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A Struggle against Oppression: An Analysis of Jewish Emigration from the Soviet Union during the 1970s and 1980s

During the 1970s and 1980s, an increasing number of Jewish Soviet citizens wished to emigrate from the Soviet Union (USSR) due to institutional anti-Semitism and the state’s attempt to lower their quality of life. Although the number of Jews who applied for exit visas during the two decades remained consistent, the number of Jews allowed to emigrate by the Soviet government fluctuated. This discrepancy was affected by the trajectory of U.S.-Soviet relations concerning trade, arms control, and human rights. When the U.S. was willing to cooperate more with the USSR in terms of trading rights, the Soviet government became more lenient toward Jewish emigration, but Soviet Jews suffered when U.S.-Soviet relations became more strained. The Soviet government assumed that the Jews who obtained exit visas would emigrate to Israel, but many of these Jewish emigrants came to the U.S. searching for a better life. To obtain a more direct perspective of this emigration process, we conducted video interviews in Russian with Jewish émigrés living in Los Angeles. These interviews confirmed the information we gathered through our literary research that leaving the USSR was the most viable option for Jews seeking a life without discrimination.

Due to a high concentration of Soviet Jews in the scientific and academic professions, the Brezhnev regime (1964-82) implemented officially sanctioned discrimination against Jews, undermining the younger Jewish generation’s educational goals. According to Minton Goldman, in his work, “United States Policy and Soviet Jewish Emigration from Nixon to Bush,” Soviet officials deemed the Jewish presence in the scientific and academic fields as an “over-
concentration.” As a result, the Brezhnev regime encouraged restriction of Jewish admission into Soviet universities. Goldman writes, “the number of Jews entering universities declined from 112,000 in 1968 to 105,000 in 1970, 88,500 in 1972, and an estimated 50,000 in 1980.” With these falling figures, the future for Jewish intellectuals in the Soviet Union also began to grow dimmer. This negative trend in educational opportunities forced many Soviet Jews to try to emigrate, but an exit visa was very hard to receive in the early 1970s. For example, only 1,027 Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1970. As Soviet universities restricted Jewish enrollment, the country lost future talented professionals and intellectuals, especially when certain individuals emigrated to the West. One of these relocated individuals is now a professor of physics at the University of Southern California, Vitaly Kresin. At age 16, Kresin and his parents left the Soviet Union in 1979 and settled in Oakland, California. His father was a professor of physics in the Soviet Union, and he saw a narrow future for Kresin in such a difficult social situation for Jews. In a video interview, Kresin commented that Jews had to take a different and much more difficult placement exam to enroll in universities. Without a nationwide standardized placement exam, such as the SAT or ACT in contemporary American society, each Soviet university could administer its own variant of an exam. Since Kresin strived for a career in physics, his parents managed to obtain exit visas in order to emigrate to the U.S., where he would have better educational opportunities. After finishing high school early in Oakland, Kresin studied physics at the University of California, Berkeley and became a professor of physics at USC.

2 Ibid., 338.
3 Ibid., 359.
4 Vitaly Kresin, Video Interview, March, 2011.
Even when Jewish professionals tried to escape discrimination by applying for an exit visa, the Soviet regime restricted their exit from the country in an effort to stop the brain drain. Goldman writes, “many highly educated and experienced Jewish professionals in scientific and technical areas who requested to leave were prevented from doing so on the grounds that they might take ‘secrets’ with them.”5 These Jews, who were denied exit visas, were labeled refuseniks since Soviet officials refused to let them emigrate. In a background report to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s (CPSU) Central Committee, Head of Directorate of the Committee for State Security, Babkov, lists certain Jewish individuals who were refused exit visas to Israel on the grounds of security reasons.6 In justification for refusing certain Jewish professionals exit visas, Babkov writes,

At the same time, the Soviet state must consider its security interests. For this reason, an insignificant number of individuals, who are privy to state secrets, and military draftees who have received special training in the air and missile forces and the submarine fleet, are temporarily refused exit visas for Israel.7

Although Babkov refers to the denial of exit visas as temporary, refuseniks faced heavy obstacles and restrictions to emigration until Soviet-American diplomatic relations improved in the late 1970s and the late 1980s. One of these obstacles was created in 1972, when the Soviet government began to impose “a head tax on all emigrants with higher education.”8 This tax was also known as the diploma tax, since the Soviet government wished to take back the money that it had spent on the state education of Jewish professionals. Sana Krasikov writes that “in some cases, this fee amounted to more than a decade of annual salaries and made it impossible for

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5 Goldman, 339.
6 See Boris Morozov, ed., Documents on Soviet Jewish Emigration, 143.
7 Ibid, 142.
8 Goldman, 341.
many professionals to leave.” Even if the Jewish professionals were better off financially than lesser-earning Jewish emigrants, such a steep cost to emigrate was a formidable obstacle.

In an effort to discourage emigration, the Soviet regime would often punish Jews who applied for exit visas by forcing them into unemployment and subjecting them to heightened discrimination as traitors. Soviet Jews who applied to the Office of Visas and Registration (OVIR) for exit visas often lost their jobs or had to work in extremely low-paying positions, so the Soviet regime frightened many Jews from applying for exit visas. Once an individual applied for an exit visa, he or she would be labeled as an enemy of the people because “emigration was a betrayal of the motherland.” If the prospective emigrant was denied an exit visa for an extended period of time, life would be extremely difficult with low funds and public disapproval. For example, once a Jew applied for an exit visa, he or she would lose Soviet citizenship. In his interview, Vitaly Kresin noted that his father delayed applying for an exit visa due to his fear of losing his job as a professor of physics. Public alienation was more prominent in major Russian and Ukrainian cities, since the Jews there were in closer proximity to Soviet officials. Neyla Dubrovich, who works as a tutor for the UCLA Slavic Department, faced such circumstances after applying for an exit visa in 1976. As an owner of a private apartment in Saint Petersburg, Dubrovich was forced to forfeit her property to the Soviet government once she received her exit visa. Soviet officials did not allow Dubrovich to pass ownership of the apartment to her mother, who had just lost her own room in a communal apartment in Saint Petersburg. In an interview for this project, Dubrovich remarked that she worried that her mother would be left on the street.

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10 Boris Morozov, Documents on Soviet Jewish Emigration (Portland: Frank Cass, 1999), 149.
11 Goldman, 339.
12 Kresin, Video Interview, March, 2011.
with nowhere to live. As she tried to find legal help for her mother’s housing situation, no one wanted to help her due to her decision to emigrate.\(^\text{13}\)

Even when confronted with such obstacles, an increasing number of Jews managed to leave the USSR throughout the 1970s due to eased tension between the U.S. and the USSR. Both President Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev supported détente as a way to receive concessions from each other in different areas. The Brezhnev regime desired more favorable trade conditions and arms control with the U.S., while the Nixon administration wished for the Soviet Union to negotiate with North Vietnam on ending the Vietnam War.\(^\text{14}\) When the Soviet restriction of Jewish emigration became known in the U.S., the American public supported the resfuseniks, and sided against the oppressive Soviet policies. The Nixon administration then ran into a problem, since it wanted to please the American public on the issue of preserving human rights, while it also wanted to prevent angering the Brezhnev regime through intrusion into Soviet internal affairs. In the May 1972 summit in Moscow, Nixon and Brezhnev composed a trade treaty, “in which Washington would give Soviet trade most favored nation status (MFN).”\(^\text{15}\) MFN status meant that the U.S. would have to give the USSR the same trade benefits that it gave to its other trading partners, according to World Trade Organization (WTO) rules.\(^\text{16}\)

The year of 1972, however, proved to be a complicated one in the sphere of Soviet-American relations. In August, the Brezhnev regime implemented the head tax on highly educated Jewish emigrants, and in response, Democratic Senator Henry Jackson and

\(^{13}\) Neyla Dubrovich, Video Interview, March, 2011.

\(^{14}\) Goldman, 341.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.

Congressman Charles Vanik co-authored an amendment to the Nixon-Brezhnev trade treaty. This amendment came to the dismay of both the Nixon administration and the Brezhnev regime since it “linked the award of MFN status for Soviet trade with the Kremlin’s willingness to give assurances regarding unrestricted Soviet Jewish emigration.” In other words, the American government would only give the USSR the trading benefits of MFN status if the USSR would dismantle the head tax and other restrictions to Jewish emigration.

Although the Brezhnev regime opposed this linkage of trade benefits to adjustments in Soviet internal policy, it vowed to allow a higher level of Jewish emigration in an effort to persuade the U.S. Congress into passing the trade treaty without the Jackson-Vanik amendment. According to Goldman, in May of 1973 Brezhnev said, “the USSR would allow annually between 36,000 and 40,000 Jews to emigrate.” Almost staying true to his words, the Soviet government allowed 34,733 Jewish emigrants to leave the country in 1973. Despite Brezhnev’s promises and the increasing figures of Jewish emigration, Senator Jackson and others demanded unrestricted Jewish emigration, meaning the removal of the head tax and other harassment of Jews during the emigration process. In addition to the Jackson-Vanik amendment, Democratic Illinois Senator Adlai E. Stevenson proposed an amendment to the Export-Import Bank bill in order to extend the life of the bank. This amendment “set a ceiling of 300 million dollars on credit that the bank could extend to the Soviet Union.” Ultimately, special interest in Congress favoring the human rights struggle of Soviet Jewish emigrants doomed the proposed trade treaty between Nixon and Brezhnev. In December 1973, “the House of Representatives approved the

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17 Goldman, 342.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid, 343.
20 Ibid, 359.
21 Ibid, 343.
22 Ibid.
treaty with the Jackson amendment by a vote of 272 to 140.”23 Due to Congress’s unwillingness to make concessions—while the Soviet Union continued to make concessions in the area of Jewish emigration—the Soviet government rejected the Nixon-Brezhnev trade treaty in 1975. After this, Jewish emigration declined substantially; 13,221 Jews left the Soviet Union in 1975, 14,261 in 1976, and 16,736 in 1977.24

Once Democratic President Jimmy Carter came into office in 1977, he was more willing to confront the Brezhnev regime on human rights issues than his Republican predecessors. Carter’s more aggressive approach in the arena of human rights stemmed from the Soviet Union’s acceptance of the Helsinki agreement of 1975, formed at the Human Rights Convention. According to Goldman, this agreement “guaranteed everyone the right to leave his country and to return to it.”25 When the USSR broke the agreement through the continuous restriction of Jewish emigration, President Carter possessed leverage against Brezhnev in demanding higher emigration figures. Although Brezhnev disapproved of Carter’s advice on how to run the country, his persistent desire to obtain concessions on arms control and trade allowed for an increasing level of Jewish emigration.26 For example, 51,320 Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1979, which was an increase of 23,000 emigrants from the previous year. According to Avi Beker, the 1979 increase in Jewish emigration came as a by-product of the Carter-Brezhnev summit held in Vienna that year, when the two leaders signed the SALT II treaty. Beker writes, “in 1979 the Soviets continued to allow Jewish emigration in record numbers as they hoped for

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23 Goldman, 343.
24 Ibid., 359.
25 Ibid., 339.
26 Ibid., 345.
the ratification of SALT II.” In response to the higher level of emigration, Carter appealed to Congress to approve a waiver of the Jackson-Vanik and Stevenson amendments in order to grant the USSR MFN status and renewed access to Export-Import Bank credits. Vanik and Stevenson agreed that a waiver would be appropriate, but Senator Jackson opposed it. Although Jackson was staying loyal to his contingency of Jewish advocacy groups, his tough approach toward the Soviet Union realistically could have made Soviet officials more resentful and less lenient toward Jewish emigration.

The early 1980s marked a drastic decrease in the level of Jewish emigration, stemming from the break in Soviet-American relations after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The Carter administration strongly disapproved of the invasion due to perceived Soviet expansionism in the so-called ‘arc of crises’, a “region stretching from Angola and the Horn of Africa to Afghanistan.” Any spread of communism came as a threat to American interests during the Cold War, so the Soviet expansionism in such a critical area frightened the Carter Administration. In response to the Soviet invasion, the U.S. imposed trade sanctions against the USSR, upsetting Brezhnev. Only 2,688 Jewish emigrants left the Soviet Union in 1982, while a sixteen-year low figure of 896 Jews left the country in 1984. Similar to Carter’s approach toward the Soviet Union’s treatment of Jewish emigrants, President Ronald Reagan took a strong and vocal stance against the Soviet Union in terms of human rights. In regard to Reagan’s plan toward Soviet Jewish emigration, Goldman writes, “in part his goal was to embarrass and

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28 Goldman, 346.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 359.
undermine the Soviet regime in the international community.” Reagan had vocally expressed his strong disagreement with communism, so the issue of Jewish emigration allowed him to maintain his critical approach toward the Soviet Union. Although Reagan put much focus on the Jewish emigration problem, including on the continuous struggle of the refuseniks, the turning point in the effort for increased Jewish emigration came when Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power in the Soviet Union.

Dedicated to vastly improving relations with the U.S., Gorbachev made ideological and political concessions on a grand scale that Brezhnev refused to make. Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika benefited the plight of Jewish emigrants, as 71,916 Jewish emigrants left the Soviet Union in 1989. In her work, “Redefining the Jewish Question from Lenin to Gorbachev: Terminology or Ideology?,” Naomi Blank writes that “as of 1989, almost any Jew who wished to do so was permitted to emigrate.” A breakthrough occurred during the December 1987 Reagan-Gorbachev summit in Washington D.C., when “for the first time in the history of Soviet-American relations, the issue of human rights was explicitly included in a joint Soviet-American announcement of a summit agenda.” Previous summits between American and Soviet leaders mostly covered arms control, military issues, and nuclear deterrence, while human rights issues were less heated topics. Human rights and Jewish emigration had often become linked with trade or arms control agreements, such as the Jackson-Vanik amendment, but in 1987 Jewish emigration became a bigger focus. Following previous trends, however, increased Jewish emigration in 1987 coincided with the signing of the Intermediate-Range

31 Ibid, 347.
33 Beker, 448.
Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at the Washington summit. The INF Treaty required the destruction of both American and Soviet ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. While only 914 Soviet Jews emigrated in 1986, 8,155 Jews emigrated in 1987. Additionally, in 1987, Gorbachev’s regime granted exit visas to several of the best-known refuseniks. Whereas Brezhnev took great offense to American intrusion into Soviet domestic policy, Gorbachev sacrificed traditional Soviet mentality in order to ensure more peaceful relations with the U.S.

Not only did Gorbachev allow a higher flow of Jewish emigration, he created more Jewish cultural and religious freedom within the Soviet Union’s traditionally anti-Semitic social sphere. Beker writes, “the increase in emigration in 1987 was not coupled with a crackdown on Jewish activities or with a wave of official anti-Semitism or anti-Zionism.” This greater state tolerance of Jewish culture greatly differed from Brezhnev’s officially sanctioned abuse and punishment of Jewish emigrants. Although these steps by Gorbachev were limited within Soviet society, the gesture toward more religious and cultural expression was important. For example, the Kremlin in 1987 opened a kosher kitchen in the Moscow synagogue, allowed for the training of several rabbis in the U.S., and permitted the study of Hebrew within the synagogue. Additionally, Jews took advantage of Gorbachev’s more lenient policies by leaving the USSR in mass numbers. In 1990, 181,802 Jewish citizens left the Soviet Union, and in 1991 another 178,566 Jews emigrated. The increasing number of emigrants leaving the Soviet Union,

35 Beker, 446.
36 Ibid, 449.
37 Ibid.
38 Goldman, 359.
however, meant that the U.S. would have a massive flow of Soviet Jews entering the country as refugees.

During the years of limited Jewish emigration and tense Soviet-American relations, the U.S. accepted Jewish emigrants at a reasonable rate. When Soviet-American relations greatly improved under Gorbachev, however, the American acceptance of Jewish emigrants as refugees would have threatened to ruin the improved relationship. The Reagan administration feared that the American acceptance of all refugees would undermine Gorbachev’s political efforts, since the term ‘refugee’ denotes a fleeing away from oppression in the emigrant’s home country. With the desire to maintain healthy relations with the USSR, the Reagan administration in 1988 altered “the traditional ‘open door’ policy on the admission of political refugees.”39 According to Goldman, “it redefined ‘refugee status’” by saying that people who claimed to be refugees from the Soviet Union must demonstrate ‘a well-founded fear of prosecution.’”40 Following in Reagan’s footsteps, President Bush’s administration implemented the policy of restricting the number of Soviet emigrants as refugees to 50,000, when thousands more Jewish emigrants wished to come to the U.S.41 For the emigrants who could not enter the U.S., Israel or other North American countries became options for resettlement.

By the onset of the 1970s, official discrimination of Jewish religious and cultural practices forced thousands of Jews to apply for exit visas from the Soviet Union. Since the Soviet government viewed emigration as a privilege instead of a human right, obtaining an exit visa was an extremely difficult process, especially for the highly educated Jews in the scientific and academic fields. Although these highly educated and urban refuseniks gained the most

39 Goldman, 349.
40 Ibid, 349.
41 See Ibid, 350.
attention through the diploma tax and security fears, many Jews from lower classes also attempted to emigrate. The levels of Jewish emigration fluctuated, depending on the diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the USSR. When both countries reached agreements on arms control or trade, Jewish emigration increased. Likewise, when American-Soviet relations worsened, Soviet officials punished Jews by heavily restricting emigration. Ultimately, anti-Semitism persisted in Soviet society, but a considerable number of Jews managed to start new lives in the West.
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