

The 1980s Exodus of Russian Jews from the Former Soviet Union

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History of Jews in Russia

Pale of Settlement: only area in Russian Empire where Jews were allowed permanent settlement

- emerged in 1790 under Catherine II, Jews still regarded as Russian subjects
- reforms made in the Pale under Alexander II based on status or profession
- officially abolished in 1917 with the outbreak of WWI



History of Jews in Russia (cont.)

Nicholas I (1825-1855)

- 1827: imposed a compulsory military service for Jews
- Pale of Settlement area reduced and Jews were expelled from Kiev, Sevastopol, and Nikolayev



Nicholas II (1894-1917)

- enhanced antisemitic policies established by his father
- rise of accusations of blood libel and pogroms
- large emigration of Jews to the US and elsewhere



History of Jews in Russia (cont.)

Under Bolsheviks

- The official stance renounced antisemitism, and acknowledged Jewish contributions to socialism
- But regardless Jewish and other religious traditions were suppressed throughout society, and antisemitic sentiments were widespread

Under Stalin

- Stalin was well known for being antisemitic, but the Soviet Union condemned the antisemitism associated with Nazi Germany
- Therefore, the Soviet Union used anti-Zionism as a blanket term to cover their blatantly antisemitic policies
- Various euphemisms to veil antisemitism that mirrored Nazi Germany
- Culminated in the Doctors' Plot in 1953: accused a group of Jewish doctors of conspiracy and treason, publicly renounced them with antisemitic sentiments throughout media

New York Times Article: 1981

Refugee Group Reverses Policy on Soviet Jews

By WILLIAM G. BLAIR

New York Times (1923-Current file); Dec 10, 1981; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
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Refugee Group Reverses Policy on Soviet Jews

By WILLIAM G. BLAIR

An American Jewish refugee organization said yesterday that it had agreed to participate on a trial basis in an Israeli plan to curtail the flow of Soviet Jews to countries other than Israel.

The announcement marked a policy reversal for the organization, Hias, which in August joined the State Department in opposing the plan of the Jewish Agency of Israel to deter Soviet Jewish émigrés from going to countries other than Israel.

The plan, disclosed by the Israeli agency earlier that month, permits assistance to émigrés arriving in

Vienna and seeking to go to another country only if they have close relatives — spouses, parents or children — in that country.

Edwin Shapiro, president of Hias, said the agency would test the plan for three months, starting in January, "in the hope that it will result in a heavier flow of Jews from the Soviet Union." Israeli officials have contended that the refusal of many Soviet Jews to settle in Israel jeopardizes the emigration of others who are given exit visas from the Soviet Union to go only to Israel.

A Hias statement, issued from its New York City headquarters, said the organiza-

tion had agreed to cooperate with the Jewish Agency plan "in response to a personal appeal" from Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel to Mr. Shapiro and Leonard Seidenman, executive vice president of Hias, last month in Jerusalem.

Hias's participation in the plan was approved by its board of directors late Tuesday night by a vote of 25 to 13.

Jerome L. Hoganson, director of the Office for European and Near Eastern Refugees in the State Department, said the department's position on the Israeli plan had not changed since August.

American policy "has always been

and will continue to be that Soviet Jewish refugees arriving in Vienna should have freedom of choice with regard to where they wish to resettle," the department said in August. "Once the Soviet refugees have arrived in Vienna, we see no reason why they should be obliged to go to Israel if other countries are willing to offer refuge."

The United States Government pays most of the costs associated with the resettlement of Soviet Jews. It contributes \$25 million a year to Israel and spent \$15 million last year on Jewish émigrés going elsewhere.

Emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union has dropped from the record high of 51,320 in 1979 to an 11-year low of 9,013 through November of this year, according to the National Conference on Soviet Jewry in New York. The percentage of

Soviet Jewish émigrés who settled in countries other than Israel has risen from 50 percent in 1977 to about 66 percent last year. Most of these émigrés have come to the United States.

Israeli anger and frustration at this rejection and setback to its traditional efforts to foster immigration have been compounded by the net outflow of its own citizens to other countries, again primarily to the United States, in the same period.

The Hias statement said some terms of its participation in the Israeli plan remained to be negotiated. This, according to Ira L. Neiger, a public relations official for the organization, was an allusion to "special exceptions or compassionate considerations" and to ways in which the plan would be evaluated at the end of the three-month trial period to see

if it had achieved its goal of increasing emigration from the Soviet Union.

The statement also said it was expected that Soviet Jews who did not want to go to Israel would seek the help of other refugee and resettlement organizations, both Jewish and non-Jewish. The State Department has indicated that it would funnel resettlement funds through other, mostly Protestant and Roman Catholic, agencies that already help Soviet Jews get from Vienna to Europe and North America.

New York Times Article: 1981 (Continued)

- Trial of lessening the flow of Jews to places other than Israel
- President of organization HIAS hopes that there will be more Jews leaving the Soviet Union
- American policy is that Soviet Jews going to Vienna have the choice of where to resettle → they don't have to go to Israel if other countries will have them
- U.S. Government pays money for resettlement of Soviet Jews
 - \$25 million per year for Israel & \$15 per year for Jews going to places other than Israel
- Emigration of Soviet Jews went from 51,320 in 1979 to 9,013 in 1981
 - 66% settling in places other than Israel as of 1981, most going to the United States
- Expected that Jews who did not want to go to Israel would get help from refugee and resettlement organizations

New York Times Article: 1987

Emigration Overshadows U.S.-Soviet Cities' Talks

Special to The New York Times

New York Times (1923-Current file); May 24, 1987; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times pg. 17

Emigration Overshadows U.S.-Soviet Cities' Talks

Special to The New York Times

SEATTLE, May 23 — A three-day meeting of Russian and American municipal officials has been dominated by protests against Soviet policies on the emigration of Jews.

The protesters, some of them delegates to the U.S.-Soviet Sister City Conference, say increasing trade or cooperating with Russian cities should not be discussed without also discussing the plight of 400,000 Russians who wish to emigrate.

But the organizers of the meeting say they are prohibited from discussing political issues under the rules of the conference, which ended today.

"If you're trying to deal with the Soviets and all they ever hear is tire-some, disrespectful haranguing, it just won't wash," said Rosanne Royer, chairwoman of the conference, the wife of Mayor Charles Royer of Seattle. This city and Tashkent have joined in a sister-city arrangement.

Five Soviet Mayors on Hand

Among the 200 delegates, Russian officials, including five mayors and several top trade representatives, have been talking about reorganizing the Soviet economy and the Soviet desire for "mutual profitability" with American companies.

But nearly every panel discussion has become a heated debate over alleged Soviet violations of human rights.

"The major barrier in U.S. trade laws with Russia will not be changed until the Soviet Union faces up to these human rights issues," Bill Cohen of Boulder, Colo., said at the opening session of a panel on trade.

"Many prominent Jewish leaders in the U.S. disagree with that philosophy," replied Erwin Salk of Chicago. "It's a very sad commentary that some of the Jewish establishment organizations continue to perpetuate the cold war."

The Russian officials were asked repeatedly about the emigration issue.

Mayor Shukurulla Mirsayidov of Tashkent was having his picture taken with several American women at a cocktail reception when he was asked about Jews in his city who wish to emigrate.

"Let them leave," he said through a translator. "We don't have that problem. They can leave if they want." He said he had been informed of only four people who wanted to emigrate from Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan and, with a population of 2.2 million, the fourth-largest city in the Soviet Union.

"That's the standard Russian response," said Judy Balint, a delegate who is a member of the national board of the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews.

Ms. Balint said she did not consider discussing Soviet Jews a violation of the conference bylaws. "It's absurd to have three sessions on business and

trade and claim that is not politics while not scheduling any discussions on human rights violations," she said.

Russians Are Given Lists

The Mayors of Baku, Nakhodka, Odessa, Tashkent and Vilnius were given lists of about 1,000 Jews who wish to emigrate, according to representatives of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry.

Stephen Rhinesmith, the coordinator of the U.S.-Soviet Exchange Initiative, which was founded after President Reagan met in Geneva last year with Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, told the conferees that human rights should be a concern of sister cities. He also said, in an interview, that the Reagan Administration favored increasing such ties between American and Soviet cities. "One of

our objectives is to get people out of the Soviet Union to take a look at us over here," he said.

According to officials here, 10 cities in the United States have Soviet "sisters," 15 such arrangements are pending, and talks are just beginning for 20 others.

New York Times Article: 1987 (Continued)

- There were protests against Soviet policies on the emigration of Jews
 - Protesters claim that foreign policies cannot be discussed without also discussing the 400,000 Jews who seek to emigrate
- Panel discussions by delegates have turned into debates over Soviet violations of basic human rights
 - U.S. trade laws with Russia cannot be changed until human rights issues are resolved within the Soviet Union
- Russian mayors are given lists of those who wish to emigrate
- At this time, 10 cities in the United States have Soviet “sisters”, and other arrangements are being made for more Soviet sisters

The Soviet Government's Response

- In the 1980s the government made it increasingly difficult for Jews to engage in their cultural and religious practices.
- It was asserted that the Soviet government was “engaged in a ‘systematic campaign to disrupt all Jewish religious and cultural activities’ that threatened ‘the very survival of Judaism in the Soviet Union” (Blair)
- Further, the final years of Brezhnev government was especially bad for Jews, and the government specifically targeted Hebrew teachers.

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- In addition to the discrimination that Jews faced within the country, they were also restricted in their movement outside of the Soviet Union, as emigration from the Soviet Union was very limited during this time.
- Emigration dropped sharply from 1981-84 (Blair)
- 1984 – the number of Jews allowed to emigrate fell to below 1,000 for the first time since the 1970s (Blair)
- As of 1985, 20,000 out of 350,000 Jews who had applied to emigrate had already been denied (Blair)
- Yet, the Soviet Union maintained that all those Jews who wished to emigrate had been allowed to do so with the exception of those who had access to government secrets (Blair)

Where did the Jews go?

- A record 71,000 Soviet Jews were granted exodus from the USSR, of whom, only 12,117 immigrated to Israel
- American policy initially treated them like refugees but this policy came to an end
- Israel, Germany, and the United States
- Majority went to Israel
 - “Between 1948 and October 1992, 2,279,179 Jewish immigrants arrived in Israel. Russian Jews accounted for nearly 27 percent of this total” (Middle Eastern Research and Information Project)
- About 1 million Jews stayed in the Former Soviet Union
- Currently 90% of Germany’s Jewish population come from the former USSR

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