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Reform, Repression, and Revolution

December 9, 2025

2,390 words

Suppression and Emigration: Jewish Identity and Departure in Soviet Ukraine

After World War II, Ukraine became home to one of the largest remaining Jewish populations in the Soviet Union,¹ even though the Holocaust and earlier Soviet repression had already devastated Jewish communities there. In the decades that followed World War II, Jews in Ukraine lived under a government that restricted religious practice, censored Jewish cultural life, and treated Jewish identity as politically suspicious. From 1945 to 1991, Soviet and Ukrainian policies repressed Jewish identity while also blocking emigration, making large-scale departure impossible despite the persistent discrimination. Only after the 1967 revival of Jewish national consciousness, the rise of the refusenik movement, international pressure, and Gorbachev-era reforms did Jews gain both the ability to leave and the necessary collective identity motivating them to do so. Thus, state policies shaped not only the repression of Jewish life in Ukraine but also the delayed timing and eventual scale of Jewish emigration.

Jews in Ukraine pre-1945:

¹ Magosci et al., *Jews and Ukrainians: a Millennium of Co-Existence* (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 72.

The Holocaust is foundational to the mentality of post-war Ukrainian Jews. German occupation of Ukraine wiped out masses of Jews in what is called the “Holocaust by bullets.” The majority of these deaths were in pogroms or mass shootings, not in the more publicized concentration camp architecture.² One of the most famous examples happened in Kyiv, when Nazi authorities ordered Jews of all ages and genders to report to the Babyn Yar ravine. They were lined up at the edge of the ravine, and then machine gunned down. 34,000 were killed in the first phase alone.³ In 1942, an estimated 350,000 Jews from central and eastern Ukraine were killed.⁴ In Western Ukraine, an estimated 530,000 Jews were deported and murdered at various surrounding concentration camps.⁵ The Ukrainian Jewish population and infrastructure was devastated by 1945. The survivors had lost their friends, family, personal belongings and wealth, and even the right to grieve and mark the pogrom sites. This context is essential for understanding the postwar period: Soviet policies after 1945 did not suppress a flourishing community but instead intensified pressures on a population already struggling to preserve its identity.

Stalinist Repression (1945-1953):

After 1945, Jewish life in Ukraine entered a new phase of repression under Stalin, as the Soviet state treated Jewish identity as politically suspicious while making emigration physically impossible. Ukrainian Jewish survivors reentered a society devastated by war and genocide, expecting support but encountering hostility. The Soviet government discouraged open mourning

² Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 93.

³ Magosci et al., *Jews and Ukrainians: a Millennium of Co-Existence*, 72.

⁴ Magosci et al., *Jews and Ukrainians: a Millennium of Co-Existence*, 73.

⁵ Ibid.

and prohibited memorials specific to Jewish suffering. Babyn Yar and other massacre sites were framed as general “Soviet civilian” tragedies. Yuli Kosharovsky, a leader of the Jewish Refusenik movement, wrote that “the silence about Jewish victims at Babii Yar... became emblematic of a taboo on Jewish topics...”⁶ Ukraine harshly imposed silence about anti-Jewish violence. This created deep psychological distress and a sense that Jewish memory and identity were unsafe inside the USSR.

The climate of fear surrounding Jewish life in Ukraine reached its peak with the 1952–53 Doctor’s Plot, when Soviet authorities accused a group of predominantly Jewish doctors of conspiring to poison high-ranking officials. Newspapers across the Soviet republics, including Ukraine, portrayed the doctors as traitors whose “Zionist” loyalties made them enemies of the state. In Kyiv, Odessa, and Kharkiv, Jewish physicians were interrogated, dismissed from their posts, or arrested on false charges.⁷ Many Soviet Jews believed that a mass deportation to Siberia was imminent. Scholars debate whether Stalin was actually planning to deport the Jews to Siberian camps, but the fact that so many Jews believed it could happen based on the social climate shows the level of antisemitism in Soviet society.⁸ The antisemitism from the Doctor’s Plot trickled down into all areas of life for Jews, as they were nicknamed “poisoners” in classrooms and on the streets.⁹ The government encouraged this, publishing in their newspaper, *Pravda*, that “the Soviet people wrathfully and indignantly condemn the criminal band of

⁶ Kosharovskii, Hoffman, and Komaromi, *We Are Jews Again: Jewish Activism in the Soviet Union* (Syracuse University Press, 2017), 27.

⁷ Zvi Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence, Second Expanded Edition: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present* (Indiana University Press, 2001), 239.

⁸ David Brandenberger, “Stalin’s Last Crime? Recent Scholarship on Postwar Soviet Antisemitism and the Doctor’s Plot,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 1, 2005, 204.

⁹ Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence, Second Expanded Edition: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present*, 239.

murderers and their foreign masters.”¹⁰ For Ukrainian Jews, the Doctor’s Plot confirmed that their lives and professions were precarious under Soviet rule, deepening their desire to leave.

Khrushchev Era (1953-1964):

Although Stalin’s death in 1953 ended the most extreme period of state-sponsored antisemitism, the Khrushchev era did not open the borders or grant Ukrainian Jews meaningful cultural freedom. Instead, de-Stalinization brought a partial thaw in repression but not the political or ideological conditions that would enable Jewish emigration. Jewish religion and culture was still not permitted. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency, an international Jewish newspaper, wrote in 1959 that “numerous synagogues have been closed by local Soviet authorities in various parts of the USSR, primarily in the Ukraine...”¹¹ It reported on the continued stifling of Jews’ cultural lives, with an anecdote about a policeman confiscating crackers from a Jewish family on Passover and telling them: ““You are eating Russian bread but praying for Israel.””¹² Even while privately eating crackers in their own home, Jewish families were being surveilled and punished by law enforcement.

Babyn Yar remained marked as a “Soviet citizens” memorial, and the government continued to block any explicitly Jewish commemorations. Ukrainian Jews experienced profound alienation from the state narrative of the war since writers, poets, and activists who tried to discuss Jewish-specific suffering were censored or punished. However, later in this period, one notable Soviet poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, published a poem about Babyn Yar. He had already been expelled from most Soviet institutes and valued the story of Babyn Yar enough

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Moscow Intensifies Drive against Jewish Religion; Closes Synagogues,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, May 22, 1959, <https://www.jta.org/archive/moscow-intensifies-drive-against-jewish-religion-closes-synagogues>

¹² Ibid.

to risk additional punishment. When he visited Babyn Yar, he had known that there was no monument, but “was expecting to see some sign of respect. But what [he] saw was absolutely terrible – there were lots of trucks and they were unloading stinking garbage on the tens of thousands of people who were killed.”¹³ This demonstrates the level of callousness towards Jewish grave sites from the Holocaust, and how much of a hot-button topic this remained.

Brezhnev Era Turning Point (1964-1985):

The Brezhnev era was a major turning point for Jews in Ukraine. During these years, Jewish identity grew stronger at the same time that the Soviet government tried harder to suppress it. A key moment came in 1967 during the Six-Day War. Israel’s quick victory surprised the world and inspired many Soviet Jews, including those in Ukraine. For young Jews raised in a mostly secular Soviet environment, the war created a new sense of pride and connection to Israel. It helped them imagine themselves as part of a global Jewish community. Refusenik activist Natan Sharansky wrote that the Six-Day War made him realize that “personal freedom wasn’t something you could achieve through assimilation. It was available only by reclaiming your historical roots.”¹⁴ Soviet Jews started to form rebellious attitudes, and the Soviet government reacted with fear and anger. It launched harsh anti-Zionist campaigns, claiming that Zionism was a dangerous and anti-Soviet ideology. Instead of weakening Jewish identity, these campaigns had the opposite effect. They made Jews more aware of their heritage and pushed them to come together in small, secret communities.

By the 1970s, many Ukrainian Jews wanted to leave the Soviet Union. Jews faced workplace discrimination and were often blocked from promotions. Universities limited how

¹³ “Babi Yar Massacre: Poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko Recollects,” BBC News, September 29, 2011

¹⁴ Natan Sharansky and Stefani Hoffman, *Fear No Evil* (Random House, 1988), XIV.

many Jewish students could be admitted, especially in fields like engineering, math, or foreign studies. The KGB added even more pressure by watching Jewish families, questioning activists, and following anyone who seemed interested in Israel. The surveillance was especially intense in cities such as Kyiv, Odessa, and Lviv. Despite the risks, a quiet cultural revival began. People met in private homes to learn Hebrew, study Jewish history, and share books or music from Israel. These small gatherings helped Jews feel connected to each other and to Jewish communities around the world.

However, it was still extremely hard for Ukrainian Jews to leave the country. Soviet officials denied most exit visa applications. Jews who applied were often punished. Some lost their jobs, and others were interrogated or closely watched. These individuals became known as “refuseniks.” Many Ukrainian refuseniks actively spread information about their situation, which drew the attention of journalists and Jewish organizations in the West. Their stories helped create international pressure on the Soviet Union. In 1974, the United States passed the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which linked trade benefits to Soviet emigration policies. This created occasional openings when the Soviet government allowed more Jews to leave, followed by periods when it shut down emigration again. For the first time, Jewish identity, the desire to emigrate, and international support came together. But even with these forces in place, the Soviet state still kept tight control, and truly large-scale emigration would not occur until the Gorbachev era in the late 1980s.

Gorbachev Era (1985-1991):

The reforms introduced by Gorbachev in the mid-1980s transformed the conditions of Jewish life in Ukraine. *Glasnost* and *perestroika* weakened the power of the Soviet state, reduced censorship, and encouraged public discussion of topics that had long been forbidden. As restrictions on speech were lifted, Jewish cultural life was able to exist more publicly.

Changes in emigration policy soon followed the political reforms of this era. Between 1987 and 1991, exit restrictions loosened and new laws gradually legalized the right to emigrate. Former refuseniks who had waited for years were suddenly able to get visas. Gorbachev caved to the pressures from the West. At the same time, powerful forces inside Ukraine pushed many Jews to consider leaving. The economy was collapsing, producing shortages, unemployment, and a rapid decline in living conditions. Political instability grew as the Soviet Union weakened. For Sasha Feldman, who was born in & grew up in Rovno, a Western Ukrainian town, Chernobyl was the breaking point.¹⁵ After Chernobyl, her parents “were terrified. Everyone was terrified there.”¹⁶ While Ukraine was already not an ideal place to live, Chernobyl settled the Feldman family’s mind that they had to get the family out once Sasha graduated high school.

The living conditions in the USSR became intolerable for many Soviet Jews, and emigration surged. Borders were opening just as Jewish identity was being rebuilt and the Soviet state was falling apart. International networks (especially Jewish aid organizations in the United States and Israel) helped with visas, travel, and resettlement. For the first time, the desire to leave and the ability to leave existed at the same moment.

However, the destination of the emigration wave shifted throughout the period. In the 80s, 72 percent of all Jews emigrating from the Soviet Union preferred the United States as their

¹⁵ A pseudonym has been used to protect the participant’s privacy.

¹⁶ Dina Goldman, Interview with Sasha Feldman, 2025.

destination and only 26 percent of them preferred Israel.¹⁷ However, in the 1990s, Israel pressured the United States to redirect the flow of immigrants to them.¹⁸ The United States was happy to agree, since they wanted less Eastern European Jewish immigrants anyway, and stopped accepting them as refugees.¹⁹ After this, 70 percent of all Jews emigrating from the Soviet Union chose to immigrate to Israel.²⁰ This shift in US policy affected the Feldman family directly. They had been planning to immigrate to the United States and meet up with a relative who had made it there in the Brezhnev Era, but in the couple of years that they waited for Feldman to graduate high school, the option to immigrate to the United States shut down. Israel became their only viable option. Even though it was an extremely challenging process to make it there and to adjust to the new society, Feldman today says that she would “return to Israel any moment. Israel is [her] home.”²¹

Exception to the Immigration Wave:

Although hundreds of thousands of Jews left Ukraine in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years, many others stayed behind. These were mainly older Jews whose suppressed Jewish identities became deeply tied to their local lives.²² For them, Jewish life continued through habits of speech, shared memories, neighborly familiarity, and local traditions. These were not easily transferable to Israel or the United States. Feldman commented in her interview that she “was sure that if [they] stayed in the Soviet Union one more generation, there would be

¹⁷Magosci et al., *Jews and Ukrainians: a Millennium of Co-Existence*, 240.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Dina Goldman, Interview with Sasha Feldman, 2025.

²² Jeffrey Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl: Small-Town Jewish Life in Soviet Ukraine*, (Indiana University Press, 2013).

zero Jewishness left in [them].”²³ To keep the next generation safe, Soviet Jewish parents suppressed their own Judaism and tried to make their children as Soviet as possible. This resulted in a kind of Judaism that would not have easily assimilated into Israeli or American Jewish communities. Feldman only learned the words “matzah” (Jewish ritual flatbread) and “Holocaust” once arriving in Israel.²⁴

Many Jews who stayed did so because they believed they were too old to begin again, because they lacked family abroad, or because they feared the cultural and linguistic challenges of migration. After 1991, those who remained became the core of the new Jewish community revival.²⁵ They joined reopened synagogues, attended cultural programs, and rebuilt community life with outside assistance. The Ukrainian Jewish community was eviscerated by the Holocaust, then eviscerated again by the massive wave of emigration, but still exists quietly in urban centers and the remains of what used to be shtetls (small Yiddish towns).

Conclusion:

The timing of Jewish emigration from Ukraine was shaped primarily by Soviet and Ukrainian state policies. From the late 1940s through the 1960s, repression and sealed borders prevented Jews from leaving even as discrimination made many want to go. These same policies unintentionally strengthened Jewish identity, especially after the Six Day War and the rise of Soviet anti-Zionist campaigns. By the 1970s, international attention to refuseniks and pressure from Western governments made Jewish emigration a political issue the USSR had to manage, though it still tried to control the flow tightly. In the late 1980s, the system finally weakened.

²³ Dina Goldman, Interview with Sasha Feldman, 2025.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Jeffrey Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, 2013.

Glasnost and perestroika, economic crisis, and the collapse of Soviet authority removed the state's ability to block departures. For the first time, Jewish identity, the desire to emigrate, and the legal ability to leave aligned, producing a massive emigration wave. Feldman commented that in her last visit to Israel, in the summer of 2025, she heard "more Russian and Ukrainian being spoken in Tel Aviv than [she] had ever heard before." Ultimately, the Soviet attempts to suppress Judaism and Zionism out of existence resulted in a large, powerful wave of passionate Jews that reshaped the international Jewish community. This history exposes a core Soviet contradiction: the state tried both to suppress Jewish life and to prevent Jews from escaping that suppression, and counterintuitively these efforts resulted in reigniting the spirit of the Jewish community. The wave of Ukrainian & Soviet Jews to Israel fundamentally shaped Israel's history and its modern culture.

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