belongs to the past.

The first mention of the presence of Jews on the current territory of the Russian Federation appears in the 1st century CE and is associated with the Bosporan Kingdom on the shores of the Kerch Strait. In the 7th-10th centuries, the Khazar Khaganate existed along the Volga, the Don, and in the northern Caucasus. Its rulers adopted Judaism in the 8th century. From the Mongol invasion of the 13th century, which destroyed the existing Judaic communities, up until the end of the 18th century Jews appeared on the territory of Russia rather infrequently. The situation changed after the partitions of Poland, when, between 1772 and 1795, territories populated by nearly a million Jews entered into the composition of the Russian Empire. But even then, nearly all the territory of modern-day Russia was excluded from the Pale of Settlement. Only a few parts of previously Polish lands were incorporated into what is today Russian Federation territory: the southern part of the modern Pskov Oblast, the western and northern part of Smolensk and Tver oblasts, the western part of Bryansk Oblast, as well as the cities of Rostov-on-Don and Taganrog. Only certain categories of Jews received special permissions to live beyond the bounds of the Pale of Settlement. In 1897, when the first All-Russian census was conducted, 314,000 Jews were residing outside the pale; this accounted for a mere 6 per cent of the overall numerical strength of the Jewish population of the Russian Empire. The Pale of Settlement was formally retained until 1917.¹ As a result of mass migration from the small towns, the *shtetlekh*, of the former pale, the Jewish population of the *Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic* grew precipitously to 585,000 persons in 1926 and 956,000 persons in 1939.²

Semen Charnyi (b. 1977) is a historian with Memorial in Moscow.

¹ Norbert Franz, Wilfried Jilge, „Rußland, Ukraine, Weißrußland, Baltikum (Lettland, Estland)“, in: Elke-Vera Kotowski et al.: *Handbuch zur Geschichte der Juden in Europa*, vol. I (Darmstadt 2001), pp. 167–227, here p. 186. For the former Pale of Settlement, see map 1, insert I.

² Ibid. p. 200. The social cultural consequences of this migration in Moscow are discussed in Gabriele Freitag, *Nächstes Jahr in Moskau! Die Zuwanderung von Juden in die sowjetische Metropole 1917–1932* (Göttingen 2004).

In the 1920s, the Soviet state pursued a double-edged policy towards the Jews. On the one hand it repressed representatives of the religious and national elite, and on the other, it undertook active measures to promote the development of the Jewish minority. In 1934, a Jewish Autonomous Oblast, with its centre in the new city of Birobidzhan, was founded in the Far East, some 200 kilometres from Khabarovsk. Until the end of the 1940s, the authorities organized several planned relocations from the areas of the former Pale of Settlement to this region. The aim of the Birobidzhan project was the creation of a Jewish territorial formation as a counterweight to the Zionist idea of the founding of an independent Jewish state. The Jewish Autonomous Oblast remains a part of the Russian Federation to this day. At the end of the 1930s, the majority of Jewish organisations were closed and their leaders were repressed.

During the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet leadership was forced for considerations of foreign policy purposes to allow the formation of a Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (chaired by Solomon Mikhoels) and to permit the publication of a newspaper in Yiddish.

More than half a million Soviet Jews, among them inhabitants of the Russian Federation, fought in the Red Army during the Second World War, or the Great Patriotic War as it is known in the Soviet Union. Around 150 Jews were awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. Nearly half of the Jewish soldiers fell in combat. The vast majority of the Jews remaining on the territory occupied by the Nazis were annihilated during the time of the Holocaust.

At the end of the 1940s, within the framework of the new domestic-policy course of the Soviet Union, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and the existing Jewish cultural organisations were closed, while their leaders and functionaries ended up in jails or were annihilated. Mikhoels was killed in 1948, while nearly all the outstanding figures of Yiddish culture were shot on 12 August 1952. A severe purge of the leadership of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast was carried out.³

For several years, the sole officially recognized Jewish institution in Russia remained the synagogue. But even the number of synagogues significantly dwindled during the anti-religious campaign of 1958–1964. The majority of Russian Jews were subjected to acculturation, severed themselves from religious traditions, and gave up their native language for Russian. At the same time, it was none other than they who accounted for a significant part of the Soviet intelligentsia. A specific kind of Jewish identity took shape and was retained throughout the existence of the Soviet Union, the successor states, and even in emigration. Stronger than previously known forms of Jewish identity, it was primarily ethnic and secular. The Jewish population of the Russian Federation continued to decline from 807,900 persons in 1970, to 700,700 persons in 1979, and 551,000 in 1989.⁴ The reasons for this were primarily a low birth rate and emigration. Starting in the 1960s, there existed in the Russian Federation an independent Jewish movement. Its most important centres were Moscow and Leningrad, where it was even possible to build quasi-community structures in the 1970s. The first issue of the journal *Sovyetish heymland*, which became the official centre of the “Jewish literary

³ Ibid. p. 201.

⁴ *Sovetskii Soiuz. Etnicheskaia demografiia sovetskogo evreistva* [= *Kratkaia Evreiskaia Entsiklopediia*, tom 8] col. 293–305 ; <<http://www.eleven.co.il/article/15423>>.

renaissance” in Yiddish, appeared in Moscow in 1961. It was renamed *Di yidishe gas* in 1992 and continued to appear until 1999.

To impede the self-organisation of the Jews, the Soviet regime founded the Anti-Zionist Committee of Soviet Society (*Antisionistskii komitet sovetsoi obshchestvennosti*) in 1983. The first legal Jewish organisations in the Russian Federation came into being in Moscow in 1988 – the Jewish Cultural Association (*Evreiskaia Kul'turnaia Assotsiatsiia*) and the Moscow Jewish Cultural Enlightenment Society (*Moskovskoe Evreiskoe Kul'turno-prosvetitel'skoe obshchestvo*). In 1989, Soviet Jews established their first umbrella organisation in the Soviet Union: the Vaad USSR, which continued to exist until the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Its activity aimed at the re-establishment of Jewish community life in the Soviet Union. At the same time, a mass exodus of Soviet Jews from Russia set in.

Jews in Russia Today

Since 1991, around half a million Jews have left Russia for Israel, the United States, and the Federal Republic of Germany. According to the 2002 census, Russia's Jewish population numbers 233,400 persons, most of whom live primarily in large cities.⁵ Around 70 per cent of the Jewish population lives in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. However, most representatives of the Jewish community and experts consider this figure to be greatly understated, because Jews remain reluctant to this day to disclose their nationality, and because some communities could simply have chosen to ignore the census. In 2004, the demographer Mark Kupovetskii estimated the “demographic potential” of Jews in Russia to be 850,000 persons.⁶

In addition to the Ashkenazi Jews, Russia is home to communities of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, in particular Mountain Jews from Azerbaijan and Dagestan. The 2002 census states that there are 3,000 Mountain Jews and 100 each Georgian and Bukharan Jews, but these figures cannot be taken seriously. It is likely that some of these Jews eluded the census, while others were recorded simply as Jews or gave their citizenship instead of nationality and were recorded as Azerbaijani, Uzbek, or Georgian. It is estimated that there are tens of thousands of Georgian, Mountain, and Bukharan Jews, who live mostly in Moscow. But there are also communities in the Northern Caucasus in Derbent, Makhachkala, and Nal'chik. The Worldwide Congress of Mountain Jews is located in Moscow. It was formed in 2003 and is a member of the Eurasian Jewish Congress (*Evroaziatskii Evreiskii Kongress, EAEK*) and the affiliated Foundation for the Development of Jewish Culture. In addition, there are around 1,000 Karaim, 150 Krymchaks, and several thousand “Subbotniks”, descendants of Russian peasants converted to Judaism in the 18th and 19th centuries.⁷

⁵ Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia, Ofitsialnye rezul'taty perepisi naseleniia 2002 g. <www.perepis2002.ru/ct/doc/TOM_04_01.xls>.

⁶ Mark Kupovetskii, *K otsenke chislennosti evreev i demograficheskogo potentsiala evreiskoi obshchiny v SSSR i postsovetsskikh gosudarstvakh v 1989–2003 gg.* (Kiev 2005) [= *Evroaziatskii evreiskii ezhegodnik*, 5765 (2004/2005)] Kiev 2005, S. 91.

⁷ Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia, Itogi Vserossiiskoi perepisi naseleniia 2002 g. <www.perepis2002.ru/ct/doc/TOM_04_01.xls>.

Organisation, Communities, Associations

An important Jewish umbrella organisation in Russia is the Federation of Jewish Organisations and Communities (Vaad of Russia), which was founded in 1992. Its president, Mikhail Chlenov, is at the same general secretary of the EAEK. The Russian Jewish Congress (*Rossiiskii Evreiskii Kongress*) has existed since 1996 and is headed by Viacheslav Kantor. In addition, there are also associations for three Jewish religious communities: Chabad, Reform Judaism, and traditional Rabbinical Orthodoxy (Misnagdim). The numerically largest and most influential of these forms of devotion is the Chabad, a Hasidic group that originated in the shtetl of Lubavich near Smolensk. Chabad has over 200 communities united in the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (*Federatsija Evreiskikh Obshchin Rossii*, FEOR) under Chief Rabbi Berl Lazar and President Alexander Boroda.⁸ FEOR presently supports communities with more than 1,000 Jews in the construction of community centres. In 2007, 11 synagogues and community centres were built as part of this programme.

The first Reform communities appeared in Moscow at the end of the 1980s. At present, they are united in the Association of Religious Organisations of Modern Judaism in Russia (*Ob'edinenie religioznykh organizatsii sovremennogo iudaizma v Rossii*) under Irina Shcherban. The Federation of Orthodox Jews of Russia (*Federatsiia ortodoksal'nykh evreev Rossii*, FOER), which is in the process of registering, represents Orthodox communities. Like the Association of Religious Organisations of Modern Judaism in Russia, FOER is a member of the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organisations of Russia (*Kongress evreiskikh religioznikh obshchin i organizatsii Rossii*, KEROOR), which was founded in 1993. It is headed by Chief Rabbi Avraam (Adolf) Shaeovich and Rabbi Zinovii Kogan and includes circa 100 communities, of which approximately 40 are Reform communities. Such a co-existence of representatives of Orthodox and Reform Judaism within the framework of one organisation is unique.

In January 2004 and March 2006, FEOR attempted to form a single Jewish community and to take over KEROOR. However, KEROOR and almost all of its member communities rejected this proposal.

Since the election of entrepreneur Arkadii Gaidamak as president of KEROOR in May 2005, this organisation has experienced an upswing. It looked as if it could displace the Russian Jewish Congress, which had dedicated itself completely to commemorating the victims of the Holocaust. More recently, KEROOR has been wrestling with structural problems. At present, Russia's Jewish community has two chief rabbis. In the eyes of KEROOR, Chief Rabbi Shaeovich, elected to this position in 1993, is entitled to the office. FEOR, on the other hand, considers Chief Rabbi Lazar the only legitimate rabbi.

Russia's Jews are organised in "national-cultural autonomies", whose existence is stipulated by a special federal law, adopted in 1996. These are national secular organisations that are to guarantee the national distinctiveness of the Diaspora with regard to language, culture, and education. The law on national-cultural autonomies established the legal relationship between the Diaspora and the state. In all, there are 40 regional Jewish

⁸ Itogi raboty FEOF v 2007 godu, Agentstvo evreiskikh novostei, 25 December 2007. <www.aen.ru/index.php?page=article&article_id=1247&category=tradition>.

autonomies and several dozen autonomies of a local level.⁹ The Federal Jewish National-Cultural Autonomy (*Federal'naia evreiskaia natsional'no-kul'turnaia avtonomiia*) was founded in 1999. Mikhail Chlenov has been its president since 2003. Aleksandr Mashkevich has been chairman of the board of trustees since 2004.

The Vaad of Russia and the Russian Jewish Congress were co-founders of EAK and are represented in its general council. In 2002, at the initiative of FEOR and EAK, the Worldwide Congress of Russian-Speaking Jewry (*Vsemirnyi Kongress ruskoiazynogo evreistva*) was founded with headquarters in Moscow. Boris Shpigel became president of the congress in 2007. The council of the Worldwide Congress of Russian-Speaking Jewry includes representatives of the Vaad of Russia and FEOR. At the end of July 2005, the founding congress of the Council of Sephardic Jews of the Commonwealth of Independent States took place in Moscow.

In all there are around 600 Jewish organisations active in Russia, including representations of Sokhnut (Jewish Agency for Israel) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). JDC oversees a network of charity organisations that reach more than 150,000 persons. Since 2004, Sokhnut and JDC have reduced their activity in Russia. In early 2005, a branch of the Jewish National Fund was opened in Russia. Founded in 1901 in order to raise money for the purchase of land in Palestine, it today supports the construction of apartments and promotes the development of agriculture in Israel.

Education, Academia, Research

Jewish organisations are also involved in education. There are 45 Jewish basic schools and 60 Sunday schools functioning in Russia. In addition, there are several pre-school educational institutions, yeshivot, and pedagogical colleges. Most are financed from the state budget, but many receive support from organisations such as the foundation Or Avner, Sokhnut, Society for Crafts and Agriculture among Jews (*Obshchestvo remeslennogo i zemledel'cheskogo truda sredi evreev*) as well as international religious associations.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jewish Studies have been experiencing a renaissance in Russia, as evidenced by the numerous institutions that have been founded in the interim.¹⁰ In 1989, the *Institute for Jewish Studies* was founded in Moscow under the leadership of Rabbi Adin Steinsalz. It has published Russian translations of parts of the Talmud and the Aggadah. At the University of the Humanities in Moscow, there is the *Russian-American Centre for Biblical Studies and Jewish Studies*. Since 1992, Moscow has been home to the *Maimonides State Jewish Academy*. There is a chair of Jewish Studies at the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Moscow State University. The International Institute of the XXI Century (*Mezhdunarodnyi institut XXI veka*) was founded in 2003.

Farther north, the Petersburg Jewish University – now *Petersburg Institute of Jewish Studies* – was founded in 1992. In 2000, this institute, together with the Department of Philosophy at Saint Petersburg University, inaugurated a *Centre of Biblical and Jew-*

⁹ Reestr natsional'no-kul'turnykh avtonomii, Ofitsial'ny sait Federal'noi registratsionnoi sluzhby <www.rosregistr.ru/index.php?menu=3015000000>.

¹⁰ For a more detailed overview see the article of Dmitrii El'iashevich in this volume, pp. 255–270.

ish Studies. In cities with Jewish communities, lectures are held at Jewish centres for adult education.

In 1994, the Sefer Centre was founded in Moscow. It organises annual interdisciplinary conferences, offers courses for older pupils, students, young scholars, and doctoral candidates, and publishes collections and monographs as well as the journal *Vestnik evreiskogo universiteta. Istoriia. Kultura. Tsvivilizatsiia*, which has become the leading Russian-language periodical in the field of research.

The Institute of Social and Community Workers, which was founded by JDC in Krasnoïarsk, also organises conferences and publishes material. Yiddish is taught at the Social Sciences and Humanities Academy Birobidzhan. In June 2005, a reading room for Hebrew and Yiddish literature was opened at the Oriental Centre of the Russian State Library, where the Schneerson Library is located.¹¹

Since the turn of the century, archaeological excavations have gotten underway on the Taman Peninsula of the Volga Delta, where it is thought that Itil, the capital of the Khazar Khaganate, was located.

The Holocaust Foundation and Holocaust Centre have made valuable contributions to assessing the Holocaust.¹² It was possible to introduce the term “Holocaust” into a draft curriculum for the teaching of history. The Holocaust Foundation is working on a concept for a memorial complex with joint education centre called Genocide – Holocaust – Tolerance as well as on an encyclopaedia of the Holocaust on the territory of the former Soviet Union. The foundation also holds history competitions for schools and organises trips to the sites where the Holocaust was carried out.

Community Life, the General Public, Culture

Many Russian Jewish communities are quite active. Religious and secular community organisations are being founded, vacation camps for children and adolescents are being organised, and symposiums and continuing education seminars for teachers are being held. Some places have active chapters of the international Jewish youth organisation Hillel.

Before Perestroika, *Sovyetish heymland* was the only permitted Jewish periodical. Otherwise, Jewish publications appeared only in *samizdat*. Today, there are over 100 titles. In Moscow, *Mezhdunarodnaia evreiskaia gazeta* [International Jewish news], *Evreiskie novosti* [Jewish news], the FEOR publication *Evreiskoe slovo* [Jewish word], and the Sokhnut newspaper *Vestnik EAR (Evreiskaia agenstvo v Rossii, Jewish agency in Russia)*. The newspaper *Ami* is published in St. Petersburg. The Association of Adult Education Centres for Jewish Culture, with the support of the EAEK, has been publishing the journal *Korni* [Roots] since 1994. Since January 2006, the Or Avner has been putting out the journal *Iunior*. Several regional communities have their own newspapers. Jewish Internet media has existed since the end of the 1990s.

¹¹ The Schneerson Library is part of a 235-year-old collection of religious texts – books and manuscripts – maintained by the first five Lubavitcher Rebbes, the spiritual heads of the Chabad Hasidic movement. The collection was captured first by the Nazis in 1939 and then by the Soviets towards the end of the Second World War.

¹² Il’ia Altman, „Shoah! Gedenken verboten! Der weite Weg vom Sowjettabu zur Erinnerung“, in: *Kluffen der Erinnerung Rußland und Deutschland 60 Jahre nach dem Krieg* (Berlin 2005) [= OSTEUROPA, 4–6/05], pp. 149–164

The most popular of these is the portal <www.Sem40.ru>. Its strongest competitor is <www.Jewish.ru>, which is supported by FEOR. In February 2003, the first Jewish news agency went on-line: the Agency for Jewish News (Agenstvo evreiskikh novostei, <www.aen.ru>), which is also supported by FEOR and Worldwide Congress of Russian-Speaking Jewry. KEROOR supports the project <www.jjew.ru>.

The largest publishing house producing Russian-language books on Jewish topics today is *Gesharim / Mosty kultury*. Its backlist includes around 400 different titles. Since 2002, it has been the publisher of the bibliography *Evreiskii knigonosha* and since 2007 the magazine *Lekhaim*. There are also the publishing houses *Dom evreiskoi knigi*, which puts out the magazine *Paralleli*, as well as the publishing houses *Daat / Znanie* and *Feniks* in Rostov-on-the-Don. Since 2005, the publishing houses *Evreiskoe slovo* and *Tekst* have been producing the series *Proza evreiskoi zhizn'* [Prose of Jewish life]. In 2007, they launched the series *Cheisovskaia kolleksiia*, in which non-fiction literature appears. Ze'ev Vagner has been publishing the Russian Jewish Encyclopaedia since 1994. To date, six of the nine volumes planned have come out. The oldest Jewish bibliographic journal in Russia is the bulletin *Narod knigi v mire knig* [The people of the book in the world of books], which has been appearing in Saint Petersburg since 1995.

The Jewish theatre *Shalom* has been operating in Moscow since 1988 under the direction of Aleksander Levenbuk. A year later, the Solomon Mikhoels Cultural Centre (Kul'turnyj tsentr im. Solomona Mikhoelsa) was opened under the management of Mikhail Gluz. Since 1998, Gluz has also been running an annual Solomon Mikhoels Art Festival. Klezfest, a festival of klezmer song, has been taking place in St. Petersburg since 1995. The Leonid Sonts International Competition of Performers of Jewish Music and Dance and the Yurii Pil'ner International Festival of Jewish Culture have been taking place in Kazan' since 2001. In Birobidzhan, the Jewish Musical-Dramatic Theater Kogelet is in operation, and an International Festival of Jewish Culture has been held there annually since 1997. A Tat language Jewish theatre took up its work in Derbent in July 2005. The popular actor Efim Shifrin and the singer Efim Aleksandrov use Jewish subject matter for their performances in the programme *Songs of the Shtetl*. It is important to mention that the directors Vladimir Dvinskii, Galina Evtushenko, and others are making films about the life of Soviet Jews. At present, planning is underway for two state Jewish museums: the Museum of Jewish Culture and Everyday Life in Saint Petersburg and the Museum of the Holocaust in Moscow. FEOR is likewise preparing to open a Museum of Tolerance in Moscow. A Museum of Judaism was opened in Birobidzhan in November 2005.

Antisemitism

According to sociological research, 6-9 per cent of the Russian population is ardently antisemitic. Individual negative stereotypes regarding Jews are present in various degrees among 17-64 per cent of the population.¹³ Antisemitic vandalism, such as offensive graffiti on the walls of synagogues and the desecration of cemeteries, is also present in Russia. In the 1990s, Holocaust deniers could be heard in Russia. Starting in 2005, the ritual murder myth re-emerged in Krasnoiarsk, Istra, and Lipetsk. A leg-

¹³ Data of a survey by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM), January 2007, <www.wciom.ru/?pt=9&article=2291>.

end specific to Russia is the spread of the “Khazar myth” during the 1990s. This links the misfortunes of Rus’ and Russia with the Khazars, who converted to Judaism, and their descendants, who supposedly seized power in 1917. Anti-Jewish tirades are limited to the mass media supported by marginal opposition parties and organisations. Antisemitism in the Russian Federation remains an integral element of ultra-right, conservative politics and is not particular to any one party or party chairman. Among the adherents of antisemitism are radical nationalists, neo-Nazis of various hues, and fundamentalists from the Orthodox tradition and currents of the Russian Orthodox Church as well as from Islam and neo-paganism.

Nonetheless, state antisemitism disappeared with the demise of the Soviet Union. The highest representatives of the Russian government regularly speak out in public against racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism. In January 2005, during a speech at ceremonies marking the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz by the Soviet Army, then President Vladimir Putin said that he was ashamed that antisemitic tendencies still existed in the country that defeated Fascism. Jews are not the only object of ethnic phobias. Far more widespread and far more radically expressed are prejudices against people from the Caucasus, Roma (Gypsies), and others. A consensus is gradually spreading in the political class that antisemitic comments from politicians are unacceptable. Nonetheless, antisemitism remains a problem that has to be taken seriously.

Translated by Stephan Lang, Toronto