# THE END OF INTIMATE INSULARITY: NEW NARRATIVES OF JEWISH HISTORY IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA[1]

Henry Abramson

## 1. THE SPECIAL PLACE OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVE IN JEWISH CULTURE

> The Rabbis taught: who wrote the scroll of fast [days]? They said, Haninah ben Hizkiyah and his circle, who loved [periods of] oppression. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: We also love [periods of] oppression, but what can we do? Were we to begin writing, we could not complete the task.
>
> Babylonian Talmud, *Shabat* 13b

Jewish cultural texts are saturated with a pervasive sense of historical narrative from their very beginnings; a narrative that both presages a Messianic future as well as a cyclic, meaningful past. For example, even the most uneducated Jewish peasant of the 19th century would be familiar with the historical paradigm set forth in the Passover liturgy, read at the Seder table: "not only *one* has risen against us to destroy us, rather in each and every generation, they rise against us to destroy us, but the Holy One who is Blessed rescues us from their hands." The Jewish historical narrative is replete with stories of near-extinction, fol-

---

1 This paper was written while I was the Eugene and Daymel Shklar Fellow at the Ukrainian Research Institute of Harvard University. I am grateful to URI for their support, and I am also grateful to the Schmidt Distinguished Chair of the Humanities at Florida Atlantic University, Dr. Teresa Brennan, for assistance with additional research support. This paper was improved by the sophisticated reading of my American colleagues Dr. Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern and Dr. Viktoria Khiterer, as well as the insightful comments of my Japanese discussants, Dr. Nobuaki Shiokawa and Dr. Chika Obiya. Needless to say, all errors of fact or interpretation remain my responsibility. Finally, I must express my gratitude to Drs. Kimitaka Matzusato and Tadayuki Hayashi of the SRC for their kind invitation to participate in this conference.

lowed by a miraculous redemption and renaissance; a paradigm described in the biblical books of Exodus, Judges, Samuel, Esther, and onwards. Indeed, this Jewish model of national survival is at the core of western culture.

A coherent historical narrative such as this is one of the fundamental aspects of maintaining and developing a national polity. The difficulty, however, lies in the choice of a single historical narrative in the face of several conflicting alternatives. At the very least, the lowest common denominator of all historical narratives is the fundamentally negative ascription of "they haven't been able to kill us yet," as shown in the story of the Exodus from Egypt. One also sees this in very stark terms in both the Polish national anthem ("Poland has not yet succumbed") and the non-Soviet Ukrainian national anthem ("Ukraine is not dead yet").[2] Ascribing positive characteristics – precisely *how* the nation has survived, and more importantly, for what reason, for what destiny – is an altogether different task, but no less important if the national polity is to retain its integrity. This is an especially important task for many of the non-titular nationalities of the former Soviet Union, who have not necessarily inherited a long tradition of coherent historical narrative.[3]

For Jews in the former Soviet Union, the task is absolutely essential to their continued survival as a discrete nationality. Unlike the so-called "territorial nationalities," the Jews no longer possess any common ethnographic features that would allow them to put aside the task of defining their historical narrative in Slavic Eurasia. They have no contiguous territory, being highly

---

2 The lyrics of the Polish national anthem *Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła* were composed by Josef Wybicki and adopted in 1927. The Ukrainian national anthem *Shche ne vmerla Ukraïna* was adopted in 1917, but rejected shortly thereafter by the Soviets. In 1992, the music by Mykhailo Verbytsky was re-adopted as the national anthem – without the lyrics of Pavlo Chubynsky.

3 For a thought-provoking treatment of the search for historical narrative in post-Soviet Ukraine, see Taras Kuzio, *Ukraine: State and Nation Building* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998).

urbanized and spread throughout the major population centers.[4] They have no large, critical demographic mass, having suffered devastating losses during the period of Nazi occupation.[5] They no longer share a common, unique language, as Yiddish is spoken only by the very elderly, and after the Soviet persecution of religion, they have only the most tenuous connection with Jewish ritual.[6] Perhaps most devastatingly, the massive immigration of Jewishly motivated youth to Israel and the USA in the 1990s has removed a significant portion of the youngest, most dynamic elements of the Jewish population.[7]

In truth, the Jews of the former Soviet Union face an absolutely unprecedented challenge to their national cohesion. Even the threat of antisemitism, which in previous generations had always served to rally the rapidly assimilating Jewish population around a common center, seems to have had little effect. Antisemitic organizations and their publications circulate widely in the former USSR, but the demonstrably low levels of social distance between Jews and non-Jews, combined with new possibilities of immigration for those who experience actual persecution, clearly work against centripetal, nationality-building tendencies among Jews.[8] In other words, the Jews of the

---

4 See Mordechai Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry Since the Second World War: Population and Social Structure* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

5 See Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Gurock, eds., *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941-1945* (Armonk, NY, London, England: M.E. Sharpe, 1993); Zvi Gitelman, ed., *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997).

6 See for example Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917-1920* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972); Aaron Chazan, *Deep in the Russian Night* (New York: CIS Publishers, 1990); Bohdan Bociurkiw, "Soviet Religious Policy and the Status of Judaism in the USSR," *Bulletin on Soviet and East European Jewish Affairs* 6 (1970), pp. 13-19.

7 See Zvi Gitelman, "Native Land, Promised Land, Golden Land: Jewish Immigration from Russia and Ukraine," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 22 (1998), pp. 137-164.

8 Robert J. Brym, *The Jews of Moscow, Kiev and Minsk: Identity, Antisemitism, Emigration* (New York: New York University Press, Institute

former Soviet Union are traveling between the Scylla of outright assimilation and the Charybdis of emigration, and it remains to be seen precisely how the various Jewish communities, particularly in smaller population centers, will persist after a few generations. That said, however, it should be noted that Jewish history is replete with examples of dramatic reversals of fortune – as the Talmudic dictum has it (*Shabat* 156a), "there is no constellation for the Jews," as if to say that natural forces do not control their destiny – and even now there are promising signs of a Jewish renaissance in the former Soviet Union.

## 2. TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES OF JEWISH HISTORY IN THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH

Despite their long history, the Jews did not develop a sophisticated national historiography until the 19th century. This strange fact may be attributed in part to the persistence of a very strong religious paradigm that describes the millennial exile of the Jews from the Land of Israel as a punishment for sinful behavior. Their status as wayfarers, living at the discretion of the non-Jewish host cultures, explained away all persecutions as a consequence of transgressions in the late Biblical period, with an eventual Messianic redemption resulting in the "ingathering

---

of Jewish Affairs, 1994); Volodymyr Paniotto, "The Levels of Anti-Semitism in Ukraine," *International Journal of Sociology* 29:3 (1999), pp. 66-75. See also the interesting debate in *Slavic Review* 53:3 (1994): James L. Gibson, "Understandings of Anti-Semitism in Russia: An Analysis of the Politics of Antii-Jewish Attitudes," pp. 796-806; Vicki L. Hesli, Arthur H. Miller, William M. Reisinger and Kevin L. Morgan, "Social Distance from Jews in Russia and Ukraine," pp. 807-828; James L. Gibson, "Misunderstandings of Anti-Semitism in Russia: An Analysis of the Politics of Anti-Jewish Attitudes," pp. 829-835; Vicki L. Hesli, Arthur H. Miller and William M. Reisinger, "Comment on Brym and Degtyarev's Discussion of Anti-Semitism in Moscow," pp. 836-841; Robert J. Brym, "Anti-Semitism in Moscow: A Re-examination," pp. 842-855. I have made some comments on this research in a forthcoming chapter, "Shouldering the Burdens of History: The Ukrainian-Jewish Encounter Since Independence," in Wsevolod W. Isajiw, ed., *Society in Transition: Social Change in Ukraine in Western Perspectives* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, forthcoming 2003).

of the exiles" in a distant, but eagerly anticipated future. In the words of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith, "I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may tarry, nevertheless I wait for him." Viewed from this perspective, social and economic forces acting on the Jewish population were epiphenomenal to a broader, Divine view of Jewish history, and as such they generally received little attention in the unfortunately rich literature of Jewish martyrology.

A clear example of this may be seen in the first major historical event to be extensively covered in Jewish sources: the Khmel'nyts'kyi rebellion of 1648-49. The various Hebrew chronicles refer to this period of widespread pogroms as *Gzeires Tah ve-Tat*, "the [Evil] Decree of 1648-49," understanding the violence as a Divine Edict rather than a complex phenomenon with social, economic, religious, and nationalistic implications.[9] The various national players are understood in a straightforward, unidimensional way: the Poles are initially friendly to Jews, but will betray them to the Ukrainians if circumstances dictate, while the Ukrainians are hostile to the Jews, largely because of the deleterious effect of Jewish leaseholders on their livelihood, and so on. The essential aspect of this view, however, is that the non-Jewish nations are fundamentally "other" – they are illustrations of the 2nd-century Mishnaic dictum (*Avot* 2:3), "be careful with the powers that be, for they only draw a person close to them for their own needs – they appear loving when it benefits them, but do not stand by a person in times of distress."

---

9 See Mordekhai Nadav, "The Jewish Community of Nemyriv in 1648: Their Massacre and Loyalty Oath to the Cossacks," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 8:3/4 (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 376-395; Bernard Weinryb, "The Hebrew Chronicles on Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi and the Cossack-Polish War," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 1:2 (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 153-177; Frank E. Sysn, "The Jewish Massacres in the Historiography of the Khmelnytsky Uprising," *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 23:1 (1998), pp. 83-90; Joel Raba, "Das Schicksal der Juden in der Ukraine während des Aufstands von Chmel'nyćkyj im Spiegel zeitgenőssischer Verőffentlichungen," *Jahrbűcher fűr Geschichte Osteuropas* 37:3 (1989), pp. 387-392.

To a certain degree, this historical narrative even seems to exculpate, at least in a philosophical sense, the perpetrators of the massacres. Since the relationship between the Jews and their neighbors is a function of how faithful the Jews remained to their traditional piety, the rebelling Ukrainians and duplicitous Poles are merely the earthly manifestation of the Divine displeasure with the Jews. Moreover, this narrative is ethnocentric in the extreme, placing the Jews at the center of a cosmic drama while other nationalities merely play roles assigned to them by a supernatural Director. Despite these more problematic aspects, this theoretical framework was tested countless times since the expulsion of the Jews by the Romans in the first century of the common era, and was exceptionally effective in maintaining group cohesion in the difficult and changing atmosphere of the diaspora. As historical narratives go, it has the great advantage of simplicity, being easily understood by the uneducated Jewish masses. It could only survive, however, in a fundamentally religious Weltanschauung – when the modernizing trends from the West began to buffet the traditionally Orthodox Jewish community of the Russian Empire, the historical narrative was adapted to meet the new, secularized sensibilities of the Jews.

## 3. THE HASKALAH AND THE BEGINNING OF A MODERN JEWISH HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Jewish life changed radically with the advent of the Haskalah, or Jewish enlightenment, in western Europe during the 18th century. Beginning with the German thinker Moses Mendelsohn, the movement spread rapidly throughout the continent, albeit with a very distinct geographical distinction. The *maskilim*, as the adherents of the Haskalah were called, were all concerned with one basic task: how to achieve the legal and social emancipation of Jews, giving them equal rights and freedom of movement in all areas of cultural and economic life. The *maskilim* of western Europe sought to do this by reforming Jewish practice (the forerunners of the Reform and Conservative movements were created by German *maskilim* in the first four decades of the 19th century), often slavishly imitating

Church practices in an attempt to make Judaism, and by extension Jews, more acceptable to German sensibilities.[10] Western European *maskilim* urged Jews to abandon Yiddish, the *patois* based on medieval German, in favor of the vernacular language, along with other changes. As they achieved positive results – emancipation in France came soon after the Revolution, and was later confirmed by Napoleon; Germany took longer but the cause showed incremental progress throughout the 19th century – many *maskilim* even went so far as to convert to Christianity.

Eastern European *maskilim*, on the other hand, were considerably more conservative in their approach. Religion was not so much abandoned as ignored, as the *maskilim* adopted a more non-confrontational approach than their western counterparts. The conditions for Jewish emancipation in the late Tsarist Empire were not nearly as opportune as those in western Europe, and the early *maskilim* were careful to portray themselves as socially conservative, arguing that they were intent on giving the Jewish masses the kind of civic skills (fluency in Russian, etc.) that would make them staunch supporters of the Romanov regime.[11]

A major watershed in the history of the Jews of the Russian Empire, and world Jewish history in general, is the series of anti-Jewish pogroms that begun with the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881.[12] In the years that followed, Jews adopted

---

10 Examples of changes include the removal of much Hebrew from the liturgy, redesigning synagogue architecture to imitate church norms, the introduction of the organ into the synagogue, etc.

11 See David E. Fishman, *Russia's First Modern Jews: The Jews of Shklov* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: the Transformation of Jewish Society in Russia* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983); Steven Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry: Memory, History, Identity* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1999).

12 See I. Michael Aronson, *Troubled Waters: The Origins of the 1881 Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Russia* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1990); Stephen M. Berk, *Year of Crisis, Year of Hope: Russian Jewry and the Pogroms of 1881-1882* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1985); Omeljan Pritsak, "The Pogroms of 1881," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 9:1/2 (1987), pp. 8-43.

five distinct, modern strategies to respond to this new crisis, which threatened to undermine the traditional narrative of near-extinction/dramatic redemption/renaissance. With the exception of the fifth, all of these strategies were instigated and developed by *maskilim*, challenging the traditional historical narrative of the Jews in the Russian Empire.[13]

1) *Emigrationism*, a popular but politically inchoate movement to abandon Europe and create a new, as yet undefined, Jewish community in the USA and elsewhere.

In this model, the historical narrative was largely maintained, although only in the New World – the narrative of Jewish civilization in Slavic Eurasia was abandoned. The fate of the Jews left behind was ignored, as the new immigrants take the leading role in defining a post-1881 Jewish historical narrative. The thousand-year narrative of the Jews in Eastern Europe comes to an end.

2) *Zionism*, a movement to create a refuge for Jews in the traditional homeland of Israel.

Like emigrationism, Zionism argued for the end of the old narrative, but with a far more radical solution. The Jewish civilization in the Russian Empire, after all, was merely the latest chapter in a long history of expulsions and wanderings of the

---

13 Thumbnail sketches of the major political orientations of turn-of-the century Jews in the Russian Empire may be found in Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). More substantial treatments are available in Isaac Levitats, *The Jewish Community in Russia, 1844-1917* (Jerusalem: Posner, 1981) and O.Ia. Haiman, *Evreis'ki partiż ta ob''ednannia Ukraïny (1917-1925)* (Kyïv: Natsional'na akademiia nauk Ukraïny, Institut politychnykh i etnonatsional'nykh doslidzhen', Mizhnarodnyi solomoniv universytet, Akademiia istoriï ta kul'tury Evreïv Ukraïny im. Shymona Dubnova, 1998). I have discussed these five strategies in greater detail in a forthcoming book chapter, "Two Jews, Three Opinions: Politics in the Shtetl at the Turn of the 20th Century," in Steven Katz, ed., *The Shtetl: New Perspectives* (forthcoming).

Jews. Zionism argued for a final, fundamental redress of the national disposition of the Jews by attempting to write the last, felicitous chapter in their long history. By returning to the ancient homeland, the Zionists argued that the Jews would end the cycle of persecution and redemption. This directly challenged the traditionally pious view of the Jewish exile as punishment for sinful behavior, as the Zionists refused to wait for the arrival of the Messiah to accomplish the prophetic "ingathering of the exiles."

3) *Jewish Socialism,* a movement to address change in the *shtetl* – without abandoning it – by radically transforming the general political climate of the entire region through the adoption of a socialist program.

In the historical narrative of the Jewish Socialists, which included specifically Jewish parties such as the Bund as well as the numerous Jewish members of various general socialist parties such as the Social Democrats, the traditional historical narrative of Jewish persecution as Divine punishment is rejected by the strong anti-clerical tendencies of the socialist movements. More doctrinaire socialists, following a line described by Lenin and Stalin, viewed the existence of the Jews as an historical accident; a group of people held together by a false consciousness born of their religious sensibilities. Others, such as the Bundist Vladimir Medem, regarded the Jews as a nationality if only by default, and argued for some acceptance of Jewish culture, supporting, for example, the use of Yiddish as a legitimate language and propaganda tool. Still others, such as the Faraynikte, were positively inclined towards the maintenance of a Jewish national culture, albeit cut loose from its religious moorings. In all cases, however, the historical narrative changes radically under socialist influence. Like the Zionists, the Jewish Socialists argue that the time has come to write the last chapter of the Jewish historical narrative – the merging of the Jewish people into a multi- or non-national Soviet paradise of workers, the great äđóćář íŕđîäîâ foretold, ironically, in the ancient prophetic writings of the Jews. This historical narrative describes the Jews

as stoically enduring a double oppression – that of the feudal or capitalist exploiters (sometimes describing a shameful role for Jewish participants in the system), as well as that of the Rabbis, deluding the Jews by foisting the "opiate of the masses" upon the unsuspecting population.

4) *Diaspora Nationalism,* a movement to similarly maintain the presence of Jews in Eastern Europe, but without the dramatic change demanded by the Jewish Socialists. Instead, a more moderate, secularized form of the status quo would be the basis of a renewed Jewish *shtetl* in a democratized all-Russian Federation.

The Diaspora Nationalists, most notably the historian Shimon Dubnow and his political organization, the Folkspartey, argued less for the end of the traditionalist narrative than for a maturation of the paradigm. Like the Zionists and Jewish Socialists, the Diaspora Nationalist orientation was secular, although without the outright hostility to religion so often evident in other movements. In a series of articles later published under the title *Essays on Old and New Judaism*, Dubnow argued that the Jews in Russia reached their peak as a national entity during the 16th century with the establishment of the Council of Lands in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.[14] This Council of Lands was an umbrella organization, representing all of the local Jewish communities spread throughout the vast region from the Baltic to the Black Seas. Supported by the power of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Council of Lands was able to pass legislation that affected all Jewish communities, and imposed a level of standardization and centralization that

---

14 Koppel Pinson, ed., *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism* (New York: Athaneum, 1970). For a discussion of the political application of Dubnow's theories, see Mark Kiel, "The Ideology of the Folks-Partey," *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 5:2 (London, 1975), pp. 75-89, also my monograph, *A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute and the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard, 1999), pp. 67-108.

no other Jewish civilization has achieved, then or since. Dubnow's historical narrative called for a return to this model of civic organization – rather than attempting to write the "last chapter" by abandoning the Russian Empire (emigrationism and Zionism) or radically, perhaps violently, transforming society (Jewish socialism), the Diaspora Nationalists argued that the Jews should work for the reestablishment of a secularized Council of Lands, uniting Jews throughout a posited Russian Federation through democratic franchise.[15] The dissolution of the Council of Lands in the late 18th century and the destruction of the legal Jewish community (the *kehilah*) by Tsar Nicholas I in 1844 were to be viewed as an historical aberration, and this new narrative argued that a new, secular Weltanschauung should be brought to bear to reconstruct this pinnacle of Jewish self-government. Ironically, while Dubnow's model could not be realized in Eastern Europe (despite attempts in Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), it is the ideological basis of the World Council of Jewish Federations.[16]

5) *Renewed Traditionalism,* a movement that identified with the traditional historical narrative yet utilized many of the methods and ideals of mass political mobilization used by the *maskilim*. The last to organize, renewed traditionalists used the tools of modern politics to advance the religious platform of the Orthodox population.

   The last response to the pogroms of 1881-1884 was a group

---

15 This is broadly similar to the position taken by many liberal Jews in the early 20th century, viewing positively the establishment of the Duma, although with varying degrees of fealty to the Russian Empire. See Christoph Gassenschmidt, *Jewish Liberal Politics in Tsarist Russia, 1900-1914: The Modernization of Russian Jewry* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).

16 For information on the experiments in the Baltics, see S. Gringauz, "Jewish National Autonomy in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia," in G. Aronson et al., eds., *Russian Jewry 1917-1967* (New York: Yoseloff, 1969), pp. 58-71; Kurt Stillschweig, *Die Juden Osteuropas in den Minderheitenvertragen* (Berlin: Jastrow, 1936). The attempt to establish this political model in Ukraine is the topic of my monograph, *A Prayer for the Government*.

I have called "renewed traditionalists," best exemplified by a political group called Agudas Yisroel and first organized in 1912. The renewed traditionalists did not challenge the pious historical narrative of exile as punishment; rather they added a new chapter – the perseverance of the faithful despite the heretical and assimilatory assault of the *maskilim*. The threat to Jewish survival in a hostile environment was obvious, but the maskilic solutions were condemned. The emigrationists flouted traditional Orthodox bans on traveling to the "non-kosher land" of the United States, with its dearth of Jewish educational establishments, synagogues and the like; the Zionists disobeyed the ban on reestablishing a Jewish state before the Messianic era, and even called for this state to be based on secular principles; and the "militant atheism" of the Socialists rendered them totally unacceptable. By viewing the *maskilim* as a threat from within, the renewed traditionalists were able to further reinforce the time-honored historical narrative of Jewish survival.

## 4. SOVIET NARRATIVES OF JEWISH HISTORY

Obviously, under the Soviet regime, only a doctrinaire socialist narrative could be justified, and this precluded the idea of a nationality based on something so ephemeral as religion. The Communists had, therefore, made little provision for the reality of millions of Jews who considered themselves members of a distinct nationality, and were caught in a bind with their "discovery" shortly after the success of the revolution. During the twenties, in line with much of the Soviet nationality policy, an organ dedicated to specifically Jewish concerns, the Yevsektsia, was established by the Soviets, only to be dismantled in 1930.[17] The Soviet narrative of Jewish history was triumphalist in the extreme: the advent of Communism had, once and for all, successfully addressed the ironies and difficulties of Jewish survival. In the heady atmosphere of radical social change, the Soviets had removed all artificial hindrances to the natural, proletar-

---

17 The classic study of the Yevsektsiia is Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*.

ian development of Jewish culture, and indeed the age-old Jewish "problem" was "solved" through Soviet prosecution of anti-semitism and the removal of all legal disabilities placed on Jews under the Tsarist governments. The unbalanced economic profile of the Jews, with its heavy emphasis on commerce, was rectified with the establishment of Jewish agricultural colonies in Ukraine – and for those would-be Zionists who craved a concentrated Jewish experience in a Soviet Jewish homeland, there was the establishment of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast', better known as Birobidzhan.[18]

The reality, of course, was far removed from the Soviet fantasy. After the Stalinist reversal of the policy of *korenizatsiia*, which allowed for the brief flourishing of socialist Jewish culture in the 1920s, the grim facts for Soviet Jews were much the same as they were in the Tsarist Empire, with even the prestigious Academy of Sciences publishing crude antisemitic tracts such as Trofim Kichko's *Iudaizm bez prykras* (Kiev, 1963).

More to the point, with the exception of the 1920s, the Jewish historical narrative in the Soviet Union was intimidated into silence. Even the famous *Black Book of Russian Jewry* by Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, authors with impeccable Soviet and literary credentials, was prevented from going into circulation after it was sent to the presses, and it now exists only in western translations.[19] During the long decades from Stalin's assertion of power until *glasnost'*, Soviet Jewry were beaten into submission, and their indigenous historical narrative viewed only through the artificial lenses of the American and Israeli Jewry.

---

18 See Allan Kagedan, "Soviet Jewish Territorial Units and Ukrainian-Jewish Relations," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 9:1/2 (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 118-132; Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland, an Illustrated History, 1928-1996* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

19 A new, authoritative translation of this important work has recently appeared with new material not preserved in earlier versions: Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grosman, *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*, translated and edited by David Patterson (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

## 5. THE END OF INTIMATE INSULARITY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF POST-SOVIET JEWISH NARRATIVES

A recent survey of Jews in Ukraine, published in 1995, begins its section on post-Soviet Jewry with the following header: "Renaissance or *Judenfrei*?"[20] This is, ultimately, the most pressing issue for post-Soviet Jewry, and it turns on the question of whether or not they will be able to define an acceptable historical narrative. Indeed, the very survival of the various post-Soviet Jewish communities hangs on this question. The "intimate insularity" that allowed Jewish culture to develop within a cocoon of self-absorption, with an often hostile host population guarding against assimilation, while governmental forces prevented mass emigration, has disappeared. Now, as estimates of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews in Russia (a high indicator of levels of assimilation) exceed 65 %, and with the most Jewishly motivated elements of the population often choosing to immigrate to Israel or the USA, thus depleting the homeland of its most vital human resource, Jewish activists are asking probing questions regarding the future of Eastern European Jewry. [21] Will the age-old paradigm of near-destruction/miraculous redemption be followed by a renaissance of Jewish life, or is the great Jewish civilization that flourished here for centuries in its final generation? In other words, will the Jewish culture of the region be frozen in perpetuity in its "golden age," much like the Jewish culture of medieval Spain?[22]

---

20 F.Ia Gorovskii, Ia.S. Khonigsman, A. Ia.Haiman, S.Ia. Elisavetskii, *Evrei Ukrainy (Kratkii ocherk istorii)*, Chast' 2 (Kiev: Ministerstvo Obrazovaniia Ukrainy, Ukrainsko-Finskii Institut Menedzhmenta i Biznesa, Mezhdunarodnyi Solomonov universitet, 1995), p. 216.

21 In his comments on an earlier version of this paper, Dr. Shiokawa made the useful observation that the "end of intimate insularity" was not an abrupt affair coinciding with the post-Soviet period, rather, Jewish assimilation was a marked phenomenon of the 20th century as a whole, and not something confined to the last decade alone. My argument here is that this phenomenon has undergone some acceleration during the post-Soviet period.

22 For a fascinating discussion of varieties of Jewish identity in the post-Soviet Union, see Rebecca Golbert, "In Search of a Meaningful Framework for the Study of Post-Soviet Jewish Identities, with Special Em-

It is simply too early to tell. There are some promising signs – renewed scholarly output, for example, and a truly remarkable flourishing of Jewish education at the tertiary level.[23] Some of this scholarship is rather unconventional by western standards, however, as newly established Jewish universities attempt to revive a culture long suppressed by the Soviet regime. A great deal of energy is expended, not surprisingly, in the field of teacher training, with the goal of bringing a higher level of Jewish consciousness to the youngest members of the Jewish community. Furthermore, these universities, often with a widespread but probably very tenuous support base, run extensive programs of what westerners might call "continuing" or "adult" education. According to their website, the Dniepropetrovsk Jewish People's University (founded in 1993 and located, ironically, on Karl Marx Avenue), for example, offers two years of Sunday classes in Religion fundamentals, Jewish Life, The History of the Jewish People, Jewish Civilization, and Language (presumably Hebrew).[24] Extensive and important research is being produced on topics concerning local history as well as archival studies, and this is certainly encouraging.[25] Furthermore, numerous and regular conferences on scholarly topics are taking place, followed by the publication of their proceedings.

---

phasis on the Case of Ukraine," *East European Jewish Affairs* 28:1 (1998), pp. 3-28.

23 Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, "The Revival of University Studies of Judaica in Ukraine and General Cultural Life," in Zvi Gitelman, ed., *Jewish Life after the USSR: A Community in Transition* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, forthcoming 2002). I am grateful to Dr. Petrovsky-Shtern for sharing his research with me. Dr. Petrovsky-Shtern is currently working on a monographic study of post-Soviet Ukrainian Jewry, under the working title of *A Fragile Utopia: The Jewish-Ukrainian Rapprochement, 1991-2001.*

24 "Dniepropetrovsk Jewish People's University," http://jew.dp.ua/english/denau.htm, June 18, 2002. For some statistical information on Jewish higher education in Russia, see the comprehensive "Academic Jewish Studies in Russia" website (http://eshnav.narod.ru/stats.htm, June 18, 2002), with links to Jewish studies in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

25 For an example of solid archival work, see Viktoria Khiterer, *Dokumenty po evreiskoi istorii XVI-XX vekov v Kievskikh arkhivakh* (Kiev, Moskva: Institut Iudaiki, Mosti Kul'turi, 2001).

This renewed scholarly output, however, is not synonymous with the development of a new historical narrative – a popular narrative requires a complex set of shared beliefs, and it is clear that post-Soviet Jews have yet to acquire anything of the sort. Looking, for example, at S. Asinovskii and E. Yoffe's recent Evrei: Po stranitsam istorii (Minsk: Zavigar, 1997), we see a large section of the book – nearly half of its 313 pages – devoted to the Jews of Eastern Europe from the period of the Khazars, with over forty pages on the Soviet period alone. The post-Soviet era, however, is hardly mentioned! The narrative in this general survey switches to a discussion of Israeli history after 1991, as if the chapter on the Jews of Eastern Europe has been closed. A similar comment could be made with regards to Matviyi Shapoval's *Evreï na Ukraïni (Istorychna Dovidka)* (Kyïv: Oriian, 1999). Many works have been produced that deal with "Russian-Jewish Dialogue" and the like, but the general tenor is one of a groping, tentative experimentation with the post-Soviet reality. At the turn of the 20th century, Eastern European Jews devised a broad range of historical narratives from which to choose. One hundred years later, they are struggling to maintain even a single narrative that will legitimate and perpetuate their continued communal existence in the former Soviet Union. Echoing the Talmudic comment cited at the beginning of this paper, it is as if post-Soviet Jewry would love to engage in a comprehensive "writing of oppressions" – yet one fears that they may not be able to complete the task.