Religion and Nationality:
The Transformation of Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union
Anna Vinogradov

One night in January, 1935, the curtain closed on the dark stage of the Bolshoi Theater as Solomon Mikhoels and his Moscow State Yiddish Theater finished a performance for a gala event. It was a night of optimism and triumph for the proponents of the new, revolutionary, Bolshevik-approved, Soviet Yiddish culture. Stalin himself led a standing ovation for Mikhoels.[1] No one in that theater could have guessed that by 1949, Stalin would have murdered the actors in the troupe and Hitler would have murdered most of the Jews in the audience.

Both the immense popularity of Mikhoels and his murder by Stalin in 1948 were emblematic of the extreme historical circumstances that affected Soviet Jewry from 1917 onwards. Modern Soviet Jewish identity, which is fundamentally national with few religious or cultural elements, is a product of these extraordinary pressures.

In order to understand how a radically modified identity can be salient for Soviet Jews, it is important to recognize that Judaism has been transformed over time as new categories have been applied to it. "Religion" and "nationality" are themselves modern concepts that did not figure in Jewish identity for thousands of years. Religion itself, of course, is ancient but it was not separated from other aspects of life that are considered "secular" or "national" until modernity. "Judaism developed in the ancient Near East at a time when no differentiation was made between religion and ethnicity. The biblical account of the founding of Judaism is simultaneously an account of the genesis of the Jewish people."[3] However, the religious and national elements of Jewish identity have been reconfigured over time in response to historical circumstances.

Today, Western European and American Jews define themselves primarily in terms of religion, de-emphasizing the national elements of Judaism that originated in biblical times. This development is closely linked to the strong assimilatory forces that have affected Jews in these communities. Jews who have culturally assimilated to their country of residence do not wish to have their loyalty and patriotism called into question because of their

identification with a foreign national group. This occurred, for instance, during the Dreyfus Affair at the end of the nineteenth century in France, when Anti-Semitism led to the conviction of a Jewish artillery captain for treason. In order to facilitate full cultural and national assimilation, Western European and American Jewish identity adopted its religious focus, leaving the realm of the national to the host country.

In the Soviet Union, the historical circumstances were different than those in Western Europe and therefore the resultant Jewish identity was different as well. Like the Western European and American identity, the Soviet concept of Jewish nationality is distinctly modern. Before 1917, assimilation was less pervasive amongst the Jews of Eastern Europe, many of whom continued to live in isolated communities until the Russian Revolution. When the Bolsheviks came to power, Soviet Jews were pressured to de-emphasize not the national elements of their identity, but rather its religious aspects. After the Russian Revolution, Jewish identity underwent a process of drastic transformation. It was destroyed and then reinvented in a new national form, and eventually the new form was stripped of its cultural content. Since the USSR was an atheist state, religious aspects of Judaism were strongly discouraged and Jews were instead recognized as one of many Soviet nationalities. Religious Jewish identity was suppressed in favor of Soviet Yiddish culture, which was then destroyed after World War II on Stalin's orders. Soviet Jews were left with an extremely limited knowledge of Jewish religion or culture, but they continued to be identified as Jews by nationality through their official documents and they consistently affirmed their own Jewish identity in the national sense, as a minority group with a common ancestry. When immigrants like my mother, Elizabeth Vinogradov, left the fallen Soviet Union and came to the U.S. in the early 1990s, they continued to view the Jewish people as a nationality or an ethnic group.[4] Historical circumstances and processes shaped Soviet Jewish identity, ultimately resulting in an identity with strong national elements, but few cultural or religious ones.

Soviet nationality policy in general, not only towards the Jews, is an intricate subject. Rogers Brubaker has argued that "The Soviet state not only passively tolerated but actively institutionalized the existence of multiple nations and nationalities as constitutive elements of the state and its citizenry. It codified nationhood and nationality as fundamental social categories sharply distinct from statehood and citizenship."[5] In other words, the state and the nation were separate entities in the USSR. Nationalities were encouraged to function on a sub-state level; the Soviet Union was not unified by, or created
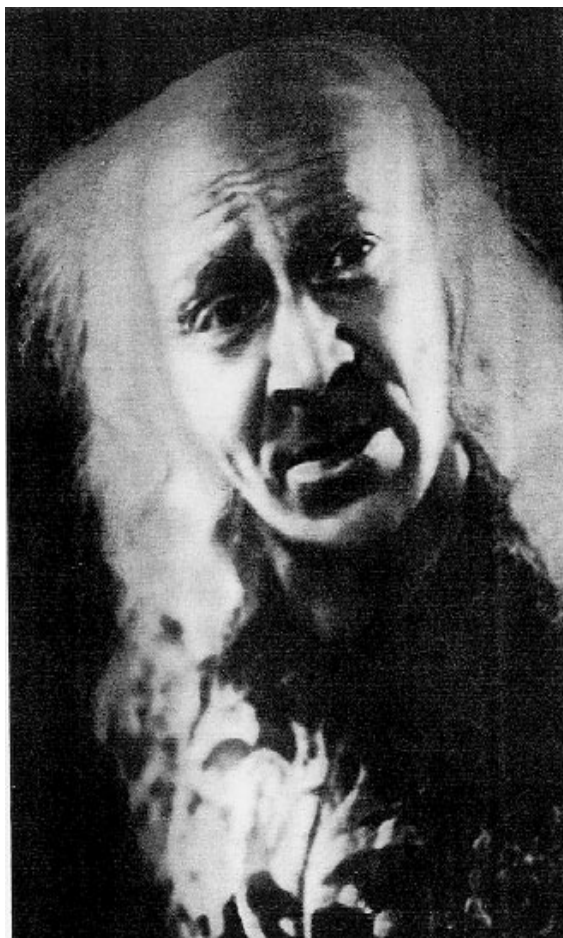
Solomon Mikhoels playing King Lear in a production by the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre, Moscow, 1934.

for, any one nationality. Instead, the USSR was made up of fifteen Union Republics that were sovereign according to the constitution, if not entirely so in practice.[6] Each republic was named after a different nationality within the USSR.

It certainly appears on the surface irrational for the Soviet government to have institutionalized sub-state national groups, some even with their own territories, as they could potentially have detracted from the central power of the state. While it is impossible to determine the exact reasoning behind these policies, there are several plausible explanations that can be considered. Brubaker suggests that multi-ethnic nationality policy was unintended by Soviet officials, who created it haphazardly and did not expect it to last as long as it did.[7]

It was thus through an irony of history, through the unintended consequences of a variety of ad hoc regime policies, that nationality became and remained a basic institutional building block of the avowedly internationalist, supranationalist, and anti-nationalist Soviet state.[8]

Another important factor is that multi-nationality was a political reality for the Bolsheviks, who inherited it from the Russian empire when they came to power. The territory that they found themselves controlling was the home of many ethnic minorities, some of whom were calling for cultural and political autonomy or even independence after the revolution. The new government was forced to take these nationalistic demands into account.[9] Nationality policy, therefore, may have been a way to pacify discontented ethnic minorities, while simultaneously working towards their eventual assimilation into communist Soviet society; "the passing of ethnic discontent would result in the demystification of ethnic groups and their ultimate fusion under communism."[10] In this view, the government was promoting diversity only to eventually attain unity. I am, however, critical of this interpretation because it seems unlikely that nationality policy was only a means to an end of fusion. If this was the case, why did the Soviet state promote ideas about national difference so actively and consistently, and why was national identification made compulsory through the passport system?

There is another explanation of Soviet nationality policy that is more compelling: institutionalized nationality appealed to the government because it was a form of social control. It was a chance to reshape national identities in accordance with Soviet principles. The government could infuse identities with satisfactory content, or drain any unacceptable content. Soviet nationality "policies were intended…to harness, contain, channel,

and control the potentially disruptive political expression of nationality by creating national-territorial administrative structures and by cultivating, co-opting, and (when they threatened to get out of line) repressing national elites."[11] In this way, the power of various national groups could be overseen by the state.

These explanations of Soviet nationality policy in general still do not explain why Jews specifically were recognized as a Soviet nationality. Additionally, why did the Soviet state create and encourage national Yiddish culture? One factor was the practical necessity and convenience of bringing Soviet ideas to the not-yet-acculturated Yiddish-speaking masses. The promotion of Yiddish culture and the recognition of Jews as a nationality can be seen as a "[concession] made in the face of the obvious lack of support for Bolshevism among the Jewish masses and the need to work among them in Yiddish if they were to be won over."[12] If this was the state's goal, it was successfully achieved. Many Jews became loyal Soviet citizens in the 1920s and 1930s, and formed a large part of the Soviet bureaucracy.

The new Jewish identity, however, was more than a means for advancing Bolshevik propaganda among the Jewish population. It was also the lesser of two evils in the eyes of the Soviet authorities, as it served as a substitute for Hebrew culture. "The idea was to create a new Jewish culture and a Soviet Jewish nationality, one which would be secular, socialist, and Yiddish. This nationality would have nothing in common with the religious, Hebraist, Zionist, bourgeois Jews in capitalist countries."[13] The government wanted Soviet Jews to take on a new identity that would divorce them from the rest of world Jewry and align them more closely with the USSR in terms of ideology. Yet, at the same time, Soviet officials probably hoped that the new Yiddish-centered identity would gain international support for the new Soviet state from Yiddish speakers, who were all over the world after the great migration of Jews from Eastern Europe.[14]

The new national identity was also meant to integrate Jews into the Soviet system. It was a way of creating national roots for the cosmopolitan Jew, a rootless foreigner. Therefore, like Zionism, these policies were intended to normalize the Jewish people, at least with respect to other Soviet nationalities. To this end, the government backed a campaign to turn 400,000 urban Jews into farmers since it believed Jews were too concentrated at the top of the social pyramid and that some had to be moved to the bottom.[15] This project eventually became the Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan, a national territory created for the Jews by the Soviet state. This approach was meant

to solve the problem of the abnormal Jews by making them like Ukrainians, Georgians, and other territorial Soviet nationalities. "Like Zionists, who needed territory in which to incubate a Hebrew nation in Palestine, Soviet Jewish activists fought to establish Jewish agricultural colonies, Jewish city councils, and eventually an entire Jewish region."[16] In practice, however, the Jewish Autonomous Region turned out to be essentially a legal fiction. On paper the Jews had a territory, but in reality it was only a formality and so far to the east, near the border with China, that few Jews moved there.

Although the Jewish territory was merely a formality, the new national identity was not. It was an effective means for organizing Jewish society that had a lasting impact on the nature of Judaism in the Soviet Union. By condemning certain aspects of Jewish practice and actively promoting others, the Soviet government created definitions of "nation" and "religion" for the Jews. The Soviets split Jewish identity into its components and determined that certain aspects, such as the Yiddish language, were "national" and therefore could play a role in Soviet multiethnic policy, while others were religious and had to be eliminated. What criteria did Soviet officials use to make these decisions? How did they judge whether certain elements of the identity posed a threat to the Soviet state? Actually, they were informed in their decisions by the Jewish sections of the Communist Party, who "argued to a puzzled party leadership that Hebrew must be a 'bourgeois' language because it was used almost exclusively by the class enemy, rabbis and Zionists. Yiddish, on the other hand, was the language commonly spoken by the Jewish workers, and hence was a 'proletarian' language."[17]

Many of these Jewish party members became part of the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia, a small group of writers, activists, publishers, critics, and scholars who played the largest role in the redefinition of Jewish identity.[18] The intelligentsia was created and supported by the Soviet government, which gave the group of Jewish public figures "conditional access to power to remake the ethnic group in the state's own image."[19] With the blessing of the state, the intelligentsia led the way in the 1920s and 1930s, an era of Yiddish cultural production in areas such as literature and theater. The development of secular Jewish nationalism through Yiddish culture was seen as a contribution to Soviet socialism in this period, not an attempt to undermine it.[20] Therefore, the intelligentsia did not feel any conflict between their loyalty to the Soviet state and their desire to build a Jewish nation.

The close association of the Yiddish intelligentsia with the Soviet government raises questions about which group was truly in control of the

transformation of Jewish identity. Which historical actors took the initiative in bringing about the high degree of acculturation that occurred? Was it Soviet officials or the Jews themselves who were eager to rid themselves of the religious content of their Judaism? In other words, the creation of this new identity highlights tensions between self-definition and definition by others. To an extent, Soviet Jews allowed themselves to be defined externally by a dominant group; the destruction and recreation of their identity was initiated through government policy rather than a grassroots movement among the Jews themselves. Nevertheless, the members of the Jewish intelligentsia were not merely tools of the state. Although they promoted the spread of Bolshevik ideology in Yiddish with the state's backing, they also had a significant amount of agency. "The Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia served as intermediaries, envisioning the future of Jewish culture and society for the state and for Jews, and using state power to realize those visions."[21] This was not simply a one-sided process based on the state using the intelligentsia to destroy and create Jewish identities. Rather, the intelligentsia also used the power of the Soviet state to realize their goals for the modernization of the Jewish people. Both sides used each other, as the Jewish intelligentsia worked with the Soviet government towards the same goals. The new identity was not entirely forced on the Jews from the outside but was welcomed by Jewish public figures.

The new national identity was embraced not only by the small group that made up the intelligentsia, but also by many Jews in the former Pale of Settlement who saw it as a chance to partake in the wider world. They acculturated quickly into Soviet life, leaving the shtetls for the big cities. "No other ethnic group was as good at being Soviet, and no other ethnic group was as keen on abandoning its language, rituals, and traditional areas of settlement."[22] Jews who knew Yiddish preferred that their children learn Russian, which they saw as the language of opportunity. Cultural production in Yiddish continued, but once the Jews were redefined as a Soviet nationality they felt that more doors were open to those who were willing to acculturate. "Linguistic and cultural modernization and assimilation were happening 'from the bottom up' without any outside interference from Jewish intellectuals or the Soviet state."[23] Therefore, Soviet Jewish culture was neither created nor destroyed solely by the non-Jewish state. The Jews themselves participated in both the destruction of the old identity through assimilation and the construction of the new one. The process of redefinition was both external and internal. In an essay on Soviet Jewish identity, Aleksander Voronel

laments the loss of "tradition, language, unique forms of community life, understanding of earlier generations, [and] identity with Jews all over the world" that resulted from the destruction of the old identity. He writes that "it would be unfair to blame the Soviet government for these losses. The rupture with age-old traditions of Jewry was to a great extent the fault of the older generation of Jews themselves."[24] The dichotomy of self-definition vs. definition by others is, however, too simplistic to describe what happened. There were some Jewish groups who wanted to redefine themselves and reduce the influence of religion, whether because they were faithful believers in communism or because they saw this as a way of escaping discrimination based on religion. Yet there were other Jews who were traditionalists and played no role in the actions of the intelligentsia. Jews did not uniformly agree on a new definition of themselves, nor did they uniformly accept a definition created by outsiders. This was, at least, the situation in the early years of Bolshevik rule, the 1920s and 1930s. Later on, even the intelligentsia lost control of the process of redefinition, which was taken over by non-Jews in the Communist party and hence became an entirely externally driven process.

By the 1930s, nationality had become a major aspect of an individual's legal status in the USSR. It was recorded in the majority of documents, internal and external, including passports and numerous bureaucratic forms. National identification had become a mandatory and pervasive aspect of everyday life. The Jews were locked into their new identity in a way that they probably had not expected. According to my mother,

> "The Jews were tricked by Soviet policies of nationality. In tsarist Russia, nationality did not exist but religion did and Jews thought they were oppressed because they practiced their religion. But time showed that that was not the case; even in tsarist Russia on the surface they were hated for their religion but underneath that there was always hatred because of their national identity. People would say that Jews were manipulative, stubborn, and greedy, none of which had anything to do with their religion."

The belief that the Jews were always a nationality underneath a surface of religion is very interesting. It indicates that after the Jewish national identity was established, it seemed to some Soviet Jews almost like it had always existed. Some Soviet Jews saw it as somehow deeper than religious identity. Religion was something that the Jews did, but national identity was something that the

Jews were. The route back to the old identity was closed.

Once the Soviet government had established a high degree of control over the Jews as a nationality, there was no longer any need to bother with the intelligentsia and meaningful cultural production. Therefore, after World War II, Stalin decided to systematically destroy Soviet Yiddish culture by abolishing its institutions and murdering its leaders. All Yiddish schools were closed, while Yiddish publications and theatrical productions were strongly discouraged.[25] There was the official campaign against rootless cosmopolitans, the arrest of Yiddish cultural figures such as writers and actors, and the infamous Doctors' Plot, where most of the accused were Jews. The murder of Mikhoels in 1948 was only the tip of the iceberg. Most major Jewish figures who did not die during World War II and the Holocaust were killed in the Great Purges of 1936-9 and the anti-Semitic purges of 1948-52.[26]

With the elimination of Jewish institutions, Jews transitioned from being members of a community to individual actors within Soviet society. What effect did this have on their identity? It led to their further immersion in Russian culture, the emptying of Jewish content from their identity, and their increased focus on their persecution as Jews as a substitute for a religious or cultural identity. What was once a physical, interactive community became an invisible, almost imagined community of people who never met as a group or shared any religious or cultural experiences but nevertheless felt connected in some way. For instance, my mother felt that her Jewish identity connected her to famous Jewish scientists and scholars: "My only solace was the existence of these famous and bright Jewish people who showed me that to be a Jew is not such a bad thing and that I was not alone."

Thus, in the years after the Purges, Jewish identity became externally defined and passive. The USSR officially recognized the Jews as a national group whose membership was inherited. Therefore, Soviet Jews did not believe one has to do anything to create or maintain a Jewish identity. It was considered an inescapable fact of life that is recorded in one's documents at birth. The passive identity is related to the absence of choice that came to be perceived by Jews after the destruction of Yiddish culture. "The state kept asking its citizens about their nationality, and they kept answering, over and over again—first according to their self-perception or self-interest and then according to their blood (whether they liked it or not)."[27] For later generations, the perception of choice was entirely destroyed. Jews were forced to repeatedly and passively affirm the label they had been given. When my mother wanted to register her son in a nursery or even get a library card, she

had to fill out a form and item number five always asked for her nationality. Because of the lack of choice, "western Jews have tended to see Soviet Jews as tragic subjects or repressed, silenced objects."[28] Shneer suggests that this impression is the result of viewing Soviet Jewish history through the lens of hindsight, which is colored by the Purges.[29]   This passive identity was all that was left to the Jews after the destruction of Yiddish culture. Jewish identity became a label lacking religious or cultural content. How could Soviet Jews be an "ethnocultural nation"[30] if they hardly knew any substantial Jewish culture? My mother told me, "I didn't know what Chanukah was, but I knew I was Jewish. I always knew I was different. The only holidays I knew were Passover and Yom Kippur. I didn't know that Jews should not mix meat and milk. I only knew they could not eat pork." How could such patchy, incomplete knowledge of Jewish traditions serve as a foundation for a national group? Did Soviet Jews really have anything in common other than ancestry?

There have been some attempts by scholars to prove that there actually was a significant amount of content in the seemingly empty identity. For instance, Shneer argues that Soviet Jewish culture could not possibly rid itself Jewish content because the cultural symbols, myths, and archetypes that were used to create the new ethnic identity already had Jewish meanings that could not be erased.[31] The Soviet state and the intelligentsia could not have created the new culture from nothing; they built it on a basis of Jewish life that already existed. However, this argument pertains mainly to the period of cultural production in the 1920s and 1930s. Jewish myths and archetypes were used in the literature and plays of this period, but they were not really perpetuated after these formats were destroyed.

Voronel also tries to find some communal elements that can be used to justify the existence of Jewish identity as more than an empty label. He points to "characteristic traits and inter-relational principles creating a psychological community" and to a "literary heritage."[32] Yet how many Soviet Jews really had an in-depth knowledge of Jewish literature? Their knowledge was limited to certain authors, such as Sholem Aleichem, while biblical and rabbinical literature was completely ignored.

That leaves the perception of certain distinguishing national traits, which my mother also mentioned. She said, "Although Jews lost many of their traditions, they tried to maintain certain national characteristic. For instance, in the upbringing of their children they always put education first. There were more bookish types among the Jews than among the population
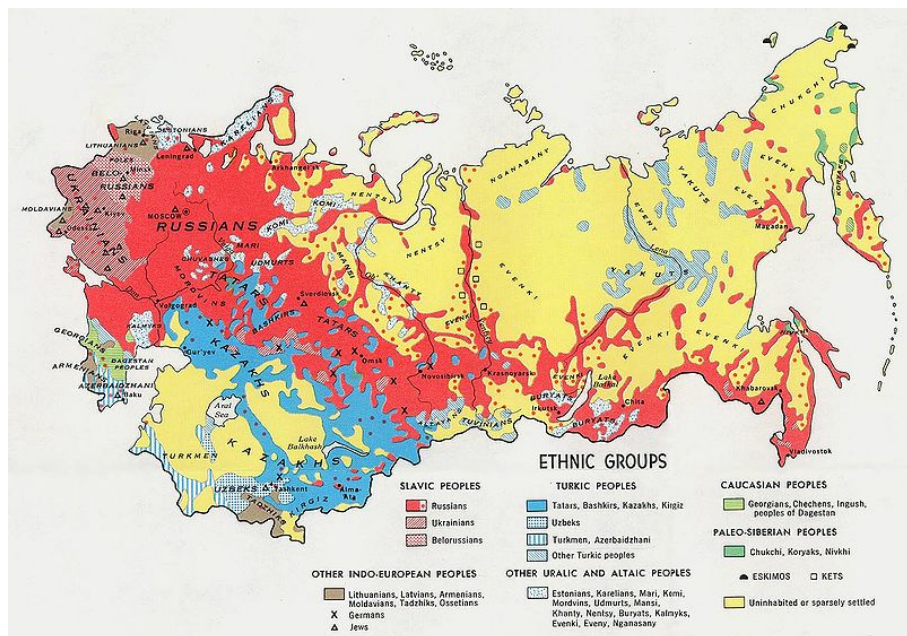
Map displaying the locations of different ethnic groups recognized in the Soviet Union in 1974

in general." While it is doubtful that such group tendencies are enough to maintain a cultural community, what is certain is that Jews nevertheless felt very strongly connected to their identity and to each other through a sense of common national origin and national destiny. "They are no longer a community of faith as they are one of fate."[33]

In spite of its lack of religious or cultural content, the identity proved durable and salient even after the disappearance of Yiddish, the national language. "There was a concerted effort on the part of the intelligentsia to make Yiddish the defining feature of Soviet Jewishness. After all, without language what would define Jews in a socialist, atheist, modern world?"[34] Shneer raises this question but does not answer it. His focus is on the rise of Yiddish as a cultural medium rather than on Soviet Jewish identity post-Yiddish culture, post-World War II, post-Purges. In the sober light of this later period, the one cohesive force that came to the forefront of Soviet Jewish identity was anti-Semitism. At a time when Soviet Jews had very few real characteristics to distinguish them from the general population, anti-Semitism filled that role and preserved their group consciousness.

Government policy regarding anti-Semitism changed dramatically over time. Initially, in the 1920s, the Communist Party disapproved of anti-Semitism and even took initiatives to combat it. Populist anti-Semitism was connected to a capitalistic way of thinking. However, after the Purges and WWII, the government's policies changed. The reasons for this complete reversal are unclear, though it was probably related to the creation of Israel as a Jewish state. Soviet officials discovered that "the Jews as a Soviet nationality were now an ethnic Diaspora potentially loyal to a hostile foreign state… presumed to be beholden to an external homeland and thus irredeemably alien."[35] The government no longer saw any reason to protect a group of people who were perceived essentially as foreigners.

Full assimilation became impossible for Jews because of official anti-Semitic campaigns.[36] Thus, the Jews acculturated without assimilating. They admired Russian culture, but could never feel that it fully belonged to them; it was seen as a culture created by, and for, another ethnic group. The most pervasive emotion associated with Jewish identity in the USSR was alienation. This led to a negative definition of identity that was based on what Jews were not, namely Russian, rather than what they were. For some Soviet Jews, identity confusion resulted from the conflict between their Russian cultural immersion and their Jewish national label. For instance, Soviet Jewish political activist Larisa Bogoraz wrote, "Unfortunately, I do not

feel like a Jew…I am accustomed to the color, smell, rustle of the Russian landscape, as I am to the Russian language, the rhythm of Russian poetry… And nevertheless, no, I am not Russian. I am a stranger today in this land."[37] Bogoraz later resolved this problem by converting to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Anti-Semitism and inescapable, meticulously documented nationality combined to make life difficult for Soviet Jews after WWII. For instance, various "affirmative action" programs were established that legitimized discrimination against Jews while favoring other ethnic minorities. "In some contexts, notably admission to higher education and application for certain types of employment, legal nationality significantly shaped life chances, both negatively (especially for Jews) and positively (for 'titular' nationalities in the non-Russian republics, who benefited from mainly tacit 'affirmative action' or preferential treatment policies)."[38]

Mandatory ethnic identification made it difficult for Jews to avoid discrimination, but is an ethnic Jewish identity inherently anti-Semitic? Not necessarily. The initial creation of this identity was not perceived that way. It divided the community and pitted modernity against tradition rather than anti-Semites against Jews. In the 1920s and 1930s, it was the Jewish intelligentsia rather than the Soviet government that conducted anti-Judaism campaigns. Members of the intelligentsia participated in the abolishment of traditional Jewish institutions such as synagogues and Jewish schools.[39] Proponents of the new identity were against religion and traditional ways of life, but they were not necessarily anti-Semites. Many of them were Jews themselves who wanted to perpetuate Jewish life in a different way.

However, Jewish ethnic identity later became a convenient form for perpetuating anti-Semitic stereotypes, and for destroying the religious and cultural content of Judaism. After the Holocaust, it was associated with Hitler and his particularly virulent form of racial anti-Semitism. Soviet Jews "may never have been to a synagogue, seen a menorah, heard Yiddish or Hebrew, tasted gefilte fish, or indeed met their grandparents. But they knew that they were Jews in the Soviet sense, which was also—in essence—the Nazi sense. They were Jews by blood."[40] From the Soviet point of view, the Holocaust confirmed that the Jews are a race or ethnic group. After all, Hitler exterminated Jews because of their family trees, not because they expressed religiosity. However, the association of Jewish ethnicity with Hitler discredits Soviet ethnic identity from the point of view of American Jews. They do not want to preserve an identity that was affirmed consistently by

anti-Semites. Why should Jews allow themselves to be defined ethnically by outsiders when they can define themselves religiously and culturally? On the other hand, when American Jews insist that Jewish immigrants from the former USSR abandon their ethnic Jewish identity and re-define themselves religiously, are they not asking these immigrants to let themselves be defined by others?

Anti-Semitism and mandatory national identification were enough to maintain Jewish identity in the Soviet Union even in the absence of religion, tradition, and culture. Does this mean that Soviet Jews need to be persecuted to know who they are? Can their identity persist in the absence of anti-Semitism and mandatory documentation? Soviet Jewish immigrants in the U.S. have shown that it can. Psychological studies of these immigrants have determined that when Jewish, Russian, and American identities are considered, the immigrants feel most strongly connected to the Jewish identity.[41] Soviet Jewish immigrants also indicated that it is important to them that their children identify as Jewish, even if they do not observe Jewish traditions.[42] They have pride in their identity, however "empty" it may be, and they want their children to perpetuate it. Self-identification is the most important aspect of Soviet Jewish identity in the U.S., which is ironic because in the USSR self-identification through choice was impossible.

Soviet immigrants have also preserved their own form of Jewish identity even in a context where they have the chance to redefine themselves. They continue to perceive the Jewish people as an ethnic group and do not consider religion essential to Jewish identity. In the same study cited above, "more than 93% of the participants mentioned nationality as a criterion [for considering themselves Jewish], and only 7% religion."[43] Many of the immigrants who identified as Jewish also indicated that they have no religion.[44] In general, their identity continues to have little religious, cultural, or traditional content, though some have become religious or at least enhanced their knowledge of Jewish traditions.

American Jews have had a difficult time accepting the legitimacy of Soviet Jewish ethnic identity. They often consider Soviet Jews, who are immersed in Russian culture, to be more Russian than Jewish. "Soviet Jews are referred to as 'Russians' by Americans in the United States…However, ironically, Soviet Jews were not and could not be considered 'Russian' in the former Soviet Union."[45] In the USSR, they were constantly reminded that they were Jews. In the US, they are often excluded from the Jewish community. These problems stem from the differences between the social construction

of Jewish identity in the Soviet Union and America. In the 1970s, during the first wave of Soviet Jewish immigration to the U.S., observant American Jews reached out to immigrants in an attempt to bring them back into the religious fold but they were largely unsuccessful. Few synagogues were able to attract the immigrants to join.[46] This led to feelings of disappointment and even resentment among American Jews towards the Soviets. "You could hear it on the streets, on the boardwalk, in the synagogues, in the stores: 'Why did we fight to bring them here? Why did they want to come here? They're not even Jews. They don't want to be Jews."[47] Soviet Jews do not understand what wanting to be a Jew means because wanting implies that they have a choice. They only understand being a Jew. Even those who wished at some point that they had been born Russian did not believe that this wish made them any less Jewish. Their identity is unquestionable and inescapable. It may be lacking in religious, cultural, and traditional content, but it has played such an omnipresent role in their lives that it should not be lightly dismissed. Besides, "passive identity can be transformed into active assertiveness, and some form can be filled with content."[48] If these immigrants are truly integrated into the Jewish community, it is likely that their identity will take on more religious and cultural elements rather than remaining solely national; it will eventually adapt itself to take into account factors other than Jewish ancestry and a common history of Anti-Semitism. There is a perception among American Jews that Soviet Jewish identity has been distorted by the USSR. This is undeniably true. It was transformed in accordance with the historical experience of Soviet Jews. This, however, does not make it less genuine than American Jewish identity, which has also been transformed. "Judaism has been enfeebled because its historic manifestations could not be squared with the dominant ideals of American society."[49] A new, modern Jewish identity has been created in the U.S., like in the Soviet Union, and in the course of its creation much Jewish culture has also been lost. In a way, American Jewish identity was also determined by others; it was shaped by the social pressure of acculturation exerted by the great American melting pot.

Like American and Western European Jewish identity, Soviet Jewish national identity is the product of historical processes resulting from interactions between Jews and non-Jews in the modern period. The redefinition of Jews as a national group was not entirely forced on them by the Soviet government; in many cases Jewish communities and their leaders welcomed it and contributed to its formation, especially in the early years of

Bolshevik rule that saw the creation of Soviet Yiddish culture. After World War II Yiddish culture declined, but it had been created within a national form that persisted while emptied of its religious and cultural Jewish content. The label of the Jews as a nationality became a pervasive and constant factor in the lives of Soviet Jews in the years after World War II. They knew very little about Jewish religion and culture, but they continued to be identified as Jews by nationality through their official documents.

The view of the Jewish people as a nationality that Soviet Jews subscribe to, may conflict with the perceptions of American Jews, many of whom emigrated from the same territory earlier and have never experienced the USSR. American Jews have a primarily religious Jewish identity, while many of the Soviet immigrants consider themselves Jews without a religion.[50] Confronted with both sets of categories, I struggled to determine whether the Jews are primarily a religion or a nation, but in reality they are not one or the other. Jewish identity is constructed and dynamic; it evolves through historical processes. Notions of Soviet Jewish ethnic identity as "not real" or "artificial" stem from a narrow approach to the question of identity. While it is true that the ethnic identity was created through historical circumstances, especially by Soviet nationality policy, what identity is there that was not somehow historically created? The creation of Soviet Jewish identity does not make it an illusion. To Soviet Jews, it is meaningful and legitimate.

There is no one solid Jewish identity running as an unbroken thread from antiquity to eternity. In this sense, the Jewish insistence on unchangeableness is a myth. It may be difficult to understand how such a changeable identity can be meaningful, but each version of Jewish identity is meaningful within the context of its own time and place. Ethnic Jewish identity made sense in the context of the USSR, though it is not in accordance with American Jewish experience. The situation of Soviet Jews developed differently from that of American Jews, but their identity is equally legitimate. It is possible to view the history of Soviet Jewish identity by emphasizing the earlier period of cultural production or the later decline and draining of content. The most remarkable aspect of Soviet Jewish identity, however, is its persistence. It has lasted through the transformations of the 1920s and 1930s, the era after the Purges, and even emigration out of the former USSR. The essential aspects of Soviet Jewish identity are its durability, its mutability, and its reality. The rest is commentary.

[1] Annelise Orleck, *The Soviet Jewish Americans* (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 2001), 23.

[2] Although the terms "national" and "ethnic" have distinct meanings in English, their meanings are very close to one another in Russian. Ethnic groups within the Soviet states were referred to as "nationalities", though they clearly did not constitute sovereign nation-states in the sense that is implied by the English meaning of the word. To bypass any confusion or controversy over differences between the two terms, they will be used interchangeably in this paper.

[3] Zvi Gitelman, "Jewish Nationality and Religion in the USSR and Eastern Europe" in *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics,* ed. Pedro Ramet (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1989), 59.

[4] Although the terms "national" and "ethnic" have distinct meanings in English, their meanings are very close to one another in Russian. Ethnic groups within the Soviet states were referred to as "nationalities", though they clearly did not constitute sovereign nation-states in the sense that is implied by the English meaning of the word. To bypass any confusion or controversy over differences between the two terms, they will be used interchangeably in this paper.

[5] Rogers Brubaker, "Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutionalist Account," *Theory and Society* 23.1 (1994): 49. JSTOR.

[6] Brubaker, "Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia," 52.

[7] Ibid., 53.

[8] Ibid., 54.

[9] David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918-1930* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 9.

[10] Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 246.

[11] Brubaker, "Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia," 49.

[12] Gitelman, "The Evolution of Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union," 64

[13] Ibid., 65

[14] Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918-1930*, 6.

[15] Slezkine. *The Jewish Century*, 248

[16] Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918-1930*, 10.

[17] Gitelman, "Jewish Nationality and Religion in the USSR and Eastern Europe," 65.

[18] Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918-1930*, 4.

[19] Ibid., 9.

[20] Ibid. 10.

[21] Ibid., 15.

[22] Slezkine. *The Jewish Century*, 247.

[23] Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918-1930*, 18.

[24] Aleksander Voronel, "The Social Pre-Conditions of the National Awakening of the Jews in the USSR," in *I Am a Jew: Essays on Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union*, ed. Viktor Yakhot. (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1973), 32-3.

[25] Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918-1930*, 13.

[26] Ibid., 2.

[27] Slezkine. *The Jewish Century*, 285.

[28] Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918-1930*, 4

[29] Ibid., 3.

[30] Brubaker, "Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia," 62.

[31] Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918-1930*, 3.

[32] Aleksander Voronel, "The Social Pre-Conditions of the National Awakening of the Jews in the USSR," in *I Am a Jew: Essays on Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union*, ed. Viktor Yakhot. (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1973), 33.

[33] Zvi Gitelman, "The Evolution of Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union," in *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*, ed. Yaacov Ro'i and Avi Beker (New York: New York UP, 1991), 7.

[34] Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918-1930*, 8.

[35] Slezkine. *The Jewish Century*, 297.

[36] Gitelman, "The Evolution of Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union," 14.

[37] Larisa Borogaz, "Do I Feel I Belong to the Jewish People?" in *I Am a Jew: Essays on Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union*, ed. Aleksander Voronel and Viktor Yakhot. (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1973), 63-4.

[38] Brubaker, "Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia," 53.

[39] Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918-1930*, 11.

[40] Slezkine. *The Jewish Century*, 286.

[41] Irena Persky and Dina Birman, "Ethnic Identity in Acculturation Research: A Study of Multiple Identities of Jewish Refugees From the Former Soviet Union." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 36 (2005): 2, doi: 10.1177/0022022105278542

[42] Ibid., 8.

[43] Irena Persky and Dina Birman, "Ethnic Identity in Acculturation Research," 8.

[44] Ibid., 4.

[45] Ibid., 4.

[46] Annelise Orleck, *The Soviet Jewish Americans* (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 2001), 97.

[47] Ibid., 97.

[48] Gitelman, "Jewish Nationality and Religion in the USSR and Eastern Europe," 69.

[49] Deborah D. Moore, *American Jewish Identity Politics* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2008), 253.

[50] Persky and Birman, "Ethnic Identity in Acculturation Research," 8.