

# Jewish Life in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union: An Ambivalent History

From the late eighteenth century until the outbreak of World War I and the Russian Revolution, most Jews in the Russian Empire were confined to the “Pale of Settlement,” an area encompassing present-day Belarus, Moldova, Lithuania, and most of Ukraine and eastern Poland. At the heart of Jewish life in the Pale were the shtetls (shtetelach), small market towns where Jews eked out a living as artisans, peddlers, and petty merchants.

As economic conditions deteriorated in the shtetls at the end of the nineteenth century, Jews began migrating to large urban and industrial centers in search of work. Some of those who left traditional Judaism turned to political ideologies such as socialism and Marxism. Few entertained a territorial solution to Jewish emancipation – especially Zionism – but the majority were members of the Bund and allied themselves with local socialist parties. Only a small number joined the Bolsheviks, the precursors of the Communists, but they were noticeable enough to connect Jews with the Bolsheviks in the antisemitic imagination.



Map of Western Russia showing the Jewish Pale of Settlement. [The Jewish Encyclopedia, ed. Singer, Funk and Wagner, New York & Longon, 1901 vol. 10, art. Russia, p. 531]

Jews faced civil and legal restrictions and were often scapegoated. When Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 by a socialist group called the People’s Will, Jews were blamed for his murder in the media and by the government. Waves of pogroms then swept the Pale of Settlement, culminating during the years of civil war from 1918 to 1921, when more than 50,000 were killed. This prolonged period of anti-Jewish violence, alongside declining economic opportunities and increasing poverty, prompted a massive Jewish migration from eastern Europe, with a staggering two million Jews arriving in the United States between the 1870s and 1924.

The Pale, with its many restrictions, was abolished following the Russian Revolution in 1917. In the 1920s, Jews were free to settle throughout the nascent Soviet Union. Many joined the Soviet intelligentsia and entered the technical professions and academia. Although the Bolsheviks sought to root out all religious expression, they initially attempted to win support by promoting the distinct cultures of all ethnic minorities. During the 1920s, and to a lesser extent the 1930s, secular Yiddish schools existed and Yiddish-language publications, including works of fiction, abounded. But the clampdown on religious institutions meant that large segments of the Jewish population could not observe their religious ceremonies and holy days. As a result, a new secular, Soviet Jewish identity began to take shape.



An OZET poster from 1929. “A Jewish landworker with every turn of the wheel of his tractor makes a contribution to building socialism and you will help him! Buy a ticket for the OZET lottery.”

Courtesy of the Wolfsonian-Florida International University Museum.



After Lenin's death in 1924, Joseph Stalin began consolidating his dictatorial powers. By 1927, Stalin had outmaneuvered his rivals in the Communist Party and launched a disastrous collectivization drive, which resulted in a deadly manmade famine in 1932 and 1933 (known as the Holodomor). In Ukraine, millions perished under Stalin's economic plans. By the middle of the decade, having grown increasingly suspicious of his opponents, Stalin unleashed a purge of his real and imagined enemies. The campaign peaked between 1936 and 1938. Jews were swept up in the purge, along with hundreds of thousands of members of other ethnic groups. Most were either summarily executed or imprisoned in the Gulag (the system of penal/labor camps).

World War II brought unprecedented levels of suffering and death to the Soviet Union, with an estimated 27 million killed or murdered. The Holocaust on Soviet territory saw the murder of more than 2 million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators.



This memorial was erected at the site of a 1941 massacre in Khotyn, Ukraine in the late 1960s by Mikhail Rozenberg and other Jewish survivors.

Courtesy of the Rozenberg family.



Edward Nizhnikov and his son, Alex, leading an underground festival of Jewish music in Moscow in 1978.

Courtesy of the Nizhnikov family.

Having made tremendous wartime sacrifices, many Soviet citizens believed that reforms would come at war's end, but their hopes were frustrated. In 1947, a new campaign against "rootless cosmopolitans" quickly turned into an anti-Jewish crusade. Thousands of scientists, literati, and artists were arrested. Some were murdered; others disappeared without a trace. In 1948, Stalin disbanded the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC), which was formed to solicit Western support during World War II and had become the leading Jewish organization in the country. Subsequently, 13 members of the JAC were accused of treason and secretly executed. Then, in 1952, a group of Jewish doctors was accused of trying to poison the Communist leadership in the so-called "Doctors' plot." Only Stalin's death in March 1953 prevented a new episode of senseless killings.

After Stalin's death, the accused doctors were released. Stalin's replacement, Nikita Khrushchev, denounced many of the former leader's crimes while initiating a period of "de-Stalinization" and relative openness known as the Khrushchev Thaw. Political prisoners received amnesty, many victims were "rehabilitated," and the Gulag was officially closed. The Thaw encouraged hopes of further reforms and liberalization as well as a cautious growth in Jewish national consciousness. Young Jews began meeting to learn Jewish culture and Hebrew and to celebrate Jewish holidays. Others went to the mass graves of Holocaust victims, where they held secret memorials. Still, Khrushchev did not endorse Jewish cultural institutions and practices. Moreover, a renewed antireligious campaign saw the closing of most of the remaining synagogues in the country.

The Thaw was winding down when Khrushchev was ousted in 1964. The reign of his successor, Leonid Brezhnev, did not see a return to the dark days of Stalinism, but it was nonetheless characterized by growing censorship and persecution of the regime's critics, who were known as dissidents. By the late 1960s, the Soviet economy entered a period of slow decline. Soviet citizens reacted to the political retrenchment and economic stagnation of the Brezhnev years in various ways. While some sought to change the system from within, others simply retreated into their private lives.

Meanwhile, the Israeli victory in the Six-Day War of 1967 and disillusionment with the Soviet regime further encouraged the growth of Jewish national consciousness. Proud of Israel's achievement, several thousand Jews sought to emigrate to Israel. The majority were refused and earned the name *refuseniks*. Those who wished to emigrate faced harassment and often lost their jobs. To further discourage *refuseniks* and dissidents from pursuing their goals, the Soviet government sentenced thousands to hard labor. They fought back with petitions, letters, and hunger strikes. After their cause was picked up abroad, due to growing international pressure, nearly 240,000 Jews were able to emigrate between 1968 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Most initially went to Israel, but, starting in the mid-1970s, a growing proportion chose to emigrate to the United States.



An exit visa for Israel from 1988.

Courtesy of the Brusilovsky family.

