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BEN-SASSON, 964-978

Soviet Jewry Between the Wars

The Flowering of the Soviet Jewish Community

The revolution that broke out early in 1917 in Russia put an end to the Tsarist regime and resulted in a republic headed by a provisional government. The new government abolished discrimination and granted the Jews equal rights. But not only did this legal equality characterize the new situation of the Jews in post-revolutionary Russia, the atmosphere of freedom that now prevailed greatly affected the large Jewish community, which had suffered so much. For the first time in the annals of Russian Jewry they were able to organize their life as they saw fit and to further their own chosen objectives. As a result, all the social and cultural forces latent in this community now erupted.

The Jewish parties, which had restricted or even totally suspended their activities during the reactionary period from 1907 onwards, now awoke to great activity and became extremely influential in the Jewish world. There was a particularly strong revival of the Ze'irei Zion, the United Party (an amalgamation of the S.S. and the Sejmists), Poalei Zion and the Bund. After the prohibition imposed during the war years on all publications in Hebrew lettering, the Hebrew and Yiddish publishing houses now resumed their activities, and dozens of periodicals and even several newspapers began to appear. An extensive network of Jewish education was developed. In the space of a few months, some 250 Hebrew educational institutions were established, ranging from kindergartens to teachers' seminaries.

The conventions of Jewish parties and their publications unanimously demanded the right to Jewish national autonomy, but while the Bund was content with autonomy in the field of education and culture alone, the other parties expanded their demands for autonomy in more comprehensive areas, such as welfare and mutual economic aid, legal recognition of Jewish matrimonial laws, the right to observe the Jewish Sabbath, etc. The Zionist parties demanded both national autonomy in Russia and Jewish political independence in Palestine. This situation differed from that at the turn of the century, for now the non-Jewish parties began to support the idea of Jewish national and cultural autonomy. In 1917 this was the decision of the S.R., the Mensheviks and the Constitutional Democrats (Kadets). The only left-ist or centrist party that was against this was the Bolshevik Party, which, despite

the considerable number of Jewish activists in its ranks and even among its leaders, lacked any real influence in the Jewish milieu.

The initial objectives of the Jewish parties in Russia included the restoration of community life (the basic nucleus of national autonomy) and the establishment of an all-Russian Jewish representation. In fact, during the second half of 1917, democratic elections were held for community councils and for an all-Russian Jewish conference. This conference was supposed to bring the demands of Russian Jewry before the all-Russian Constituent Assembly – elections to which were held at the same time. During the first elections the Zionists won approximately two-thirds of the votes; these results encouraged the British and French Zionist leaders, who were then petitioning their governments to support their demands concerning Palestine. At the elections to the Constituent Assembly the nationalist parties stood as a united Jewish-national list, and the elected deputies agreed to unite into an independent faction to act in accordance with the resolutions of the all-Russian Jewish conference.

The October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution frustrated all these plans. The Jewish Conference was not convened, and the Russian Constituent Assembly, in elections to which the S.R. won a decisive majority, was dispersed by force by the Bolsheviks immediately after its convocation on 5 January 1918. The Jewish public did not submit: in July 1918, community representatives met in Moscow and elected a central bureau whose task was to co-ordinate the activities of Jewish institutions. But both the community federation and the parties were subjected to increasing pressure and persecution on the part of the Soviet regime.

The Jewish Commissariats and the Communist 'Sections'

The relations between the Soviet authorities, or Bolshevik Party, and the Russian Jewish community after the consolidation of Bolshevik rule are unique, even in eventful Jewish history. On the one hand, these relations were based upon the supposedly emancipatory and egalitarian intentions of the Bolsheviks towards the Jews; for the most part, the Jews and their institutions carried out the policy of the regime, and the Jews under Soviet rule were initially offered a secular Yiddish culture to replace their old traditions. On the other hand, there were the immanent assimulatory tendencies of the Bolsheviks, who reintroduced Russification methods in the Soviet Union, that eventually created the basis for a straight-forward anti-Semitism. The prejudices and hostility of the past were fused with what appeared to be revolutionary innovation; hence, the intensity and the dialectical tension of this historical development, despite its brief span.

After the seizure of power, it became clear to the Bolshevik Party that it had no instrument of influence among the Jews. Not only were there no Communist publications in Yiddish, but the party had no people capable of conducting propaganda in this language. A special Jewish commissariat was therefore established in January 1918 within the framework of the Soviet Ministry for Nationalities; its function was to organize Communist activity among the Jews in their own language. The active members of this commissariat were emigrants to the United States who had returned

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to Russia after the revolution. It opened local branches, and its initial move was to take control of Jewish schools and to combat the influence of the Jewish parties. At first representatives of the left-wing S.R. and Poalei Zion participated in the Jewish commissariat. Its first publications spoke of the establishment of local Jewish soviets or of the creation of Jewish sections in the general soviets, and even of convening an all-Russian convention of these soviets to decide on the organization of Jewish life in Russia and the election of the Commissar of Jewish Affairs. The declared aim was, therefore, to develop life within Jewish frameworks and fill it with Communist content.

But all these plans and aims were soon cancelled. At the beginning of July 1918, the representatives of the non-Communist parties were expelled from the Jewish commissariat, and Communist sections, which served as emissaries of the party among the Jews, were set up within it. The activists of the Jewish sections regarded themselves as members of the general party, each belonging to a local cell besides working within the 'Jewish milieu'. The heads of the sections were not elected by the public, nor by the sections themselves, but were functionaries appointed by the party.

At the first convention of commissariats and sections in October 1918, it was explicitly stated that the establishment of these institutions had not been decided upon 'because we demand national autonomy' for the Jews, but in order 'to disseminate the ideals of the October Revolution among the Jewish working masses, and for this reason alone. You may be sure that the commissariat will not become a Jewish parliament.' The new institutions were, therefore, nothing but a party instrument for action among Yiddish-speakers, but their activists were not ardent supporters even of the Yiddish language. 'It has not become "holy Yiddish" for us as for the Jewish nationalists. The language in itself is unimportant to us,' declared one of the commissariat leaders, S. Dimanstein.

The Cessation of Independent Jewish Activity

In the first stage the main function of these Jewish sections was to fight against the Jewish parties and against independent Jewish organizational patterns. For the left-wing parties, the section advocated propaganda based on the importance of 'unity'. As the Red Army conquered more and more areas of the Ukraine, there was increasing pressure on these parties from outside, augmented by the pro-Communist tendencies of its members from within. Not only did the Communists appear to many members of these parties as their sole defenders against the extermination of the Jewish people by the White Army and by various nationalistic Ukrainian gangs, but they also believed that they could rely on the Communists to safeguard the future of the Jewish people.

The outside pressure together with this inner belief served to dissolve the Jewish leftist parties. In February 1919 there was a split in the Ukrainian Bund, and the left-wing majority took the name of Combund, i.e., Communist Bund. A similar process occurred in the United Party: the left wing established the United Jewish Community Party. The majority of Poalei Zion also tended to a pro-Communist orientation. In May 1919 these groups united in the Ukrainian Communist Union

(Comfarband). This Union wanted to amalgamate at once with the Communist Party, but the latter refused, demanding the dismantling of the Jewish organization and insisting that its former members join the Communists as individuals; it was only after the military situation of the Bolsheviks in the Ukraine worsened that the Communist Party agreed to allow the Union to join it as an organized unit (August 1919). The degree of confidence that the Union placed in the national policy of the Communist Party is attested to by the following decision: 'Special political guarantees for national minorities, such as autonomy . . . or the right to national self-determination, should be demanded only of the bourgeois state . . . the interests of the proletariat now necessitate full concentration of power . . .' In other words, at that fateful hour of struggle to maintain the Soviet regime, no political demands should be put forward that might lead to a division of power. This implied their confidence that, when the war ended, the Communist regime would concern itself with safeguarding the national rights of Russian Jews.

In White Russia, the weak Soviet regime agreed to permit the Communist Bund, which wished to maintain its autonomous status in the party, to organize itself into a Jewish Communist Party (January 1919). A considerable number of its members demanded national autonomy and Jewish activity within special frameworks. As a compromise it was agreed, in this region as well, to establish a Communist Union of White Russia and Lithuania (February 1919), but soon it too joined the Communist Party. The demands of this group that the Jewish sections of the Communist Party should constitute an autonomous Jewish body within it were rejected at the third all-Russian conference of Jewish sections (July 1920). This conference reiterated that the sections were a mere technical instrument for the implementation of party policy among the Jews. The remaining section of the Bund also declared at the time that it accepted the Communist programme, but demanded the right to continue as a separate organization within the framework of the party. The Communist leaders refused, and in 1921 the Bund was obliged to announce its dissolution.

The Zionist parties were disbanded in a different fashion. In the summer of 1919, the Ukrainian Communist Union demanded that Zionist activity be prohibited, and, in fact, all Zionist organizations and parties were ordered to hand over their property and documents to a 'liquidation committee'. At that time the Soviet regime had not yet established a uniform or comprehensive stand as regards the official suppression of the movement, but contented itself with imposing restrictions on its activity. Only when an all-Russian Zionist conference was convened in Moscow in April 1920 were all its members and guests arrested; in the summer of the same year, a clandestine circular was distributed by the Soviet political police, ordering the prevention of assemblies, the interception of mail and confiscation of the apartments of members of Zionist organizations. This was the beginning of a long history of cruel persecution. Thousands of Zionists of various outlooks were thrown into prison, incarcerated in concentration camps or exiled to Siberia or central Asia.

But despite all these measures, Zionist activity did not cease in Soviet Russia in the twenties. Some Zionists carried out their activities in underground or semi-underground conditions. The most extensive activity was conducted by Hehaluz, the association for agricultural and labour training that was established mainly on the

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initiative of Ze'irei Zion, but soon became an independent non-party organization. The founder and father of the Russian Hehaluz was Joseph Trumpeldor, one of the leaders of the Palestinian labour movement, who had distinguished himself as an officer in the Russian Army and had lost an arm fighting in the Russo-Japanese War. Hehaluz established agricultural training farms and maintained contact with Palestinian labour parties and with large Jewish organizations, encouraging Jews to engage in agricultural work. It also promoted cultural activity in Hebrew. From 1924 onwards the authorities clamped down on the Hehaluz movement as well, but it stood firm for another two years, when it was finally eliminated. After the Hebrew publishing houses were closed down, a group of Hebrew writers and poets founded in 1925 a literary journal entitled *Bereshit*, but it ceased publication after the first issue. A Hebrew theatre, Habimah, was founded in Moscow and operated there until 1925. The Jewish Communist party, Poalei Zion, was finally suppressed in 1928.

In addition to the parties and organizations, communities that immediately after the Revolution had organized themselves into democratic bodies representing the Jewish public began to be rapidly suppressed. The very first conference of the Jewish commissariats and sections in October 1918 had demanded the liquidation of these 'bourgeois institutions'. The commissariat decided on the abolition of the communities in April 1919, but published the edict only in June of that year, as it was incapable of taking over at one move the numerous and varied community institutions, including hospitals, orphanages and old-age homes. The liquidation order claimed that the communities had rallied around them the 'enemies of the working class', were 'obscuring the class consciousness of the Jewish working masses' and were appropriating state functions, such as education and culture, and implementing them in an 'anti-proletarian spirit'. The communities should therefore be permanently dissolved and their property and assets handed over to the Jewish commissariats. In practice, the communities were again reduced to the status of synagogue committees, as in Tsarist times. But they were subjected to increasingly strict control, particularly with regard to the prohibition of religious instruction, including the teaching of Hebrew, to those under the age of eighteen. The maintenance of Jewish organization and Jewish awareness was made immeasurably difficult. The government's attitude put an end to attempts to introduce Jewish autonomy and independent Jewish activity into existing frameworks. But it also spelled the end of the Jewish commissariats. They were replaced by a Jewish Department in the People's Commissariat (Ministry) for Nationalities in 1920, but this too disappeared after the liquidation of this Ministry. Only the Jewish section of the Communist Party (the *Yevsektiya*) continued to be active among the Jews.

Suffering During the Civil War and the 'War Communism' Era

Lenin and the Bolshevik leaders regarded the special status of the Jews under Tsarism as the consequence of a deliberately discriminatory government policy and of official anti-Semitic incitement. It was for this reason that they demanded equal rights for

the Jews, which would inevitably lead to rapid assimilation, as they believed had occurred in the West. But the realities of Russia in the first post-revolutionary years refuted these assumptions and hopes. The White armies and nationalistic groups advocated a violently anti-Semitic policy, conducted pogroms against the Jews and incited the population against them, claiming that Bolshevism was 'a Jewish regime'. The Soviet government attempted to resist anti-Semitism by educating the public and even employed punitive measures against the organizers of the pogroms. According to a government order signed by Lenin and published in July 1918:

The council of people's commissars declares that the anti-Semitic movement and the pogroms against the Jews are damaging to the interests of the revolution of the workers and peasants, and calls on the labouring people of socialist Russia to fight this evil by all possible means. National hatred weakens the revolutionary ranks and the united labour front, irrespective of nationality, and can only help our enemies. The council of the people's commissariat orders all the *Sovdeps* [local councils] to take all appropriate measure in order to uproot the anti-Semitic movement; the organizers of pogroms and those inciting to pogroms should be outlawed.

This policy enlisted the sympathy of many Jews on behalf of the new regime, but did not reduce anti-Semitism. Opposition to the Bolsheviks was exacerbated when increasing numbers of Jews began to occupy important posts in the new regime and its administration; many Russian officials and members of the intelligentsia left government and public service because of their resistance to the Soviet regime and were replaced by educated and semi-educated Jews, who in Tsarist times could not have hoped to obtain such positions.

The wave of savage pogroms in the Ukraine, the activities of gangs in White Russia, the transformation of the Pale of Settlement into the main arena of battle between the 'Whites' and the 'Reds' and between Poles and Russians brought terrible suffering for Russian Jews and totally undermined their economic security. The world war and the civil war (1918-20), which ruined Russian industry and communications and severely affected the large farms and estates, destroyed the foundations of Jewish livelihood in the 'Pale' and wiped out their main economic and social function - mediation between the town and the village. The town now had nothing to offer the village in return for agricultural produce. This situation was aggravated by several years of severe drought in various parts of Russia.

In 1920-1, the hungry towns were joined in their distress by widespread famine-stricken rural areas. Almost the sole source of livelihood that remained to the Jews in villages and small towns was conveying foodstuffs and other goods from place to place, or smuggling contraband - though this involved danger of robbery and expropriation. But under the conditions of 'war Communism' (the name given to the first period of Bolshevik rule, during which foodstuffs were obtained for the towns by forced seizure from the peasants by military units), this activity was regarded as 'speculation', and offenders were shot. The numerous Jewish artisans could only obtain raw materials by what were regarded as illegal methods, and they were also punished with excessive severity. The impoverished and hungry Jewish masses,

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who had hoped that the Soviet regime would at least bring them security, suddenly found themselves regarded as 'class enemies'. There were instances in which Jewish hostages were arrested in border areas and sometimes executed. There were even armed clashes between Jews in small towns and the Soviet authorities. Under the new rule, the peculiar conditions of Jewish life were even more strongly emphasized.

The Change in the Years of the New Economic Policy (NEP)

One of the gravest consequences of the 'war Communism' era was the deterioration of the Jewish *shtetl*. Anyone who was able to escape from the *shtetl* did so. The young people who had been unemployed for months or years, through no fault of their own, moved to the larger towns or to central Russia, eagerly looking for any opportunity of obtaining employment or of studying there. Even when the New Economic Policy replaced 'war Communism' and opened up opportunities for economic activity through private enterprise, there were still immeasurably greater possibilities in the towns, and this, too, stimulated departure from the *shtetl*. Only those who were supported by relatives abroad, maintained contact with local peasants or had themselves become semi-peasants cultivating plots of land, remained in their homes. But even under the conditions of the NEP, the situation in the *shtetl* areas was more difficult than in the towns; the local authorities imposed stricter control, and most of the new workshops, businesses or shops were soon ruined by the heavy burden of taxation. Needless to say, when all these businessmen (NEP-men) were declared to be 'deprived of rights' (*lishentsy*), including the right to medical care, when their children were expelled from school and were sometimes even driven out of their homes, their situation was much worse in small townlets; in towns and cities undesirable 'social origin' could be obscured through joining a cooperative or taking up some employment in a large plant. The Jewish townlet was doomed to extinction.

However, the move to larger towns and the mass migration to central Russia created new problems. The concentration of unemployed Jews in towns where there was already a high rate of unemployment and where living conditions were very poor created severe competition, and the plaint was heard that 'the Jews are conquering Moscow'. The increase in the number of Jewish businesses, particularly in the central cities, gave rise to the claim that most of the NEP-men were Jews. This again aroused acute anti-Semitism, which in the second half of the twentieth century became a common and severe phenomenon. There were increasing attacks on Jews, and even instances of murder. But above all, wide circles were influenced by anti-Semitic propaganda: 'We spilled our blood for the sake of the Revolution and only the Jews are benefiting from it.'

The NEP itself was only a brief episode. Even the partial rehabilitation of the nationalized industry was sufficient to ruin private enterprises, which lacked sources for the supply of raw materials and struggled for survival under the ruinous tax burden. When the NEP was abolished, the *lishentsy* remained without means of livelihood or any hope of integrating into the labour force. The second generation

could not gain admittance to secondary or higher institutions of learning, which now began to pay stricter attention to 'social origin'. The sufferings of the *lishentsy* increased particularly during the years of collectivization, when there again was a severe shortage of food and in many areas actual famine prevailed. Rationed food distribution was introduced; each social group received a different quantity, and the *lishentsy* were deprived of ration-cards altogether.

Agricultural Settlement Programmes and Territorial Concentration

The Soviet regime could not disregard these developments and was obliged to re-examine its attitude towards the Jewish problem. When industry was ruined, and even veteran workers found themselves out of work, the sole method of preventing the transformation of the 'little profiteers' into a dangerous 'anti-social element' and of saving them from actual hunger lay in directing them to agriculture. This had been discussed by the Jewish sections back in 1919. It was not a specifically socialist solution, but a continuation of the drive for 'productive occupations' – a legacy from previous generations. In desolate Russia it was clear to both the authorities and the Jews that only the farmer could be sure of his daily bread. Furthermore, Jewish organizations abroad also proposed similar plans and promised to extend aid to the settlers.

The Soviet regime adopted such plans, but only arrived at their systematic implementation a few years later. On 29 August 1924 the Soviet Presidium decided to establish 'a committee for the settlement of Jewish workers on the soil' (*Komzet*), and a year later, in June 1925, it approved plans to transfer 100,000 Jewish families to agricultural settlement within the space of a few years. These aims were never achieved, but Jewish agricultural settlement developed rapidly. According to the December 1926 population census, there were 155,400 Jews in the agricultural population, some 6% of all Jews; and in 1928 they totalled 220,000, or 8.5%. In October 1930, the total number of Jews who found their livelihood in agriculture totalled 10.1% – an all-time record for Russian Jews.

The success of agricultural settlement reinforced nationalistic trends among the Jews, particularly in light of the strengthening of Ukrainian and White Russian nationalism in the twenties. In White Russia, Yiddish was recognized as one of the four official languages of the republic and was widely employed, but there were no autonomous Jewish regions, and the number of soviets (local councils) where business was conducted in Yiddish was small: twenty-two in 1927 and twenty-seven in 1935. On the other hand, there were three autonomous regions in Ukraine – which never developed into important Jewish centres despite the fact that new agricultural settlers were sent there – and a considerable number of rural and urban Jewish soviets: in 1929 there were soviets of this type in seventy-seven villages and sixty-nine townlets, and in 1932, in 113 villages and fifty-five townlets. In the Ukraine in 1931 there were forty-six courts where business was conducted in Yiddish (as against ten in White Russia and eleven in central Russia).

As a result of these developments, even several members of the *Yevseksiya*

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began to speak of the possibility of creating an autonomous Jewish territory within the framework of the Soviet Union. Since the great majority of the heads of the *Yevseksiya* had once been Bundists or territorialists, the differences between them sometimes took on the form of disputes between the positions of their 'parent parties' regarding the nature of Jewish autonomy. In any case there were those who claimed that the 'proletarian dictatorship' created the possibility of Jewish national-territorial consolidation, or even stressed that only such concentration could prevent anti-Semitism. Despite the attacks of Chemeriski, secretary of the *Yevseksiya*, against this 'nationalistic deviation', it was Kalinin, head of the Presidium of the Soviet State (in a speech at the Conference of Ozet, the public association for the support of Jewish settlement), who supported the 'Jewish desire to preserve their nationality' by explaining that this accounted for the Jewish leaning towards agricultural settlement. In addition to the influence of economic factors, he also recalled that 'among the Jewish masses there has developed a sense of self-preservation, the struggle for nationality' and that agricultural settlement was 'one of the most efficient means of preserving the independent existence of the Jews as a nation'.

Although this view was not universally accepted in government circles, it undoubtedly provided additional momentum for the search for a territory in which continuous Jewish settlement could be developed. Such a territory was required also because Jewish settlement on a small scale in the Ukraine and White Russia had already succeeded in arousing the opposition of local farmers. Jewish settlement in the Crimea had even stimulated a wave of anti-Semitism; despite the lack of water and the soil salinity in Crimea, which had particularly hampered Jewish settlement there, an outcry was raised in Russia alleging that the best lands in the country, in the supposedly fertile south, were being handed over to the Jews. For these reasons, and out of strategic and political considerations, the authorities concentrated their search on the Far East. The need to populate the area close to the Chinese border and to fortify it against the traditional enemy, Japan, was one of the major concerns of the regime, and the establishment of a Jewish territorial unit there could, in theory, further this goal. In addition, as Kalinin had stated at the above-mentioned Ozet conference:

The Jews as a nation are one of the most lively and influential peoples, politically speaking, although as a people they do not entirely constitute one complete entity. The Jews are an energetic people, and in certain cases have demonstrated this. We should therefore consider the question if, under the existing situation, in conditions of capitalistic encirclement it is important or not that the mass of the Jews will display the warmest attitude towards the Soviet Union. If the petit bourgeois Jewish masses, small traders, artisans, etc., outside the borders of the Soviet Union, display warm feelings towards the Soviet Union will this be of any value to the revolution? Of course it will. And if so, it is clear that from this point of view as well, the establishment of a Jewish republic will be of tremendous value . . .

The territory chosen was Birobidzhan. In the summer of 1927 an investigatory commission was sent there, and although it could not carry out a thorough study,

the first Jewish settlers left for the region in April 1928. Despite the extensive support provided by various Jewish organizations abroad, which also extended aid to Jewish settlement in the Crimea, the Ukraine and White Russia, the Birobidzhan project did not meet with great success. In the first five years, some 20,000 settlers arrived there, of whom about 60% later left. The climatic and soil conditions were poor, and the aid extended proved insufficient. All the same, in May 1934, Birobidzhan was declared to be 'an autonomous Jewish district', despite the fact that the Jews constituted not more than 20% of the population.

It is clear that one of the main reasons for the lack of success in Birobidzhan lay in the widespread opportunities that opened up to Jewish youth elsewhere with the commencement of the Five-Year Plans (1928-9). But there were also other more basic reasons, as we may see from a report by A. Merezhin, one of the *Yevseksiya* leaders, to an Ozet council in 1929, on a group of graduates of a Minsk agricultural school, from which the

entire graduate class went to Birobidzhan and founded a commune there. And in this commune - in contrast to other settlements in the same region which lost their herds - not one horse, not one cow was lost. This is because they are the children of peasants, because they graduated from agricultural schools and know how to look after cattle in an expert fashion. They renounced personal comfort, started by building cowsheds, saved the herds, and even said to the others: don't be discouraged, don't think that Siberian fever cannot be overcome. Raise the standard of proficiency as we have and you will not lose even one head of cattle. But would we have obtained this commune without the slogan 'to the land of the Jews'. Would the entire graduating class of an agricultural school have gone there? I doubt it very much. I also doubt whether the large number of workers we needed would have gone there without the slogan 'to the land of the Jews'. Would the present number of settlers have held firm there without this slogan?

The main attraction of Birobidzhan lay in the catchphrase 'to the land of the Jews'. But it soon became clear to the settlers that their dream of Birobidzhan as the 'land of the Jews' would not be realized under the conditions of Soviet Russia.

The Suppression of Hebrew and the Flowering of Yiddish Culture

The main struggle within the Jewish population occurred in the early twenties between the *Yevseksiya* and the pre-Soviet parties and organizations. From the mid-twenties it raged between orthodox Jewry and the advocates of secular Jewish culture.

Despite the prohibition against religious instruction for the young, there were still *heders* and even *yeshivot* in the first few years. The number of pupils at state schools was limited. But the Soviet authorities initiated an anti-religious propaganda campaign with public debates, trials and arrests. Rabbis, ritual slaughterers and teachers were warned, expelled or arrested, and synagogues were closed. The study of Hebrew subjects continued clandestinely. The printing of religious books, even

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prayerbooks, was discontinued at the end of the twenties. In the thirties there were only a few groups (outstanding among them in their cohesion were the *Habad Hasidim*) who maintained their traditional way of life under constant threat.

The objection of the leaders of the *Yevseksiya* to 'cultural autonomy' made itself felt only after they took over the educational network and the Jewish cultural and social welfare institutions. They abolished the study of Hebrew and based education on Yiddish, probably realizing that otherwise there would be no chance of influencing the public. According to the 1926 census, more than 90% of White Russian Jews, more than 75% of Ukrainian Jews and more than 50% in central Russia declared Yiddish to be their mother tongue. As a substitute for the prohibited Hebrew language and religion, the Jews were offered a secular Communist culture in Yiddish. In the small towns the number of pupils at schools where teaching was carried out in Yiddish increased rapidly: at the beginning of the thirties there were 30,000 pupils at such schools in White Russia and close to 90,000 in Ukraine. However, the Yiddish schools in Soviet Russia not only failed to inculcate any Jewish cultural or historical values, but also attempted to eradicate and uproot them. It soon transpired that these schools were not to the liking of the Jews; observant parents and assimilated families alike preferred to send their children to general schools, mainly Russian. In the smaller towns the *Yevseksiya* officials forced Jewish parents to send their children to the Yiddish schools and prohibited them from entering general schools. In the larger towns of the Ukraine the Yiddish schools never encompassed more than a small percentage of Jewish pupils.

Despite the tension, the struggles and the conflicts – or perhaps as a result of them – there was a great cultural flowering in Yiddish in the 1920s. The number of newspapers had been reduced as a result of the suppression of the Jewish parties, but a large number of books and pamphlets appeared in Yiddish, published by state publishing houses. Soviet Jewish literature flourished. Not only did several young Communist writers, such as Izi Kharik and Itzik Fefer, emerge, but several non-Communist writers, who had left Russia after the revolution, began to return out of the belief that only in this country did suitable conditions exist for the growth of Jewish culture. Thus, in the late 1920s an important school of writers emerged in Soviet Russia, who described in their works the life of the Jewish townlet and the vicissitudes of its disintegration; the problems of adaption to the new realities also found expression in this literature. Several of these writers described the past and its values with love and nostalgia. They included David Bergelson, Perez Markish, Der Nister (Pinkhes Kahanovich), David Hofstein, Moshe Kulbak, Leib Kvitko and others. Jewish theatres also attained considerable achievements, and several of them, such as the Moscow Jewish Theatre directed by Solomon Mikhoels, reached a remarkably high standard. In Moscow, Kiev and Minsk there were also Yiddish drama schools.

The study of Jewish history and literature continued in the twenties. There were still several scholarly societies whose publications appeared in Russian, but they were finally liquidated at the beginning of the thirties. In the twenties, two Communist scholarly institutes were established, which conducted their work in Yiddish: the Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture, affiliated to the Ukrainian

Academy of Sciences, and the Jewish Section of the White Russian Academy. They published several linguistic and literary studies, essays on social ferment, on the class struggle among Russian Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and on the history of the Jewish labour movement. But their main efforts were devoted to 'exposing the image of bourgeois scholarship' in the past and the struggle against the 'anti-revolutionary and fascist' trends of Jewish scholarship outside Russia.

After the suppression of the Jewish parties – and throughout the twenties – the *Yevseksiya* was regarded as the representative of Soviet Jewry. This, however, never was the view of the Jews themselves. Those who lived in the townlets or remained within Jewish frameworks feared this body and were hostile towards it, while those who had moved to large towns or to central Russia were absorbed into broader frameworks and did not want recourse to its aid. There were those who claimed that the *Yevseksiya* was responsible for the negative attitude of the Soviet authorities towards independent Jewish activity, though this was not so – the *Yevseksiya* was only one of the agencies of the government. But it did at least symbolize the fact that the Soviet regime recognized the existence of a 'Jewish problem', which called for treatment and consideration, and the need for a special Jewish framework. The dissolution of the *Yevseksiya* marked the beginning of a process of disregard for Jewish existence and its eventual suppression. When several of its officials displayed over-enthusiasm for the fostering of Yiddish cultural activity or wanted 'to maintain the specific weight of the Jews' – namely, to preserve their special role in the population (as the White Russian *Yevseksiya* claimed with regard to agricultural settlement projects in that republic), they were accused of 'nationalistic deviationism', and in January 1930 all the *Yevseksiyas* were disbanded.

The Changes in Russian Jewish Life in the 1930s

The shift in the attitude of the Soviet regime towards the Jewish community resulted in part from changes in the way of life of the Jews in the twenties and early thirties and partly from the changes in methods of government – particularly its growing opposition towards nationalistic sentiment and the intensification of its suppressive measures.

The 1920s were a period of far-reaching change in Jewish life as a result of the transition to agriculture and manual labour and the increased involvement in institutions of learning; it was expressed in a rapid process of 'proletarianization' and cultural assimilation. Between 1926 and 1935 the number of those engaged in manual labour tripled, until they constituted almost half of all Jewish wage-earners. There was also a rapid increase in the percentage of Jewish youth studying at higher institutions. The Jews were less than 2% of the total Soviet population, but constituted 14.4% of all students in 1927–8; and despite the tremendous expansion of the number of students in the following years, they still accounted for 13.3% of the total in 1935. These revolutionary processes, which occurred over a very brief span of time, naturally produced far-reaching effects on Jewish society and a transformation of the cultural and spiritual image of the Jews.

During the thirties there was a decisive change in the occupational structure of the

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Soviet Jewish community, and the following trends emerged among Jewish bread-winners: the abandonment of agriculture, a change-over to skilled industrial work, a more important role for the technological intelligentsia and professionals, such as teachers, physicians, scientists and artists, and the proliferation of officials (commercial employees, bookkeepers, etc.).

Agriculture was abandoned because of the new opportunities that opened up in the towns as a result of the Five-Year Plans. The Jews, who had always been town-dwellers, turned to agriculture only when this offered the sole solution to their hopeless economic situation and seemed to promise a minimal livelihood. But as soon as it became possible – even if through arduous labour – to make a living in town, they preferred this alternative. Hence there was a drop in the number of those who turned to agricultural settlement in the early thirties. An additional factor was collectivization, which eradicated all private initiative in the agricultural economy and converted the collective farms into estates managed by officials. The Jewish settlers, who had been the first to set up communal farms of their own free will, now began to leave them. This process was particularly influenced by the fact that the Jewish communes were generally created by people who were in any case close to one another; they maintained their own way of life within the village, observed religious traditions, maintained synagogues and sometimes even employed a rabbi, and so they were imbued with a sense of social and national cohesion. When the slogan of 'internationalization of the kolkhoz' was first bandied about in the early thirties, implying the amalgamation of Jewish and non-Jewish farms into a single unit, in practice, all the advantages of belonging to a commune evaporated and only the disadvantages remained.

The nationalist aspect of agricultural settlement in a 'Jewish territory' was also affected. Those who had feared for Jewish national existence now tired of the incessant attacks on 'nationalistic deviation' and the pronouncements that the raising of pigs was the symbol of Jewish liberation. The consequence was that the number of Jews engaged in agriculture in 1939 was low, not only in comparison with the peak figures of the early thirties, but also in comparison with those of 1926. The process of proletarianization was also checked. The industrial development of the Five-Year Plans absorbed the unemployed Jewish labour force, and these Jews rapidly adjusted to the new working and living conditions, as well as to the language and concepts of their environment. Within a few years most of them had become skilled workers: the data of the 1939 population census reveals that 50% of the Jewish workers were skilled labourers, 40% semi-skilled and only 10% unskilled. Some of them graduated, within the industrial enterprises themselves, from manual labour to organizational and managerial positions; in 1939 there were less manual labourers among the total number of Jewish wage-earners than at the beginning of the thirties (43% as compared to 50%). But the most important change was that many of those who underwent the process of proletarianization – or in some cases their children – succeeded in completing their studies at higher institutions and moved up to become part of the intelligentsia.

At the end of the thirties, those engaged in clerical work and liberal professions constituted the largest group among Jewish bread-winners. The liquidation of

privately owned shops and the development of state commerce and the complicated methods of administration and economic control opened up – for those Jews who were acquainted with the vernacular – the gateway to state employment, even for those who had not completed secondary or higher education. The ranks of the intelligentsia were augmented by students at higher institutions during the late twenties and early thirties. Tens of thousands of Jewish engineers, physicians and teachers were absorbed into the state machinery. Several of them attained high standing in their respective fields. Some of the most important scientists in the Soviet Union were Jews, e.g., the physicists Abraham Joffe, Leonid Mandelstam, Lev Landau and Grigori Landsberg. Prominent in artistic life were poets such as Osip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak and Samuel Marshak, writers such as Isaac Babel and Ilya Ehrenburg, and musicians such as David Oistrach, Emil Gilels and Mark Reizin.

This change in occupational predominance came simultaneously with increased Jewish dispersion throughout the Soviet Union, since graduates of higher institutions were obliged to serve, after completion of studies, wherever they were sent. Yet they increasingly concentrated in the larger towns, as these were the administrative, economic and cultural centres. In 1939 some 40% of all Soviet Jews lived in only six cities: Moscow, Leningrad, Odessa, Kiev, Kharkov and Dnepropetrovsk.

At the same time Yiddish began to forfeit its importance in Jewish life. Even in the townlets of the Ukraine and White Russia, parents endeavoured not to send their children to Yiddish schools, as there were no higher institutions that taught in these languages and without education in Russian or one of the major languages it was impossible to find a post in the bureaucracy or in academic professions. The authorities also increased their onslaught on 'nationalistic deviation' and tried to raise the prestige of the Russian language as that 'uniting all the peoples of the Soviet Union'. Jews who acquired Russian education not only made considerable progress towards adopting Russian culture, but also served as a 'russificatory' factor in the national republics of the Soviet Union.

Thus we find that all the achievements of the cultural and social flowering of the twenties – Yiddish schools and courts, soviets and autonomous regions – were rapidly dwindling in the mid-thirties. Literary creativity was also affected, and at the beginning of 1939 there were those who proposed that Yiddish literature be published from the outset in Russian translation or in Ukrainian. The persecution of 'nationalistic deviationism', which was intensified in the period of the 1936–8 trials and terror, gravely affected many of those active in Jewish culture in the Ukraine and White Russia and totally destroyed the burgeoning of this culture in Birobidzhan. The war against anti-Semitism, which increased between 1927 and 1931, was also completely suspended during these years.

Parallel to the rapid linguistic assimilation, religious persecution was renewed, and the activities of foreign Jewish organizations within the Soviet Union (the Joint, ICA and ORT) were suspended. Jewish identity became obscured, mixed marriages increased, and the young Jewish generation was almost totally detached not only from Jewish tradition and culture, but also from the Jewish way of life.

The rapid assimilation of Soviet Jews, and the important position that many

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of them began to attain in economic and cultural life might, under different circumstances, have led to a negative reaction on the part of the non-Jews around them and an intensification of anti-Semitism. But hostility towards the Jews was not sharply felt in the Soviet Union at the end of the thirties, as, on the one hand, this was a period of Jewish expulsion from political life – not only were many Jews, who were veteran Bolsheviks and had held important positions, murdered or exiled in the years of terror, but, in addition, because of the desire to placate Nazi Germany, Jews were rapidly ejected from the party machinery, diplomatic service and such; and, on the other hand, even if there existed jealousy and hostility towards the Jews, the regime, which cruelly suppressed any public expression of opinion, prevented them from emerging.

The Effect of the Annexation of Areas in the West

In 1939 and in 1940 Russia annexed extensive areas in the west (eastern Poland, the Baltic states, Bessarabia and Bukovina), which were densely populated by Jews. Some two million Jews were added to those three million already living in the Soviet Union. Despite the administrative barriers that the regime strictly observed between the 'old' Soviet Union and the annexed territories, contact was rapidly established between the Jews of the two areas. Many of the Jews of the older Soviet territories were vastly impressed by the lively and independent Jewish life in the annexed territories: the existence of organizations and parties, the religious and communal life, Jewish schools and cultural institutions. This contact with the 'western' Jews (as the residents of the annexed territories were called) revived among Jews from various sections of Jewish society memories of the past and helped reshape the national awareness that had gradually become obscured.

For some time the Soviet regime was obliged to maintain some of the independent institutions of the Jews in the annexed territories – for example, schools – but, generally speaking, the rapid liquidation of Jewish life commenced at once. Parties and organizations were disbanded and their members arrested, the cultural and social institutions were dissolved or integrated into the state systems, under Communist control. Furthermore, the Soviet regime began mass expulsion of 'untrustworthy elements' from the new areas to Siberia and Kazakhstan. Thousands of Jews were arrested and exiled. The brief period (less than two years) between the annexation of the western areas and the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union was sufficient to destroy independent Jewish life in those regions. But the dispersal of the 'westerners' throughout the Soviet Union strengthened the Jewish consciousness of those Jews who had been living for more than twenty years under Soviet rule.

The *rapprochement* between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany led, as we have noted, to an acceleration in the pace of Jewish expulsion from influential positions. It was forbidden to refer openly to Nazi anti-Semitism and the persecution of the Jews in Germany and Central Europe. On the day when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the vast Jewish community of the U.S.S.R., numbering almost five million, stood helpless and defenceless, abandoned to the Nazi mass-extermi-