

Chapter VIII. Jewish Emigration from the Soviet Union to Israel and Other Countries

The struggle of Soviet Jews to break through the Iron Curtain and immigrate to Israel in the 1970s astounded the world. This was one of those “Black Swans” that no one expected to happen, let alone succeed.

To comprehend this phenomenon, one must study the full range of events and geopolitical undercurrents that lead to a spectacular resurrection of the Zionist movement in the harsh environment of the Soviet Union, and explains why the early 1970s was the moment of its success.

Just a few years before the 1970s, authorities would have seen an application to emigrate from the Soviet Union, and especially to Israel, as treason to the fatherland, a subversive act of a traitor.

The birth of the Jewish motto, “Let my people go,” in the Soviet Union occurred in a dramatic, if not overtly spectacular, manner. A group of Jews planned to hijack an airliner and take off for Israel. The KGB had little trouble uncovering the plot. All sixteen conspirators were apprehended with no violence or damage to property or people. All of them acknowledged plotting a hijacking and flying to Israel.

Soon, some details of the plot became known. The conspirators suspected the leak of information about the plot and that the KGB knew about it and would have no problem arresting them before boarding the plane. Why didn't they abort the operation then? Why not postpone it to another time when chances of success would be much better?

The primary purpose of the would-be hijackers was to demonstrate to the world how desperately the Soviet Jews wanted to leave the Soviet Union and settle in Israel. This was a sacrifice. They sacrificed their lives and the lives of their families for the sake of breaking barriers for others to immigrate to Israel. And there was another factor, which was the primary one. This action, in the minds and considerations of the conspirators, had a great chance to achieve its goal. As the following dynamics unfolded, they proved to be correct.

After a superfluous investigation and short court proceedings, the two leaders of the plot were sentenced to death and others to various times in hard labor camps. Later the sentences were reduced and eventually all conspirators were released and settled in Israel.

The event triggered a media shock wave, a kind of political tsunami, that rolled over the whole Western world. The hijacking attempt looked like a desperate act to break out of prison. What kind of life should there be in the Soviet Union that pushed people to a suicide mission? In contrast, anyone living in the free world does not need to ask permission to exit the country.

For an outside observer, it might seem that the life of Jews in the Soviet Union was on the brink of despair. In truth, the reality was much more complicated. As a matter of fact, the life of most Jewish activists before they had applied for an exit visa had been, by the Soviet standards, comfortable and safe.

The story unfolded from one surprise to another for both the Soviets and the world outside the Iron Curtain. Harsh sentences, meant to frighten those who thought of immigrating to Israel, produced the opposite effect. Thousands of Jews sent their protesting letters to the top echelon of Soviet power, condemning the harsh sentences and expressing outrage for the policy of persecution of those who wanted to immigrate to Israel. These were not anonymous letters; they were signed and provided all the

information identifying the signees. Some of the protest letters found their way to the Western media and were published and broadcasted. To the chagrin and utter surprise of the Soviet authorities, they faced the fact that the young generation of Jews had no fear of the mighty KGB which, it seemed, held the whole population in its iron grip. For good measure, the Communist Party was not prepared for the mass repressions and had no mechanism to conduct them. The international situation made such a policy near impossible, which we will discuss in detail below. To ease the pressure of protests, the authorities let some of the most active Jews emigrate and sent a few to prison. The waves of emigrations that followed had a few interesting features, which had had no precedent in Russian Jewish history.

- A disproportionately large part of applicants for an exit visa consisted of people with higher education
- The average applicant's standard of living was substantially higher than that of the average in the total population
- A disproportionately large number of Jews in this group occupied high positions in all social spheres of life. They had a lot to lose and, in case of successful emigration, faced uncertainties and problems in Israel and elsewhere.
- Contrary to some beliefs, at the end of the 1960s and in later years, Jews in the Soviet Union were not harassed or disadvantaged except for incidents of no major significance. There was no danger of pogroms or any sort of mob violence; there was no official anti-Semitic campaign sponsored by the government. In comparison, the mob's harassment and government-sponsored anti-Semitism in Tsarist Russia were the primary cause of emigration.
- An applicant faced a dilemma, which did not exist in the past; either to live a comfortable life in the Soviet Union or apply for an exit visa, which entailed harassment by the authorities, possibly long years in prison and no assurance of getting such a visa in the future.
- The government's harsh measures were undertaken only against political activists, Jewish or not. For all others life was safe and, as seemed for the most in the Soviet Union at that time, no cloud of troubles was on the horizon.
- Active proponents for emigration to Israel were young generations, the majority of which had never been persecuted, harassed, or disadvantaged for being Jewish.
- Almost all activists were secular, non-religious Jews.
- Few of the Jews had access to Zionist literature beyond the confines of official publications, which could have influenced their Zionist aspirations if available.

The key to understanding these issues is the history of Jews in the Soviet Union after the October Revolution in 1917. It seemed then that the new Jewish life had begun. All restrictions for Jews had been abolished. All peoples, minorities or not, declared equals in rights and opportunities. Young Jews rushed to educational establishments and, as a result, became professionals and employed in all branches of intellectual activities. As should have been expected, their percentage in the intelligent professions was much higher than their share in the total population. Although their presence in an educational

layer of the country was too conspicuous, there were no state-sponsored restrictions for Jewish students. All this changed in 1943–1944 in the heat of WWII.

In 1944 Malenkov, a high-ranking Communist Party executive and, at that time, likely Stalin's heir, sent a letter to local party leaders, later dubbed "Malenkov's Circular," instructing them to limit the appointments of Jews to high-ranking positions.ⁱ

Most historians tend to think that this was a pure anti-Semitic act orchestrated by Stalin and executed by Malenkov. But others claim that there was some merit in this policy. At that time, they point out, the proportion of Jews in all spheres of social activity was too conspicuous. Complaints from the local party leaders demonstrate that in some organizations the proportion of Jews exceeded 50 percent, and the number of students in universities and technical institutions was way larger than the Jewish share in the total population. Such disproportional representation ought to trigger hatred of the majority.

For example, historian Balandin quotes the letter of the party secretary of Moscow University complaining that in 1942, the share of Jews who graduated the faculty of physics was 98 percent and Russians 2 percent.ⁱⁱ

The post-war history of Jews in the Soviet Union is proof that both opinions were correct. The success of Jews had always had tragic consequences for them in any country and any period in history. Notably, Malenkov's circular appeared at the pinnacle of collective Jewish success in the Soviet Union and became a platform for an anti-Jewish campaign, which continued with various intensity up to the 1990s.

Immediately after the war rumors spread out that during the war Jews were hiding in the "rear" of the front where they took "warm and safe places" far away from deadly front lines. As proof of that allegation, there was a disproportional number of Jews, white-collar workers, working in the "rear" during the war. Indeed, there were many Jews who occupied a variety of prominent positions in all branches of economy and science, and particularly so in military production enterprises. This fact was interpreted by anti-Semites as proof that Jews are cowards and chose to hide in the "rear" rather than risk their lives on the front.

At the time of war, it was impossible to avoid conscription. Any attempt, or even a suspicion of such an attempt, entailed a risk of death punishment or years in labor camps. Even for the deftest individuals avoiding conscription was impossible. To suggest that a part of the Jewish population managed to avoid it was an absurd proposition. So, how did it happen that Jews became a visible minority working in the rear?

As mentioned before, the percentage of Jews who graduated from educational establishments was much higher than their share in the total population. After graduation, they became professionals: engineers, managers, medical personal, and so on. When the war started, the government undertook a titanic effort to evacuate vital industries from the western part of the Soviet Union to the east in Ural and West Siberian areas. An integral part of this undertaking was the evacuation of professionals capable of rebuilding the industries in the new places. The effort was a huge success; the new factories were built in record time, the disassembled and evacuated factories were restored to the maximum of their production capacity, electrical power stations with all the gears set up, pharmaceutical enterprises, and most important, military production factories, military equipment design. The whole infrastructure required for the total war had been put in operation. This was an exhausting, nerve-wracking job in the rear of the front. People worked around the clock for years without proper sleep and nourishment while under

immense stress. The government considered, and rightly so as history proved, that the professionals were much more valuable in the rear than on the front, and Jewish professionals, along with other nationalities, were among those appointed to this task. It was not the choice of professionals, whatever their nationality was, to take “warm places” because this was not a matter of their choice. Rather, they did whatever the government assigned them to do and did a remarkable job in the design, construction, and production of the modern armaments without which the victory over the German army would have been impossible.

Still, Jews had their share in the heroism and tragedy of the war. Thus, according to various sources, from 480,000 to 520,000 Jewsⁱⁱⁱ were on the front lines, of which 120,000 to 140,000 were killed in action. About 160 Jews were decorated with the highest reward at the time, The Star of Hero of the Soviet Union. At the end of the war, there were 305 Jews (some sources quote 230) in the rank of generals in the Red Army, not counting those who hid their nationality. Jews also actively participated in the partisan war against the German army, fighting deep inside the occupied territory.

In this regard, a few important issues need to be clarified. First, what made Stalin change his policy toward Jews and other nationalities and choose Russian nationalism? Second, why, contrary to the government’s discriminating policy toward minorities and particularly toward Jews, so many Jews were promoted to the middle and high-ranking positions in the army and the rear and decorated for bravery and achievements in fighting the enemy?

There is no doubt that the initiator of the anti-Jewish campaign was Stalin. The proof of it is the fact that immediately after his death in March 1953, the blatant anti-Semitic campaign ended and was never repeated, at least in such intensity, since then. Many Jews, previously wrongly convicted were rehabilitated and restored in rank and job position.

Some historians and political analysts maintain that Stalin was anti-Semitic and acted upon his feelings of hostility toward Jews. But then, before the war, when Stalin already was an undisputed dictator, there were many Jews in high positions in the party apparatus and all branches of the economy. At that time a verbal anti-Semitic abuse was punished. The whole mood of the country was not anti-Semitic and, even where it existed, usually was unremarkable. Stalin’s anti-Semitic policy began during the war and was, at least in part, based on political considerations, rather than just on personal prejudices. After all, Stalin was a communist; his ideology was not based on Jew-hatred, as it was in Nazi Germany, but rather on internationalism, which postulate was the equality of nations. What really happened that changed Stalin’s mind and heart?

After the war, in his well-known speech, Stalin praised the role of the Russian people in the victory over Germany and explained catastrophic defeats in 1941–1942 by the government’s mistakes. Naturally, nobody asked Stalin what mistakes they were and what the government had done to correct them. Stalin didn’t give any specifics either as it could’ve opened the gates for a flood of unwelcomed discussions and conclusions.

The first months of the Great Patriotic War was a series of catastrophes unprecedented in the history of Russia and perhaps that of humanity. Millions of soldiers were captured as prisoners of war. A large part of the Russian European territory with its industrial and agricultural base fell under Germany’s control. The country was on the verge of collapse. After the war, the task of explaining these gigantic failures was loaded

on the official ideological propaganda machine. They conveniently obliged. In their explanations, there was hardly any mistake of the government. All faults were placed on external forces and circumstances. The perfidy of Germany, which broke the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, and intrigues of Western bourgeois democracies aimed at pushing Germany and the Soviet Union against each other to weaken them both were blamed.

The star argument of ideologists was a surprise German attack. This was not true as the Soviet Army knew it was coming. But no matter how unexpected the assault was, to get millions of soldiers killed and about 3 million captured as POWs in the first few months of war sounds like fantasy. Taking into account the vast space of the Soviet Union, its poor roads, rough terrain, and harsh climate, the advantage of an unexpected assault would not last long and certainly didn't warrant such impressive German initial success. With the proper organization of defense, even the encircled army could resist for a long time and be effective at that. A vivid example of it was the German army of Paulus at the Stalingrad battle. Encircled, deprived of supplies and support, in severe winter, this army fought a few months. More than a million Soviet soldiers died in this battle. Why the Red Army was not capable of such resistance at the start of the war? Clearly, it was the consequence of appalling incompetence of all layers of military and civilian governance. This was not entirely the fault of the government per se, but the scope of that analysis is beyond the purpose of this work. Rather, we will limit the discussion to only one relevant topic of the system of personnel promotion, the appointment of cadres to the key positions, and the decision-making process.

Before the war, the most important criterion for promotion in the army was the degree of conformity to the Communist Marxist ideology. To become an officer, or more so a general, the candidate had to belong to the working class or "productive peasantry," the meaning of which was a poor peasant, whose parents (and himself) had no property and no income above the poverty level. The system of military commissars was created to govern this process and supervise the activity of unit commanders. Commissars had the authority to revoke at will the officer's decisions and instead make their own if deemed necessary by ideological considerations.

For any organization to be effective, it has to employ a system promoting talent, initiative, and achievements. Deviation from this rule leads to the decline of an entity and eventually to its decay. That's what had demonstratively happened at the beginning of the war. Commissars and incompetent careerists, responsible for the combat capability of the huge army, were unable to handle the complexities of modern technological warfare and make competent decisions. Thus, the Red Army became the target of a well-prepared, well-organized foe. As a result, this amorphous mass, officially called Workers-Peasant Red Army, was brought to the brink of disintegration.

But in October 1942, the situation on the front began changing despite the preceding, seemingly fatal losses of armaments, personnel, industrial base, and territories. Something happened that changed the course of the war.

Under the pressure of the battles failures and demands of the General Staff, Staling agreed to abolish the system of commissars and replace it with the system of political workers (Politrabotnic), whose task was limited to ideological matters. This measure restored the principle of the commander's decision-making without consulting a commissar. Naturally, in the heat of a battle decisions had to be made by a professional military man, accountable only to his military superior rather than to a party

representative. Consequently, promotion criteria for officers and soldiers became the achievements of an individual regardless of his devotion to ideology. The most convincing manifestation of it was in promotion of the “not desirable elements,” such as Jews, Crimea Tartars, and others who fit this definition despite Stalin’s measures limiting the promotion of these elements.

Initially, the Malenkov Circular did not have a desirable effect; the promotion of “undesirable elements” did not stop because for the military commanders success in battles was more important than ideology. As was mentioned before, a disproportionately large number of Jews were decorated and promoted to the highest-ranking positions. Among the recipients of the highest award, The Star of Hero of the Soviet Union, were even Crimean Tartars, whom Stalin accused at the end of the war of being a nation of traitors. This whole nation was uprooted from their traditional living place (Crimea) and transferred to Uzbekistan and other southeast republics. (Crimea Tartars decorated by The Star of Hero of the Soviet Union were allowed to stay.)

This principle of promotion had a profound effect on the Army’s quality. All officer corps up to the top were quickly replaced by individuals who demonstrated their capabilities on the battlefield. This elevated the quality of military management almost to the level of their adversary and became one of the primary factors which decided the war’s outcome.

Nothing was more defaming to the image of Jewish people as the spreading disinformation that they did not fight on the front lines. At the end of the war, there was hardly a single family in the Soviet Union which had not lost a relative in the battles. The notion that Russians fought and died to save the life of sly, cowardly Jews in the rear was extremely insulting and inflammatory. A Jew became an object of contempt, humiliation, and hatred.

For Jews, it was a double insult. Not only was it a blatant lie about their role in the war but they lost, in addition to those who fought and died on the front line, their relatives and loved ones in the Nazis holocaust in the occupied territories.

In 1945, after the war, when the anti-Jewish hysteria was gathering strength, the Soviet newspaper Einikait published a list of Jewish soldiers decorated with the highest award of the time, The Star of Hero of the Soviet Union. At that time 135 of them were known out of 157. This was an unusually high percentage for the half a million Jewish soldiers who were in combat. The author of the article was journalist Miriam Eisenshtadt. At that time the authorities did not react as the translated version of the article was reprinted in many Western newspapers. The wrath of the communist ideologists found Eisenshtadt later in April 1950. She was arrested and accused of disclosing the “state secret,” which she obtained legally and officially from the 7th Award department.

She was sentenced to the “highest measure,” which meant the death penalty. The colonel who helped her with obtaining the list was sentenced to twenty-five years in a labor camp. This was just one, albeit a vivid, example of the anti-Semitic campaign that continued with various intensity to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

After Stalin’s death, the government adopted a less harsh anti-Semitic policy but did not abandon it. Jokes about Jewish cowardice during the war became the humor of the day. Central newspapers printed articles about corrupted Jews and criminal Jews, about Jews abusing the power of their position, and about Jews with connections to their relatives in Western countries. In lower levels of society, one often can hear stories of

how filthy Jews were and how low their morality was in comparison to the Russians. One could have heard such stories even in the remote Siberian locations where generations had not seen any Jew.

The human resources department restricted hiring Jews in military industries where high-security admission was required. And yet, with all these restrictions, the authorities were unable to stop the advancement of Jewish professionals to the upper, educated strata of society. Sooner or later, non-Jewish top managers had to employ the most suitable candidates, regardless of nationality, to get things done. Many among them were Jewish.

New generations of Jews were willing to assimilate and disappear as Jews, but the government did not let them. One of the strict bureaucratic identifications was nationality, which was a part of passport particulars. With all the comfort and good life for many Jews in the post-Stalin era, a significant part of them felt that it was a temporary quiet before the storm. History, at last, delivered its lesson to the minds of new generations that the storm will come; the only uncertainty is when. Older generations remained quiet and scared. For them, it was unthinkable to contemplate anything to change the situation even more so to emigrate from the Soviet Union.

The 1960s in the Soviet Union started with promising features for all, Jews included. The standard of living, albeit not impressive in comparison with Western Europe, rose to a level much higher than it had been at any time in the history of Imperial and Soviet Russia. Open descent was not significant although the younger generations, who did not experience Stalin's terror, did not fear the secret service as much as their parents did. Criticizing authorities in private conversations was not punished; political prisoners were just a handful. On the surface, it looked like the society lived in contentment if not in harmony with the communist regime.

But as in any peace-and-quiet period in the history of societies, it was the time when discontent and the want for change were brewing under the thin veneer of the quiet life. Troubles just were waiting for the right circumstances to emerge. And these circumstances did come in clusters in rapid succession, causing drastic changes in the life of Jews in the Soviet Union.

In June 1967, a war erupted between Israel and its three Arab neighbors: Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. Equipped by the Soviet Union with the best armaments, the Arab armies appeared to be a formidable force, superior in the quantity of hardware and manpower over Israel. The Soviet rulers were confident in the victory of the Arab coalition. The tone of the official media was bellicose and revengeful, justifying the annihilation of Israel for all its wrongdoings.

In the first two days, all news was about the impressive losses of the Israeli army and the fast advance of the Arab forces. And then, all of a sudden, the mood of the news changed to fury and indignation. "Stop Israeli aggression!" screamed the Soviet media. It appealed to all honest, peace-loving people around the world and the Soviet Union population in the first place to stand for Arab countries, which became victims of Israeli aggression. The Soviet people, and Jews among them, understood the message.

Six days after the war had started, its outcome was the mind-boggling news of the day; Israel defeated the Arab coalition. The truth became an ugly reality for the Soviet government's ideological machine and anti-Semites.

The Soviet military trained Arab armies in modern warfare; the Soviet government supplied them the latest war technology; a few Soviet military officers participated in the

battles against Israel; the military superiority of Arab armies was out of the question; and yet, in a matter of six days Arabs lost the war and the myth of Soviet military equipment superiority was ruined. And there was much more than just the defeat of Arab armies; another myth was destroyed, the myth that Jews are cowards and incapable of fighting.

In private conversations anti-Semites resorted to non-convincing explanations, the most popular one being that Americans, not Israelis, fought and won the war. Also, they blamed Arabs claiming that they were so backward that modern warfare was beyond their level of civilization. But all these anecdotal theories evaporated with time.

The Six-Day War had a profound effect on the mentality of the Soviet Jews. Most of them felt vindicated with their mood elevated to euphoria. The war outcome restored Jewish dignity; it was the revelation of the truth so long distorted by hatred or political considerations of the rulers. It was a blow in the face of the government and anti-Semites. Above all though, there was another consequence of the Six-Day War, which the Soviet government was most displeased by. Young generations of Jews realized that they were no longer homeless. There was a country, the Jewish country, which was armed and had the strength and will to defend itself, and stay equal and proud among other nations. Zionism, which started in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century, spread among young Jews almost a hundred years later like a fire in a dry forest. Brewing under the calm surface, it was gathering strength, invisible and waiting for a suitable moment to manifest itself in bold action. It must be noted in this regard that Zionism was not an anti-Soviet movement. It was not its intention to change the existing regime or challenge it in any way as long as it let Jews go. For many Jews, however, discontent with the communist regime and the spirit of the anti-Jewish environment were the primary reasons for emigration.

As various statistical sources show, in the 1970s from 150,000 to 250,000 Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union of which in the middle of the decade most of them chose to go to the US or other countries of Western civilization. Later, emigration was even less connected with Judaism and Zionism. Thus, in 1989, about 71,000 Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union of whom only 12,117 went to Israel. Communist ideology, assimilation, mixed marriages, and harassment by authorities almost solved the so-long-debated "Jewish Question" in Russia.

There was another factor that made Soviet Jews prefer America to Israel, namely, worries about war and the enormous military challenge of defending Israel against surrounding hostile countries. Israel is a tiny country whose territory is not defensible. A war with its neighbors has been a certainty. For the family with kids, it is the responsibility of parents to decide for them, knowing too well that they will live through wars and possibly die in them. The wounds of WWII were still fresh in the memory of the Soviet people. If not for consideration of war, many more Jews likely would have chosen Israel over any other country.

There are some Soviet Jews who went to Germany, attracted by the country's excellent financial support to immigrants, its tolerance to Jews and other nations, and its high living standard. There is no doubt in their minds that Germany now is the one of best European democracies, tolerant and kind to newcomers. Indeed, it is. But so far, providence has not rewarded those who ignored history's lessons in Germany or elsewhere.

The issue of morality and legality of Jewish settlements on the land previously populated by Arabs sometimes was a topic of discussion among intellectuals and Jewish activists in the Soviet Union. The consensus was that the land that Arabs lost in wars was not “occupied” but “conquered,” the aggressor being Arab countries. The notion of giving back the conquered territory seemed absurd for the Russian mentality of an assimilated Jew. If the aggressor gets compensated for its loss in the war by getting back the lost territory, it could try again and again to destroy the adversary and has nothing to lose in case of defeat.

But for the majority of Zionist-minded Jews, it was not an issue at all. For them, there was a Jewish state where they could live in dignity.

Although the Six-Day War had triggered Zionist aspiration in a significant part of the Soviet Jewry, there were just a few sporadic attempts to request an exit visa in its aftermath. A chance to get it was slim, and harassment by authorities was certain. An appeal for help from any foreign country or organization was out of the question since the Soviet rulers did not yield to the pressure of any kind from abroad. But the Soviet determination to persecute all visa applicants began to change in 1970, after a failed attempt to hijack an airplane. The trigger was the least expected cause: military clashes of Soviet and Chinese armies in March 1969 at the Damansky Island on the Ussuri River.

Actually, the Sino-Soviet tensions started much earlier, in the late 1950s or the early 1960s, caused by a number of issues, but neither country let them become public knowledge. Hostility erupted over a tiny, useless piece of land amid the Ussuri River, where the Sino-Russian border runs and threatened to morph into a large-scale war, possibly with the use of nuclear bombs. Soviets had better military hardware, a better army, and large nuclear potential. Chinese nuclear capacity was very small and the delivery system virtually non-existent, but they had an enormous superiority in the number of foot soldiers they could conscript if the need arose. In the rough Siberian terrain with dense forests, swamps, hills, and mountains, the use of war technology would not be efficient and certainly would not decide the outcome of a prolonged war. For the Soviets, therefore, it was of primary importance to know how the West, and America in the first place, would react if the Soviet Union used nuclear bombs against China in the case of a major confrontation.

For example, according to records of Michael S. Gerson, “At an 18th August lunch meeting in Washington between William Stearman, a mid-level State Department official in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), and Boris Davydov, the Second Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, Davydov asked ‘point-blank what the U.S. would do if the Soviet Union attacked and destroyed China’s nuclear installations.’”^{iv}

The Soviet government tried its best to make sure that America as well as Western Europe, at the very least, remain neutral, or better yet sympathetic to the Soviet position. To move in this direction, the Soviets initiated talks with Western countries, which later were dubbed “detente.” In consequence, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe started in 1973, and two years later the Helsinki Accord was signed. One of its articles was “Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.” Although the agreement was not a binding one, the Soviet Union could not ignore it, more so with facing a large-scale Jewish protest against restriction on emigration.

Coincidentally, a massive Jewish struggle for emigration took place at the time when the Soviet Communist party was neither prepared nor had an inclination for the mass repressions of Stalin's era. After Stalin's death, the Communist Party fundamentally restricted the power of the KGB. In the 1970s, it had no authority to arrest a Soviet citizen for any reason. Moreover, it had no prisons, and therefore no place to hold a detainee after midnight. The only action it was allowed to do was to interrogate a person for a few hours, after which this person should be either released or, if there were proof of guilt, handed over to the militia (now police) for further, now legal, procedures. But this procedure is public with open courts, indictments, legal defense, and other provisions restricting the power of the security establishments.

The restrictions to the KGB's power were established not so much out of concern for the broad population but for protecting the Communist Party itself. In Stalin's time, the NKVD (what became the KGB) could arrest anyone, literally, anyone, except Stalin, at will, accuse the arrested of anything without any proof of guilt, and then execute them after a short court procedure behind closed doors. Consequently, the Communist Party's top echelon were victims of the NKVD even in greater proportion than the general population. For example, the special commission established in 1956 found out that of 1,966 delegates to the XXII Communist Party congress, 1,103 had been arrested; of them, 848 were executed; of 139 members and member candidates to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the highest level of power, 98 were executed, and 5 committed suicides.^v

Even worse was the situation in the lower levels of the party apparatus; in most locales, all leadership was executed. This was also true for other important places of power such as the army, the navy, and the economy.

With the profound restriction of KGB power, it was impossible to use the existing legal system for persecution of such magnitude. The penitentiary system also could not handle that many prisoners. There was also concern about the consequence of old-time-style repression when so many of the young generation were no longer afraid of authorities.

The mix of internal and external circumstances forced the Soviet Union to yield to international and internal pressure and let tens of thousands of Jewish applicants go.

In practical terms, authorities were alarmed by a large-scale brain drain. One thing is to constrain Jewish upward mobility when exit from the Soviet Union was impossible, but quite another is to let them go leaving their "warm places" empty with no quick replacement in sight. Particularly troublesome was the brain drain in industries responsible for military hardware design, production, and services. In some cases, authorities issued a back-dated security clearance to applicants which gave them the legal grounds to refuse the exit visa.

At the same time, the Communist propaganda machine began working in high gear. Zionism was declared as a culprit guilty of all the sins of humanity and became a target of ideological brainwashing. According to the Communist Party doctrine, a Zionist was a Jew, of course, but a bad sort of Jew. What exactly was wrong with this evil Jew was not clearly defined. In general, Zionism was a sort of imperialistic ideology the goal of which was the same as of imperialists. The only feature that distinguished Zionism from other ills of capitalist ideologies was that it was Jewish. To call someone a Zionist was even worse than just to call him a Jew.

The Jews who wanted to emigrate became Zionists and as such considered traitors. What else could explain their desire to leave the best country in the world, as propaganda claimed the Soviet Union was? No loyalty to the country where they were born and raised? More so, Israel was declared an enemy. Therefore, the one who wanted to live in Israel was an enemy.

Much later, long after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a serious attempt to attract expatriate Jews back to Russia. Thus, in September 2013, the government of the Jewish Autonomous Region created in 1934 (In 2010, approximately 1,600 Jews lived in it.) voted for the program of incentives to attract former Russian-Jewish compatriots living abroad to return and settle in the region. According to official statistics, so far, the grand total number of the returned was one Jew. This is impressive in a funny way.

More than one million Jews have emigrated from Russia since the early 1970s. The Jewish emigration continues in waves to 2021. Now, by different estimates, fewer than 200,000 Jews remain in Russia.

Paradoxically, the so-called “Jewish Question” in the Soviet Union in the 1960s was very close to its solution in a rather peaceful way. There was almost nothing connecting the majority of the Soviet Jews to international Jewry, Jewish religion, and traditions. The children of mixed marriages usually took the nationality of a non-Jewish parent. The younger generations were quite willing to forfeit their Jewish identity, but the authorities did not let them, enforcing the mandatory identification of nationality on their passports.

As it stands now, the trend of assimilation, acculturation, mixed marriages, and departure from Judaism continues unabated and likely will not change in the foreseeable future. Perhaps it won't be too long before almost all Jews either leave Russia or fully assimilate taking another nationality, and the only ever-lasting anti-Semitism will remain in this country in their stead.

ⁱ Malenkov's circular. «Маленковский циркуляр». Маленков. Третий вождь Страны Советов [Maxima-Library] (wikireading.ru)

ⁱⁱ Malenkov's circular.

ⁱⁱⁱ Евреи в Красной армии во время Великой Отечественной Войны. Арад Ицхак

^{iv} Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict. Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969*

^v Доклад комиссии ЦК КПСС Президиуму ЦК КПСС. Документ№7