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West Hollywood’s “Little Russia”: An Inquiry into Cultural Policy, Gentrification, and the Russian-Jewish Immigrant Community

1. Introduction

The Russian community of Los Angeles is an enormous, ever-evolving mix of people, a large number of whom identify as Jewish. They often reside in diasporic pockets of the broader Angeleno landscape such as “Little Russia” in West Hollywood. The neighborhood is dotted with Russian-language delis and bookstores, and the community center in Plummer Park has been a long-standing hub of Russian-Jewish immigrant life.¹ The Russian-speaking community of West Hollywood was initially established by a small number of refugees who came to Los Angeles during the Russian Revolution and has been augmented many times over the past century.² Most of the current Russian-Jewish population in West Hollywood is of the third and fourth waves of immigration, which occurred in the second half of the twentieth century.³ Many of these immigrants left the Soviet Union because of cultural and institutional anti-Semitism.⁴

Soviet Jews immigrated to the United States in large numbers, favoring this country because of its navigable immigration policies and pre-established Jewish populations. Although the USSR allowed many Soviet Jews to emigrate after World War II, some were denied emigration and were refused the right to work, earning the label “refuseniks” as a result.⁵ In the United States,

¹ See Simon, 2.
² The first influxes of Russian-Jewish immigration to the United States began in the 1870s and continued until the 1920s, when, after over two millions Jews arrived in America from Eastern Europe, immigration quota acts stemmed this flow.
³ The third wave of Russian-Jewish immigration occurred primarily during the 1970s and 1980s, while the fourth wave occurred during and after perestroika.
⁴ See Gornberg, Herscher, Chyet, and Gisser, 2–20.
⁵ See Kabakchi and Doyle, 277.
Jews launched efforts to expose the plight of refuseniks and to help them emigrate and settle among established communities.⁶

The legacy and offspring of these immigrants live on today in Los Angeles’s Little Russia. The cultural landscape of this Russian-Jewish-American immigrant community, however, is shifting; its population is steadily decreasing as its median age grows, a situation worsened by gentrification. Gentrification is a trend in urban districts that results in increased property values as wealthier populations arrive and settle, displacing lower-income populations.⁷ These trends may foreshadow the disintegration of this diasporic community. Researchers such as Sneja Gunew, Boris Dralyuk, and Vera Kishinevsky have identified how socio-economic changes in a new homeland affect immigrants, but none have focused on the effects of U.S. cultural policy on a specific Russian-Jewish population.

This paper examines the destabilizing effects of gentrification on the Russian neighborhood and culture of West Hollywood and the ways in which this process specifically affects the Jewish segment of that population. It will also examine how the U.S. government’s past and current approaches to minority immigrant populations continue to exacerbate Russian-Jewish immigrants’ difficulties during the adaptation process.

2. U.S. Theoretical Approaches to Immigration: The Roots of Gentrification

Although this paper argues that gentrification and its root cause, multiculturalism, work to decentralize immigrant enclave culture, a distinction must be drawn between these processes and the natural process of acculturation. In order to successfully adapt to a new culture, immigrants must become acculturated—that is, “communicatively competent in a culture [they] have not been

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⁶ See Feingold, 22.
⁷ See Lees, Slater, and Wyly, 23.
This process cannot take place while gentrification is destabilizing minority immigrant culture. Various researchers have posited that acculturation forces immigrants to step away and distance themselves from their enculturation, or “the learning of [their] own culture as [they were] brought up,” and begin the process of deculturation, “unlearning [their] original culture, leaving behind its patterns when [they] move to a new culture.”

By promoting and celebrating their home cultures, immigrant enclaves alleviate the physiological trauma that can accompany deculturation. In Little Russia, Santa Monica Boulevard has for decades been lined with Russian-owned stores catering to the community. Many have recently closed, however, replaced by English-language stores catering to a new population of gentrifiers—a typical manifestation of this process. Enclaves are invaluable to new immigrants, especially those with little to no language skills or ties to their new country, as they provide a social and cultural framework that addresses their specialized needs.

In an attempt to force acculturation, the U.S. government adopted the socio-cultural approach of assimilation in response to an enormous increase in immigration during and after the 1890s. This process was once accepted as the goal for all immigrants, but after much critical backlash this theory lost its relevance. Anti-assimilation criticism claims that this approach results in an erasure of all signs of the immigrants’ initial ethnic origins: “Assimilation simultaneously obfuscates already present realities of difference and similarity.”

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8 Hall, 270.
9 Ibid., 270–75.
10 See Smith and LeFaivre.
12 See Barth, ii–xii.
13 Ibid., 20–176.
14 Harris, xii.
there is no real, defined end-point of assimilation, thereby forcing immigrants to constantly strive to attain the “highest” level of assimilation—an unfixed, unattainable target.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the U.S. government began to embrace multiculturalist ideals as a tool to correct earlier, failed strategies of assimilation.15 This model attempts to alleviate the struggles of minority cultures by assuming that all cultures within a certain nation are equal and must be treated as such. This concept, however, disregards the presence of the nation’s “dominant culture,” a term that describes the established language, religion, values, rituals, and social customs of that nation. These traits are often the norm for the society as a whole, as is the case in the United States, where the dominant culture is synonymous with white, Anglo-Saxon culture.16 While all immigrant groups are different, minority immigrant communities must “undergo cultural transformation to assume some characteristics and identification with the dominant culture and institutions” in order to survive and adapt.17

Multiculturalism may be viewed as a “governmental strategy” that “serves to manage the nation’s minority immigrants.”18 By not acknowledging the dominant culture’s role in society, multiculturalism equates the societal status of a given minority culture with the status of the dominant culture.19 By positing that the Russian-Jewish-American community’s culture in Little Russia is equal to the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture, multiculturalism as practiced in the United States erases the notion of insider or outsider status and “obscures the social costs associated with large scale immigration that fall most heavily on the most recently arrived.”20

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15 See Hirschman, 398–401.
16 See Gunew, 12–52.
17 Harris, xii–xiii.
18 Gunew, 12.
19 See ibid., 12–30.
20 Birrell and Birrell, 45–54.
Little Russia in West Hollywood is finding its culture priced out as a result of multiculturalist economics that allow the dominant culture to move easily into the area. This process is visible in the community’s displaced population and diminishing number of Russian-Jewish-oriented stores.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, many of these stores are being “squeezed out by sneaker and skateboard shops,”\textsuperscript{22} a clear sign of gentrification.\textsuperscript{23} Gentrification is butting up against some community institutions like Plummer Park and Russian delis and bakeries. This is a manifestation of a socio-economic trend occurring in many Los Angeles districts, disproportionately affecting low-income and immigrant communities such as Latinos in East Los Angeles and African-Americans in South Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{24} By not acknowledging the dominant culture’s role in the disintegration and erasure of minority immigrant communities and by not allocating more resources to minority immigrant communities, West Hollywood is facilitating gentrification.

3. Gentrification and Russian-Jewish Immigrant History and Culture

Russian immigration to the United States has occurred in four periods. Russian-Jewish immigrants fled anti-Semitism in the second half of the nineteenth century,\textsuperscript{25} settling largely in New York and coastal cities, and founded many iconic Russian-Jewish American communities that exist to this day. But this was a rather gradual exodus. The first “wave” of Russian immigration occurred in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and was comprised mainly of people who could not reconcile themselves to Bolshevik rule and fled the collapse of the society to which they had grown accustomed.\textsuperscript{26} They settled all across America and found various forms of employment,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} See Hawkins.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Dralyuk.
\item \textsuperscript{23} See Bridge.
\item \textsuperscript{24} See Nielsen, 123–139.
\item \textsuperscript{25} See Higham, 3–5.
\item \textsuperscript{26} See Magocsi, 5–17.
\end{itemize}
with many of them rising to the middle or upper classes, as they were both well-educated and connected to those who had settled before them.\textsuperscript{27} Around 1917, a group of five hundred White Russians, all self-styled aristocrats, settled in the Hollywood area and built up the foundation of today’s Russian landscape in Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{28}

The second “wave” occurred in the aftermath of World War II, when millions of people were displaced from their homelands.\textsuperscript{29} It is estimated that fifty thousand of these refugees came to America from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{30} By the 1970s, “more than 250,000 Soviet citizens left their homeland, and approximately 100,000 of these settled in America.”\textsuperscript{31} The third and fourth “waves” occurred in the last decades of Soviet rule and in the immediate post-Soviet period; those who emigrated during these waves settled largely in West Hollywood and New York City’s Brighton Beach neighborhood. Many of these immigrants did not speak any English and had a hard time finding reliable employment, often unable to use the skills upon which they built their careers in their homeland.\textsuperscript{32} In response, with the support of other recent immigrants, Jewish relief centers in this tight-knit community provided resources to help them find employment, transportation, and affordable housing.\textsuperscript{33}

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Russian-American immigrant population of West Hollywood built up an organized community structure, implementing cultural programs and opening Russian-language groceries and bookstores. As this community becomes less centralized in West Hollywood, though, its members report a steady diminishment of these programs. As a

\textsuperscript{27} See Vil’chur, 65–73.
\textsuperscript{28} Carey McWilliams, quoted in Dralyuk.
\textsuperscript{29} See Magocsi, 17–35.
\textsuperscript{30} See Orleck.
\textsuperscript{31} Ripp, 3.
\textsuperscript{32} See Kishinevsky, 250–280.
\textsuperscript{33} See Orleck.
result of gentrification-induced displacement, the Russian community is losing cultural programs that function best in more concentrated communities.

4. Overview of Little Russia’s Demographics and Ethnographic Features

The City of West Hollywood is a new city, gaining its independent cityhood in 1984. It currently has a population of 34,399. Of this, 11 percent (3,782 individuals) are from former Soviet Union republics, “compared with one percent of the county’s population.” This is a dramatic change from the year 2000, when the number of residents from former republics totaled 5,294. About 50 percent report the former Soviet republic of Ukraine as their country of origin, 36 percent Russia, 10 percent Belarus, and 7 percent Moldova. Though many of these residents from the former Soviet Union identify as Jewish, current West Hollywood demographics do not specify the size of this population. 46 percent of residents from former Soviet republics report being over the age of fifty-five, compared with just 26 percent of the rest of West Hollywood’s population. When asked about their English language skills, 60 percent of this population reported speaking the language “less than well.”

Overall, these demographics and ethnographic community characteristics tell the story of an aging, dispersed community in need of more services that accommodate their specialized age- and culture-related needs. The five services most in need of improvement that residents from

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34 See “30 Years of Cityhood.”
35 The City of West Hollywood uses the terminology “residents from former Soviet Union republics” to describe its Russian-speaking population, which is equated with “Russian-Jewish” for the purposes of this paper.
37 Although this research acknowledges respondents to the West Hollywood 2013 Community Survey who identify themselves as Ukrainian, Belarusian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Moldovan, most of these communities’ intercultural dialogues occur in the Russian language, and so the identifier “Russian” will be employed for the purposes of this paper.
former Soviet republics listed in the *City of West Hollywood 2013 Community Survey* are: health care services, low-cost transportation services, neighborhood crime prevention programs, parks and recreation programs, and support for affordable housing.\(^{39}\) Housing is especially important for these residents, as 91 percent are long-term residents of the city, having lived there longer than ten years.\(^{40}\) Furthermore, almost 50 percent of residents from the former Soviet Union rent under a government housing subsidy or low-income program, compared to just 5 percent of West Hollywood residents overall.\(^{41}\) This community is one of the city’s populations with the highest need of housing services, and West Hollywood must implement more housing subsidy programs targeting its minority immigrant community’s needs and specialized language skills.

Rent Stabilization Commissioner Alexander Gurfinkel has stated that only twelve out of twelve hundred housing-related flyers and pamphlets available on West Hollywood’s online database of city regulations are available in Russian. He believes that this “may constitute an access barrier.”\(^{42}\) This is confirmed by the West Hollywood community survey, in which participants asked that their housing rights be more adequately championed by the city.\(^{43}\) An important revelation of this survey was this population’s desire to age in place. Populations living in subsidized housing often do not have the economic ability to move into assisted-living facilities as they grow older and have decreased mobility and higher rates of health issues. Therefore, it is important to provide services to help these residents live independently. Residents from the former Soviet Union stated that they desire a greater effort to reach out to immigrants “where they live”

\(^{39}\) See ibid.
\(^{40}\) See ibid.
\(^{41}\) See ibid.
\(^{42}\) Gurfinkel.
\(^{43}\) See *City of West Hollywood 2013 Community Survey*, 3.21–30.
and “to make announcements and disseminate important information. This would also give translators the opportunity to explain details and field questions in Russian.” Furthermore, they expressed a desire for the city to utilize existing social networks that this community has developed, such as phone trees.

The City of West Hollywood has stated in past “Primary Goals” briefings to the community that it hopes to develop increased-density buildings in the area in order to stem rent increases. Increased-density buildings are taller apartment and condominium buildings that hold more living spaces. Residents worry, however, that this will displace existing community features that give Russian-Jewish American immigrants a sense of home, such as bookstores and groceries. Old apartment buildings are already being torn down to make room for these multi-million-dollar, long-term construction projects.

The Russian-Jewish immigrant community’s struggle with gentrification and its effects on their cultural heritage is apparent. As Boris Dralyuk observes:

LA’s Russian émigré community, which snowballed in the years around the collapse of the Soviet Union, is one of the largest in the world, but Little Russia is rapidly aging, fading. The young adults who immigrated in the 1980s and 1990s couldn’t wait to get out of what they saw as a ghetto and move up in the world, and those who stayed are now, ironically, being priced out….I imagine [this community’s landmarks in Plummer Park] will be as irrelevant and inscrutable to future generations as a marker erected by the Daughters of the American Revolution, which has been gathering dust at the park since the 1950s.

Through the lens of U.S. multiculturalism, Russian-Jewish culture is on an equal footing with the dominant culture. That is, multiculturalism presupposes equal access to housing and services, but

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44 Ibid.
45 See ibid.
46 See Aviles.
47 Dralyuk, 4.
that is not the reality. As evidence demonstrates, this culture, its landmarks, and its heritage are quickly disappearing. Gentrification and its multiculturalist framework are erasing Russian-Jewish culture in West Hollywood.

5. Housing and West Hollywood

The Rent Stabilization Commission of West Hollywood was created to facilitate fair, legal, and affordable housing for the city’s residents. It consists of seven people and a team of three city staff members who report updates to the commission. The commission regularly attempts to improve the state of its “housing choice voucher program”—Section 8—which is “the federal government's major program for assisting very low-income families, the elderly, and the disabled to afford decent, safe, and sanitary housing in the private market” used by a large portion of the Russian-Jewish community. This community needs adequate Russian-language housing information in order to facilitate population growth, but these resources are simply not available. This may constitute, in Commissioner Gurfinkel’s opinion, a “barrier to education.” He explains:

People both inside the city and outside the city mention that the Russian-speaking population is an aging, senior population that needs sustainable living assistance, aging in place assistance, and social services in general. And all of that is very true....However, there is another section of the population. It is a younger population that is more integrated into American culture....Russian is still their primary language....We need to make sure we don’t just look at the largest portion of the demographic, but all of the demographic as the stores change, as people move in and out of the city....Every year, a part of the Russian speaking community leaves the city. In my opinion, it’s a travesty.

Without population regeneration, he implies, societies and their cultures dwindle. Without a path by which Russians of all socioeconomic backgrounds may immigrate to and settle in West Hollywood, their population and culture will soon be eliminated.

48 “Section 8.”
49 Gurfinkel.
Another concern of Gurfinkel’s is that young Russian-speaking workers are not aware of existing low-income housing resources that are designed to stem the displacement of minority communities. He states:

If you look at most of these small, Russian businesses in the area, they hire Russian individuals….They themselves are recent immigrants. They don’t live in West Hollywood because of two reasons. Number one: they didn’t know there was an ability to receive low-income housing. And, number two: they know that rent in West Hollywood is really expensive because that’s what their friends told them.50

What Gurfinkel emphasizes throughout commission meetings is that gentrification, its resulting higher cost of living, and a lack of resources prevent younger Russian speakers from living in the city and contributing to and preserving its culture. The preservation of culture depends on an ongoing generational dynamic. Gurfinkel advocates for more Russian-language materials on the West Hollywood city website, not for the elderly population who generally do not use the internet, but for the younger population who have the ability to revive Russian and Russian-Jewish culture.

In existing public, Russian-language housing documents, tenants and potential tenants are given information on subjects such as “rent adjustment applications, rent overcharge hearings, and appealing a hearing decision to the Rent Stabilization Commission.”  51  These multilingual informational texts are necessary to ensure a healthy, navigable housing economy.

6. Common Difficulties during the Adaptation Process and Positive Community Response

Immigrants have a multidimensional relationship with their new country, which is not only a haven and new home but also a representation of personal sacrifices made throughout the immigration and adaptation processes. The sense of loss of home often commingles with the extraordinary sense of relief offered by the security and protection found in America. Accounts of

50 Ibid.
51 Slushaniia i sredstva pravovoi zashchity spravochnik: rent kontrol’.
Russian-speaking immigrants’ adaptation processes are filled with topoi that may be found in many oral histories of immigration. First, there is the feeling that their sense of family is completely destroyed by emigration. Most common is a strong sense of loss—loss of their motherland, loss of their birth culture, and the replacement of the Russian language with American English, which all participants in Kishinevsky’s survey agree is extremely difficult to learn. One immigrant, Galina, echoed other Russian-Jewish immigrants’ sentiment that “communication with people” is “the most important thing in life. In Russia, I had a totally different lifestyle. I could not live without going to the movies with my friends, to the theater, to the opera.” Here, in America, she says that she feels like “a guest, an outsider.”

In the City of West Hollywood 2013 Community Survey, about 17 percent of respondents reported a desire for more opportunities for community gatherings; this desire is in line with the majority of research on immigrant needs. People search for and settle into diasporic communities because they feel like outsiders of the dominant culture, and community programs can give these immigrants a feeling of home and inclusion. They become stakeholders in the health of the community as a whole. In effect, they become Russian-Jewish-American insiders—as long as their community is allowed to thrive as a recognized and protected minority culture. As gentrification progresses and the physical and cultural landscapes of their neighborhood change, however, former insiders may begin to feel like outsiders. The City of West Hollywood provides a number of Russian-language, community-focused programs, but these services are not always targeted at recent immigrants who most need to find a sense of home in their new country. West Hollywood

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52 Kishinevsky, 230–35.
must adopt policies that this community desires, such as holding Russian-language informational meetings in Russian-Jewish-populated apartment complexes.

An example of community action that responds to immigrants’ needs is the West Hollywood Russian Library. Naum Reznik, with the help of others, started this public Russian-language library stocked with Russian books brought from the former Soviet Union. Literature and reading hold an important place in Russian culture, and many Russian-Jewish immigrants report it strange that Americans do not read as much as Russians. Unfortunately, as the Los Angeles Times reports, “finding a permanent home in West Hollywood remains an ongoing process” for the library. It has been forced to move five times and continues to be dislocated by construction and renovation efforts of the city. Head librarian Vera Richkina said, “Each time, we did everything by ourselves….We know it will be hard [to continue].” Grassroots community projects like the West Hollywood Russian Library are vital to immigrants during, and even after, the process of adaptation. The city must allocate more resources to its current inhabitants’ needs and acknowledge the struggle between this minority immigrant community and the encroaching dominant culture, as, currently, “multiculturalism…has remained merely symbolic, reducing ethnic and racialized cultures to folklore…while never actually alleviating the real inequalities within” the society. West Hollywood city officials have not devoted enough resources to this project, instead focusing on economic and housing development plans aimed at attracting a new generation of young, gentrifying residents.

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54 See Russian Émigré Recollections, 22, 35.
55 Lin.
56 Ibid.
57 Dickson, quoted in Gunew, 25.
7. Conclusion

West Hollywood’s Russian and Russian-Jewish populations are dwindling, and community members are in need of greater access to services that address their needs based on age and immigrant status. The U.S. multicultural approach covers up and ignores problems that arise from a culture’s minority status, and hence those problems stemming from the Russian-Jewish-American community’s minority-immigrant status have not been adequately addressed by the City of West Hollywood or by state and national governments. The symptoms of gentrification with which Little Russia is struggling—displacement, population loss, loss of culture—point to a diasporic cultural system that is also harming other minority immigrant communities in Los Angeles.58 If the United States explicitly acknowledges the role of the dominant culture in society and adopts pluralist policies that aim to address minority immigrant communities’ needs, then all of U.S. society will benefit. Moreover, with equal access to services, a diverse plurality of voices will be represented in government at all levels, ensuring a healthy, democratic society.

Multiculturalism has failed. Within American society, it is clear that not all cultures have equal economic footing or access to services, and this is the result of failed cultural policies and systemic neglect. When the government declares that all cultures matter and are equal, it is akin to ignoring the specialized needs of certain cultures. Indeed, “cultural survival is constantly in danger of being overwhelmed by the master narratives of nationalism, globalization and assimilationist versions of state multiculturalism.”59 It is no small feat to enact the changes that must be implemented in order to better serve the Russian-Jewish-American community in West Hollywood; however, doing so will preserve this space for future immigrants and Russian-Jewish

58 See Nielsen, 123–39.
59 Gunew, 107.
Americans whose cultural heritage is vital to U.S. identity. While more research is needed to establish the best practices for cultural revitalization, it is clear that West Hollywood is currently focused on building up its economy in order to cater to its new population of gentrifiers. As one council member stated, “We have an aging Russian-speaking population. They are now in their eighties and nineties. They are going to have difficulties living alone, losing lifelong friends. The remaining survivors will be isolated.”60 The city must adopt measures that address the concerns of these long-term residents, protecting their housing rights and, therefore, their culture. In essence, through inaction the city is implicitly adopting the United States’ harmful multiculturalist ideology. The Russian-American history woven into the physical and ephemeral landscape of West Hollywood’s Little Russia must be preserved in the face of U.S. multiculturalist policies and expanding gentrification. Doing so will expose the endangered state of this Russian-Jewish-American community and emphasize ways national and local governments can implement beneficial, inclusive policy changes and community programs that reflect humanistic ideals.

Works Cited


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