

Jewish Life in the Soviet Union A Historical Overview

By
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Life for the Jew in Tsarist Russia was never particularly pleasant. Russia did not undergo any period which could remotely be called a "Golden Age of the Jews", as did Spain. There were never periods when Jews felt protected by a benevolent monarch who, at least, appreciated their importance to the national economy or their ability to contribute to the royal coffers. Rather, the history of the Jew in Tsarist Russia is one of oppression and repression.

All the Tsars, without exception, were rabid anti-Semites and oppressive despots, whose hatred for the Jew was matched only by their arrogance and debauchery. In regard to Jewish affairs, the only difference between one Tsar and the other was one of degree; some were terrible, others were horrible and none were good. Indeed, the word Tsar, in Hebrew, means "The Oppressor" and they surely lived up to this title.

Jews under the Tsars were subject to persecution, herded into pales of settlement, and denied the right to free movement, free trade and free access to services. They were victims of bloody and unprovoked pogroms and massacres which, literally, decimated their populations and brought them to abject poverty. Their rabbis were arrested and imprisoned on the most spurious charges. Small boys were kidnapped and forcibly drafted into military service with the intent of converting them to Christianity. Often, Jews were accused, without cause or justification, of the most shocking and outrageous crimes against humanity; crimes such as the terrible "Blood-libel", which raised its hoary head in Russia as late as תרע"ג-1913 during the Beilis affair and claimed that Jews murdered innocent Christian children to bake their blood into the Passover matzos; and it was in Russia that the infamous anti-Semitic forgery, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion", which proclaimed a Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world, was first published under official government sanction.

As early as the 1480s-ר"מ laws were passed restricting Jews from free movement throughout Russia, excluding them from various trades and restricting them from living in Moscow except by special license. From רצ"ג-1533 on, under the reign of Ivan the Terrible, waves of forced conversions swept through Russia. For example, when he conquered the district of Polotsk in 1563-ג"ש, three hundred local Jews were drowned in the river Dvina for refusing to convert to Christianity. By תפ"א-1721 the official doctrine of Tsarist Russia became one of open anti-Semitism. Jews were expelled from much of the Ukraine in תפ"ז-1727 and government policy became increasingly hostile to the Jewish people.

In תקנ"ג-1793 and תקנ"ה-1795 large portions of Poland were annexed by Imperial Russia and they suddenly found themselves with large Jewish populations. In order to keep Jews out of

Russia proper, a Pale of Settlement was established restricting Jews to Polish and Crimean Russia; movement in any part of Russia proper required a special government permit. By the mid and late 1800s, various policies were set into motion in an attempt to convert or assimilate the Jewish population. These included the forced conscription of little boys, who were kidnapped or, literally, ripped out of their mother's arms and sent to twenty-five years of military service. It was hoped that after years of alienation from Jewish influence these boys could be induced into accepting Christianity. Despite their tender age many chose death rather than conversion. The policy proved to be an overall failure and was eventually dropped.

In addition, working hand in hand with the secular Haskala movement, the Russian government set up a Jewish school system. This was touted as an act of benevolence on the part of the Imperial government, to "raise the educational and cultural level" of the Jewish people. However, in reality, it was nothing but a sinister plot to warp and undermine Torah True Judaism by watering down and subverting Torah learning and by belittling the value of Jewish observance to impressionable young minds. As known, Rabbi Shalom Dovber, the Lubavitcher Rebbe זצוק"ל זי"ע, fought valiantly, with great self-sacrifice and courage against these dangerous and subversive policies.

Beginning with the 1860s, Tsar Alexander II, a rabid anti-Semite, stepped up repressive government measures against the Jewish people. Under his rule Jews could not hire non-Jewish servants, were forbidden to own real estate and had their movements within Russia severely restricted. In 1881 a large-scale wave of anti-Jewish pogroms swept across Russia. This was ignited by the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in which propagandists falsely blamed the Jews for the assassination. Violent pogroms broke out in 166 towns, thousands of Jewish homes were destroyed and turned to rubble, many Jewish women were violently raped, Jews numbering in the tens of thousands perished at the hands of the marauding rioters and entire communities were reduced to extreme, subsistence-level poverty.

Instead of going after the perpetrators, the new Tsar, Alexander III, blamed the victims, accusing the Jews of being the guilty party and thus bringing the pogroms upon themselves. His response was to institute a new set of draconian laws designed to suppress the Jewish population even more. These were introduced on May 15, 1882 and were known as the May laws. They were supposed to be temporary measures; however, thirty years later they were still in force.

During his reign Tsar Alexander III escalated his anti-Jewish policies and started a venomous propaganda effort in an attempt to popularize anti-Semitism by portraying the Jewish people as "Christ-killers", oppressors of the Slavic Peoples and enemies of the state. Pogroms continued through 1884 with tacit governmental approval and outright police participation. During this period, Jewish living conditions had deteriorated to such a degree that the Chief Procurator of the Russian Orthodox Church, Konstantin Pobedonotsev, who was a close personal friend and adviser of Tsar Alexander III, declared that they expected, "One-third of Russian Jews to leave the country, one-third to convert to Christianity and one-third to starve to death."

Periodic outbursts of violence continued. From 1903 to 1906 a large wave of pogroms broke out leaving thousands of victims dead or wounded. Many of these pogroms were actually organized and supported by the "Okhranka", the Imperial secret Police; and the outbreak of the Communist revolution of 1917, with the ensuing civil war, brought about even

greater pogroms in which an estimated 250,000 Jews were murdered and more than 300,000 Jewish children were left orphaned. During the period of תרע"ז-1917 to תרע"ח-1918 there were 887 bloody pogroms in the Ukraine alone, not to mention countless other pogroms throughout Russia.

Nonetheless, despite the persecution and intolerance, Jewish life flourished in Tsarist Russia. During this period there always was a very high level of Jewish religious observance. Many hundreds of Jewish communities existed in Russia, each of which had synagogues, mikvahs, chadarim and batei Midrash. Some even had yeshivos of higher learning. There were shochemim who provided kosher meat, sofrim who wrote mezuzahs, tefillin and sifrei Torah and melamdim who taught the children Torah. There also were great Torah scholars who were steeped in Talmud study and gave expert opinion in Halacha. Some were world renowned Torah Giants who answered inquiries concerning Jewish law and wrote important seforim that are studied to this day.

Besides this, Russia was one of the great centers of the Chassidic movement. It was, specifically, in the Ukraine that Chassidus had its inception under its founder, Rabbi Yisroel Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov's successor, Rabbi Dovber, the Great Maggid, established his court in White Russia, in the town of Mezeritch. After his Passing, several of his students set up Chassidic courts throughout Russia. Most notable of these was the Chassidic dynasty of Chabad, the intellectual branch of Chassidism.

Founded by Rabbi Schneur Zalman, the town of Liozna became its first center. Later, it was moved to Liadi. When Rabbi Dovber succeeded his father and took the mantle of leadership, he moved to the town of Lubavitch which became the new center of Chabad Chassidism. During the time of his successor, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, popularly known as the "Tzemach Tzedek", Chabad grew to a following of, literally, hundreds of thousands of devoted Chassidim.

Throughout this period, the Chabad Rebbes always stood up to the Russian authorities with complete self-sacrifice in the service of the Jewish people. Besides founding Jewish agricultural communities, charitable organizations and institutions of higher Torah learning, such as Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim, the Chabad Rebbes courageously represented their Jewish brethren to the Imperial government and constantly fought on behalf of Jewish rights and religious freedom. It was because of these activities that the Chabad Rebbes often found themselves to be especially targeted for persecution and were sometimes arrested and imprisoned.

After hundreds of years of persecution at the hands of the Tsars it is no wonder that when Socialism, with its utopian promise of a secular heaven upon earth, spread its influence across Russia, it found fertile ground in the minds and hearts of many young Jews who, unwittingly, were drawn to its intoxicating spirit of equality for all. Its pledge to uproot the entrenched tyranny of a decadent and arrogant nobility that for centuries had paid for its excesses by riding on the backs of the poor working class, and replacing it with an egalitarian government of the common man; a government in which all class distinctions would be eliminated and every man, be he Jew or Gentile, would call his fellow citizen "comrade", struck a resonant cord in their hearts.

Though the great majority of the Jewish masses remained loyal citizens of the crown and were generally apolitical, a significant number of Jews cast their lot with Bolshevism and tied their destiny to its success. The groundwork for this had been laid years before with the advent and

infiltration of the Haskala movement into Russia. This was a movement which sought to secularize the Jewish experience and divorce it from its roots in Torah observance. By the time of the Communist revolution it had already succeeded in making great inroads into Jewish life, especially through the education of the youth, and was steadily gnawing away at the very foundations and institutions of Torah True Judaism.

For those young Jews who had been raised in its ideology it required but a small step to complete the divorce and replace Judaism altogether, with the new, atheistic “religion” of Communism, which promised redemption in the here and now, rather than in the world to come. Its appeal was so powerful that not only the secularized youth, but even some who had been born and raised in devoutly Orthodox and even Chasidic homes were lured by its siren call.

Many of them became such ardent supporters that they threw themselves into the revolution with the fanatic zeal of true believers. Some, such as Lev Dovidovitch Bronstein (Leon Trotsky), who led the Red Armies into victory and after Lenin’s demise became Stalin’s chief rival in a power grab for government control, reached very high in the ranks of the Communist party. The number of Jews in the Bolshevik party was disproportionately larger than their numbers in the general population. This was especially true of the party leadership, which had a very high Jewish representation. This was so much so, that Jews comprised a majority in the Communist Central Committee, even outnumbering ethnic Russians. Jewish membership in the rival Menshevik party was even greater.

After the successful execution of the Bolshevik revolution, Jewish organs of the Communist party were formed with the express purpose of uprooting and eradicating every last vestige of Judaism in the Soviet Union. Most notable of these was the infamous Yevsektzia. In raising the banner of atheism, the Soviets had declared war against all religion, but its war against Judaism was particularly vicious and pernicious. This was due to several causes:

Firstly, after hundreds of years of Christian influence, anti-Semitism was already firmly ingrained in the Russian psyche. Thus, it was no great feat to sublimate it to the Soviet cause by turning it against Judaism in the name of Communism.

Secondly, by appointing Jewish Communists to the task of obliterating Judaism, the Soviets unleashed their greatest weapon against it, for there is no greater hatred than self-hatred and there is no greater self-hater than a Jew who hates himself. The hatred of the Jewish Communists toward their fellow Jews was particularly potent and virulent, for ultimately, it was rooted in their own self-loathing. They went to greater lengths and expended greater effort in incriminating their fellow Jews at every opportunity than any non-Jew would have done.

Moreover, they did this not only because they despised Judaism, but also in the hope of pleasing their Soviet masters. Thus, they rose within the Communist party by stepping over the bodies of their fellow Jews. Little did they realize that with the takeover of the Government by Stalin only a few years later, they, the Jewish members of the Communist party, would be amongst the first to lose their heads, in what was destined to be called, “The Great Purge.”

Thirdly, after thousands of years of self-sacrifice against adversity, Jews were accustomed to clinging to their religion even under the most extreme conditions of duress. Thus, Jews of faith within the Soviet Union clung to their ancient customs, beliefs and practices with far greater

tenacity and determination than their non-Jewish counterparts. Because they were a harder nut to crack, this necessitated greater efforts on the part of the Soviets in their war against Judaism.

If life as a Jew was difficult during the time of the Tsars it became unimaginably more difficult with the Communist takeover. Jewish schools and yeshivas were shut down. Teaching religion to children became a crime of subversion and counterrevolution, punishable by long years of imprisonment in the harsh labor camps of Siberia. Most synagogues were confiscated and turned into factories or warehouses, kosher slaughterhouses were shut down making it extremely difficult to keep kosher, mikvahs were filled in and paved over, Hebrew books were prohibited from being published and it became increasingly difficult to appear in public as a devout Jew. Those who did so were subject to losing their jobs and being reduced to abject poverty.

All these measures were brought about at the insistence of the Yevseksia, the Jewish organ of the Communist party. They were specifically designed to destroy Judaism by making it impossible for Jews to keep mitzvos. Because of this, in the early years, before the iron gates of the Soviet Union were completely sealed off to emigration, many Jews, including most of the learned rabbis and Torah Giants, fled to the freedom of the west.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitschak Shneerson זצוק"ל זי"ע, remained alone, as the sole pillar of Torah True Judaism in the Soviet Union. He made it his sworn mission to uphold religious observance, at all costs, by waging battle against the mighty Soviet regime which was increasingly spreading its tentacles to every corner of society, gripping the Jewish people in a powerful stranglehold.

The Rebbe called upon his Chassidim to stand up, with courage, determination and fortitude, against the Soviet threat, by upholding Torah True Judaism at all costs, even at the cost of death. In order to save Judaism, he set up an underground network of secret Torah institutions throughout Russia. Clandestine chadarim, yeshivas, minyanim and mikvahs were organized in Jewish enclaves throughout the Soviet Union. This included kosher slaughter and circumcision, which were conducted under a shroud of secrecy.

Many of these institutions, such as the yeshivas and chadarim, constantly changed location to avoid detection. Nonetheless, they would sometimes be found out and the teachers would summarily be arrested and dragged off to prison. Some of them were executed for counterrevolutionary activity and others were sentenced to years of hard labor in the Soviet Gulag. However, incredibly, each time a teacher was arrested another Chasid would step up and volunteer to take his place. This fact is a testament to the complete devotion, heroism and self-sacrifice of Chabad Chasidim who lived through those nightmarish years. It was their self-sacrifice that kept the flame of Yiddishkeit alive and illuminated the darkness of the Soviet landscape.

Matters came to a head when in תרפ"ז-1927 the Lubavitcher Rebbe himself was arrested, sentenced to death and kept in solitary confinement in the infamous Spalerno prison, in Leningrad, on trumped up charges of treason and counterrevolutionary activities. Courageously, he stubbornly stood his ground and refused to cooperate with the authorities in any way whatsoever. Under heavy international pressure, especially from president Herbert Hoover of the United States, the Soviets first reduced the Rebbe's sentence to internal exile in Kostroma, in the Urals, and finally, on the 12th day of the Jewish month of Tammuz of that year, he was released

and permitted to leave the country. The 12th of Tammuz is celebrated by Chabad Chassidim as a day of redemption to this day.

He initially settled in Riga, Latvia and later in Warsaw, Poland. Even in exile, the Rebbe did not reduce his activities on behalf of Soviet Jewry. He continued to direct his underground institutions from afar with even greater zeal and vigor and he did everything in his power to raise the consciousness of Jews in the west regarding the plight of their Russian brethren. Even when he was saved from the jaws of the Nazi holocaust and arrived on the shores of America in ת"ש-1940, he did not forget his Chassidim in Russia and continued to work tirelessly on their behalf from America.

Lenin died in תרפ"ד-1924. In late תרפ"ז-1927, after a protracted struggle with Leon Trotsky and his wing of the Communist party, Josef Stalin prevailed and took over the reins of government. Thus began one of the most terrifying and oppressive periods in human history. The gates of emigration slammed shut and the entire Soviet Union, the largest country in the world, was transformed into a vast, inescapable, prison camp ruled by the iron fist of fear and suspicion. No one was safe from its paranoid fury, as even the staunchest, most loyal and devoted Communists found themselves accused of high treason and crimes against the state.

The Jewish members of the Communist party, especially the members of the Communist Central Committee, the Politburo and the Yevseksia, suddenly found themselves in a very precarious position. They were amongst the first to be rounded up and murdered, primarily because of suspicion that they supported Trotsky. Trotsky himself fled the country and spent the rest of his life moving from country to country as a hunted man. Finally in ת"ש-1940, Stalin's henchmen caught up with him in Mexico City, and murdered him, execution style, by crushing his skull with an ice-pick.

Under Stalin, the Soviet Union became a totalitarian society driven by fear, intimidation and paranoia. Everything and anything was controlled by the government and even the slightest independent act could be construed as an act against the collective state. Any wrong move, even a wrong word, could land a person in the vast Soviet Gulag, where an estimated 30 million people perished under the harshest conditions of slave labor and severe deprivation.

Throughout the Soviet Union it became almost impossible to keep any semblance of Judaism. Any act of Jewish observance required heroic courage and unflinching faith. Informers were everywhere and riddled all walks of society, from the highest echelons of the Communist party to the lowest common workers. No one was safe from prying eyes or curious ears and no one, not even one's own children, could be trusted.

By law all children were to attend public schools where they were taught about the progressiveness of Socialism and the backwardness of religion. Children were brainwashed by their teachers to inform on their own parents at any sign of religious observance. This made it almost impossible to transmit Torah values to one's own children or even to observe it oneself.

The result was several generations of Jews who not only were totally devoid of any knowledge of Judaism, but who suckled the poisonous milk of atheism from their public school teachers. With the passage of time, the older generation, which still remembered the Jewish practices of their youth, passed away, to be replaced by G-dless generations of Jews who had no knowledge

or understanding of their Jewish roots. Thus, the Soviet system, literally, sucked the Judaism out of the Jew, until all that remained was simply that he was identified as a Jew.

Only Chabad, with its underground religious network of Chassidim, who were willing to risk their lives to teach Torah, managed to keep the eternal flame of Torah True Judaism alive. Astonishingly, even in the stifling and repressive atmosphere of Stalinist Russia, through unwavering faith, dedication and self-sacrifice, Chabad Chassidim managed to raise their youth to be observant and knowledgeable Jews, whose enthusiasm for Torah and mitzvos was equaled only by their mesiras nefesh for it.

During the 1970's and 80's , I, myself, had the great honor and privilege of meeting many young Chassidic men, newly arrived from Soviet Russia (**before** the fall of the Communist regime), who were steeped in the knowledge of Torah and who lived Chassidus with every breath of their lungs and every beat of their hearts. These young rabbis went on to become some of the most enthusiastic and active shluchim of the Rebbe, and have been instrumental in influencing and inspiring countless Jews to return to their spiritual roots and become Torah observant Jews.

They are living proof of the incredible faith, dedication, self-sacrifice, bravery and sheer heroism of their parents, who lived through the horrors of the Stalin years and who stood straight and proud, even under the most difficult conditions, with unflinching dedication and loyalty to Torah and mitzvos.

Ultimately, they prevailed against incredible odds and through their courage and self-sacrifice, demonstrated the eternity of Torah and Yiddishkeit. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, is no more. Thankfully, it is a thing of the past, a fading memory relegated to the ash-heap of history.

However, today, dozens and dozens of Chabad houses are springing up in every corner of the former Soviet Union where Jews may be found, spreading the light and warmth of Torah and Chassidus to Russian Jewry and bringing them back to our Father in heaven. These Chabad houses are, literally, bringing about a Jewish renaissance in the former Soviet Union. The brave men and women who lived through the Stalin years lay the groundwork for this renaissance. Their lives are a shining example of hope and inspiration to all of us. May their memory be a blessing for many generations to come.