

## **A Historical look at the Situation for Soviet Jews 1940s-1960s**

### **Historical Background**

After WWII, many Soviet Jews succeeded in emigrating to Palestine. The establishment of the State of Israel (with the Soviet Union's endorsement) revived Jewish national identity causing increased anti-Semitism and propaganda against the Jews and Israel. Jews were prohibited to speak out against the misinformation that was being spread against them. In the late 1940s, the Jews were referred to as "rootless cosmopolitans", "bourgeois cosmopolitans", and "individuals devoid of nation or tribe". This campaign against them resulted in the killing of many Jewish artists and writers. Jews were accused in the press of trying to help the West and America, and of imitating bourgeois life and culture. Jewish scholars were removed from the sciences, and emigration rights were denied to Jews. August 12, 1952 became known as the night of the murdered poets, as twenty five Jews (including some prominent writers) were accused of espionage and treason and were executed. In 1953 a group of prominent doctors from Moscow, mostly Jewish, were accused of conspiring to assassinate Soviet leaders in the "Doctors' Plot". This led to the arrest or dismissal of many Jewish professionals from their jobs, and a new wave of anti-Semitism. After Stalin's death-that same year, the plot was found to be a fabrication.

Nikita Khrushchev took over after the death of Stalin and tried to de-Stalinise Soviet society. The anti-Semitism and its consequent destruction of Jewish professional, national, and cultural life from 1948-1953 did not disappear with the death of Stalin, but lines of communication between Soviet Jews and world Jewry were reopened. Under Khrushchev, Jews were used as scapegoats to deter Soviet citizens from illegal economic practices. Many were arrested and even killed by the secret police. A massive distrust of Jews had become prevalent in Soviet society. Jews were not allowed to hold high ranks in the government or in military and foreign service. The police supervised all synagogue activity as well as meetings between Soviet Jews and Jews from abroad.



In the 60s, the West began to become aware of the severity of the Jewish problem in the Soviet Union. Western communist parties sent delegations to assess the situation and were shocked at what they found. They published their findings in various publications. The Jewish problem came to the forefront of national Jewish consciousness as well as world consciousness and the fight for the rights of Soviet Jews began. Philosopher Bertrand Russell appealed to Khrushchev to restore equal rights to the Jews and maintained a correspondence with him which was eventually published in both Russian and British publications. This helped raise awareness of the anti-Semitic treatment of Jews in the Soviet Union. Conferences on the subject were held by almost every Jewish organization around the world, as well as foreign governments and the U.N. Rallies and press conferences were held as well as meetings with government officials. Student organizations played an active part in the fight for Soviet Jewry, organizing rallies of their own and signing petitions protesting the plight of Soviet Jews.

These efforts greatly pressured the Soviet government. In 1965 Leonid Brezhnev, who succeeded Khrushchev, allowed hundreds of Jewish families to emigrate to Israel under the “reunification of families” program. That same year, Elie Wiesel was sent to the Soviet Union by the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* to report on the lives of the Jews there. In 1966 he published “*The Jews of Silence*”, his eyewitness account of what he had seen which helped raise public awareness. In 1967, after Israel’s victory in the Six Day War, many previously unaffiliated Soviet Jews felt a renewed sense of Jewish pride and desire to return to their roots and emigrate to Israel. They began to gather secretly to learn Hebrew and Judaism and to celebrate Jewish holidays. They disseminated samizdat (literature banned by the state) and many of their Hebrew writings were snuck out of the USSR and published in Israel, which gave a window into the life of the Jews there. The war, however, resulted in the severing of diplomatic ties between the Soviet Union and Israel, and caused an unprecedented campaign against the Jews and Zionism. Jews were targeted in all areas of the media and Zionists were victims of smear campaigns.

Boris Kochubievsky, a Jewish-Ukrainian radio engineer wrote a letter to Brezhnev stating “I am a Jew. I want to live in the Jewish state. That is my right, just as it is the right of a Ukrainian to live in the Ukraine, the right of a Russian to live in Russia, the right of a Georgian to live in Georgia. I want to live in Israel. That is my dream; that is the goal not only of my life but also of the lives of hundreds of generations that preceded me, of my ancestors who were expelled from their land. I want my children to study in the Hebrew language. I want to read Jewish



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papers, I want to attend a Jewish theatre. What is wrong with that? What is my crime...?" Many Jews appealed to leaders worldwide requesting intercession on their behalf. In 1969, Golda Meir broadcast a letter she received from eighteen Jewish families in the Soviet Georgian Republic asking Israel to petition the UN on their behalf. This served as a turning point in the plight of Soviet Jews as they were no longer relying on others to relay their story, but rather they were speaking out themselves and fighting for their rights.