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DE LA DÉNONCIATION À L'INSTRUMENTALISATION : L'ANTISÉMITISME ET LE RÉCIT DE L'HOLOCAUSTE DANS LA RUSSIE POST-SOVIÉTIQUE



Composition du Jury :

DOUZET Frédérick, Directrice de thèse, Professeure à l'Université Paris 8
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Image de couverture :
Affiche de propagande soviétique, 1928 : « Qui est antisémite ?»
Légende au bas de l'affiche :
« Ces individus, par rage et sauvagerie, incitent les ignorants à se dresser contre les Juifs. »

Cover image:
Soviet propaganda poster, 1928, "Who is an Anti-Semite?"
Caption at the bottom reads:
“These people, out of rage and savagery, incite ignorant people against the Jews.”

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Reuven Gamburg (1923–2006), fils d'Avraham et Roza, fut officier dans l'Armée soviétique pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale.
Klara Gamburg (1928–2021), fille de Leib et Sonia Rachlis, est parvenue à fuir l'occupation nazie et à survivre à la guerre.
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Reuven Gamburg (1923–2006), son of Avraham and Roza, was an officer in the Soviet Army during World War II.
Klara Gamburg (1928–2021), daughter of Leib and Sonia Rachlis, managed to escape Nazi occupation and survive the war.
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Résumé

(version française)

Introduction

Contexte et problématique

En janvier 2016, le président russe Vladimir Poutine a invité les Juifs européens à venir vivre en Russie, en réponse à la forte hausse de l'antisémitisme sur le continent européen. « Ils sont partis sous l'Union soviétique, qu'ils reviennent ». C'est ce que proposa Vladimir Poutine lors d'une rencontre avec une délégation du Congrès juif européen. La proposition du président russe fut ignorée, malgré l'escalade significative de l'antisémitisme dans plusieurs pays européens. La tendance est plutôt contraire, entre 2022 et 2023, une nouvelle vague d'émigration juive massive depuis la Russie a réduit la population juive du pays à un niveau historiquement bas. Parallèlement, un retour marqué de l'antisémitisme russe s'esquisse, se manifestant par des actes de violence et de vandalisme, mais aussi par une présence de plus en plus marquée dans la rhétorique de hauts responsables gouvernementaux, y compris le président lui-même. C'est l'un des paradoxes des 25 années de présidence de Vladimir Poutine, qui pourtant n'a jamais caché sa sympathie pour le peuple juif depuis son arrivée à la présidence.

Le sujet de cette thèse porte sur ces nombreux paradoxes, et sur l'évolution de l'antisémitisme et du discours sur la Shoah dans la Russie post-soviétique. Ma recherche couvre une période allant de la fin des années 1980, lorsque la direction de l'Union soviétique s'engageait sur la voie de réformes, jusqu'aujourd'hui.

La fin des années 1990 a marqué une nouvelle étape dans l'évolution de l'antisémitisme, la « question juive» étant directement liée à l'agenda du Kremlin, soucieux de garantir une continuité qui ne déposséderait pas l'ancienne élite. Cette transition s'est accompagnée d'accusations d'antisémitisme (origines juives des principaux opposants du Kremlin, affiliation du nouveau président, Vladimir Poutine, à l'héritage du KGB, une organisation marquée par une forte tendance antisémite) générant un enthousiasme limité de la communauté juive, perplexe quant à la sincérité des déclarations et positions pro-juives du nouveau pouvoir.

Au-delà de cela, ce sujet revêt une importance particulière dans la Russie contemporaine ainsi que dans le cadre plus large de la montée de l'antisémitisme à travers le monde. Du point de vue de la politique étrangère russe, la mémoire de la Shoah et la question de l'antisémitisme sont

instrumentales dans la bataille idéologique contre l'Europe occidentale. Nous le voyons de façon flagrante dans la guerre menée contre l'Ukraine, le Kremlin ayant justifié cette « opération » de croisade pour libérer l'Ukraine de son passé nazi. L'intervention de la Russie par le biais d'opérations d'influence en Europe, notamment en France, mettant en scène des éléments de nature antisémite (mains rouges imprimées sur le Mémorial de la Shoah à Paris, étoiles de David rue de Rivoli etc.), démontrent ce caractère instrumental.

Compte tenu du parcours paradoxal de l'antisémitisme en Russie au cours des quarante dernières années, cette recherche s'efforcera de répondre aux questions suivantes : pourquoi, comment, et avec quelles conséquences la Russie post-soviétique est-elle passée du rejet d'une politique d'antisémitisme d'État à l'ère soviétique, pour finalement revenir vers un discours, parfois ouvertement antisémite, au plus haut niveau, passant notamment par la distorsion de la mémoire de la Shoah à des fins politiques.

Littérature et cadre théorique

L'étude universitaire de l'antisémitisme durant la perestroïka et les débuts de la période post-soviétique s'illustre avec cet ouvrage fondateur de William Korey, *Russian Anti-Semitism, Pamyat, and the Demonology of Zionism*. Adoptant une approche interdisciplinaire, Korey a analysé la montée de l'antisémitisme entre 1985 et 1994, en soulignant la continuité entre l'antisémitisme soviétique et post-soviétique, et en mettant en lumière son instrumentalisation dans le contexte de la démocratisation de la Russie. Toutefois, Korey et d'autres chercheurs de l'époque ont en grande partie négligé la dimension de politique étrangère de l'antisémitisme.

Vyacheslav Likhachev (2003) s'est penché l'infiltration politique de l'antisémitisme à travers les médias, les mouvements d'opposition et les institutions religieuses dans les années 1990. En s'appuyant sur des données sociologiques rendues disponibles après la chute de l'URSS, il a analysé corrélation entre xénophobie générale et attitudes antisémites, y associant la hausse du radicalisme islamique et de sa rhétorique antisémite.

L'historien Mikhaïl Kostyrtchenko a introduit une lecture fondée sur la continuité idéologique et géopolitique, traçant des parallèles entre l'antisémitisme soviétique tardif et la résurgence des idéologies de droite radicale.
Alors que le négationnisme de la Shoah restait un phénomène marginal à cette époque, Stella Rock a mis en garde contre certains facteurs de risque sous-jacents tels que le scepticisme historique, le sentiment antisémite et la quasi absence d'enseignement de la Shoah.

Malgré une amélioration générale des relations avec la communauté juive, Simon Kaplin a alerté sur le fait que des groupes ultranationalistes restaient actifs et influents. Par ailleurs, Vladimir Khanin a introduit la notion d'«antisémitisme par le bas», suggérant un décalage entre la perception d'une menace antisémite et sa réalité, notamment au sein de la communauté juive elle-même.

Apres 2010, des chercheurs comme Lerner et d'autres ont commencé à attribuer les politiques juives de la Russie aux convictions personnelles et à la biographie de Poutine. Cette lecture s'est imposée dans un contexte d'autoritarisme de plus en plus personnalisée, où les politiques d'État reflétaient les inclinations du président.

Tandis que Khanin qualifiait la Russie d'«îlot de sécurité» comparée à l'Europe ou au Moyen-Orient en matière de manifestations de l'antisémitisme, d'autres chercheurs comme Kaplin et Lerner ont souligné des problèmes structurels, tels que le contrôle des médias, l'anti-libéralisme et la démocratie de façade , qui permettaient à la rhétorique antisémite de persister. Lilia Shevtsova avait déjà diagnostiqué ces tendances autoritaires dès la fin des années 2000.

Malgré la complexité croissante des relations entre le Kremlin et Israël, l'antisémitisme figurait rarement de manière explicite dans les agendas bilatéraux ou de politique étrangère de la Russie. Anna Borshchevskaya a analysé l'ouverture de la Russie envers Israël sous les angles culturel, économique et géopolitique.

À partir de 2019, des chercheurs ont commencé à examiner de plus près la « militarisation » ou l'**instrumentalisation** de la mémoire de la Shoah. Sam Sokol a étudié les accusations d'antisémitisme dans le contexte de la guerre menée par la Russie contre l'Ukraine, bien que sous un angle principalement ukrainien. Ilya Yablokov, quant à lui, a évalué la place des théories

conspirationnistes antisémites en Russie, concluant qu'elles restaient marginales, apportant ainsi une rare note d'optimisme.

Un tournant majeur a eu lieu avec les travaux de Kiril Feferman et Anton Weiss-Wendt (2021-2022), qui ont analysé la politisation de la mémoire de la Shoah. Tous deux ont souligné la manière dont le Kremlin utilisait la Shoah pour légitimer sa politique étrangère, obtenir le soutien d'organisations juives, et attaquer ses adversaires géopolitiques.

Contribution

La littérature existante se penche sur les nombreux aspects de l'expression antisémite en Russie, des relations Russie-Israel, et plus récemment de l'utilisation de l'antisémitisme et de la mémoire de la Shoah à des fins politiques. Toutefois, la plupart des études abordent ces questions de manière isolée, alors qu'elles sont imbriquées et doivent être envisagées comme les différents angles d'une même stratégie. Tenter de proposer une ligne de lecture inclusive fut à la base de mon choix de sujet.

Méthodologie

Les professeurs Frédéric Douzé et David Kaplan, notant que la géopolitique diffère selon ses modes d'application, la divisent en géopolitique formelle, populaire et pratique. La géopolitique pratique est particulièrement pertinente pour cette recherche en raison de l'engagement de la direction russe envers une vision géopolitique du monde et des politiques visant à la mettre en œuvre. Cette vision géopolitique est populaire parmi les proches collaborateurs de Poutine, et le président lui-même se réfère à la géopolitique comme étant « la base de la contradiction entre la Russie et les pays occidentaux. » Il est cependant essentiel de noter que, dans les milieux politiques et universitaires russes, la géopolitique est perçue davantage dans sa forme « classique » que dans une version critique telle que développée par Lacoste. Comme le souligne Anastasia Mitrofanova, « la géopolitique russe est donc moins une

méthode analytique qu'une synthèse scientifique visant à fournir une image complète et objective de la réalité. »

L'approche géopolitique permet de réévaluer l'équilibre des forces entre divers acteurs étatiques et non étatiques sur les questions de l'antisémitisme et de la mémoire de la Shoah en Russie. L'utilisation à la fois des dimensions infranationales et supranationales, ainsi que l'idée de Lacoste « d'enchevêtrement des ensembles spatiaux »," constitue un élément crucial de cette analyse, qui inclut la confrontation de la Russie avec l'Occident et l'Ukraine ainsi que l'utilisation de la mémoire de la Shoah; les relations de la Russie avec Israël et son rôle dans les conflits au Moyen-Orient; les relations du Kremlin avec la communauté juive en Russie et avec les organisations juives internationales; et, enfin, les dynamiques de l'antisémitisme à l'intérieur même de la Russie.

Cette recherche s'appuie également sur mon expérience professionnelle et personnelle en Russie entre 2000 et 2003, ainsi que sur mes visites en Russie, Ukraine, Biélorussie et Ouzbékistan entre les années 1990 et 2000. Cette expérience a inclus une connaissance approfondie de la communauté juive et des questions liées à l'émigration juive, à l'antisémitisme et à la mémoire de la Shoah.
Entre 2019 et 2022, j'ai eu l'opportunité de travailler sur l'antisémitisme et la mémoire de l'Holocauste au sein du Conseil de l'Europe à Strasbourg, incluant des échanges avec la délégation russe sur la position de la Russie sur ces questions.

Pour mieux comprendre le rôle clé de Vladimir Poutine dans la politique du Kremlin envers la communauté juive, j'ai interviewé des personnes l'ayant rencontré, dont certaines l'ayant connu personnellement, dont l'ancien dissident et homme politique israélien Natan Sharansky, ainsi que l'ancien conseiller de Vladimir Poutine, Abbas Gallyamov. J'ai également pu interroger Arkady Mil-Man, ancien ambassadeur d'Israël en Russie. Un entretien approfondi avec Ilya Altman, vice-président de la Fondation pour la Shoah, m'a permis d'aborder plus en détail les questions contemporaines liées à la mémoire de la Shoah en Russie. Ces interviews ont été réalisées entre 2022 et 2023.

Mon travail avec des sources primaires a constitué un volet essentiel servant de base de ma recherche. Il comprend l'étude d'interviews télévisées de Vladimir Poutine et de hauts responsables, leurs articles dans les médias et sur des sites officiels, le suivi systématique des programmes analytiques et d'actualité à la télévision russe, la lecture régulière de la presse officielle, d'opposition et juive, ainsi que des publications sur les réseaux sociaux russes, principalement les chaînes Telegram.
Pour examiner la position israélienne, j'ai suivi les médias et les déclarations des dirigeants israéliens.

Positionnement

Mon origine et mon parcours ont largement prédéterminé le choix de mon sujet de recherche. Je suis né à Jytomyr, une petite ville de la République socialiste soviétique d'Ukraine, alors partie intégrante de l'Union soviétique. Ayant grandi dans une famille mixte (ma mère était juive, mon père grec), j'ai vécu très tôt les conséquences de mon statut de minorité. Mes grands-parents maternels ont survécu à la Seconde Guerre mondiale, mais une grande partie de leur famille a été décimée. Après l'arrivée au pouvoir de Mikhaïl Gorbatchev, notre famille a déménagé en Israël. Certains membres de notre famille vivent encore en Ukraine, tandis que d'autres ont récemment été contraints de partir en raison de l'occupation russe de l'est de l'Ukraine. Mon engagement sur ce sujet est directement lié à mon vécu, tant personnel que professionnel. Selon les professeurs Douzé et Kaplan, l'approche de la géopolitique critique « a montré l'importance de comprendre les propres perspectives des auteurs ». Parmi les principales façons d'éviter ou de réduire les biais dans la recherche, ils suggèrent « une certaine distance critique par rapport à leurs propres perspectives, en précisant au lecteur "d'où ils parlent" et en confrontant les points de vue contradictoires de différents acteurs pour éviter le risque de s'enfermer dans une seule représentation ou un seul point de vue ». C'est ce que j'ai tenté de faire ici.

Organisation de la thèse

La première partie analyse l'évolution de l'antisémitisme et de l'antisionisme dans la Russie post-soviétique, en se concentrant sur les présidences de Mikhaïl Gorbatchev et Boris Eltsine. Elle explore le recul des politiques antisémites soviétiques, détaillant la normalisation des relations avec la population juive et Israël dans le contexte des réformes démocratiques des années 1980 et 1990.

La seconde partie étudie l'instrumentalisation de la question juive et de la mémoire de la Shoah à des fins politiques sous Poutine. Elle montre comment ces enjeux sont utilisés pour renforcer le pouvoir, discréditer l'Ukraine et plus généralement l'Europe occidentale et justifier des politiques intérieures et extérieures, tout en exacerbant les tensions antisémites dans la société russe contemporaine.

Partie I - le démantèlement de l'antisémitisme d'État dans la Russie post-soviétique : causes, avancées et limites

L'effondrement de l'Union soviétique a marqué un tournant décisif dans la relation de l'État avec sa population juive, annonçant un démantèlement progressif de l'antisémitisme et de l'antisionisme institutionnalisés, tels qu'ils s'étaient exprimés notamment après la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Cette première partie propose d'examiner les facteurs historiques et politiques ayant conduit à la rupture avec les positions et politiques soviétiques, en analysant les causes de ce changement, ses réussites partielles mais aussi ses limites.

Nous nous attacherons d'abord à présenter un aperçu de l'antisémitisme soviétique, en retraçant son évolution depuis les positions ambivalentes de Lénine et Staline sur la « question juive », jusqu'au durcissement idéologique du stalinisme, notamment dans ses dernières années, et aux campagnes ouvertement antisionistes des années 1960 à 1980.

La perestroïka, initiée par Mikhael Gorbatchev, a ouvert la voie à un changement certain, presque immédiat, motivé par les réformes, les pressions internes, les pressions occidentales et l'émigration massive des Juifs.

Sous Boris Eltsine, les espoirs démocratiques ont été contrariés par la montée des mouvements nationalistes, encouragés par l'inaction du gouvernement, et permettant le retour du discours antisémite dans l'espace public. Malgré certaines avancées, on constate que la Russie post-soviétique n'a pas réussi à démanteler entièrement l'héritage idéologique, historique et structurel de l'antisémitisme soviétique.

Cette section explore les tensions entre réforme et continuité, progrès et régression, dans la redéfinition de l'identité de l'État russe, après la chute de l'URSS.

Chapitre 1: les raisons de la rupture avec les politiques soviétiques d'antisionisme et d'antisémitisme

Au milieu des années 1980, la «question juive» figurait de manière permanente sur l'agenda de la direction soviétique. Comme lors des décennies précédentes, cette question comportait deux volets : un volet externe, les relations avec l'État d'Israël, et un volet interne, le statut de la population juive en Union soviétique. Du point du pouvoir, ces deux aspects n'étaient officiellement pas liés, mais en réalité, les relations avec Israël exerçaient une influence considérable sur la situation des Juifs soviétiques, laquelle devenait à son tour un enjeu de politique internationale et un point de friction entre l'Union soviétique, d'une part, et Israël et les États-Unis, d'autre part.

Cadres idéologiques et politiques de l'antisionisme et de l'antisémitisme soviétiques : genèse et transformations

Avant la Révolution d'Octobre 1917, la Russie constituait un centre majeur du sionisme ; l'Organisation sioniste russe étant le principal mouvement politique juif de l'époque. Malgré une certaine tolérance initiale de la part du pouvoir soviétique envers l'émigration juive vers la Palestine britannique, la politique de l'URSS devint hostile au sionisme et à Israël à partir de la fin des années 1940, en raison de l'alignement pro-occidental d'Israël. L'idéologie marxiste de Lénine influença profondément la vision des Juifs forgée plus tard par le pouvoir soviétique, rejetant leur statut de nation distincte et s'opposant au sionisme, perçu comme une distraction par rapport à la lutte des classes. Lénine prônait l'assimilation des Juifs dans la société russe. Bien qu'il ait condamné l'antisémitisme, le mouvement bolchevik, avec des figures comme Staline, n'hésita pas à instrumentaliser le sentiment antijuif à des fins politiques.

Dans les premières années de l'Union soviétique, l'attitude envers les Juifs et le sionisme fut marquée par un certain pragmatisme : les autorités toléraient les organisations sionistes, espérant tirer des bénéfices diplomatiques, notamment auprès du Royaume-Uni et des États-Unis. Cependant, dès la fin des années 1920, cette tolérance prit fin : les activités sionistes furent

interdites et l'antisémitisme encouragé, avant de devenir une politique répressive dans les années 1930.

L'idéologie soviétique, ancrée dans le marxisme-léninisme, dénonçait le sionisme comme un projet bourgeois, impérialiste et pro-britannique, incompatible avec l'internationalisme prolétarien et les aspirations arabes. Tout en entretenant des liens commerciaux avec le Yichouv, l'URSS soutenait parallèlement les mouvements nationalistes arabes, illustrant une tension constante entre idéologie et intérêts géopolitiques. Dans le contexte de la « Grande Terreur », cette ligne se durcit : bien que Staline ait publiquement condamné l'antisémitisme, la répression frappa durement les Juifs, perçus comme surreprésentés dans l'appareil d'État. Le tournant nationaliste du « socialisme dans un seul pays» marginalisa davantage les Juifs au sein des élites, marquant le passage d'un pragmatisme initial à une hostilité idéologique affirmée.

Pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, la population juive d'Union soviétique subit d'importantes pertes. Cependant, les autorités soviétiques dissimulèrent, après-guerre, l'ampleur de la Shoah. La question juive fut instrumentalisée par le régime, notamment à travers la création du Comité juif antifasciste (JAC), utilisé à des fins de propagande à destination de l'Occident, tout en négligeant les tragédies vécues par les Juifs sur le sol soviétique.

Après la guerre, les tendances antisémites se renforcèrent, notamment à travers la campagne contre le cosmopolitisme, dans laquelle les Juifs furent particulièrement visés. Le pouvoir soviétique les accusa de liens intellectuels avec l'Occident et les considéra comme une menace pour le régime. Les tentatives du JAC de défendre les intérêts des Juifs soviétiques entraînèrent sa dissolution et la liquidation de ses dirigeants, parmi lesquels Solomon Mikhoels. Cette affirmation inattendue d'un sentiment national juif fut perçue négativement par les autorités, surtout dans le contexte de la création de l'État d'Israël en 1948, renforçant la méfiance du pouvoir envers la loyauté des Juifs soviétiques.

Malgré la montée de l'antisémitisme en URSS, entre 1946 et 1948, le gouvernement soviétique a soutenu la création de l'État d'Israël, y voyant une opportunité d'affaiblir la position britannique dans la région. L'URSS vota en faveur du plan onusien de partition de la Palestine, et fut le

premier pays à reconnaître Israël, autorisant la Tchécoslovaquie à fournir des armes aux forces israéliennes dans le cadre de la guerre d'indépendance.

Après la défaite de ses alliés arabes lors de la guerre des Six Jours, l'URSS rompit ses relations diplomatiques avec Israël. Le gouvernement soviétique lança alors une campagne antisioniste et antisémite, diffusant stéréotypes et théories du complot, et alimentant les sentiments anti-israéliens à l'étranger. Le KGB forma et soutint des groupes terroristes palestiniens agissant contre Israël et les intérêts occidentaux. Ainsi, l'antisionisme et l'antisémitisme devinrent des éléments centraux de la politique soviétique, ce qui a terme va affaiblir l'influence de Moscou au Moyen-Orient et nuire à son image sur la scène internationale. La politique de discrimination envers les Juifs se poursuivit jusqu'à l'effondrement de l'Union soviétique.

Perestroïka, rapprochement avec l'Occident et la « question juive »

Sous Gorbatchev, dès 1987, débutèrent des transformations profondes et le démantèlement progressif du système soviétique. Ces changements eurent un impact considérable sur la situation des Juifs soviétiques. Les éléments majeurs de la politique de réforme de Gorbatchev, notamment l'autorisation de l'émigration et le rapprochement diplomatique avec Israël, ont constitué une avancée majeure. En parallèle, la résurgence de l'antisémitisme à la fin des années 1980, en tant que phénomène socio-politique, fut rendue possible par l'abolition de la censure et la politique de *glasnost*, dans un contexte de concurrence politique et d'abandon du modèle d'antisémitisme d'état caractéristique de la période soviétique.

Pourtant, les premières années du pouvoir de Gorbatchev renforcèrent les politiques antisionistes et antisémites existantes, intégrées à l'idéologie officielle de l'URSS. La propagande employait des clichés antisémites, et Gorbatchev nia l'existence de l'antisémitisme dans ses premières interviews, reprenant la rhétorique soviétique traditionnelle.

Dans les discussions au Politburo comme dans ses conversations privées, il exprimait des perceptions stéréotypées des Juifs, témoignant d'un certain aveuglement idéologique. Le Comité antisioniste poursuivit ses activités, diffusant du matériel de propagande et accusant les États-Unis d'antisémitisme. La publication et la large distribution de littérature visant à diaboliser le

sionisme et à renforcer les stéréotypes antisémites au sein de la société soviétique se poursuivirent sans relâche.

Sous la surface du discours idéologique officiel, les premiers signes de changement commencèrent à apparaître, influencés par des facteurs internes et internationaux. Les autorités soviétiques engagèrent des négociations secrètes avec Israël et les États-Unis, ouvrant la voies à la reprise des relations diplomatiques et l'augmentation des départs de Juifs soviétiques.

Ces contacts, impliquant des diplomates de haut rang et des intermédiaires, furent marqués par des gestes prudents, tels que la publication dans *Izvestia* d'un message de félicitations du président israélien à l'occasion du Jour de la Victoire. La question de l'émigration juive devint un point central dans les négociations entre Gorbatchev et Reagan, ainsi que dans les actions des organisations juives américaines, qui exercèrent une forte pression sur Moscou.

Malgré cela, les dirigeants soviétiques continuèrent de nier officiellement l'existence du problème, usant de la propagande antisioniste et accusant l'Occident de pratiquer une politique de « deux poids, deux mesures ». Finalement, en 1986, l'URSS libéra Anatoly Shcharansky et Andreï Sakharov, un geste perçu comme une tentative de redorer l'image du régime à l'international, mais aussi comme une manœuvre stratégique.

L'ouverture vers l'Occident permit une nouvelle approche de la question de l'émigration juive, perçue par les dirigeants soviétiques comme un dilemme entre idéologie et intérêts pratiques. Craignant une déstabilisation du régime et une fuite des cerveaux, les autorités restaient méfiantes.
Sous Gorbatchev, des compromis furent envisagés pour alléger les pressions internationales et répondre à la crise économique. L'émigration, bien que toujours instrumentalisée, augmenta fortement à partir de 1987, devenant un symbole des réformes.

Parallèlement, la situation intérieure du pays se dégradait, et la perestroïka suscita une forte opposition de la part des forces réactionnaires, la question juive occupant une place particulière

dans ce rejet. Sous Gorbatchev, l'émigration juive s'accéléra, accompagnée de la suppression de l'antisémitisme d'État et de la libéralisation du cadre législatif.

Ce processus provoqua une résistance vigoureuse, à la fois au sein du Parti communiste et dans les cercles nationalistes de la société, notamment le mouvement « Pamyat » (Mémoire). L'antisémitisme devint une composante essentielle de l'idéologie de l'opposition à la perestroïka.

Des dirigeants de premier plan, tels que le ministre de la Défense Dmitri Iazov et le président du KGB Vladimir Krioutchkov, encouragèrent ces sentiments antisémites en diffusant des messages de propagande et en coopérant avec des groupes radicaux. Face à cela, de nombreux Juifs rejoignirent le camp démocratique et prirent part aux manifestations contre le coup d'État réactionnaire manqué de 1991.

Dans ce contexte tendu, la lutte de Gorbatchev contre l'antisémitisme fut marquée par l'ambiguïté et l'inaction, particulièrement évidente dans les dernières années de son mandat. Il s'exprima rarement sur la question et évita les mesures concrètes, se contentant de déclarations générales sur les dangers du nationalisme.

Même lorsqu'il était sollicité pour condamner l'antisémitisme, il invoquait la nécessité d'un équilibre entre les groupes ethniques, légitimant ainsi indirectement certaines manifestations antisémites sous couvert d'antisionisme. Ce n'est qu'à la toute fin de son mandat que Gorbatchev prit deux mesures symboliques :

la reconnaissance officielle de la Shoah sur le site de Babi Yar, et son soutien à l'abrogation de la résolution de l'ONU assimilant sionisme et racisme.

La tentative de démocratie de Eltsine, son échec et le rôle du facteur juif

Malgré leur rivalité politique, Gorbatchev et Eltsine partageaient des visions et des approches similaires, étant tous deux issus de l'idéologie communiste et de l'appareil du Parti. Contrairement à Gorbatchev, Eltsine parvint à aller plus loin dans la rupture avec l'héritage communiste. Toutefois, il s'arrêta à mi-chemin, échouant à mettre en œuvre des réformes

démocratiques majeures, notamment en ne démantelant pas les services secrets soviétiques, et en permettant le maintien du Parti communiste.

Par ailleurs, sous Eltsine, le discours anti-occidental fut progressivement légitimé, alors que les tendances autoritaires se renforçaient. Malgré certains acquis de la perestroïka, l'état n'a pas su prendre des mesures cohérentes contre l'émergence de nouvelles manifestations de haine anti juive, considérant que la fin de l'antisémitisme d'état constituait en soi une avancée démocratique majeure.

Pendant l'ère Eltsine (1991–1999), l'antisémitisme d'État fut définitivement aboli et les Juifs obtinrent l'égalité des droits. Cependant, dans le même temps, l'antisémitisme acquit une visibilité publique accrue et devint un instrument dans la lutte politique.

Eltsine, à l'instar de Gorbatchev, se revendiquait de la démocratie, mais sa tolérance à l'égard des extrémismes et ses erreurs dans la construction d'un État de droit contribuèrent à la diffusion de l'antisémitisme au sein de la société. Dans les dernières années de son mandat, la montée du nationalisme et les tensions avec l'Occident nourrirent davantage encore les sentiments antisémites au sein des élites politiques.

Ces contradictions étaient déjà perceptibles dès les premiers pas d'Eltsine, lorsqu'il dut faire face à des mouvements ultra-nationalistes et antisémites devenus des acteurs actifs de la vie publique.

Dès le début de son mandat, Eltsine autorisa la reconnaissance officielle du mouvement antisémite Pamyat, suscitant des critiques en Russie et à l'étranger. S'il prit ensuite ses distances, il échoua à freiner l'essor de ces mouvements.
Après le putsch manqué de 1991, l'absence de réforme des services de sécurité permit à certaines forces nationalistes radicales de s'imposer. L'antisémitisme se développa dans l'espace public, culminant lors de la crise constitutionnelle de 1993, où les discours extrémistes devinrent des outils de lutte politique.

Après 1991, le *Front de salut national* (FSN) émergea en Russie, réunissant des forces d'extrême droite et d'extrême gauche, y compris des figures ouvertement antisémites. Malgré les tentatives

du gouvernement Eltsine pour interdire le FSN, celui-ci poursuivit ses activités et intégra l'antisémitisme à son arsenal politique.

L'antisémitisme fut activement mobilisé pendant la crise de 1993, lorsque l'opposition parlementaire attira des organisations nationalistes extrémistes.

Bien qu'Eltsine ait reconnu la menace représentée par ces mouvements et, après la défaite de l'opposition en octobre 1993, il ne procéda pas à une réforme de fond des services de sécurité, leur permettant de conserver leur pouvoir.

L'antisémitisme continua de prospérer dans les années 1990, alimenté par la crise économique et le mécontentement populaire, comme en témoigne la montée en puissance des partis nationalistes, dont le LDPR (Parti libéral-démocrate de Russie), qui gagna du poids au Parlement et contribua à la légitimation des sentiments antisémites dans la vie politique russe.

Sous Eltsine, les tendances autoritaires se renforcèrent, et le système politique concentra le pouvoir entre les mains du président et de son entourage proche. Parallèlement, l'antisémitisme persista et s'intensifia dans la société russe, sans rencontrer de résistance sérieuse de la part du pouvoir.

Bien qu'Eltsine ne fût pas personnellement antisémite et qu'il ait recruté des Juifs au sein de son gouvernement, la lutte contre l'antisémitisme ne fut jamais considérée comme une priorité politique. L'abolition de l'antisémitisme d'état sous l'URSS était perçue comme un accomplissement suffisant, et la croissance des manifestations antisémites dans la société ne suscita pas de réaction ferme de la part des autorités.

Une perspective historique sur la « question juive » et le mouvement démocratique en Russie

Dans la Russie des années 1990, malgré un contexte de crise profonde, l'antisémitisme a été contenu grâce à l'absence de politique antisémite d'état, amorcée sous Gorbatchev et poursuivie sous Eltsine, qui ont cherché à normaliser les relations avec l'Occident et à rompre avec l'idéologie soviétique. Le régime d'Eltsine a reconnu l'identité juive et permis la vie communautaire, tout en restant toutefois passif face à la propagande antisémite. En comparaison

historique, ce rejet de l'antisémitisme d'État contraste fortement avec les pratiques tsaristes et staliniennes, marquant une rupture dans la gestion de la "question juive" en Russie.

Chapitre 2 : Formation d'un nouveau modèle de relations entre la Russie, sa communauté juive et Israël

Le nouveau modèle de relations entre la communauté juive et l'État russe émergea après l'effondrement de l'URSS, marquant la fin des discriminations d'État envers les Juifs. Ce changement permit une normalisation des relations entre la minorité juive et un état en voie de démocratie, garantissant l'égalité des droits.

La majorité des Juifs ont choisi d'émigrer, réduisant considérablement la population juive en Russie. Toutefois, ceux qui sont restés ont pu revendiquer leur identité et participer à la renaissance de la vie communautaire, soutenue par Israël et des organisations internationales. Des personnalités juives ont accédé à des postes influents et contribué à la création d'institutions communautaires comme le Congrès juif russe.

La fin des politiques antisionistes permit aussi un rétablissement des relations avec Israël. Le développement des liens bilatéraux, porté par une coopération économique et humaine croissante, contribua à améliorer l'image d'Israël et à réduire les stéréotypes antisémites. Malgré un bref refroidissement à la fin des années 1990, aucun retour à l'antisionisme soviétique ne fut observé.

L'héritage impérial et soviétique : relations entre la minorité juive et l'État

La Révolution de Février 1917 a offert aux Juifs une opportunité d'égalité, levant toutes les restrictions et déclenchant une montée en puissance de l'activité sociale. La Révolution d'Octobre et la guerre civile russe ont détruit ces espoirs, les communautés juives devenant cibles de violences de la part des forces en conflit. Malgré le faible nombre de Juifs parmi les bolcheviks, le mythe du « judéo-bolchevisme » a servi de justification aux pogroms. Les bolcheviks ont recruté des Juifs dans l'appareil d'État et l'Armée rouge, les percevant comme des alliés, mais le soutien juif au pouvoir soviétique venait avant tout du besoin de se protéger de

l'extermination physique. De plus, l'euphorie de l'égalité proclamée a rapidement laissé place à une nouvelle réalité : celle du pouvoir soviétique, qui, tout en ouvrant de nouvelles opportunités, a détruit la vie communautaire juive traditionnelle.

L'histoire des Juifs en URSS se divise en deux grandes périodes. Durant les deux premières décennies soviétiques, ils furent intégrés aux structures socio-économiques et administratives, alors que le communautarisme juif est peu à peu démantelé. Dès les années 1930, la communauté juive perdit ses moyens d'expression, ouvrant une phase de répression dans le cadre d'un antisémitisme d'état. Malgré des projets symboliques comme l'instauration d'un espace national juif dans la province du Birobidjan, les Juifs devinrent, à la fin de l'ère stalinienne, une minorité dénationalisée, privée de son identité culturelle et religieuse. Cette dynamique s'accentua pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, marquée pour les Juifs par une double tragédie : l'extermination menée par les nazis et la répression du pouvoir soviétique.

L'extermination massive des juifs par les nazis et l'indifférence, voire l'hostilité, des autorités soviétiques ont marqué les années de l'après-guerre. Malgré leur participation héroïque au conflit, leur contribution fut effacée, tandis que l'antisémitisme persistait. Après la guerre, une nouvelle vague de répression frappa l'intelligentsia juive, accusée de cosmopolitisme ou de sionisme, culminant avec «l'affaire des blouses blanches». L'antisémitisme d'État se renforça, marginalisant les Juifs dans l'éducation, l'accès à l'emploi et la vie publique, et réduisant leur identité à une catégorie administrative. Face à ces discriminations durables, l'émigration apparait alors pour beaucoup comme la seule échappatoire.

La question de l'émigration post-soviétique et la renaissance improbable de la communauté juive russe

Le déclin démographique des Juifs soviétiques dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle résulte de multiples facteurs, dépendant à la fois des politiques diverses mais aussi de dynamiques sociales. L'héritage de l'antisémitisme d'État, particulièrement sous Staline, a contribué à effacer la reconnaissance publique de la souffrance juive durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, mais a aussi eu des conséquences à long terme, avec l'établissement progressif de nouvelles formes de discrimination et, plus généralement, une indifférence officielle au sort des

Juifs soviétiques. Alors que la population totale de l'Union soviétique a augmenté de 60 % entre 1945 et 1989, la population juive a chuté de près de 40 %, passant de 2,3 millions à 1,48 million.

Cette baisse s'explique par la stagnation démographique de l'après-guerre, mais aussi, à partir des années 1950, par l'augmentation des mariages mixtes, de l'assimilation et du refus croissant d'inscrire les nouveau-nés comme Juifs. Cette assimilation, à laquelle les Juifs soviétiques furent contraints, a « effacé » plus de 500 000 Juifs des statistiques officielles avant 1989. Des taux élevés de mariages mixtes, dépassant 70 % dans la République socialiste fédérative soviétique de Russie dans les années 1980, combinés à une émigration croissante, ont accéléré cette érosion démographique.
De 1989 jusqu'au début des années 2000, l'émigration fut le principal facteur du déclin de la population juive. Durant les trois dernières années de l'Union soviétique, l'émigration juive atteignit près d'un demi-million de personnes. La part des Juifs dans la population totale du pays a considérablement diminué par rapport à la période prérévolutionnaire (4 % de la population totale en 1897) et même à la fin de la période soviétique (0,5 % en 1989) pour représenter aujourd'hui moins de 0,1 %.
L'effondrement de l'URSS en 1991 marqua à la fois le point culminant de cette crise démographique et le début d'une nouvelle ère, avec de nouvelles possibilités. Bien que les tendances à l'assimilation aient continué, la disparition de l'antisémitisme systémique permit une renaissance de la vie culturelle, religieuse et communautaire juive.

À la fin des années 1980 et au début des années 1990, la Russie a connu une renaissance de la vie culturelle et communautaire juive, avec une expansion rapide des organisations juives à travers le pays. Des dizaines de nouvelles associations ont vu le jour, notamment la plus grande, le Vaad, qui unifiait les communautés juives de l'URSS. Parallèlement, la vie religieuse a commencé à se raviver, notamment grâce au travail des rabbins étrangers, ainsi qu'à un intérêt croissant pour la mémoire de l'Holocauste. La vie juive s'est manifestée par la création d'écoles juives, de centres culturels et de nouvelles publications, témoignant d'une montée profonde de la conscience juive et de l'activité culturelle. Ce processus allait de pair avec la démocratisation générale du pays et la croissance de l'activité civique. Malgré un déclin important de la population juive, cette renaissance culturelle est devenue un élément important de la vie communautaire, illustrant le désir d'auto-expression et de préservation de l'identité juive. La

renaissance de la vie culturelle a contribué à la croissance de l'activité civique et à l'augmentation de la participation juive dans les sphères politique et économique.

Après la chute du régime soviétique, les Juifs restés dans le pays ont pu participer activement à la vie sociale et politique, y compris au sein du gouvernement. Beaucoup occupèrent des postes importants dans l'appareil d'État et l'économie, dirigeant de nombreuses banques et entreprises. Malgré l'assimilation, ces succès provoquèrent le mécontentement d'une partie de la population suscitant une hausse du sentiment antisémite. Au travers du pays, l'élite juive soutenait les forces démocratiques et participait activement au développement des organisations de la société civile et des médias libéraux. La participation des Juifs à la vie sociale et économique de la Russie s'accompagna par ailleurs d'une intensification des relations avec Israël dans le cadre de la normalisation des relations entre les deux pays.

Normalisation des relations Russie-Israël et ses conséquences internes et géopolitiques

La normalisation des relations entre la Russie et Israël au début des années 1990 a marqué un tournant après des décennies d'hostilité durant la Guerre froide. Après l'effondrement de l'URSS, la Russie tenta de redéfinir ses priorités diplomatiques, tandis qu'Israël saisit l'occasion de renouer le dialogue avec une Russie libérée de son idéologie soviétique. Toutefois, les liens historiques entre Moscou et les États arabes compliquèrent le rapprochement.
Ce chapitre examine les obstacles idéologiques et politiques à cette normalisation, la perspective israélienne et le rôle joué par les États-Unis, les retombées géopolitiques de la brève période de coopération, et enfin le virage anti-occidental de la politique étrangère russe.

Le processus de normalisation des relations entre l'URSS et Israël, initié sous Gorbatchev, s'est mis en place lentement, 6 années, en raison de contradictions internes à la direction soviétique, mais aussi de la pression des alliés arabes. La direction israélienne s'est montrait méfiante après des décennies de propagande antisioniste souvent initiée et instrumentalisée par le Kremlin. Les premières tentatives de dialogue (1985-1986) échouèrent. Cependant, les événements de fin 1988 (détournement d'un avion soviétique et aide apportée par Israël lors du séisme en Arménie) contribuèrent à renforcer la confiance mutuelle.

En décembre 1989, le Politburo approuva un plan prudent de développement des contacts avec Israël, sans tenir compte cependant de l'importance du sujet de l'émigration juive. La question de l'abrogation de la résolution de l'ONU assimilant le sionisme au racisme resta un symbole de la lenteur et de la prudence de la diplomatie soviétique ; ce n'est qu'en décembre 1991 que l'URSS vota pour son abrogation. La prudence et l'ambivalence de Gorbatchev, liées à la méfiance traditionnelle du pouvoir envers Israël, retardèrent la finalisation de ce rapprochement.

Lors de la deuxième phase de la normalisation (1987–1989), Israël chercha à approfondir ses relations avec l'URSS dans le cadre du processus de paix naissant avec les voisins arabes. Les divergences entre les dirigeants israéliens Peres et Shamir reflétaient deux approches. Shamir considérait la coopération avec l'URSS comme une menace, tandis que Peres espérait profiter de ce rapprochement pour faire avancer les négociations de paix. La montée de l'antisémitisme en URSS suscitait alors de sérieuses inquiétudes en Israël, motivant la mise en place d'un plan d'évacuation d'urgence des Juifs soviétiques.

Parallèlement, la coopération israélo-américaine permit de maintenir une pression diplomatique sur l'URSS, exigeant la fin des discriminations à l'égard des Juifs et l'autorisation à émigrer. La direction soviétique considérait l'émigration juive comme une concession nécessaire aux États-Unis pour garantir un partenariat avec l'Occident. La procrastination de Gorbatchev concernant la normalisation avec Israël reflétait la place secondaire qu'il accordait à cette relation, notamment en raison de son désir de conserver son alliance avec les pays arabes. Néanmoins, la levée progressive d'isolement international d'Israël et le nouveau rôle de la Russie au Moyen-Orient a préfiguré le début d'une nouvelle étape dans les relations entre les deux pays.

Les changements de politique soviétique sous Gorbatchev ont influencé la situation géopolitique au Moyen-Orient et favorisé l'augmentation du nombre de l'immigration juive vers Israël. La volonté de l'URSS de coopérer avec les États-Unis et sa participation à la préparation de la Conférence de paix de Madrid en 1991 renforcèrent le statut d'Israël dans la région et au-delà.

Après l'effondrement de l'URSS et l'accession au pouvoir de l'opposition démocratique en Russie, les relations avec Israël se normalisèrent. Les liens culturels et économiques se

développent, soutenus par la communauté russophone en Israël, formant un « pont humain » entre les deux pays.

Durant ces années la Russie poursuit une politique pro-occidentale et adopte une position neutre dans le conflit arabo-israélien, contribuant ainsi à la croissance de la confiance mutuelle. Les bonnes relations avec l'Iran constituèrent cependant une exception de taille à cette orientation pro-occidentale, mettant en évidence la dualité de la politique étrangère russe.

Ces processus posèrent toutefois les bases du développement dynamique des relations russo-israéliennes dans les années suivant l'effondrement de l'URSS. Cependant, le réchauffement initial fut de courte durée : des changements internes en Russie conduisirent à un revirement de la politique étrangère et à un nouveau refroidissement des relations avec Israël.

À la fin des années 1990, le tournant anti-occidental dans la politique russe entraîna un refroidissement des relations avec Israël, coïncidant avec la nomination de Primakov en tant que ministre des Affaires étrangères. Les développements positifs de la première moitié des années 1990 avaient favorisé la croissance active des liens économiques et militaires entre les deux pays, ainsi que l'expansion des échanges culturels, facilités par l'importante communauté russophone en Israël. Cependant, de nouveau, la coopération de la Russie avec l'Iran suscita la méfiance des politiciens israéliens, et l'activité diplomatique de Primakov sur les questions du Moyen-Orient fut perçue avec suspicion à Jérusalem. Bien que la coopération bilatérale continuât de se développer dans plusieurs domaines, les divergences autour de l'Iran pesèrent sur l'avenir des relations. La montée de l'antisémitisme en Russie durant ces années constitua également une source de préoccupation pour le gouvernement israélien et la communauté juive, les obligeant à maintenir des canaux diplomatiques avec la Russie malgré des désaccords profonds.

Chapitre 3 : Émergence rapide et vigoureuse de l'antisémitisme post-soviétique en Russie

Pour comprendre les formes qu'a pu prendre l'antisémitisme post-soviétique en Russie, et son émergence rapide sur la scène politique, il est crucial de s'attarder sur la période soviétique

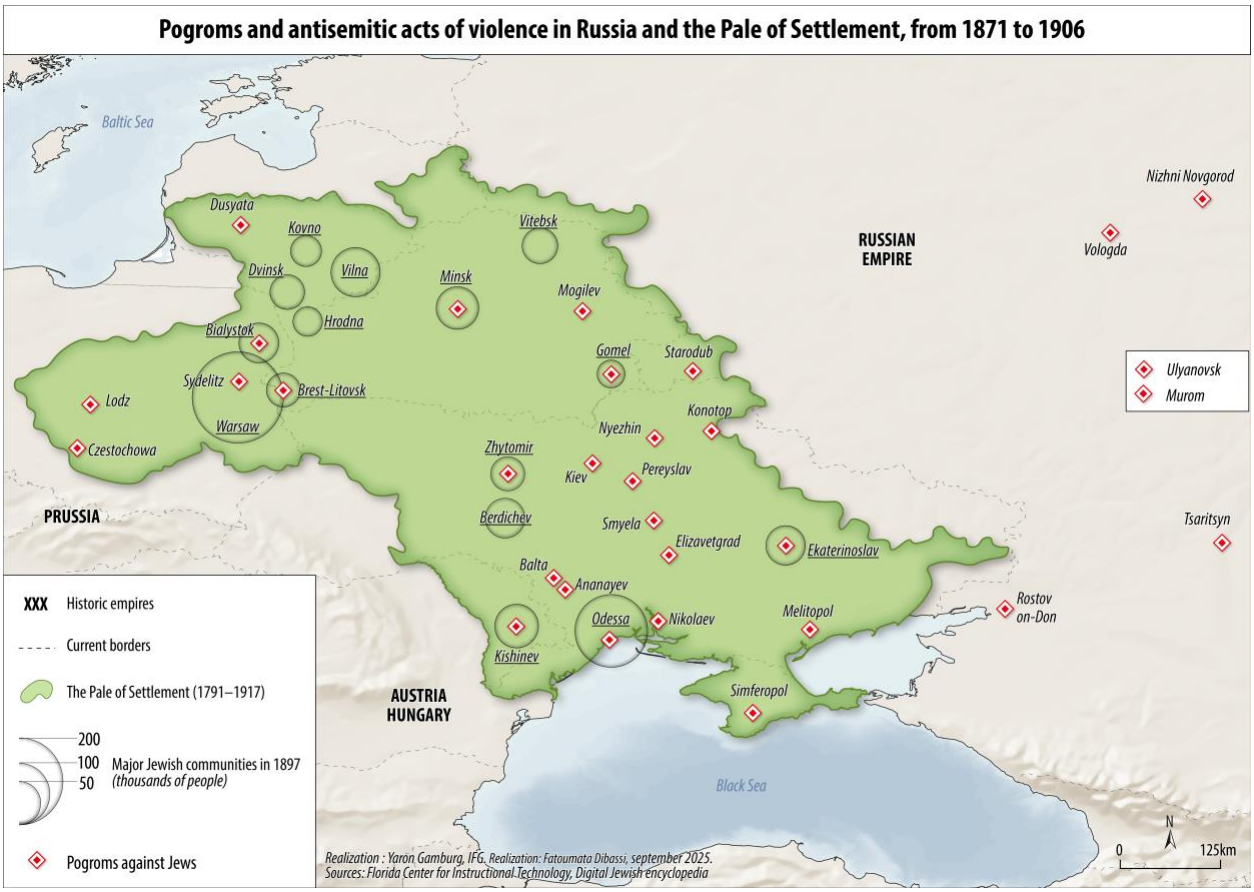
mais également d'examiner ses sources et origines prérévolutionnaires. L'antisémitisme post-soviétique est classé par de nombreux experts comme un antisémitisme « corporatiste », par opposition à l'antisémitisme d'état qui existait en Russie impériale et soviétique. L'objectif de ce chapitre est de présenter les sources prérévolutionnaires de l'antisémitisme, son évolution, ses méthodes de propagation, ainsi que ses expressions politiques et géographiques, tout en soutenant que son émergence et son existence ont été rendues possibles par le refus initial de l'État de la combattre, puis par sa volonté ultérieure de la tolérer dans le cadre de la domination d'un agenda nationaliste et impérialiste en Russie. L'idéologie anti-occidentale, anti-libérale et anti-démocratique du Kremlin a favorisé la réémergence du discours antisémite au plus haut niveau de l'establishment russe.

Sources prérévolutionnaires de la judéophobie en Russie et influence sur l'antisémitisme post-soviétique

La judéophobie et l'antisémitisme en Russie trouvent leurs racines dans la doctrine religieuse, dès la *Rus' de Kiev* (Fédération médiévale de principautés slaves, fondée au 9ème siècle et ancêtre de la Russie, Ukraine et Biélorussie), et s'intensifient au 13eme siècle dans la Principauté de Moscou. L'Église orthodoxe, affirmant son autorité, considérait les « judaïsants » et les Juifs comme une menace, jetant ainsi les bases d'un sentiment hostile. Sous Ivan le Terrible, la judéophobie se formalisa en politique antijuive d'état, enracinant l'hostilité envers les Juifs dans la conscience publique mais aussi les lois. La politique de Pierre Ier fut plus modérée, mais la judéophobie persista à tous les niveaux du gouvernement. Sous Élisabeth Petrovna, la politique antijuive s'intensifia : les Juifs furent expulsés de l'Empire, a moins de promettre d'adopter la religion orthodoxe.
Sous l'Impératrice russe Catherine II, malgré ses intentions libérales, céda sous la pression des sentiments antisémites de son entourage, annulant les projets de levée des restrictions sur les Juifs et instituant le *Pale of Settlement*, limitant la résidence juive aux régions récemment conquises. Cette mesure symbolisa le début d'une politique discriminatoire anti-juive qui perdura jusqu'à la Révolution de février 1917.

Durant les décennies de l'avant révolution, les préjugés religieux, notamment les accusations de meurtre rituel, intensifièrent l'antisémitisme en Russie. Sous Alexandre Ier, l'idée de restreindre

les Juifs au profit de la majorité chrétienne reçut un soutien important, et sous Nicolas Ier, les mesures répressives contre les Juifs s'accentuèrent. Ces derniers furent contraints au service militaire et soumis à une sélection selon leur utilité pour l'état, ce qui fit d'eux, au milieu du XIXe siècle, la minorité religieuse et nationale la plus discriminée du pays.



Carte 1 : Pogroms et actes de violence antisémites en Russie et dans la Zone de Résidence, de 1871 à 1906

Plus tard, sous le règne d'Alexandre II, la politique juive fut caractérisée par une double approche. D'une part, il permit à certains Juifs fortunés de s'intégrer à la société russe en échange d'investissements économiques, d'autre part, la majorité des Juifs restèrent soumis à des préjugés persistants. Sous Alexandre III et Nicolas II, l'antisémitisme devint un élément important de la politique d'état, les pogroms et les mesures discriminatoires. L'élite littéraire et culturelle du pays, dont des écrivains comme Gogol, Nekrassov et Dostoïevski, partageait ces préjugés, renforçant l'intolérance publique. L'apparition de publications telles que le Livre du

Kahal et les Protocoles des Sages de Sion alimenta les mythes sur une « conspiration juive », influençant les attitudes et politiques antisémites. L'État accusait les Juifs à la fois d'exploitation capitaliste et d'activités révolutionnaires, cherchant leur assimilation complète ou leur expulsion. Le sommet de l'antisémitisme fut atteint sous Nicolas II, lorsque les organisations des Cent-Noirs et les autorités gouvernementales définissaient les Juifs comme un « ennemi intérieur ». L'acquittement des accusés dans l'affaire Beilis ne dissipa pas les mythes sur les meurtres rituels, mais renforça les sentiments antisémites dans la société.

Avec l'effondrement de l'URSS et l'affaiblissement du contrôle étatique, de nouvelles formes d'antisémitisme apparurent en Russie, reproduisant les mythes prérévolutionnaires tels que la « conspiration juive » ou encore « suprématie juive ». La xénophobie et la rhétorique antisémite s'intègrent dans un discours nationaliste nouveau mêlant théories du complot et éléments religieux. Ces tendances s'expriment par la diffusion massive de publications antisémites, l'activité militante de l'opposition anti-occidentale et antidémocratique, et les actes de violence contre la communauté juive.

Évolution de l'antisémitisme comme force politique dans la Russie post-soviétique

À la fin des années 1980, l'organisation ultra-nationaliste Pamyat fut la première à faire de l'antisémitisme une stratégie politique, s'inspirant ouvertement des Cent-Noirs, mouvement ultranationaliste, monarchiste et violemment antisémite actif en Russie impériale au début du XXe siècle, et idéalisant le tsarisme comme « âge d'or » de la Russie. L'idéologie de Pamyat reposait sur des mythes et théories du complot, en premier lieu les *Protocoles des Sages de Sion*, et la croyance que les Juifs menaçaient l'existence du peuple et de la culture russes. Le mouvement recourut à des méthodes d'intimidation, y compris la violence, les menaces et les attaques contre des intellectuels juifs, créant une atmosphère de peur et provoquant une émigration massive. Bien que marginal en politique institutionnelle, la rhétorique antisémite réussira à s'enraciner également dans des partis plus influents, à gauche comme à droite.
À la fin des années 1990, l'antisémitisme fait partie intégrante de l'idéologie de nombreux partis russes, dont le PCFR (Parti communiste de la Fédération de Russie). Si leurs plateformes officielles évitaient les formulations antisémites explicites, des expressions déguisées de haine devinrent visibles. Tandis que Zyuganov (fondateur du PCFR) utilisait des formules abstraites,

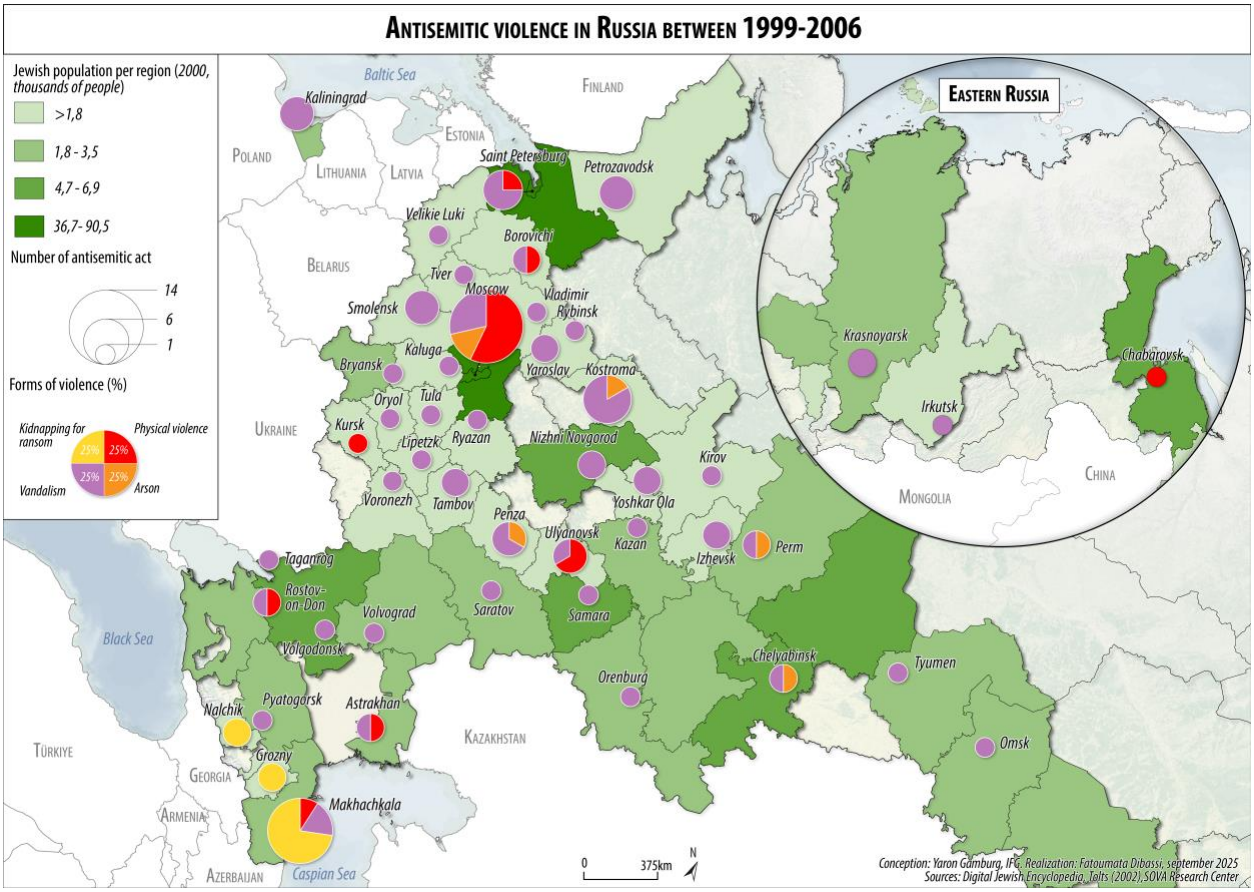
d'autres comme Makachov, autre membre influent du parti, proféraient des déclarations antisémites virulentes. Cependant, les partis radicalement antisémites et leurs leaders, tels que *Trudovaya Rossiya* et *l'Union des Officiers*, organisation militaro-patriotique, n'eurent que peu de succès dans les urnes, démontrant que le pari antisémite n'était pas forcement gagnant. Il faut noter ici que l'antisémitisme fut un rare point de convergence entre l'extrême gauche et l'extrême droite, qui malgré leurs différences idéologiques, trouvèrent ainsi un terrain.

L'antisémitisme de droite reste néanmoins très marqué dans les années 1990. L'idéologie servant de base au patriotisme russe comportait deux courants principaux : le courant impérialiste, visant à étendre le domaine d'influence de la Russie, et le courant nationaliste, privilégiant les intérêts de la nation sur ceux de l'État. Vladimir Jirinovski, leader populiste du Parti libéral-démocrate, qui utilisait activement des stéréotypes antisémites et prônait une dictature en Russie, combinait ces deux courants dans sa rhétorique. Par la suite, cette idéologie impérialiste-nationaliste fut de fait pleinement adoptée par le Kremlin. D'autres mouvements, comme les eurasiens de Dugin, la RNE de Barkachov, et le NBP de Limonov, contribuèrent à renforcer la droite radicale, bien qu'ils connussent peu de succès électoral. Certains groupes mêlaient antisémitisme et néonazisme ainsi que violence contre les minorités ethniques. Ces dynamiques s'inscrivent dans une tendance générale où, en contexte de démocratie faible et d'instabilité politique, l'antisémitisme et le nationalisme dominent une large partie du champ politique.

Evolution et dissémination du sentiment antisémite en Russie

Depuis la chute de l'URSS, l'antisémitisme en Russie a évolué d'un phénomène étatique vers une expression plus diffuse, médiatisée et idéologiquement diversifiée. Dans les années 1990, la liberté de la presse a permis la réapparition massive de discours antisémites, relayés par des personnalités influentes et tolérés par les tribunaux. Parallèlement, des groupes religieux, orthodoxes et islamistes notamment, ont réactivé les vieux mythes antijuifs, contribuant à la légitimation du discours antisémite dans l'espace public. Les enquêtes sociologiques montrent que les stéréotypes antisémites restent ancrés, malgré la marginalisation politique du phénomène. Enfin, cette hostilité s'est territorialement étendue, ciblant les symboles juif dans des zones dépourvues de forte présence juive, révélant une forme d'antisémitisme moins démographique qu'idéologique, apte à resurgir en temps de crise.

Il est important de noter sur ce point que la géographie des manifestations antisémites dans les années 1990–2010 s'étend à travers tout le pays, des mégalopoles aux centres régionaux, et ne se limite pas aux zones de présence juive traditionnelle. Les actions antisémites ciblent principalement des symboles culturels: synagogues, cimetières et centres éducatifs, ce qui souligne l'importance de la dimension symbolique de cette agressivité. Une comparaison avec la période prérévolutionnaire met en évidence à la fois la continuité et la transformation qualitative de l'antisémitisme, qui prend un caractère plus global, moins lié à la démographie réelle de la population juive. À partir de ces nouvelles formes d'antisémitisme, il devient possible de suivre comment sa rhétorique et sa fonction sociale s'adaptent aux changements politiques et culturels de la fin du XXe et du début du XXIe siècle, ouvrant la voie à sa "résurgence" dans le contexte de la crise de la démocratie.



Carte 2 : Violences antisémites en Russie entre 1999 et 2006

L’effondrement de l’Union soviétique a marqué un tournant dans la reconfiguration de l’antisémitisme en Russie, révélant la résilience de récits profondément ancrés présentant les Juifs comme des éléments étrangers et menaçants. Historiquement utilisé pour canaliser les tensions sociales ou réprimer l’opposition politique, l’antisémitisme a resurgi dans les années 1990, au cœur d’une transition démocratique fragile. Les groupes nationalistes radicaux s’en sont servis pour délégitimer les forces pro-démocratiques, inversant ainsi son usage sous le tsarisme, où il visait plutôt à étouffer les courants libéraux. Bien qu’aucune violence de masse n’ait eu lieu contre les juifs, la propagande antisémite s’est largement répandue, tolérée par un État qui refusait de la cautionner officiellement, mais ne la combattait réellement pas non plus.

Partie II : La stratégie du Kremlin sous Poutine: exploitation de l'antisémitisme et de la relation avec la communauté juive, et distorsion de l'Holocauste

Depuis son arrivée au pouvoir en 2000, Vladimir Poutine a transformé la Russie en renforçant son autorité à l'intérieure et en réaffirmant son influence internationale. Il a consolidé un pouvoir autoritaire en contrôlant les médias et en neutralisant l'opposition tout en adoptant une politique étrangère oscillant entre coopération et confrontation avec l'Occident. Le discours de Munich en 2007 marque un tournant vers une posture ouvertement anti-occidentale, s'appuyant sur la rhétorique nationaliste et la dénonciation de l'effondrement de l'Union soviétique comme une catastrophe géopolitique.

Dans ce contexte, le Kremlin a exploité l'antisémitisme et la relation avec la communauté juive comme instruments politiques. Poutine a cultivé une image judéophile à des fins stratégiques, visant à neutraliser les accusations d'antisémitisme tout en renforçant les liens avec Israël pour accroître l'influence russe au Moyen-Orient. Parallèlement, le régime a manipulé et déformé l'histoire de l'Holocauste, transformant la mémoire de la Shoah en un outil de propagande pour justifier ses campagnes anti-occidentales et anti-ukrainiennes.

Cette stratégie s'inscrit dans les «mesures actives» héritées du KGB, mêlant désinformation et guerre psychologique, visant à miner les démocraties et à mobiliser la population russe. Les récents conflits en Ukraine et au Moyen-Orient ont intensifié cette rhétorique antisémite et la falsification historique, aggravant les tensions internes et les relations avec Israël.

Chapitre 1 : L'image de Poutine en ami du peuple juif : sources, mécanismes et bénéfices

Poutine : biographie personnelle et engagement auprès de la communauté juive comme leviers politiques

Vladimir Poutine a délibérément construit une image d'ami du peuple juif, en s'appuyant sur sa biographie personnelle et son engagement politique, comme un levier pour asseoir son

pouvoir. Il a mis en avant ses expériences positives avec des voisins et mentors juifs durant son enfance, récit qu'il a renforcé dès 1999 lors de sa rencontre avec la Fédération des communautés juives de Russie et dans ses autobiographies. Cette image judéophile lui a permis de contrer les accusations antisémites et de séduire l'opinion publique.

Au moment de son arrivée au pouvoir en 1999-2000, cette stratégie répondait à un double impératif: neutraliser la rhétorique antisémite de l'opposition et contrebalancer l'influence des oligarques juifs tout en rassurant les organisations juives inquiètes face à la montée de l'antisémitisme. Par ailleurs, Poutine a systématiquement renforcé ses liens avec les grandes organisations juives américaines, notamment grâce à Berel Lazar, rabbin russe d'origine américaine, pour présenter la Russie comme un allié fiable de la communauté juive internationale, y compris après l'annexion de la Crimée et les tensions avec l'Occident.

La carte juive comme élément clé dans la consolidation du pouvoir de Poutine et la quête de légitimité internationale

La communauté juive a joué un rôle stratégique dans la consolidation du pouvoir de Poutine et dans sa quête de légitimité sur la scène internationale. Plutôt que de soutenir le Congrès juif russe (RJC) traditionnel, lié à Vladimir Goussinski, le Kremlin a favorisé la Fédération des communautés juives de Russie (FJCR) et le mouvement Chabad, représenté par le rabbin Berel Lazar. Grâce à une intervention directe, Lazar obtint la citoyenneté russe et fut installé comme Grand Rabbin officiel, transformant FJCR en un allié fidèle du régime. Ce retour à une politique de mise à profit de « Juifs utiles » rappelle les pratiques soviétiques et tsaristes d'instrumentalisation politique de certaines figures juives.
En échange, Lazar et FJCR ont promu l'image de la Russie et de Poutine à l'international, plaidant notamment pour l'abrogation de l'amendement Jackson-Vanik, une loi américaine adoptée en 1974 qui conditionne l'octroi de préférences commerciales à certains pays à la liberté d'émigration, et présentant Poutine comme un leader pro-juif. Cette alliance a renforcé la position internationale de la Russie et servi la stratégie politique intérieure, où la lutte contre l'antisémitisme a d'abord été un moyen de réprimer les extrémismes. Toutefois, à mesure que la politique russe devenait plus autoritaire et anti-occidentale, le rôle public de FJCR dans la lutte contre l'antisémitisme a diminué.

L'ingérence du Kremlin a aussi provoqué des divisions au sein de la communauté juive russe, la domination croissante de FJCR étant contestée par d'autres rabbins argumentant que la liberté de pratique juive n'était pas respectée. Le Congrès juif russe a perdu son influence, et FJCR, intégrée au système politique, a vu sa capacité d'action indépendante réduite. Malgré ces tensions, le renforcement des relations entre Israël et la Russie a contribué à consolider la position de FJCR en Russie, illustrant comment la « carte juive » a été un levier politique clé pour Poutine, tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'étranger.

« De Russie avec amour » : Poutine dans son effort de séduction d'Israel (2000-2022)

Entre 2000 et 2022, Vladimir Poutine a mené une politique active de rapprochement avec Israël, combinant diplomatie personnelle, coopération sécuritaire et instrumentalisation des mémoires historiques. Dès le début de son mandat, il a noué des relations étroites avec les principaux dirigeants israéliens, notamment Benjamin Netanyahu, avec qui il entretint un dialogue constant, même en période de tensions. Depuis son retour au pouvoir en 2009, et jusqu'en 2021, Netanyahu a rencontré Poutine une quinzaine de fois, dont plusieurs fois en Russie. En 2016, a l'occasion du 25eme anniversaire de la reprise des relations diplomatiques entre Israël et la Russie, Netanyahu a effectué une visite en Russie, la seconde en un an. Ces visites permettaient de maintenir une ligne directe de communication, essentielle notamment pour gérer la complexité stratégique dans la région, et notamment sur le sujet syrien. Ces liens personnels servaient les intérêts des deux parties : Netanyahu y voyait un levier politique interne et régional, tandis que Poutine y gagnait une influence dans les affaires du Moyen-Orient.

Ce rapprochement fut également facilité par le vide laissé par les États-Unis dans la région, notamment après le retrait partiel de l'administration Obama. En parallèle, la Russie renforça son poids régional, poussant Israël à tenir compte du facteur russe dans ses décisions stratégiques, notamment en Syrie. L'intervention militaire russe dans ce pays plaça Israël dans une position de dépendance sécuritaire vis-à-vis de Moscou, l'obligeant à maintenir un mécanisme de coordination pour ses frappes contre des cibles iraniennes sur place.

En somme, la stratégie de Poutine alliait une séduction ciblée, des rapports de force maîtrisés et une utilisation habile de l'histoire, consolidant ainsi l'influence russe auprès d'un partenaire-clé du Moyen-Orient.

La lutte contre l'antisémitisme dans le cadre de l'agenda anti-libéral de Poutine

Au début de sa présidence, Vladimir Poutine s'est publiquement engagé contre l'antisémitisme, tant pour améliorer l'image de la Russie à l'international que pour renforcer la stabilité intérieure. Il condamna l'antisémitisme dans des discours officiels, notamment en Pologne, et exerça un contrôle accru sur les institutions russes, marginalisant les discours extrémistes.

À partir du milieu des années 2000, la lutte contre l'antisémitisme fut intégrée dans la stratégie de «démocratie souveraine», centrée sur l'ordre et la stabilité. Les autorités réprimèrent progressivement les expressions antisémites, renforçant la législation et les actions policières, jusqu'à promouvoir l'image d'une Russie « refuge pour les Juifs», notamment face à l'Europe.

Cependant, cette politique changea après les manifestations démocratiques de 2011-2012. Avec la guerre en Ukraine et le retour d'une idéologie nationaliste et néo-impériale, influencée par des penseurs comme Ivan Ilyin, l'antisémitisme reprit de la légitimité dans l'espace public, notamment à travers la manipulation, par le régime, de la mémoire de l'Holocauste.

Chapitre 2 : La mémoire de l'Holocauste et l'antisémitisme comme outils de la politique intérieure et étrangère russe

La subordination de la mémoire de l'Holocauste a celle de la « Grande Guerre patriotique »

Selon Yad Vashem (le mémorial de l'Holocauste de Jérusalem), le Congrès juif mondial et l'Alliance internationale pour la mémoire de l'Holocauste (IHRA), le négationnisme, la distorsion et la banalisation de l'Holocauste constituent des formes contemporaines d'antisémitisme. Ces organisations condamnent régulièrement les dirigeants politiques ou figures publiques qui s'adonnent à de telles pratiques.

Une exception notable à cette vigilance reste cependant Vladimir Poutine. Depuis près de deux décennies, le président russe et les institutions de son gouvernement, notamment le ministère des Affaires étrangères, ont systématiquement déformé et instrumentalisé la mémoire de l'Holocauste, sans être réellement inquiétés ou publiquement dénoncés par les principales organisations juives ou ni même par l'État d'Israël.

Cette relative impunité s'explique par plusieurs facteurs, dont l'absence de consensus international sur la guerre en Ukraine, qui complique toute condamnation unifiée de la Russie ; la passivité, voire la complaisance, de certaines organisations juives russes, influencées par l'activisme de FJCR en faveur de la Russie ; et enfin les priorités sécuritaires d'Israël, soucieux de maintenir des relations pragmatiques avec Moscou

La stratégie de Poutine s'inscrit dans une continuité historique. Sous l'URSS, la mémoire de l'Holocauste avait été largement occultée, noyée dans le récit soviétique plus large de la «Grande Guerre patriotique». Poutine va exploiter activement la mémoire de l'Holocauste comme un outil de légitimation idéologique, à la fois pour renforcer le récit patriotique russe et pour disqualifier ses adversaires, internes ou étrangers, en les accusant de révisionnisme ou de complicité avec le nazisme.

La mémoire de l'Holocauste a été délibérément marginalisée par les autorités soviétiques dès la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Les massacres de Juifs sur les territoires occupés (Babi Yar dans la Republique d'Ukraine) étaient minimisés, et les récits sur les crimes nazis n'étaient exploités qu'à des fins de propagande. Après la guerre, toute commémoration juive, comme à Babi Yar,

fut réprimée, et l'historiographie officielle effaça systématiquement l'Holocauste du discours public.

Ce silence ne commença à être remis en question que sous Gorbatchev, avec la glasnost, puis timidement poursuivi sous Eltsine, qui autorisa les premières commémorations publiques et l'ouverture d'un musée de l'Holocauste à Moscou. Toutefois, même dans la Russie post-soviétique, l'Holocauste resta un sujet marginal, intégré au récit plus large et dominant de la « Grande Guerre patriotique ». Il demeura cantonné à la sphère communautaire juive, sans réelle reconnaissance dans la mémoire nationale ni dans le système éducatif.

Poutine commença à intégrer activement l'Holocauste dans sa rhétorique à partir de la fin des années 2000, bien que les premières références datent de rencontres avec l'ancien premier ministre israélien Ariel Sharon en 2001. En 2005, il utilisa pour la première fois de façon flagrante la mémoire de l'Holocauste pour dénoncer l'«héroïsation du nazisme» dans les États post-soviétiques, les accusant d'antisémitisme et de russophobie. La même année, la Russie se joint à l'initiative israélienne pour la Journée internationale de commémoration de l'Holocauste à l'ONU.

Le rôle de la mémoire de l'Holocauste et de l'antisémitisme dans les campagnes de désinformation de Poutine contre l'Ukraine et l'Occident

L'Holocauste va rapidement devenir un instrument de pression diplomatique et de diffamation contre les États baltes et l'Ukraine, notamment suite à l'adhésion des États baltes à l'OTAN et au succès électoral des forces pro-occidentales en Ukraine. Dans le milieu des années 2000, les accusations de néonazisme contre l'Ukraine étaient sporadiques, la situation changea radicalement après la révolution de Maïdan en 2014, lorsque le nouveau gouvernement ukrainien exprima sa détermination à se tourner vers l'Europe. Dès lors, le Kremlin accusa systématiquement l'Ukraine de glorification du nazisme et de ses collaborateurs locaux.

Les efforts diplomatiques russes visaient désormais à présenter le soutien occidental à Kiev comme une complicité avec le néonazisme ukrainien. Au nombre de ces : la proposition de résolutions à l'ONU condamnant la « glorification du nazisme », la publication de listes de pays

accusés d'encourager l'héroïsation nazie, et le déploiement de campagnes médiatiques et sur les réseaux sociaux pour diffuser des narratifs liant l'Ukraine au néonazisme.

Les contradictions dans la mise en œuvre des politiques mémorielles de l'Holocauste

Depuis les années 2000, Vladimir Poutine a progressivement utilisé la mémoire de l'Holocauste comme un outil de légitimation idéologique et de désinformation, notamment dans sa propagande contre l'Ukraine. En manipulant le récit de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, le Kremlin a cherché à présenter la Russie comme le principal rempart contre le néonazisme, tout en accusant l'Ukraine et les États baltes de réécrire l'histoire.

Les dirigeants israéliens se sont alors en partie alignés sur la rhétorique de Poutine, mettant en avant le rôle central de l'armée soviétique dans la défaite de l'Allemagne nazie et la libération des camps de concentration. Il y a eu peu, voire aucun effort de la part des responsables israéliens pour présenter une vision historique plus nuancée, incluant l'antisémitisme de Staline, le silence soviétique sur la Shoah, et l'exploitation de la souffrance juive à des fins de propagande. Yad Vashem s'est également abstenu de critiquer la déformation et la vulgarisation de l'histoire de la Shoah par le gouvernement russe. Même après l'annexion de la Crimée et l'apparition de manipulations flagrantes liées à la Shoah de la part de la Russie, Israël n'a pas significativement modifié sa position.

La rhétorique officielle israélienne continué à refléter et dans les faits soutenir le récit révisionniste russe. Les dirigeants israéliens ont ignorer les aspects manipulateurs des initiatives russes, s'alignant souvent sur le récit de Moscou. Le président Shimon Peres a fait des déclarations conjointes avec le président Dmitri Medvedev sur la Shoah ; le Premier ministre Benjamin Netanyahou a participé aux marches du "Régiment immortel", et les dirigeants israéliens successifs ont renforcé les récits de « la Grande Guerre Patriotique », mettant en avant le rôle de l'armée soviétique dans la libération des camps de concentration, dont Auschwitz.

Cette attitude a trouvé son point culminant lors de la projection conjointe du film *Sobibor* par la Knesset et le Conseil de la Fédération de Russie. Toutefois, des controverses comme l'exclusion de la Russie du projet international de musée de Sobibor ou le scandale de 2020 lors d'un événement commémoratif de la Shoah à Yad Vashem, impliquant la diffusion de récits

historiques manipulés par des représentants russes, ont révélé le coût diplomatique de cette stratégie. Néanmoins, ces incidents n'ont toutefois pas fondamentalement modifié la politique israélienne, qui a continué de privilégier le maintien de relations favorables avec la Russie.

Certaines organisations juives, proches du pouvoir, telles que le World *Congress of the Russian-speaking Jews,* ont soutenu cette mise en scène mémorielle en collaborant étroitement avec le Kremlin. Les grandes institutions comme l'ADL (Anti-Diffamation League) ou le SWC (Simon Wiezenthal Center) ont peu réagi aux contradictions de la politique russe, tandis que Moscou refusait d'adopter les normes internationales sur la commémoration, telles que la définition de l'antisémitisme de l'IHRA, ou de reconnaître des lieux de mémoire juifs en Russie.

Dans le même temps, le régime de Poutine a utilisé l'Holocauste pour diaboliser l'Ukraine. Des conférences, films et discours officiels ont servi à ancrer l'idée d'une continuité néo-nazie ukrainienne autour de figures comme Bandera, préparant idéologiquement le terrain à l'« opération militaire spéciale» lancée en 2022. Cette propagande, couplée à un discours anti-occidental croissant, a permis au Kremlin de justifier son invasion en se présentant comme le défenseur de la mémoire de la seconde guerre mondiale et des valeurs anti-fasciste, tout en entretenant, en Russie même, un climat idéologique de plus en plus nationaliste.

Chapitre 3 : Le retour de l'antisémitisme en Russie à l'ère des guerres

L'invasion à grande échelle de l'Ukraine a marqué un moment de vérité à bien des égards. La trajectoire impériale de la Russie en matière de politique étrangère, ainsi que la nature autoritaire de son régime intérieur, sont devenues flagrantes. La campagne menée directement par le Kremlin pour discréditer l'Ukraine en tant qu'État néo-nazi a révélé son véritable objectif : la justification d'une campagne militaire.

Ce récit a placé les derniers alliés et partenaires internationaux de la Russie dans une position de plus en plus inconfortable. Les dirigeants politiques occidentaux et les milieux académiques ont rejeté les accusations infondées de la Russie contre l'Ukraine. Le nouveau gouvernement israélien, mené par Yair Lapid, a officiellement condamné l'invasion. Yad Vashem a publié une

déclaration dénonçant l'instrumentalisation politique de la mémoire de la Shoah. Cependant, ces réactions, bien que significatives, ont été tardives et insuffisamment fermes. Tandis que les forces russes avançaient en Ukraine, le Kremlin intensifiait la répression intérieure, n'hésitant pas a distordre la mémoire juive pour l'adapter a son propre narratif.

L'attaque du Hamas contre Israël le 7 octobre 2023 a mis en lumière la profondeur des sentiments antisémites dans les médias proches du Kremlin et au sein de segments dit «patriotiques» de la société russe, débouchant entre autres, en octobre 2023, sur des incidents violents l'aéroport international de Makhachkala dans le Caucase du Nord (Dagestan).

La guerre en Ukraine, le retour de l'antisémitisme officiel en Russie et le concept de «russophobie»

Depuis le début de la guerre en Ukraine, le régime de Poutine a réintroduit l'antisémitisme dans son arsenal idéologique, à des fins à la fois internes et géopolitiques. La propagande russe a ciblé le président Zelensky, pourtant juif, par des accusations comparant son action à celle d'Hitler, banalisant ainsi la Shoah tout en tentant de discréditer l'Ukraine. Simultanément, des figures de l'opposition et des élites émigrées, souvent juives, ont été publiquement accusées de trahison, exposant une logique antisémite implicite. Bien que l'État russe affirme commémorer l'Holocauste, ses responsables ont multiplié les distorsions historiques, comme Maria Zakharova, porte-parole du ministère des Affaires étrangères russe, allant jusqu'à nier la spécificité juive de la Shoah. Quant à la communauté juive russe, seule FJCR a conservé une voix officielle, en maintenant une posture prudente, tandis que la majorité des Juifs ont émigré. Ce climat de manipulation idéologique a ainsi légitimé un antisémitisme d'État déguisé, toléré à l'étranger, notamment en Israel, pour des raisons stratégiques et intériorisé dans la Russie post-2022.

Depuis le début des années 2000, la diplomatie russe a progressivement intégré le concept de « russophobie» dans son arsenal rhétorique, en l'utilisant d'abord pour dénoncer la situation des minorités russes dans les États baltes. Avec la dégradation des relations avec l'Ukraine et l'Occident, cette notion a pris une place centrale dans la propagande du Kremlin. À partir de 2014, la « russophobie » est devenue l'un des arguments clés pour justifier les politiques agressives de la Russie**,** présentée comme une réaction légitime à une prétendue hostilité

occidentale. Ce discours s'est institutionnalisé quant en 2023 la Douma adopte une loi criminalisant la russophobie, assimilée dans les discours officiels **à** l'antisémitisme**,** au point de présenter les Russes comme les « nouveaux Juifs », sujets à discrimination et persécutés**.** Cette instrumentalisation a culminé avec la déclaration du ministre russe des affaires étrangères, Sergueï Lavrov, affirmant que l'Occident cherchait une « solution finale à la question russe »**,** établissant un parallèle provocateur avec la « solution finale » des nazis envers les juifs. Cette stratégie de victimisation s'inscrit dans une logique de détournement mémoriel : en inversant les rôles historiques, Moscou tente de se présenter comme une victime, non un agresseur. Ce récit est diffusé via la culture populaire (comme les chansons de Chnour), relayé parfois par des personnalités juives et amplifié par les médias d'état et les réseaux sociaux**.**

L'héritage antisémite du KGB et les « opérations d'influence » à l'étranger

L'antisémitisme d'État en Russie contemporaine s'inscrit dans une longue tradition issue du KGB, dont les méthodes sont aujourd'hui perpétuées à travers les « opérations d'influence» menées par les services de renseignement russes, héritier des « mesures actives» du KGB et des pratiques de l'*Okhrana* tsariste qui, pendant des siècles, a combattu les prétendues « activités subversives étrangères ». La vision du monde de Poutine reste profondément marquée par son passé au KGB, où l'antisémitisme était un outil de guerre idéologique. Après la défaite russe lors de la Guerre des Six Jours en 1967 (la Russie avait soutenu y comprit militairement les nations arabes, notamment l'Égypte), le KGB devient l'un des principaux diffuseurs de propagande antisémite dans le monde arabe, formant des terroristes palestiniens et installant l'égyptien Yasser Arafat, alors agent du KGB, à la tête de l'OLP. Le KGB devient le principal outil de la lutte de l'URSS contre les Etats-Unis, Israël et le sionisme. L'effondrement de l'URSS a été perçu par les cadres du KGB comme la conséquence d'une série d'erreur de leadership, dont l'une aurait été une mauvaise gestion de « la question juive ».

Au-delà de l'Ukraine, les services de renseignements russes mènent en parallèle des opérations d'influence en Occident. Cette stratégie ancienne se poursuit sous une forme adaptée aux réalités locales. En France, la Russie attise les tensions liées à l'antisionisme (Peinture de mains rouges sur le Mémorial de la Shoah à Paris, étoiles de David rue de Rivoli à Paris). Aux États-Unis, des

bots russes infiltrent et exploitent les mouvements anti-israéliens pour semer le chaos. Lors des manifestations anti-israéliennes qui ont notamment emmaillées les campus, des bots russes ont mené des campagnes de propagande visant à discréditer la police et le gouvernement. En parallèle, Moscou favorise la diffusion de l'antisémitisme à travers des plateformes comme Instagram, et apporte son soutien à des groupes néonazis comme *Rusich*, une unité paramilitaire néonazie russe fondée en 2014, tout en prétendant combattre le nazisme. Ces tentatives de déstabilisation ont été reportées dans un document du Département d'État Américain « More than a century of anti-Semitism » publié en janvier 2014.

Encore une fois, cette duplicité illustre comment le Kremlin instrumentalise l'antisémitisme à la fois comme outil de subversion externe et comme levier de politique intérieure.

La guerre Hamas–Israël et son impact sur la politique intérieure et étrangère de la Russie

Dans les années 1990 et 2000, la Russie condamnait les attentats du Hamas, préoccupée par les liens de ce dernier avec les séparatistes tchétchènes, sans jamais le classer officiellement comme organisation terroriste, a l'instar des pays européens et des Etats-Unis. Après la prise de pouvoir du Hamas à Gaza en 2007, Moscou a normalisé ses relations avec l'enclave, affirmant que le choix palestinien devait être respecté. Durant ces années, Israël, peu inquiète par ce rapprochement, a préféré maintenir une coopération pragmatique avec la Russie.

Le conflit militaire post 7 octobre a mis en lumière une véritable brèche dans la relation Israel-Russie: cette dernière a soutenu le Hamas politiquement, voté nombre de résolutions anti-israéliennes à l'ONU, et tenu une rhétorique antisémite virulente par la voix de son président, comparant l'armée israélienne à la Wehrmacht. Même si en 2024 l'ambassadeur israélien à Moscou a publiquement critiqué le soutien russe au Hamas, Israel choisi de conserver une position modérée pour éviter toute rupture qui pourrait mettre en danger le fragile équilibre, a la frontière syrienne notamment. Poutine n'a par ailleurs pas cache ses relations avec la branche politique du Hamas, notamment dans le cadre de la libération d'otages russes détenus par le Hamas dans la bande de Gaza.

L’appui russe aux ennemis d’Israel ne se limite pas au Hamas. Des armes russes, capturées lors de l’opération israélienne contre le Hezbollah à la fin de l’année 2024, provenaient vraisemblablement de bases russes en Syrie. D’autre part, la guerre en Ukraine a généré une dépendance militaire croissante de Moscou vis-à-vis de l’Iran (livraisons de chasseurs Su-35 et de systèmes S-400), autre ennemis d’Israel, qui a largement participé au renforcement de l’arsenal du Hamas depuis son arrivée au pouvoir en 2007.
Simultanément, les médias pro-Kremlin ont lancé la campagne antisémite la plus intense depuis les années 1960, encouragée par des responsables russes. Cette vague d’antisémitisme, amplifiée par la guerre à Gaza, a principalement visé à accuser l’Occident d’hypocrisie face à l’Ukraine. Moscou semble avoir choisi son camp, sacrifiant ses liens avec Israël pour renforcer son alliance avec l’Iran et d’autres acteurs anti-occidentaux.

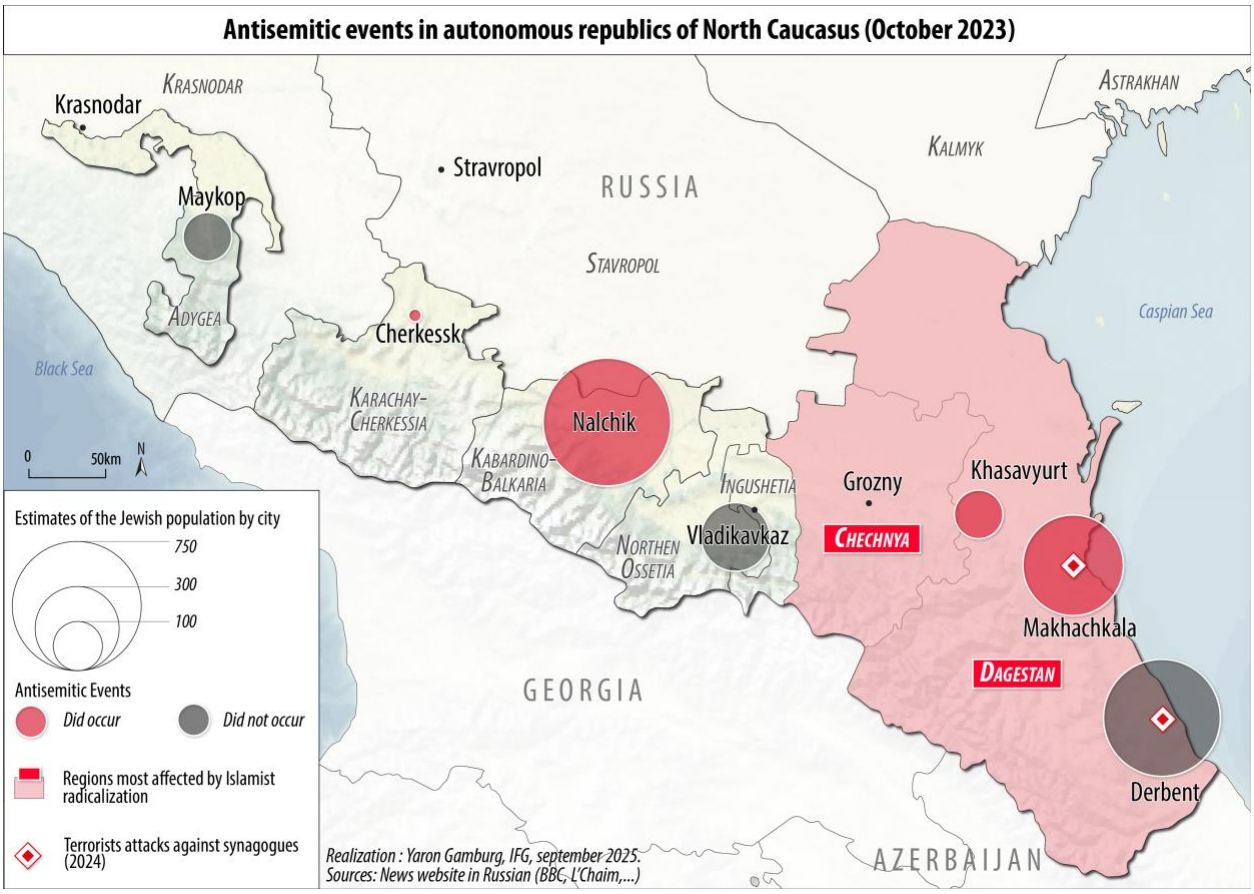
Il est important de noter que dans le contexte de la guerre Israël-Hamas, le Kremlin fait largement usage d’un narratif antisioniste, alimentant chez certains un sentiment de flou entre judaïsme et sionisme, servant le narratif de ceux qui assimilent l’antisémitisme à un simple antisionisme « légitime ». Cet amalgame sert à instrumentaliser la cause palestinienne à des fins internes et internationales, tout en réactivant des réflexes antisémites dans la société russe.

Sociologie et géographie de l'antisémitisme contemporain en Russie

Depuis les années 2010, l’antisémitisme en Russie a connu une transformation notable : il a progressivement quitté le terrain de la violence physique pour s’ancrer dans l’espace médiatique et numérique.

Un tournant significatif s’est produit en octobre 2023, avec les émeutes antisémites au Daghestan, notamment l’attaque de l’aéroport de Makhatchkala par une foule cherchant à s’en prendre à des passagers supposés juifs ou israéliens. Cet événement a mis en lumière une dynamique régionale inquiétante dans le Caucase du Nord, marquée depuis les années 2000 par une islamisation croissante, nourrie par la pauvreté, le chômage, l’affaiblissement des institutions laïques, et une stratégie du Kremlin consistant à acheter la loyauté des élites locales en échange d’un contrôle politique relatif.

Ces violences ont exposé les limites de l'état russe : malgré un important appareil sécuritaire, les autorités fédérales se sont montrées incapables de prévenir ou de contenir rapidement la flambée de haine. La réponse du Kremlin est finalement arrivée mais est restée prudente, presque ambiguë. Elle a été perçue comme un signal de faiblesse de la part du pouvoir et de sa capacite à maintenir l'ordre, ce qui a eu pour conséquence de renforcer le sentiment d'impunité de certaines forces islamistes radicales dans la région.



Carte 3 : Événements antisémites dans les républiques autonomes du Caucase du Nord (octobre 2023)

Il faut noter enfin que la position de la Russie sur le conflit entre Israel et le Hamas pourrait entrainer une flambée de violence à Moscou même, qui accueille une importante population issue du Caucase du Nord. De nombreux observateurs estiment que cette configuration démographique, au cœur même de la Russie, pourrait, à terme, constituer une bombe à retardement.

Ce phénomène régional s'inscrit dans un contexte national plus large. Malgré la marginalité démographique de la population juive en Russie (moins de 0,1 %), les préjugés antisémites sont réactivés pour détourner l'attention des difficultés internes: guerre en Ukraine, isolement international, instabilité sociale. La figure du président « juif » Volodymyr Zelensky, continue d'être exploitée pour alimenter ces narratifs.

Alors même que l'influence de la communauté juive sur la vie politique et culturelle russe a fortement décliné, certaines personnes influentes de confession juive, intégrées au régime, tel le rabbin Berel Lazar ou le propagandiste Vladimir Soloviev, affichent une loyauté sans faille à la Russie et a son président, servant largement de caution dans la stratégie ambiguë du Kremlin, que beaucoup assimilent à une fuite en avant.

Conclusion

Cette dissertation a tenté d'analyser l'évolution de l'antisémitisme et du récit de l'Holocauste en Russie sur une période de près de quarante ans, allant de la fin des années 1980 à nos jours. Cette évolution a suivi une trajectoire complexe, souvent imprévisible, dans laquelle, après une tentative initiale de rupture avec le passé, des éléments caractéristiques de périodes antérieures de l'histoire russe ont progressivement réapparu. Après avoir commencé par une tentative de normaliser la « question juive», par le biais de l'abolition de la politique soviétique d'antisémitisme et le rejet de l'idéologie antisioniste, celle-ci s'est reformatée en un instrument de manipulation et de contrôle pour servir les objectifs politiques du gouvernement.

Nous avons observé deux transformations de l'antisémitisme. La première était liée à la décision des autorités d'abandonner l'héritage soviétique de l'antisémitisme d'état au profit d'un modèle démocratique fondé sur l'égalité des minorités ethniques et religieuses. Cette transformation a

permis de résoudre partiellement le problème de la discrimination envers les Juifs, de permettre l'émigration des Juifs, et de créer les conditions d'un renouveau de la vie culturelle et religieuse juive. Cependant, elle n'a pas empêché la diffusion de l'antisémitisme dans les sphères politiques et médiatiques. La seconde transformation a consisté en l'établissement d'un contrôle sur la communauté juive et l'usage de l'antisémitisme et de la mémoire de l'Holocauste comme outil au service de la politique étrangère russe. En échange de leur loyauté envers le gouvernement, les organisations juives ont obtenu son soutien ainsi qu'une certaine liberté pour reconstruire progressivement la vie juive. En revanche, leur capacité à lutter contre l'antisémitisme et les falsifications de la mémoire de l'Holocauste a été limitée. L'émergence de politiques néo-impériales, la confrontation avec l'Occident et la guerre contre l'Ukraine ont renforcé la rhétorique antisémite des autorités, tout en alimentant les actes antisémites au sein des franges radicales de la société.

Je formule trois conclusions principales.

Premièrement, l'évolution de l'antisémitisme en Russie, marquée par de nombreux paradoxes, a été largement façonnée par les priorités politiques, tant internes qu'externes, des autorités centrales.

Deuxièmement, l'exploitation politique de l'antisémitisme et de la mémoire de l'Holocauste relève d'une stratégie délibérée de la direction actuelle. Elle constitue à la fois un outil de politique étrangère et un mécanisme de contrôle interne.

Troisièmement, l'agressivité croissante du Kremlin à l'égard de l'Ukraine et des pays occidentaux, combinée à une répression intérieure renforcée et à un durcissement autoritaire, a entraîné une résurgence de l'antisémitisme, une reprise de l'émigration juive, ainsi qu'une manipulation systématique de la mémoire de l'Holocauste. De ce fait, la politique actuelle de la Russie entre en contradiction directe avec l'un des acquis majeurs de l'ère post-soviétique : l'abolition de l'antisémitisme d'État en URSS.

Le paradoxe de la politique juive sous Vladimir Poutine réside dans le fait que, malgré l'image qu'il s'est construite d'«ami du peuple juif», l'antisémitisme, souvent sous couvert d'antisionisme, a progressivement retrouvé sa place dans le discours officiel.

Cette étude avait pour objectif d'analyser les causes, les mécanismes et les conséquences de la transition de la Russie post-soviétique, passée d'un rejet explicite de l'antisémitisme d'État soviétique à une instrumentalisation croissante de ce phénomène: adoption par les élites d'une rhétorique antisémite, manipulation de la mémoire de la Shoah à des fins politiques, utilisation de l'antisémitisme comme outil dans les «opérations d'influence» du Kremlin a l'étranger, et notamment en Europe, et hausse des actes de vandalisme et de violence ciblant les Juifs.
L'élimination de l'antisémitisme d'état, et de son corollaire idéologique, l'antisionisme, avait accompagné le rejet de l'héritage soviétique et du système totalitaire. En revanche, la réapparition actuelle de l'antisémitisme et la déformation du récit de l'Holocauste résultent de la dérive autoritaire du régime et de sa politique étrangère agressive, orientée vers la reconstitution d'une sphère d'influence « traditionnelle» de la Russie.
Les résultats de cette recherche montrent un lien clair entre les premières tentatives du Kremlin pour consolider son pouvoir après 1999, qui incluaient une forte ingérence dans les affaires de la communauté juive, et l'usage actuel de l'antisémitisme et de la mémoire de l'Holocauste dans le cadre de sa confrontation avec l'Ukraine et l'Occident.
L'image de la Russie comme rempart contre l'antisémitisme et celle de Poutine comme protecteur du peuple juif ont été façonnées par des intérêts politiques, non par une quelconque « affinité personnelle de Poutine avec les Juifs», comme le suggère Feferman en 2021 dans son article « Russia as a Bulwark against Anti-Semitism and Holocaust Denial». Dans la vision géopolitique de Poutine, les Juifs, et Israël, représentaient des alliés utiles. Durant son premier mandat présidentiel, il a su obtenir leur soutien.

Enfin, cette étude permet d'esquisser les perspectives d'évolution de l'antisémitisme en Russie. À court terme, la poursuite des tendances actuelles semble la plus probable. Tant que dureront la guerre en Ukraine et l'affrontement avec l'Occident, l'antisémitisme continuera de servir d'arme contre les ennemis extérieurs. L'Holocauste, en tant qu'élément central du récit officiel de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, demeurera un pilier de la propagande d'État, dans une logique géopolitique inchangée.
Dans ce contexte, la communauté juive de Russie poursuivra son déclin démographique, tandis que ses représentants resteront largement dépendants du Kremlin.

Perspectives

L'évolution de l'antisémitisme en Russie au cours des 25 dernières années, en particulier dans sa dimension de politique étrangère ou géopolitique, s'inscrit dans une dynamique plus large, qui dépasse le seul cadre russe. Elle ouvre ainsi de nombreuses pistes pour des recherches futures.

La montée de l'antisémitisme dans des pays abritant d'importantes communautés juives, notamment dans le contexte de l'escalade du conflit israélo-palestinien, a placé ces États au centre de dynamiques complexes. D'un côté, ils subissent des pressions internationales concernant leur position sur le conflit, de l'autre ils doivent gérer des tensions internes, parfois violentes, qui menacent la sécurité de leurs citoyens juifs. En parallèle, ces États doivent aussi tenir compte des liens particuliers entre leurs communautés juives et l'État d'Israël.
D'un point de vue méthodologique, cette relation entre les diasporas juives et Israël peut être analysée à travers le modèle de l'«État-émigration» développé par Alan Gamlen. Ce modèle aide à comprendre de nouveaux concepts géopolitiques, en montrant comment les États cherchent à maintenir des liens structurés avec leurs diasporas. Israël entretient des relations particulièrement étroites avec les communautés juives à travers le monde, les considérant comme sa propre diaspora, en raison notamment de la Loi du Retour qui leur garantit l'accès à la citoyenneté israélienne s'ils en font la demande.

Le cas français illustre bien cette logique. La décision du président Macron de reconnaître un État palestinien a coïncidé avec une hausse de l'antisémitisme en France, créant une double pression. Sur le plan intérieur, la communauté juive a été la cible de violences liées au conflit israélo-palestinien. Le Premier ministre israélien, Benyamin Netanyahu, et l'ambassadeur américain en France, ont accusé le gouvernement français de ne pas suffisamment protéger sa population juive. Dans sa lettre de réponse à Netanyahu, le président Macron a rejeté ces accusations, dénonçant une «instrumentalisation de l'antisémitisme».
Ces événements montrent qu'en France, il existe pour certain une perception géopolitique de la communauté juive comme appartenant à la diaspora d'Israël, intensifiant et encourageant l'amalgame entre antisémitisme et antisionisme, et permettant à l'antisémitisme, dans certaines

sphères de la société civile, de s'exprimer sous couvert de critique à l'égard de la politique israélienne.

Les manifestations de l'après 7 octobre 2023 sur les campus américains confirment également que l'antisémitisme est devenu un point de tension entre politique intérieure et politique étrangère. L'administration Biden s'est retrouvée confrontée à un double défi : réagir fermement face à la montée de l'antisémitisme aux États-Unis, tout en gérant tant bien que mal l'impact politique de la guerre entre Israël et le Hamas.

A la lumière de ces développements, il apparait que l'antisémitisme et la sécurité des communautés juives ne peuvent plus être abordés uniquement comme des questions sociales ou nationales. Ils sont devenus des enjeux géopolitiques.

L'avenir de la vie juive en Russie reste incertain, mais une chose est claire : tant que l'antisémitisme continuera d'être utilisé comme un outil de pouvoir, son élimination restera impossible. La principale leçon des quarante dernières années d'histoire post-soviétique est que sans véritable transformation démocratique ni rejet profond de l'héritage antisémite, qu'il soit impérial, soviétique ou post-soviétique, l'antisémitisme persistera, à la fois comme symptôme des abus de pouvoir et comme instrument de leur maintien.

FROM DENUNCIATION TO INSTRUMENTALIZATION: ANTI-SEMITISM AND THE NARRATIVE OF THE HOLOCAUST IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

Introduction

"The Jewish question is a Russian question."[1]
Dmitry Merezhkovsky

In January 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin invited European Jews to come and live in Russia in response to the sharp rise in anti-Semitism on the European continent. "They left in the Soviet Union, so let them return,"[2] proposed Putin at a meeting with a delegation from the European Jewish Congress. However, the Russian president's proposal was ignored, despite the significant escalation of anti-Semitism in several European countries. On the contrary, between 2022 and 2023, a new surge of mass Jewish emigration from Russia reduced the country's Jewish population to a historically low level. Simultaneously, a renewed "comeback" of Russian anti-Semitism has been unfolding, manifested not only in acts of violence and vandalism but also in the rhetoric of senior government officials, including the president himself. This is one of the paradoxes of Vladimir Putin's 25-year rule, who has made no secret of his sympathy for the Jewish people since assuming the presidency.

The topic of this dissertation is the evolution of anti-Semitism and the formation of Holocaust discourse in post-Soviet Russia. My research covers the period that began in the late 1980s, when the Soviet Union's leadership embarked on a course of reform. This process was accompanied by a profound economic and social crisis, conflicts with national republics (primarily the Baltics), demanding independence, and political upheavals, leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The course toward economic and political reforms continued in post-Soviet Russia. However, it also took place in an atmosphere of intense political confrontation and social crisis, exacerbated by the adverse effects of economic reforms. The armed standoff between the president and parliament in 1993, the adoption of a new Russian constitution that contained "considerable authoritarian potential,"[3] and presidential elections in 1996 marred by numerous abuses by the Kremlin undermined democratic reforms. In effect, democratization was "sacrificed in the name of economic reform and the restructuring of the

[1] Dmitry Merezhkovsky, «The Jewish question as Russian», (Stchit, Moscow:1915,) pp. 136-138. Quoted from Wikisource
[2] "Putin Invites European Jews to Move to Russia", *RBK*, January 19, 2016, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/19/01/2016/569e66669a794733927094ea
[3] Vladimir Gelman, *Authoritarian Russia. Flight from freedom, or Why democracy does not take root in our country* (Moscow: Hovard Roark, 2021), p. 50-51.

state".[4] By the late 1990s, Russian democratization had reached a dead end,[5] and Vladimir Putin's first decade in power (2000-2010) saw the formation of an authoritarian system of government.[6] These processes had a direct impact on the situation of the Jewish community in Russia and the questions of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.

Context

This subject holds particular significance in contemporary Russia and within the broader framework of the global rise of anti-Semitism. From a Russian foreign policy perspective, Holocaust remembrance and the issue of anti-Semitism are directly related to the Russian-Ukrainian war, the largest military conflict on the European continent since World War II, and a challenge to the entire system of international relations. The "denazification" of Ukraine was one of the three reasons and goals of the "Special Military operation"[7] as announced by President Putin on the eve of the invasion. Russia has long accused Ukraine of glorifying Nazis, Holocaust denial, anti-Semitism, and genocide against the Russian-speaking population of the Donbas area. Furthermore, even today, three years after the start of the war, the official Russian position still demands the "denazification" of Ukraine, although the manipulative nature of Russian policy has already drawn condemnations.[8]

Russian-Israeli relations, which at times causes disappointment among its allies[9], are also inextricably linked to the topic of anti-Semitism and Holocaust remembrance. Despite its Western orientation and special relationship with the United States, the Israeli government strives to maintain trusting relations with Russia and pursues a neutral policy regarding the war in Ukraine. Despite their profound differences in interests in the Middle East, Russia and Israel do

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[4] Ibid., p. 45.
[5] Ibid., p. 159.
[6] Ibid. p. 48.
[7] Calling the “Special Military Operation” a war in Russia is prohibited and punishable by law.
[8] “Museum Condemns Russia's Invasion of Ukraine”, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum site, February 24, 2022, https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/museum-condemns-russias-invasion-of-ukraine
[9] “The Israeli Reaction to the War in Ukraine”, The Institute for Human Sciences, https://www.iwm.at/publication/iwmpost-article/the-israeli-reaction-to-the-war-in-ukraine, also “Israel’s complicated but strategic relationship with Russia could strengthen with Trump in the White House”, Chatham House, March 21, 2025, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/israels-complicated-strategic-relationship-russia-could-strengthen-trump-white-house

not shy away from dialogue on strategic issues. Alongside their common rhetoric about the Russian-speaking community in Israel, both countries highlight a shared vision of the Soviet Army's role in defeating Germany and bringing the Holocaust to an end. This study will help clarify the dynamics of this multilayered relationship.

Equally important is the question of the status of the Jewish community in Russia and its future. President Putin has invited European Jews to move to Russia, and Jewish community leaders are celebrating the revival of Jewish life, yet the Jewish population in Russia continues to decline. The war in Ukraine has pushed tens of thousands of Russian Jews to emigrate, while growing anti-Semitism is heightening the sense of insecurity among those who remain in the country.[10] Meanwhile, official representatives of the Jewish community, having become part of Putin's political system, are unable to effectively combat distortions of the Holocaust and the anti-Semitism of the country's top leadership.

The rise of anti-Semitism in Russia is also important in an international context. The wave of anti-Israel unrest, which has resulted in acts of anti-Semitic violence and discrimination in many Western countries, has not bypassed Russia. This fact is even more interesting given that in its drive to isolate itself from the outside world, Russia is restricting its population's access to foreign media and social networks, creating a so-called "sovereign internet."[11] No less telling is the fact that the pronounced anti-Zionist nature of the global campaign of Hamas supporters is almost identical in its messages to the Soviet anti-Zionist campaign and its anti-Semitic content.[12] In both cases, Israel is accused of genocide, Zionism equated with racism and Nazism, and Diaspora Jews are considered as supporters of the Israeli government and legitimate targets of discrimination and physical violence.[13]

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[10] "An Epidemic of Hate: Why is anti-Semitism so widespread in Russia, and where do its roots come from?", *Novaya Gazeta*, November 25, 2023, https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/11/24/epidemiia-nenavisti

[11] "Why are the authorities creating a "sovereign RuNet": what will it protect against and what are the threats?", *RBK*, February 28, 2022, https://trends.rbc.ru/trends/industry/609a52329a79471fba0f0837?from=copy

[12] Izabella Tabarovsky, "Demonization Blueprints: "Soviet Conspiracist Antizionism in Contemporary Left-Wing Discourse", *Journal of Contemporary Aanti-Semitism*, August 11, 2022

[13] "France : 31% des 18 à 24 ans considèrent légitime de s'en prendre aux Juifs au nom de la guerre à Gaza", *I24*, September 19, 2025, https://www.i24news.tv/fr/actu/france/artc-france-31-des-18-a-24-ans-considerent-legitime-de-s-en-prendre-aux-francais-juifs-au-nom-de-la-guerre-a-gaza

President Putin's own rhetoric has increasingly taken on an antisemitic character, marked by distortions of the Holocaust. While formally condemning anti-Semitism, Putin resorts to anti-Semitic language against President Zelenskyy and opponents of the war in Ukraine. In late 2024, he blamed ethnic "godless Jews" for the persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine.[14] While acknowledging the Holocaust, Putin fails to recognize its unique character, equating it with the suffering of other peoples of the USSR.[15] Putin also blames the Holocaust in Ukraine exclusively on Ukrainian nationalists, absolving the German authorities and army of responsibility.[16] At the same time, Putin compares the actions of the IDF in Gaza to the German Wehrmacht blockade of Leningrad, yet another example of the trivialization and distortion of the Holocaust, borrowed from the Soviet repertoire of anti-Zionist propaganda clichés.[17]

Research Problem

Considering a contradictory and cyclical trajectory of anti-Semitism in Russia over the past 40 years, the current research will address the following questions: why, how, and with what consequences did post-Soviet Russia shift from the total rejection of the Soviet policy of state anti-Semitism to the weaponization of anti-Semitism and the memory of the Holocaust for strategic purpose.

The central hypothesis of my research is that in post-Soviet Russia both the initial rejection of anti-Semitism and its subsequent instrumentalization were shaped by external and internal factors, reflecting strategic decisions made by the Kremlin. Following the initial rejection of state anti-Semitism by Gorbachev and Yeltsin, under Putin's rule, issues of anti-

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[14] "They are ethnic Jews, but who has ever seen them in a synagogue?" Putin called those involved in banning the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine "atheists", Meduza, December 19, 2024, https://meduza.io/news/2024/12/19/oni-etnicheskie-evrei-no-kto-ih-videl-v-sinagoge-putin-nazval-bezbozhnikami-teh-kto-prichasten-k-zapretu-deyatelnosti-rpts-v-ukraine

[15] Vladimir Solovyov, "World Order 2018", https://smotrim.ru/brand/62720

[16] 'Even the SS troops didn't consider it possible' Putin says 'local nationalists and anti-Semites' killed 1.5 million Jews in Ukraine during WWII," *Meduza*, (September 5, 2023), https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/09/05/even-the-ss-troops-didn-t-consider-it-possible

[17] "Putin compared Israel to Nazi Germany", Cursor info, October 13, 2023, https://cursorinfo.co.il/israel-news/putin-sravnil-izrail-s-natsistskoj-germaniej/, also "Putin compared Gaza to Leningrad", Palestinian Information Center, November 5, 2023, https://russian.palinfo.com/news/2023/11/5/путин-сравнил-газу-с-ленинградом

Semitism and the Holocaust once again became political instruments of the Kremlin. This did not amount to a full return to a Soviet-style antisemitic policy, but rather to its instrumentalization in pursuit of political goals. I argue that this transformation began during the transition from Yeltsin to Putin (1999-2000), when the Kremlin administration actively intervened in the affairs of the Jewish community to create a loyal Jewish organization in its struggle against Jewish oligarchs. In this instrumental approach, the Kremlin positioned itself as the primary "regulator" of anti-Semitism in the country: depending on its political calculations, it can lower or raise the level of anti-Semitism at will.

Building on this, my second hypothesis is that, the collaboration between the Kremlin and loyal Jewish organizations has produced two contradictory trends: on the one hand, the continued development of Jewish religious and cultural life in Russia; on the other, the loss of independence of Jewish organizations, which became integrated into the authoritarian system and lost the ability to counter anti-Semitism and distortions of the Holocaust effectively. From the Kremlin's perspective, however, this collaboration became an important reputational and political asset on the international stage.

The third hypothesis concerns the factors that enabled the Kremlin to construct the image of Russia as a bulwark against anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial. I argue that the international legitimacy of Russian discourse on the Holocaust and the combat against anti-Semitism rested on support from Jewish organizations loyal to the Kremlin, and from the Israeli government. Both were ready to overlook Holocaust distortions and Russia's manipulations of anti-Semitism. Russian Jewish organizations acted as part of the Kremlin's political system, while Israel's position was shaped by two considerations: recognition of the USSR's historical role in the war against Nazism and national security concerns, linked to Russia's growing influence in the Middle East.

Finally, my fourth hypothesis is that the use of anti-Semitism and Holocaust memory in the context of confrontation with Ukraine and the West has led to systematic Holocaust distortion, outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence within Russia that at times escaped state control, and a deterioration in relations with Israel. According to this hypothesis, the policy of instrumentalizing anti-Semitism and the Holocaust carries certain costs for the Kremlin; yet its perceived effectiveness could also encourage Russian leadership to escalate anti-Semitism further in the event of extreme political or economic destabilization.

Terminology

Anti-Semitism

The term anti-Semitism first appeared in the second half of the 19th century, but the expression of prejudice and hostility toward Jews is considered the "longest hatred" in human history.[18] Russian history, where the state's anti-Jewish policy began as early as the 16th century, even in the absence of a Jewish population, vividly illustrates this assertion.

From its inception to the present, the concept of anti-Semitism has been defined in multiple ways, yet a consensus on its meaning remains elusive. "Defining Anti-Semitism Is the Subject of Bitter Debate" reads the headline of a New York Times article on July 25, 2025.[19] Particularly violent manifestations of anti-Semitism typically prompt new attempts to understand and define it. Witnessing the pogroms and persecution of Jews in the Russian empire, Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev distinguished between «everyday» ("bytovoy") and political anti-Semitism, highlighting the manipulative nature of the latter.[20] After the horrors of the Holocaust, French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre argued that anti-Semitism is "a global attitude that one adopts not only toward Jews but toward men in general," emphasizing the irrational nature of this hatred.[21] In her "The Origins of Totalitarianism", Hannah Arendt considered anti-Semitism a political ideology aimed at undermining liberal democracy through conspiracy theories about Jewish global domination.[22]

The most widely accepted definition of anti-Semitism today is the "Working Definition" of IHRA[23], adopted in 2016. According to IHRA, "Anti-Semitism is a certain perception of

[18] Robert S. Wistrich, "Parallel Lines: Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism in the 21st Century", The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the study of Anti-Semitism", 2017, https://openscholar.huji.ac.il/sicsa/publications/parallel-lines-anti-zionism-and-anti-Semitism-21st-century; also "Anti-Semitism in History: From the Early Church to 1400", US Holocaust Memorial Museum website, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/anti-Semitism-in-history-from-the-early-church-to-1400

[19] "Defining Anti-Semitism Is the Subject of Bitter Debate", *New York Times*, July 15, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/15/us/defining-anti-Semitism.html

[20] Nikolai Berdyaev, "The religious fate of Jewry", in" *The Fall of the Holy Russian Kingdom: Journalism 1914-1922*, (Moscow: "Astrel", 2007).

[21] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive* (Paris : Galimard, 2017), part 1.

[22] Hannah Arendt, "The Jews, the Nation-State, and the Birth of Anti-Semitism", in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Mariner Books, 1976).

[23] The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), an intergovernmental organization of 35 member states.

Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews, rhetorical and physical manifestations of anti-Semitism directed toward Jewish and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities"[24] and includes anti-Zionism as a contemporary expression of anti-Semitism. In addition to the governments of these countries, this definition enjoys the support of central Jewish organizations, many experts on anti-Semitism and the Holocaust[25], major Holocaust remembrance museums, such as Yad Vashem[26], the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum[27], and the Mémorial de la Shoah[28]. The definition's clarity and practicality allow for the formulation of concrete steps to monitor and combat anti-Semitism. There are also other definitions of anti-Semitism, for example "Jerusalem Declaration on Anti-Semitism"[29], which narrow the definition of anti-Semitism in the context of criticism of Israel.[30]

State anti-Semitism is a key concept in my study. Hannah Arendt highlighted the connection between modern anti-Semitism and the totalitarian states of the 20th century - German Nazism and Soviet communism.[31] As Kostyrchenko points out, anti-Semitism was a state policy in both Nazi Germany and the USSR.[32] The main difference between them was that in "Germany, official anti-Semitism assumed an open, overtly aggressive character, while in the USSR it was camouflaged and latent."[33] Russian historian Pavel Polyan adds that "state anti-Semitism has almost always predominated" throughout Russian history.

Kostyrchenko argues that state anti-Semitism "grows" out of party-propaganda anti-Semitism, thus moving into the next phase of development.[34] Consequently, Soviet anti-Semitism reached its peak in the final years of Stalin's rule and continued in a more mitigated

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[24] "Working definition of anti-Semitism", International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance website, https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-anti-Semitism
[25] "Letter Urging Inclusion of IHRA Working Definition of Anti-Semitism in UN Action Plan", World Jewish Congress, May 18, 2023, https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/letter-urging-inclusion-of-ihra-working-definition-of-anti-Semitism-in-un-action-plan
[26] "A working definition of anti-Semitism", Yad Vashem, https://www.yadvashem.org/he/holocaust/resource-center/lexicon/alef/anti-Semitism.html
[27] "Anti-Semitism: An Introduction", US Holocaust Memorial Museum, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/anti-Semitism
[28] "Le sens des mots : L'antisémitisme", Mémorial de la Shoah, https://www.memorialdelashoah.org/lanti-Semitisme.html
[29] "**Jerusalem Declaration on Anti-Semitism", https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/**
[30] "Five Definitions of Anti-Semitism", Union for Reform Judaism, April 24, 2025, https://urj.org/blog/five-definitions-anti-Semitism
[31] Hannah Arendt.
[32] Gennady Kostyrchenko, *Stalin's Secret Policy: Power and Anti-Semitism*, (Moscow: International relations, 2003), p. 5
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., P. 5

form until Gorbachev's rise to power.[35] While Kostyrchenko does not provide a complete definition of state anti-Semitism, it can be characterized, based on his analysis, as a form of anti-Semitism in which hostility toward Jews, their persecution, and discrimination by the state are part of official policy or supported by state institutions. Consequently, this concept helps explain the policies of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, which sought to dismantle Soviet state anti-Semitism by lifting restrictions on Jewish emigration, ending discrimination against Jews, and abandoning the USSR's anti-Zionist ideology. It also informs the analysis of the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust under Putin, by exposing its manipulative nature as part of Kremlin's foreign policy and operations of influence reminiscent of Soviet practices.

Corporate anti-Semitism differs from state anti-Semitism in that it is driven by political forces that do not possess the state power yet can exert significant influence on society. According to Polyan, there have been two periods in Russian history when anti-Semitism was primarily corporate rather than state-driven: the first from 1917 to 1939, and the second beginning with the collapse of the USSR, which, after the invasion of Ukraine, appears to be drifting back toward state anti-Semitism.[36] He emphasizes that corporate anti-Semitism can have grave consequences when the state fails to confront antisemitic manifestations or chooses to ignore it.

Both Polyan and Kostyrchenko stress the continuity between state and corporate anti-Semitism.[37] Taken together, these definitions provide a theoretical framework for analyzing the evolution of post-Soviet anti-Semitism, from the rejection of Soviet policies to corporate anti-Semitism and the subsequent resurgence of antisemitic discourse at the state level. Those definitions are particularly useful for highlighting the paradoxes in the two transformations of post-Soviet anti-Semitism in Russia. First, despite the complete rejection of state anti-Semitism, the inaction of Gorbachev and Yeltsin led to a surge in corporate anti-Semitism. Second, under Putin, the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, within an authoritarian regime and expanding geopolitical ambitions, produced a contradiction between the initially favorable attitude toward Jews and Israel and the revival of official anti-Semitism and Holocaust distortion.

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[35] Ibid., pp. 619-623.

[36] **Pavel Polyan, "Anti-Semitism in Russia: the day before yesterday, yesterday, today, tomorrow", Historical expertise, 2023,** https://www.istorex.org/post/полян-п-м-антисемитизм-в-россии-позавчера-вчера-сегодня-завтра

[37] Ibid., Kostyrchenko, p. 623.

Holocaust

Defining the Holocaust, along with its denial and distortion, is the second key concept of my research. The Holocaust has become a central element of Russian foreign policy, which in turn has generated systematic distortions of its history. To grasp the manipulative and distorted nature of Russia's Holocaust discourse, it is essential to clarify the terminology involved.

Unlike the concept of anti-Semitism, the Holocaust is a historical event, defined by a clear time frame. Here is how Yad Vashem defines it: "The Holocaust was the murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators. Between the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 and the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, Nazi Germany and its accomplices strove to murder every Jew under their domination. Because Nazi discrimination against the Jews began with Hitler's accession to power in January 1933, many historians consider this the beginning of the Holocaust era. The Jews were not the only victims of Hitler's regime, but they were the only group that the Nazis sought to destroy entirely."[38] The US Holocaust Memorial Museum gives a similar definition.[39] The UN adds several more elements, stating that "...Nazi ideology [was] built upon pre-existing anti-Semitism and anti-gypsyism... Nazi racism demanded the forced sterilization of Germans of African descent, the murder of Germans with disabilities and Soviet prisoners of war, and the enslavement of Slavs. The Nazis criminalized all they deemed regime opponents, including homosexuals, political dissenters, and Jehovah's Witnesses. But in the Nazi imagination, Jews loomed as the primary threat to their new world order."[40]

Despite the abundance of incontrovertible evidence, the Holocaust has, from the very outset, been accompanied by attempts at denial, distortion, and minimization, including during World War II itself. Nazi Germany deliberately used euphemisms for its policy of extermination of Jews and systematically erased traces of its crimes.[41] Holocaust denial is defined as "claims that the mass extermination of the Jews by the Nazis never happened; that the number of Jewish losses has been greatly exaggerated; that the Holocaust was not systematic nor a result of an

[38] "What was the Holocaust", Yad Vashem website, https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/faqs.html
[39] "Introduction to the Holocaust", US Holocaust Memorial Museum website, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust
[40] "The Holocaust: 1933–1945", UN Outreach Program on the Holocaust, https://www.un.org/en/holocaustremembrance/permanentexhibition/theholocaust1933-1945
[41] What is Holocaust Denial", Yad Vashem website, https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/faqs.html

official policy; or simply that the Holocaust never took place."[42] In several European countries, Holocaust denial has encountered public resistance, has been deemed illegal[43], and has led to several high-profile court cases.[44]

A much more widespread and unaddressed form of discrediting the concept of the Holocaust has become the distortion of its history. Emergence of new information technologies turned Holocaust distortion into a global challenge, leading to the adoption of a UN resolution in 2022. The resolution states that Holocaust denial and distortion are expressions of anti-Semitism and defines it as follows:

> "(a) Intentional efforts to excuse or minimize the impact of the Holocaust or its principal elements, including collaborators and allies of Nazi Germany,
>
> (b) Gross minimization of the number of victims of the Holocaust in contradiction to reliable sources,
>
> (c) Attempts to blame the Jews for causing their own genocide,
>
> (d) Statements that cast the Holocaust as a positive historical event,
>
> (e) Attempts to blur the responsibility for the establishment of concentration and death camps devised and operated by Nazi Germany by blaming other nations or ethnic groups."[45]

The issue of distorting the Holocaust through its manipulation in political struggles in the United States was raised by former ADL President Abraham Foxman in 2014.[46] State-sponsored manipulation of Holocaust memory is addressed in the new 2021 IHRA recommendations, which define "state-sponsored manipulation of Holocaust history to sow political discord within or outside a nation's borders" as a form of Holocaust distortion.[47] Russia is not explicitly mentioned

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Michael J. Bazyler, "Holocaust Denial Laws and Other Legislation Criminalizing Promotion of Nazism", *Bard - Center for the study of hate*, https://bcsh.bard.edu/files/2019/06/Holocaust-denial-laws.pdf
[44] "David Irving jailed for Holocaust denial", The Guardian, February 20, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/feb/20/austria.thefarright, "Holocaust denial writer jailed for five years", The Guardian, February 16, 2007, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/feb/16/historybooks.secondworldwar, "The ruling against David Irving", The Guardian, April 11, 2000, https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/apr/11/irving1
[45] "Holocaust denial", United Nations General Assembly A/76/L.30, January 13, 2022, https://docs.un.org/en/A/76/L.30
[46] Abraham Foxman, "Inappropriate Comparisons Trivialize the Holocaust", ADL website, January 27, 2014, https://www.adl.org/resources/news/inappropriate-comparisons-trivialize-holocaust
[47] "Identifying and countering distortions of the Holocaust - Recommendations for policymakers and decision makers", International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance website, 2021, https://holocaustremembrance.com/wp-

in the document, but the allusion to Cold War practices hints at the source of this type of Holocaust distortion. A 2024 AJC report, in turn, clearly states an example of Holocaust distortion by the Russian Foreign Minister.[48] Those definitions facilitate the task of identifying Holocaust distortions and exposing its manipulative nature by Russian president and senior officials.

Literature review and theoretical framework

The first in-depth study of anti-Semitism during perestroika and the early years of post-Soviet Russia was William Korey's book, "Russian Anti-Semitism, Pamyat, and the Demonology of Zionism."[49] Following the interdisciplinary approach of Anti-Semitism Studies, the book combines historical, public policy, social science, and Jewish studies research to analyze the dramatic rise of anti-Semitism in the USSR and the Russian Federation from 1985 to 1994. Korey's research focuses on two questions: what are the causes of the rise of anti-Semitism during this period, and what factors contribute to the growing influence of anti-Semitism in Russian politics and society, despite the abandonment of the Soviet policy of state anti-Semitism. The fundamental contribution of his research lies in demonstrating the continuity of Soviet and post-Soviet anti-Semitism, as well as the political use of anti-Semitism in the context of Russian democratization.[50] However, the foreign policy aspect of anti-Semitism has received less attention than its domestic political dimension.

Another important study of anti-Semitism of the first decade of post-Soviet Russia was published by Russian researcher Vyacheslav Likhachev in 2003[51]. He analyzes the political aspect of anti-Semitism, which by the late 1990s had permeated a significant portion of

content/uploads/2023/08/Recognizing-and-Countering-Holocaust-Distortion-Recommendations-%E2%80%93-IHRA.pdf

[48] Alyssa Weiner Sandler, “Breaking Down and Fighting Holocaust Trivialization”, American Jewish Committee website, https://www.ajc.org/breaking-down-and-fighting-holocaust-trivialization

[49] Korey, William, Russian Anti-Semitism, Pamyat, and the Demonology of Zionism. New York: Institute of the World Jewish Congress, 1995.

[50] William Korey, *Russian Anti-Semitism, Pamyat, and the Demonology of Zionism* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1995), ch. 11.

[51] Likhachev, Vyacheslav. *Political Anti-Semitism in Post-Soviet Russia: Actors and Ideas in 1991-2003.* Translated and edited by Eugene Veklerov, Series: Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society, no. 37. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2006

opposition parties and organizations, the media, and radical movements within the Russian Orthodox Church and among the Muslim population. Using sociological survey data (banned in the USSR), the author demonstrated a high correlation between the general level of xenophobia in Russian society and manifestations of anti-Semitism.[52] His analysis included an in-depth discussion of the anti-Zionist dimension of post-Soviet anti-Semitism and, in this context, addressed the rise of Islamic radicalism, which was a relatively new phenomenon in Russia at the time.[53] Like Korey, Likhachev did not consider the foreign policy dimension of anti-Semitism or the impact of the Jewish question in Russia on relations with Israel and international Jewish organizations.

Considering the abolition of state anti-Semitism, much research in this period focused on sociological surveys and monitoring of anti-Semitic manifestations conducted by the Levada Center[54], as well as by VTsIOM.[55] Analysis and interpretation of this data became one of the main tools for studying post-Soviet anti-Semitism. These surveys demonstrated a gradual improvement in Russians' attitudes toward Jews and Israel and a "general trend of declining anti-Semitism."[56] The unsuccessful attempts of the Russian anti-democratic opposition to blame Jews for the deteriorating socio-economic situation in Russia in the late 1990s and early 2000s led Gibbson and Howard to conclude that "a majority of Russians are predisposed to reject scurrilous allegations against Russian Jews."[57] Based on this, they argued that the "scapegoat" theory regarding the Jewish minority, traditionally blamed for all of the country's ills, had lost its ability to explain anti-Semitism in Russia.[58]

Kostyrchenko's historical approach to the history of Soviet anti-Semitism, which combined a geopolitical approach, allowed him to point to the ideological continuity of Soviet

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[52] Vyacheslav Likhachev, *Political anti-Semitism in modern Russia* (M: Moscow Bureau for Human Rights, Academia, 2003), p.
[53] Ibid., pp. 86-87.
[54] Lev Gudkov, Natalia Zorkaya, Ekaterina Kochergina, Evgenia Lezina, “Anti-Semitism in the Structure of Mass Xenophobia in Russia: Negative Identity and the Potential for Mobilization”, *Public Opinion Bulletin*, No. 1–2 (122) January-June 2016.
[55] VTsIOM report on the study "Attitudes of the population of Russia towards Jews and the problem of anti-Semitism" (Moscow, 1997); VTsIOM reports on studies: "Attitudes of the population of the USSR towards Jews and the problem of anti-Semitism" (Moscow, 1991); "Attitudes of the population of the former Soviet Union towards Jews." (Moscow, 1992).
[56] Gudkov, Zorkaya, Kochergina, Lezina, p.143.
[57] James L. Gibson and Marc Morje Howard, “Russian Anti-Semitism and the Scapegoating of Jews”, British Journal of Political Science, April 2007, p. 217.
[58] Ibid., p. 193.

and post-Soviet anti-Semitism: "Official anti-Semitism, which was on its last legs... seemed to pass the baton to a resurgent, more aggressive, ideological anti-Semitism of the Black Hundreds variety."[59] This approach allowed him to offer not only a diagnosis but also a prognosis: "A certain danger also lies in the desire of a certain section of the ruling bureaucracy, although largely liberated during the Yeltsin revolution from conservative elements infected with anti-Semitism, but still bearing the marks of its totalitarian past, to once again rise above society and rule the country unchecked. If something similar were to happen, a revanche of nomenklatura *pochvenichestvo*[60] cannot be ruled out, and then state anti-Semitism would gain new life, no longer in Stalin's camouflaged guise, but would assert itself, in the poet's words, weightily, crudely, and visibly."[61]

The topic of Holocaust denial or distortion was relatively marginal in Russia during this period, which explains the low level of interest in it in academic circles, as Stella Rock notes in her research.[62] However, she notes risk factors that could contribute to the intensification of this phenomenon: "the comparatively high level of anti-Semitism in Russia, post-Soviet suspicion of historiography, and lack of education about the Holocaust."[63] During this period, Russian-Israeli relations were assessed within the broader context of Russia's relations with the West, its Middle East policy, and domestic factors linked to the rise of anti-democratic opposition.[64] However, anti-Semitism was not treated as an issue on the bilateral agenda.

Since the early 2000s, several research centers and international and Russian Jewish organizations have conducted joint monitoring of antisemitic acts in Russia, documenting an increase in antisemitic acts from 1999, which was followed by a decline in 2007.[65] Public opinion polls indicated a continued improvement in attitudes toward Jews and Israel.[66] The

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[59] Kostyrchenko, p. 623.
[60] Pochvennichestvo, literally meaning “return to the native soil,” was a late 19th-century Russian movement closely aligned with the contemporary ideology of Slavophilism. Many of its leaders and adherents embraced a militant antisemitic stance.
[61] Kostyrchenko, p. 625.
[62] Stella Rock, “Russian revisionism: Holocaust denial and the new nationalist historiography”, Institute for Jewish Policy Research, vol. 35, no. 4, 2001, pp.64-65.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Robert O. Freedman, Russia and Israel under Yeltsin, Israel Studies, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring, 1998).
[65] For example, joint research by RJC with the Levada Center and SOVA Center, and by ADL in cooperation with Tel Aviv University.
[66] “Russians and "foreigners": tolerance or xenophobia?”, VTsIOM, November 16, 2004, https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/rossiyane-i-inorodczy-tolerantnost-ili-ksenofobiya, and Lev, Zorkaya, Kochergina, Lezina

decline in antisemitic violence and vandalism from 2007 onward, and the simultaneous persistence of antisemitic manifestations in public discourse, demonstrated the limits of the sociological approach. To explain the complex dynamics of anti-Semitism, Alexis Lerner turned to research of government activities, which allowed him to highlight the role of law enforcement in combating antisemitic manifestations.[67] He also referred to survey data showing that intolerance in Russian society shifted "from Jews to other minority groups perceived as a threat."[68]

Agreeing with Gibbson and Howard's assessment that anti-Semitism lacked a broad societal base, Simon Caplin of CERS noted that "many right-wing ultra-nationalist organizations in the former Soviet Union … remain a permanent feature in Russian society and contribute to the general atmosphere of anti-Semitism."[69] One explanation for this contradiction was the suggestion that "anti-Semitism from below" is inherent in Russia[70]; Khanin, in this context, pointed to the possibility of subjective perceptions of antisemitic incidents among the Jewish population.[71]

Gradually, President Putin's personal role in improving the situation of anti-Semitism in the country came to the fore: "The most convincing existing evidence suggests that the Jewish policies of Putin's government are primarily motivated by his personal attitudes toward Jews, based on his biography, which includes several notably influential and positive Jewish friends, mentors, and role models."[72] The study of state policy thus became intrinsically linked to the biography and personal convictions of Vladimir Putin himself. In the system of personal authoritarianism established in Russia over the past quarter-century, such an approach seemed justified.

An analysis of state policy on anti-Semitism led Vladimir Khanin to define Russia as a "secure island" in terms of hard-core manifestations of anti-Semitism compared to Europe and

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[67] Alexis Lerner, “Crime and Punishment: Hate Crime, Legislation, Public Opinion Polling, and the Jewish Minority in Post-Soviet Russia”, *University of Toronto Journal on Jewish Thought* 1, no. 5 (2015), pp. 66-68.
[68] Ibid., p. 70.
[69] Simon Caplin, “Anti-Semitism in Russia”, University of Leeds Center for Ethnicity and Racism, Working paper, 2012, p. 8.
[70] Lerner, pp. 61-65.
[71] Vladimir (Ze’ev) Khanin, “Anti-Semitism and Philo-Semitism in Russia and Ukraine: from Evolution to Revolution”, Tel Aviv University, (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2019, p. 21.
[72] Benjamin Parker, “Putin’s chosen people: Theories of Russian Jewish policies 2000-2017”, University of Pennsylvania Scholarly Commons, December 19, 2017, p. 59.

the Middle East.[73] Not everyone shared this rather optimistic assessment. Caplin, as early as 2012, pointed to anti-liberal trends in Russia, first and foremost, the lack of freedom of press and, simultaneously, the massive manipulation of media by the Russian government, which created conditions conducive to the persistence of antisemitic expressions in the public sphere.[74] Alexis Lerner pointed to the regime's anti-liberal trajectory, which could threaten the Jewish community with the loss of "this sense (or façade) of independence and security."[75]

The word "façade" is crucial for understanding not only the situation of the Jewish community but also the authoritarian nature of Putin's regime which has long been concealed behind vague terms like "sovereign democracy."[76] In analyzing the Kremlin's Jewish policy, insufficient attention has been given to the overall transformation of the Russian regime toward personal autocracy. However, Lilia Shevtsova pointed out the regime's authoritarian tilt and the imitation of democratic institutions in Russia as early as the late 2000s.[77] Parker's thesis about Putin's Russia unprecedented break from the anti-Jewish policies during the three centuries of Romanov rule and 74 years of the Soviet Union[78] ignores the manipulative nature of Putin's Jewish policy and the Kremlin's control over Jewish organizations.

Analysis of anti-Semitism often ignores the Kremlin's foreign policy agenda, and vice versa. Borshchevskaya analyzes in detail the elements of Putin's pragmatic personal outreach to Israel, which include the expansion of economic, cultural, and political ties, as well as the influence of factors such as counterterrorism, World War II, religious interests, and the rehabilitation of Stalin and Stalinism.[79] Nevertheless, the issue of anti-Semitism and the status of the Jewish community in Russia remains outside the scope of her analysis.

These issues, like the emergence of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in Russian official rhetoric, remained primarily the subject of journalistic publications until the late 2010s. In 2019, Sam Sokol published a book that examined the role of accusations of anti-Semitism in Putin's

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[73] Khanin, p. 11.
[74] Caplin, p. 8.
[75] Lerner, p. 70.
[76] Dmitry Orlov, “The New Russian Century and Sovereign Democracy”, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, July 13, 2007, https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2007-07-13/7_newcentury.html
[77] Liliya Shevtsova, The Lonely Power: Why Russia Hasn't Become the West and Why Russia Has a Difficult Relationship with the West (Moscow: Carnegie Center/ROSSPEN, 2010), p.37.
[78] Parker, p. 7-11.
[79] Anna Borshchevskaya, Evolution of Russian Strategy toward Israel: From Non-Recognition to Pragmatic Engagement”, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Strategic Assessment, Volume 25, n. 1, March 2022

hybrid war against Ukraine; however, it focused on Ukrainian rather than Russian issues.[80] That same year, Ilya Yablokov published an article examining examples of anti-Jewish conspiracy rhetoric in Russia. However, the author concluded that this phenomenon is marginal in society and called it "one of the rare pieces of good news relevant to Russia."[81] The author of current research analyzed the Russian authorities' use of Holocaust discourse as part of their "memory wars" with Ukraine and confrontation with the West, highlighting the disparities between official rhetoric and the implementation of Holocaust remembrance and education in Russia.[82]

In 2021 and 2022, Kiril Feferman and Anton Weiss-Wendt published articles that examined in detail the Russian authorities' "weaponization" of the Holocaust for political purposes.[83] Both researchers raise questions about the reasons and content of this policy, its effectiveness from the Kremlin's perspective, and compare it to Soviet policy on the Holocaust. Feferman contrasts Russia's foreign policy agenda with the modest attention paid to its memory domestically, explaining this gap by the fact that "Russian public opinion might view laws prohibiting Holocaust denial as promoting Jewish interests."[84]

Anton Weiss-Wendt describes the evolution of the Holocaust theme in Russian foreign policy and its main vectors of application: attracting support from Israel and Jewish organizations, using the UN platform to legitimize its narrative of the Holocaust and World War II, and accusing hostile countries of neo-Nazism.[85] Weiss-Wendt also notes the supporting role of the leaders of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FJCR) and other Jewish organizations in supporting the official Russian narrative of the Holocaust and World War II[86] and points to the geopolitical component in Israel's calculations, which, according to him, is forced to agree with the Russian narrative of the Holocaust in exchange for Russia's cooperation

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[80] Sam Sokol, *Putin's Hybrid War and the Jews: Anti-Semitism, Propaganda, and the Displacement of Ukrainian Jewry* (New York: ISGAP, 2019).
[81] Ilya Yablokov, "Jewish Conspiracy Theories in Putin's Russia", *Contemporary Anti-Semitism,* Fall 2019.
[82] Yaron Gamburg, "From Oblivion to Center Stage: official Holocaust discourse in post-Soviet Russia", Kesher, Tel-Aviv University, n. 53, Fall 2019, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26948889
[83] Kiril Feferman, "Russia as a Bulwark against Anti-Semitism and Holocaust Denial: The Second World War according to Moscow", in *The Future of the Soviet Past: The Politics of History in Putin's Russia,* Edited by Anton Weiss-Wendt and Nanci Adler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), p. 91, and Anton Weiss-Wendt, "Holocaust discourse in Putin's Russia as a foreign policy tool," in *The Memory of the Second World War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. by David Hoffmann (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 290.
[84] Feferman, p. 94.
[85] Anton Weiss-Wendt*, Putin's Russia and the Falsification of History: Reasserting Control over the Past* (London, Bloomsberry Academic, 2021), pp. 322-324
[86] Weiss-Wendt, p. 315.

in the context of its security interests.[87] Weiss-Wendt highlights specific examples of the selective use of the Holocaust theme. He concludes that, for the Russian authorities, Holocaust memory functions merely as a convenient "ruse" that "serves purposes other than an accurate historical representation or genuine commemoration."[88] In his opinion, the Russian authorities' contemporary discourse on the Holocaust "is surprisingly similar to the late Soviet one,"[89] which contrasts with the assessment by other experts, including Feferman, who argue that Putin's position on the Holocaust parted ways with the Soviet Union tradition.[90]

Contribution

Existing literature illuminates important aspects of anti-Semitism in Russia and its relations with Israel, and in the last five years, its use of anti-Semitism and Holocaust memory to advance its political goals. However, most studies examine these issues in isolation. When they are considered in dynamic interaction, as in the studies of Feferman, Weiss-Wendt, and Korey, a deeper understanding is achieved.

In my research, I attempt to connect these aspects and demonstrate how they have influenced the transformation of anti-Semitism: its causes, mechanisms, and consequences. Several key aspects of this issue are largely absent from the literature. One such aspect concerns the status of Jewish community leaders in the power system, their role, and influence. The second aspect highlights the manipulative and opportunistic nature of Putin's philo-Semitic image, and its connection to his KGB legacy. I attempt to show how these factors help explain the contradictions in Putin's rhetoric toward Jews. Current research examines Putin's Jewish policy through the lens of his system of personal power, which is founded on loyalty to the leader and strict societal control. It also aims to challenge the notion that Russia's Jewish policy is driven by "Putin's *personal predisposition toward the Jews".*[91]

[87] Ibid., p. 367.
[88] Weiss-Wendt, p. 365.
[89] Weiss-Wendt, "Holocaust discourse in Putin's Russia as a foreign policy tool, p. 291.
[90] Feferman, p. 93.
[91] Feferman, p. 99.

My research's goal is to demonstrate that the themes of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust are interconnected within a broader geopolitical context that brings together the Kremlin's foreign policy toward Ukraine and Western countries, as well as its relations with Israel and the Jewish community. This geopolitical context is a product of the Kremlin's worldview, and its success or failure depends on its ability to impose these perceptions on other actors. It will allow us to address questions about the effectiveness of Russia's efforts to project its image as a bulwark against anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, and to explain why, despite their opposing positions on the Middle East and periodic crises in their relations, Moscow and Jerusalem remain interested in direct contacts and maintaining friendly ties.

Anti-Semitic incidents in the North Caucasus, along with the resurgence of anti-Semitic vandalism in other parts of Russia, remain largely unstudied. This research aims to analyze these developments in order to better understand the trajectory of anti-Semitism in Russia and its wider implications.

Methodology

Based on the above, I employ a geopolitical approach in this study, which allows me to integrate the aforementioned methods and disciplines used to study anti-Semitism and the Holocaust narrative in Russia. According to Lacoste, geopolitics is "Power rivalries over territory, whether large or small in scale… Geographic territory is essential in geopolitics, but it is not only about territory as such. It is also about the men and women who live there, the powers they accept and those they resist, shaped by the histories they tell themselves, rightly or wrongly, by their fears, and by the way they perceive a more or less distant past and a more or less near future."[92]

Central to geopolitics as a method of analysis are perceptions of reality that may be distorted, not only by informational gaps, but also by a deliberate intent to mislead public opinion in order to mobilize support. [93] Disputes between opposing forces for territorial control

[92] Yves Lacoste, "Géographie, la géopolitique et le raisonnement géographique", *Hérodote*, n.146-7, 2012/3, p. 27.
[93] Ibid., p. 28.

are evidence of conflicting geopolitical perceptions.[94] Lacoste makes an important observation about the origins of these perceptions: "« They were produced, refined (and sometimes invented) at a certain time by what one might roughly call intellectuals connected to political leaders."[95]

Professors Frédérick Douzét and David Kaplan, noting that geopolitics differs in modes of its application, divide it into formal, popular, and practical geopolitics.[96] Practical geopolitics is particularly applicable to current research due to the Russian leadership's commitment to a geopolitical thinking and the policies aimed at implementing it. This geopolitical vision is popular among Putin's close associates,[97] and the president himself refers to geopolitics as "the basis of the contradictions between Russia and Western countries."[98] It is essential to note, however, that in Russian political establishments and academic circles, geopolitics is perceived more in its "classical" form than in the critical one developed by Lacoste.[99] As Anastasia Mitrofanova notes, "Russian geopolitics is therefore less an analytical method than a scientific synthesis aimed at providing a complete and objective picture of reality.»[100]

Geopolitical analysis enables us to consider not only relations between states but also the role of subnational entities or extraterritorial associations of people, such as diasporas, or "emigration states," as Alan Gamlen refers to them.[101] As he explains, the existence of emigration states "highlights that they are forms of political organization."[102] Another advantage of the geopolitical approach is what Douzet and Kaplan refer to as "multiscale analysis."[103] The question of scale allows us to analyze the relations of the nation-state, which remains the "échelle de référence", with other states but also with supranational and subnational collectives.[104]

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[94] Ibid., p. 32.
[95] Ibid., p.33.
[96] Frédérick Douzet, David H. Kaplan, « La géopolitique dans le monde anglo-américain », Hérodote, n.146-147, 2012/3, p. 245.
[97] Marlène Laruelle, "Ideological Construction in the Context of the War in Ukraine", Ifri, March 2024, pp. 26-27
[98] “Putin called geopolitics the basis of contradictions between Russia and Western countries”, *Kommersant*, July 3, 2025, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7888206
[99] Anastasia Mitrofanova, “La géopolitique dans la Russie contemporaine”, *Hérodote,* n.146-147, 2012/3, p. 188.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Alan Gamlen, “The emigration state and the modern geopolitical imagination”, Political Geography, n. 27, 2008, p. 251.
[102] Ibid., p. 253.
[103] Douzet, Kaplan, p. 248.
[104] Ibid, p. 243.

Applying a geopolitical approach allows us to reassess the balance of powers between various state and non-state actors on the issues of anti-Semitism and Holocaust memory in Russia. The use of both subnational and supranational dimensions, the Lacoste idea of "enchevêtrement des ensembles spatiaux,"[105] is a critical element of this analysis, which includes Russia's confrontation with the West and Ukraine and the use of Holocaust memory; Russia's relations with Israel and its role in Middle East conflicts; the Kremlin's relations with the Jewish community in Russia and with international Jewish organizations; and, finally, the dynamics of anti-Semitism within Russia proper.

This research draws on my personal experience working in Russia from 2000 to 2003, as well as my visits to Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Uzbekistan in the 1990s and 2000s. This experience involved working with the Jewish community and dealing with issues of emigration, anti-Semitism, and Holocaust remembrance. Also, during this period, I regularly visited Jewish community centers and synagogues in Moscow and other cities. These vibrant Jewish centers and synagogues were a clea indication of the revival of Jewish life in the post-Soviet space, hoping to shape new realities.

Throughout my career, I have personally met and collaborated with representatives of Russian and international Jewish organizations. One such example was the preparation of the Righteous Among the Nations special ceremony in Moscow in collaboration with the Russian Holocaust Foundation in 2003, the first of its kind in Russia.[106] This event brought together the Russian Righteous Among the Nations and their family members not only from Moscow but also from cities in central Russia and the Urals. Such an event would have been unthinkable 15 years earlier and testified to the profound transformation of attitudes toward the Jewish minority in post-Soviet Russia.

Between 2019 and 2022, I had the opportunity to work on anti-Semitism and Holocaust remembrance within the Council of Europe in Strasbourg,[107] which included interacting with the Russian delegation and exploring Russia's position on these issues. Russia demanded recognition

[105] Lacoste, p. 29.
[106] “Nineteen Russians have been awarded the title of "Righteous Among the Nations", *Kommersant*, April 28, 2003, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/962700
[107] “Combating Anti-Semitism: Government, Parliamentary, Civil Society and Business Responses”, Council of Europe (archive), https://www.coe.int/en/web/antisemitic-anti-muslim-hatred-hate-crimes/-/-1

of its narrative of the Holocaust and World War II, which significantly delayed the Council of Europe's adoption of recommendations on Holocaust education.[108] In March 2022, the Russian Federation was expelled from the organization due to its invasion of Ukraine,[109] and the recommendations were approved the following day. [110]

To understand better Vladimir Putin's key role in the Kremlin's policy toward the Jewish community and Holocaust remembrance, I interviewed individuals who met with Putin and knew him personally, including former dissident and Israeli public figure Natan Sharansky and former adviser to Vladimir Putin, Abbas Gallyamov. To gain a deeper understanding of Russian domestic and foreign policy, I interviewed Arkady Mil-Man, former Israeli Ambassador to Russia. An in-deep interview with Ilya Altman, Vice President of the Holocaust Foundation, provided an opportunity to delve deeper into contemporary issues of Holocaust remembrance in Russia. These interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2023.

Working with primary sources was a critical component of my research. These included studying television interviews with Vladimir Putin and senior officials, their articles in the media and on official websites; systematically tracking analytical and news programs on Russian television; regularly reading official, opposition, and Jewish press; and publications on Russian social media, primarily Telegram channels. To examine the Israeli position, I tracked media publications and statements by Israeli leaders on the relevant topics. Consequently, most of the primary sources were in Russian, and some in Hebrew. To facilitate the reading of the thesis, the titles of those primary sources have been translated into English and provided with internet links.

The current situation in Russia poses two challenges for such research. First, monitoring of anti-Semitism in Russia has effectively ceased in recent years. The Russian government never published statistics on anti-Semitism, but allowed independent organizations to do so. However, independent monitoring ceased in 2023.[111] Second, as will be discussed in the study, concealing

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[108] "New recommendation on passing on remembrance of the Holocaust and preventing crimes against humanity", Council of Europe website, April 13, 2022, https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/new-reocommendation-on-passing-on-remembrance-of-the-holocaust-and-preventing-crimes-against-humanity

[109] "The Russian Federation is excluded from the Council of Europe", Council of Europe website, March 16, 2022, https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/the-russian-federation-is-excluded-from-the-council-of-europe

[110] "Council of Europe releases new Recommendation to European governments on Holocaust remembrance", March 17, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/items/740404

[111] Vyacheslav Likhachev, "The circuit starts working in reverse - Anti-Semitism in Russia: A Throwback to Soviet Times?", *Kontinent,* March 26, 2025, https://kontinentusa.com/shema-nachinaet-rabotat-v-obratnom-napravlenii/

the actual state of affairs and manipulating public opinion characterizes the government's general approach to controversial or sensitive issues.[112] Anti-Semitism and Holocaust make no exception.

Positioning

My origins and background largely predetermined the research topic I chose. I was born in Zhytomyr, a city in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, then an integral part of the Soviet Union. Growing up in a mixed family (my mother was Jewish, my father Greek), I experienced the consequences of my Jewish minority status from an early age. My mother's parents survived World War II, but part of their family was murdered in the Holocaust, which they first told me about when I was ten years old. From them, I also learned about the discrimination against Jews in the USSR after the war and about their personal encounters with anti-Semitism.

When the opportunity to emigrate arose after Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika, our family moved to Israel. Some of our family still live in Ukraine, while others were more recently forced to leave due to the Russian occupation of eastern Ukraine. In my professional life, I had the opportunity to be involved in matters related to the Jewish diaspora and combating Anti-Semitism. First, in the Russian context, as noted above, and later during my stays in France (8 years) and the United States (8 years).

These personal and professional experiences not only motivated me to pursue this research but also necessitated reflection on my research position. This experience creates significant advantages for my study. I speak Russian, am well-versed in Russian history and culture, and have lived in both the USSR and post-Soviet Russia. I am closely familiar with the issues of anti-Semitism and the Jewish diaspora, both in the Russian and international contexts. My knowledge of Hebrew and a deep understanding of Israeli politics and society, as well as Middle Eastern issues, are essential for analyzing the Israeli aspect of this study. My origins and connections to Ukraine, as well as my experience in the United States and France, are important for understanding Russia's geopolitical positioning with these countries. At the same time, my

[112] Aaron Leah and Boruch Taskin, “Putin's Endless War: Imperial Ambitions and Europe's Moment of Truth”, The Moscow Times, September 21, 2025, https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2025/09/21/beskonechnaya-voina-putina-imperskie-ambitsii-i-moment-istini-dlya-evropi-a175018

deep engagement with this topic, both personal and professional, requires consideration from the perspective of personal reflexivity. According to Professors Douzet and Kaplan, the critical geopolitics approach « showed the importance of understanding the authors' own perspectives."[113] Among the main ways to avoid or reduce research bias, they suggest « a certain critical distance from their own perspectives, making it clear to the reader "from where they speak," and confronting the contradictory views of different actors to avoid the risk of becoming trapped in a single representation or point of view.[114]

To avoid bias in the study, I sought to contrast opposing perspectives and ideas. In this regard, I was primarily assisted by working with primary and secondary sources from various countries and languages. Secondly, in my analysis, I contrasted quantitative data from demographic analyses and sociological surveys with common perceptions, assertions, or beliefs. Moreover, the multilayered nature of my experience living and working in different countries and diverse environments has strengthened my capacity for self-reflection, enabling me to combine an "inside" perspective with an analytical "outside" one. This dual perspective, I hope, makes my research more balanced and credible.

Organization of the Thesis

The first part of my research examines the rejection of Soviet state policies of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, analyzing their causes, achievements, and shortcomings. It focuses on the presidencies of Mikhail Gorbachev (1985–1991) and Boris Yeltsin (1991–2000). The central argument is that democratization in post-Soviet Russia, driven by both external pressures and government's decisions, facilitated the normalization of relations with the Jewish population and the state of Israel. At the same time, I argue that state inaction, combined with a gradual retreat from democratic and liberal principles beginning in the mid-1990s, contributed to the reemergence of anti-Semitism in the political sphere.

The first chapter examines the role of the "Jewish factor" in the foreign and domestic policies of Gorbachev and Yeltsin. It shows that the dismantling of Soviet state anti-Semitism

[113] Douzet, Kaplan, p. 244.
[114] Ibid.

began with Gorbachev's decision to allow free Jewish emigration, as part of his desire to normalize the USSR's relations with the West. It also demonstrates that the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yeltsin's pro-democracy agenda marked the complete rejection of state anti-Semitism in Russia. However, I argue that an indecisive approach toward anti-Semitism and insufficient government action against it were among the factors that contributed to the emergence of post-Soviet anti-Semitism.

The second chapter analyzes the new model of relations between Russian Jewry and the state, as well as between Israel and post-Soviet Russia. I argue that, despite the demographic decline of the Jewish population caused by mass emigration, Jewish life in Russia underwent a remarkable revival, largely due to the abolition of state anti-Semitism and the democratization of the country. I further argue that the normalization of Russia's relations with Israel took place as part of Russia's democratization process, its reconciliation with the West, and the abandonment of Soviet anti-Zionist ideology. Finally, I contend that the cooling of relations after the brief "honeymoon" period reflected an anti-Western turn in Russian policy but did not sever bilateral ties with Israel.

The third chapter examines the main proponents and characteristics of post-Soviet corporate anti-Semitism, which became fully visible by the late 1990s. I argue that post-Soviet anti-Semitism in Russia blended elements of both the Tsarist and Soviet periods, functioning as a political instrument for opposition parties and movements, both right- and left-wing, in their struggle against the government. I also argue that although Russian public opinion toward Jews and Israel was generally improving, ideological or religious radicalization led to a surge in antisemitic violence between 1999 and 2006.

The second part of the research demonstrates how, under Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin instrumentalized anti-Semitism and Holocaust discourse in pursuit of its political objectives. The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East revived official antisemitic rhetoric and triggered outbreaks of antisemitic violence within Russia.

The first chapter argues that Putin's "Judeophile" image was constructed as part of the Kremlin's strategy to consolidate power and eliminate political adversaries. A benevolent attitude toward the Russian Jewish community, along with efforts to court leaders of international Jewish

organizations and Israeli officials, was also part of this strategy, aimed to strengthen the Kremlin's international legitimacy and advance its foreign policy goals. At the same time, I argue that, in exchange for loyalty, Russian Jewish organizations were allowed to continue the revival of Jewish life in Russia; however, once incorporated into the political system, they lost their independent voice and became constrained in their ability to combat anti-Semitism. The chapter's final argument is that Putin's personal diplomacy, framed around Israel's cultural affinity with Russia and a shared narrative of the Holocaust and World War II, entered a new phase in the early 2010s, as Israel grew increasingly dependent on Russia's role in the Middle East.

The second chapter examines the dynamics of Russia's manipulation and distortion of Holocaust discourse as part of its anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western policies. I argue in this chapter that the Kremlin weaponized the memory of the Holocaust as part of its geopolitical struggle against Baltic states, Ukraine, and the West. The theme of Holocasut was included in the Russian narrative of World War II, which distinguishes it from the Soviet tradition of Holocaust obliteration. However, education and commemoration of the Holocaust in Russia never approached the level of emphasis the Kremlin placed on the Holocaust in the international arena qwhere it was used as a tool of propaganda. I also argue that, despite those contradictions, Russia succedded in promoting its narrative of the Holocaust, largely because of the international community's uncritical acceptance.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine tested the entire system of international relations and intensified antisemitic trends within the country. Chapter three, therefore, argues that Russia's use of antisemitic tactics against the Ukrainian president and Jewish opponents of the war in Ukraine has fueled domestic antisemitic sentiment and strained relations with both Israel and Jewish organizations within Russia. I also demonstrate that during this time, when Russia faced unexpected setbacks on the battlefield, its use of anti-Semitism in disinformation campaigns and operations of influence against the West, as well as a sharp rise in anti-Israeli rhetoric, echoed the KGB's subversive methods and Soviet-style anti-Zionist propaganda. Finally, I argue that official antisemitic rhetoric and the radical Islamization were major sources of antisemitic violence in the North Caucasus in 2023, the uncontrolled nature of which reflected the limit of government's ability to "regulate" the level of anti-Semitism at its will. At the same time, the resurgence of

anti-Semitism in Russia coincided with a new wave of Jewish emigration, casting doubt about the future of the country's already diminished Jewish community.

Part I:

The unmaking of state anti-Semitism in post-Soviet Russia: its causes, successes and shortcomings

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked a decisive turning point in the state's relationship with its Jewish population, presaging a gradual dismantling of institutionalized anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism as they had been expressed particularly after the Second World War. This first part proposes to examine the historical and political factors which led to the break with Soviet positions and policies, by analyzing the causes of this change, its partial successes but also its limits. We will first focus on presenting an overview of Soviet anti-Semitism, tracing its evolution from the ambivalent positions of Lenin and Stalin on the "Jewish question", to the ideological hardening of Stalinism, particularly in its last years, and to the openly anti-Zionist campaigns of the 1960s to 1980s. Perestroika initiated by Gorbachev opened the way to a certain, almost immediate change, driven not only by reforms, but also by internal difficulties, Western pressure, the massive emigration of Jews.

However, this period also revealed strong resistance within the party and society. Under Boris Yeltsin, democratic hopes were thwarted by the rise of nationalist movements, encouraged by government inaction, allowing the return of anti-Semitic discourse in the public space. Despite certain advances, we will note that post-Soviet Russia has not succeeded in fully dismantling the ideological, historical and structural legacy of Soviet anti-Semitism. This section explores the tensions between reform and continuity, progress and regression, in redefining the identity of the Russian state after the fall of the USSR, both in relation to its Jewish citizens and in the context of international standards.

Chapter 1: The reasons for rupture with the Soviet policies of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism

A. The origins, characteristics and evolution of the Soviet antizionism and anti-Semitism

In the mid-1980s, the "Jewish question" was a permanent item on the agenda of the Soviet leadership. As in previous decades, this issue had two aspects: external - relations with the state

of Israel and internal - the status of the Jewish population of the Soviet Union. From the Soviet point of view, these aspects were not officially connected, but in reality, relations with Israel had a significant impact on the situation of Soviet Jews, which in turn became an element of international politics and a stumbling block between the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and Israel, as well as its main ally, the United States, on the other.

The policy of the Soviet Union towards Israel was dictated in the first post-war years by considerations of the British-Soviet and then American-Soviet confrontation in the Middle East. After a short period of supporting the Jewish national home in Palestine, the USSR became an ally of the Arab countries and groups in conflict with Israel, and the state of Israel joined the Western camp. At the same time, the leadership of the young Jewish state attached great importance to the issue of freedom of emigration of Soviet Jewry, which it considered the main source of demographic potential for Israel. This situation created Israel's dependence on the position of the Soviet Union, for which the issue of Jewish emigration was a bargaining chip in relations with Israel and the United States. However, from the point of view of domestic politics, it represented a complex, virtually insoluble, ideological dilemma. As a result of this interweaving of ideological considerations and geopolitical interests, from the late 1940s to the mid-1980s, the anti-Israeli position of the USSR was one of the main sources of discriminatory policies towards the Jewish population in the country.

But the ideological roots of Soviet anti-Semitism run much deeper, predating the creation of the State of Israel. The ideological struggle in early 20th-century Russia between Bolshevism and various Jewish national and socialist movements played a major role in shaping the Soviet Union’s foreign policy of anti-Zionism and its model of state-sponsored anti-Semitism.

1. Lenin, Stalin, and the Jewish question

On the eve of the October Revolution of 1917, Russia was the largest center of the international Zionist movement. Zionist views were actively spreading among Russian Jewry even before the creation of the international Zionist movement by Theodor Herzl. In the year of the First Zionist Congress in Basel, 1897, almost 400 Zionist societies were already operating in Russia – more than 40% of the total number of Zionist associations worldwide. In 1902, they

united to form the Russian Zionist Organization (RZO), which was the largest political movement among the Jewish population of Russia; in 1917 it had more than 300,000 members.

During the first ten years of Soviet rule, despite the official ban on Zionism and the competition between the Soviet and Zionist projects for the Jewish people, the USSR permitted Jewish emigration to the Jewish national home in Palestine, developed economic and scientific ties with it, and after the outbreak of World War II, Soviet officials began to meet with representatives of the Zionist movement regularly. Moreover, somewhat paradoxically, the Soviet Union provided critical assistance to the young Jewish state in the first months of its formation; no less surprising is that this support was provided at a time of increasing anti-Semitic campaigning in the Soviet Union. A direct correlation between the hostile policy of the USSR towards Zionism and Israel and the growth of state anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union began to emerge only in the late 1940s after the Soviet leadership became disillusioned with Israel's pro-Western orientation.

From the beginning, the Soviet attitude towards the Jews and the Zionist movement was shaped by the ideology and policies of the Bolshevik Party's founder Vladimir Lenin in the pre-revolutionary period. Lenin's approach to the Jewish question was based on the Marxist theory of class struggle and the definition of nationalism as a phenomenon that runs counter to the proletariat's interests. Lenin did not consider the Jews of Russia to be a separate nation or people but a caste since they did not have a common territory or language. He argued that "the Zionist idea is entirely false and reactionary in its essence…The idea of a separate Jewish nation, which is utterly untenable scientifically, is reactionary in its implications."[115] Lenin praised certain features of Jewish culture that contained elements of social democracy - such as "its internationalism, its responsiveness to the advanced movements of the era," and which manifested themselves if Jews lived in countries of the "civilized world." However, in "backward and semi-savage countries," like Russia, where Jews were considered a religious caste, the Jewish bourgeoisie put forward the slogan of a Jewish national culture, which, in Lenin's opinion, was contrary to the interests of the proletariat.

[115] Vladimir Lenin, "Critical Notes on the National Question", *V. I. Lenin Complete Works,* 5th ed., Vol. 24, pp. 113-150.

Following this position, already at the second congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1903, Lenin spoke out against the demand of the Jewish workers' organization Bund for autonomy within the Russian Social-Democrat Labor Party of Bolsheviks (RSDLPb), citing the principle of party centralism. He also opposed the idea of cultural-national autonomy for Jews in the future state structure of Russia, pointing to the ideological similarity of the Bund and the Zionist parties. Protesting Lenin's position, the Bund delegation left the RSDLPb congress, which allowed Lenin's supporters to receive most of the votes and turn into the majority, the "Bolsheviks." It is important to point out that the Bund, like the Bolsheviks, had an extremely negative attitude towards Zionism, criticizing it for inciting nationalism and competing with it for the support of the Jewish masses.[116] Lenin considered Zionism to be a more dangerous phenomenon than anti-Semitism because "the Zionist movement poses a much greater threat to the development of the class organization of the proletariat than anti-Semitism, [since] Zionism distracts fairly cultured strata of the Jewish proletariat from the labor movement, [while] anti-Semitism attracts only elements that are completely ignorant in cultural and political terms."[117]

According to Lenin, the only correct solution to the Jewish question was the complete assimilation of the Jews, which required the establishment of national and racial equality. "From the point of view of the leaders of the RSDLPb, the assimilation of Russian Jews should have occurred as a result of their joint struggle with representatives of other nationalities for the revolutionary-democratic transformation of Russia."[118] Lenin considered Europe to be a model for the solution to the Jewish question, where, as he believed, "the Jews have received complete equality and are increasingly merging with the people among whom they live," ignoring the growing anti-Semitism in Western Europe. At the same time, Lenin recognized the particularly difficult situation of the Jews in the Russian Empire and consistently spoke out against anti-Semitism, accusing the tsarist regime of deliberately inciting ethnic hatred and organizing pogroms. As chairman of the revolutionary government, Lenin supported appointing Jews to key

[116] Mikhail Agapov, *Origins of Soviet-Israeli relations: "Jewish national home" in the policy of the USSR in the 1920-19230s* (Tyumen: "Vector Book", 2011), p. 88.
[117] Vladimir Lenin, "Mobilization of reactionary forces and our tasks", *Collected works*, , Vol. IV. (Moscow, 1924), p. 236.
[118] Agapov, p. 87.

positions within the state and party apparatus – a policy that proved vital to the functioning of the Soviet regime amid the collapse and sabotage of the tsarist bureaucracy.

The origins of this dual approach could be traced back to the Russian populist movement, the Narodniks, of the late 19th century - the ideological predecessor of the Russian revolutionary movement, which showed a dual and, at times, manipulative and cynical approach to the Jewish question. Russian Jews, particularly young people, took an active part in anti-government activities, driven by the anti-Jewish policies of the tsarist regime. As early as the 1870s, Jews participated in the activity of "going to the people" - the populist revolutionary agitation among the peasants. Others engaged in eliminating illiteracy among workers, such as Pavel Axelrod, one of the founders of the first Marxist circle in Russia. On the other hand, the Narodnik movement- a revolutionary movement of intellectuals who committed to agrarian socialism and struggle against tsarist rule - not only failed to condemn the pogroms of 1881-84 but tried to use them for revolutionary causes.

The Narodniks saw the Jewish pogroms as the first stage of a popular movement against exploitation, which they believed would eventually turn against the government and aristocracy. In their view, the task of the revolutionaries was to redirect the people's antisemitic violence toward this goal. In fact, this approach to the Jewish population was a mirror image of the existing stereotypes of Jewish exploiters that the tsarist government, the main enemy of the revolutionaries, was promoting: "Instead of confronting the distorted popular ideas about Jewish exploitation, they (the revolutionaries) accepted the negative public image of the Jew on faith and, without a second thought, convinced themselves that the pogroms were directed against the Jews as a parasitic class, and not as a religious-ethnic community."[119] Narodniks' covert (and in some cases overt) support for the pogroms was criticized within the revolutionary movement and became the subject of serious discussion, which allowed it to "cleanse itself"[120] of anti-Jewish prejudices so that "from 1884 onwards, it was no longer customary to welcome anti-Semitic mob action as a manifestation of the revolutionary popular temperament."[121]

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[119] Erich Haberer, "Cosmopolitanism, Anti-Semitism and Populism: Reassessing the Reaction of the Russian and Jewish Public to the Pogroms of 1881-1882", in *Pogroms in Russian History of the New Age*, ed. John Klier and Schlomo Lambrosa, (Moscow, 2016), p.117.
[120] Erich Haberer p.146
[121] Ibid.

As the events of the following years showed, the revolutionary movement did not abandon the instrumental approach to the Jewish question. On the eve of the revolutionary events of 1905, Lenin wrote that by inciting racial hatred, the tsarist government "would turn broader, truly proletarian masses against itself" and thereby bring the civil war closer - and "it is in this arena," according to him, that the Bolsheviks feel "especially reliable."[122] From Lenin's point of view, anti-Semitism, despite all the moral rejection of the phenomenon, could serve as a legitimate means of achieving political goals. It is worth noting that some Bolshevik leaders did not shy away from vulgar anti-Semitic statements, such as Joseph Stalin, who in 1907 noted that "the Bolsheviks should organize a pogrom against their opponents," hinting at the widespread participation of Jews in other political parties.[123]

Stalin's position on the Jewish question was covered in detail in his article "Marxism and the National Question" from 1913. It was completely in line with Lenin's theory and criticism of the Bund. At the same time, Stalin added the following explanation to the thesis about the non-existence of the Jewish nation:

> "... the Jews do not have a broad, stable layer connected to the land, which naturally binds the nation together not only as its backbone but also as a "national" market. Of the 5-6 million Russian Jews, only 3-4 percent are connected in one way or another with agriculture. The remaining 96% are employed in trade, industry, city institutions and, in general, live in cities, and scattered throughout Russia, they do not constitute a majority in any one province."[124]

The main idea is that Jews often live as national minorities among other ethnic groups. According to Staline, they tend to take on roles like traders, industries workers, etc. and naturally assimilate, adapting to the culture of the population. As capitalism develops and populations become more mixed, this situation leads to the gradual assimilation of Jews into the surrounding societies. He added:

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[122] Vladimir Lenin, "Preface to the brochure "Report of the Director of the Police Department Lopukhin", *V. I. Lenin Complete Works*, Vol. 9. Pp. 333-334.
[123] Iosif Stalin, "London Congress of the RSDLP (notes of a delegate)", *Stalin I.V. Works* (Moscow, 1946),Vol. 2. P. 49.
[124] ibid

"Given this, the question of national autonomy for Russian Jews takes on a somewhat curious character: they are proposing autonomy for a nation whose future is denied, the existence of which still needs to be proven!"[125]

2. Soviet policy on Zionism: from pragmatism to ideology

It is noteworthy that in the first two decades of the Soviet state, the policy on the Jewish question and the attitude towards Zionism was the result of a combination of pragmatic considerations with the teachings of the Leninist-Stalinist doctrine on the national question. As a result, this period was characterized by a relatively tolerant attitude towards Zionist organizations, somewhat ambivalent relations with the Jewish national homeland in Palestine, and multiple experiments with the socio-economic and national-territorial settlement of the Jewish population (that in many ways contradicted the theoretical doctrine of Marxism and Leninism). According to the assessment of the political exigencies of the moment, the Soviet government combined the fight against anti-Semitism with a gradual strengthening of anti-Semitic tendencies that by the end of the 1930s translated into a policy of anti-Jewish repression, at first secret, and then increasingly overt.

The communist ideology of the Russian Communist Party of Bolsheviks (RCPb)[126] demanded an uncompromising struggle against the Zionist movement in Russia: not only because it was considered a bourgeois ideology, but also due to its alleged collaboration with British imperialism and its 'encroachment on the rights of the Arab working masses under the guise of national revival.'[127] Those were the recommendations for the Yevsektsiya, the body of RCPb responsible for involving the Jewish masses in constructing a socialist society. The Communist International (Comintern) organized congresses such as the Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East (1920) and adopted resolutions in support of anti-colonial uprisings in Palestine, Iraq, Syria, etc.[128] These policies were formulated within the framework of Marxist-

[125] Joseph Stalin, "Marxism and the national question", 1913, https://www.marxists.org/russkij/stalin/t2/marxism_nationalism.htm
[126] New name given to the RSDLPb in 1918.
[127] Agapov, pp. 95-96.
[128] Ibid., p. 71.

Leninist anti-imperialism, often relying on Arab communists or “Arabized” party structures to operate in the region.[129]

However, as in many other matters, the Soviet leadership preferred to be guided by more pragmatic considerations. Since the October Revolution, the Russian Zionist Organization has avoided confrontation with the Soviet government. It even declared its neutrality in domestic Russian politics, which created the conditions for a more tolerant attitude towards it on the part of the authorities in the first years after the revolution. The People's Commissariat of Agriculture even advocated cooperation with the Russian Zionist Organization on the issue of land management for the Jewish population."[130] Foreign policy considerations also explained the attempt to demonstrate tolerance towards the Zionist movement in the context of international recognition of the Zionist movement by Great Britain and the United States, with which the Soviet Union was trying to establish relations.[131] On the one hand, Zionist organizations received formal permission from the Soviet government to continue their activities; on the other hand, the security services launched a "secret struggle" against them, carrying out arrests of their leaders, administrative repressions and financial pressure. To carry out these "operational measures," a Jewish division was created within the secret department of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission, the Cheka.[132] The Zionist movement in Russia was banned entirely in 1928, 11 years after the Bolsheviks came to power.

The attitude of the USSR towards the Jewish national homeland in Palestine was also a combination of ideological principles and pragmatic interests. On the one hand, from the very beginning, the Soviet leadership emphasized the puppet nature of the Zionist project within the framework of the colonial policy of Great Britain. In the eyes of the Soviet leadership, the Jewish homeland and the mandate system in Palestine contradicted the national aspirations of the Arab population. In 1920 the Second Congress of the Comintern had issued a statement on both the colonial and national question: "A glaring example of the deception of the working people of

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[129] *Free Arab Voice*, Marxist Internet Archive, August 9, 1935, https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/7th-congress/arab1.htm?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[130] Yuri Krapivin, “Russian Zionist Organization and the Soviet State in the First Post-Revolutionary Years (1918-1920)”, in *Russia and the Revolution of 1917: Experience of History and Theory: Proceedings of the All-Russian Scientific Conference* (St. Petersburg, November 12-13, 2007), pp. 135-139.
[131] Agapov, p. 97.
[132] Kostyrchenko, p. 68.

oppressed nations by the united forces of imperialism of the Entente and the bourgeoisie of these nations is the Palestinian adventure that is being put forward by the Zionists"[133] The policy of the Soviet Union consisted of spreading anti-British propaganda in Arab countries and attempting to awaken the peoples of the East to a national liberation war. The main instrument of Soviet propaganda and influence was the organization of the Communist International, which was utterly subordinate to the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), within the framework of which the Soviet leadership tried to direct the activities of the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP), and to involve the Arab population in the anti-colonialist struggle. Curiously, in the early years after the 1917 Revolution, and certainly between 1917 and the early 1920s, Jews were overrepresented in the leadership of the party, relative to their weight in the general population.[134] Soviet secret services deployed a network of agents in Palestine to collect information about the actions of Great Britain.

On the other hand, the Soviet Union derived practical benefits from economic cooperation with Great Britain and the Jewish Yishuv (settlement) in Palestine. Already in 1920, Lenin explained: "Our goal now is to obtain a trade agreement with England... The sooner we do this, the more basis we will have for economic independence from the capitalist countries."[135] The signing of this agreement created a mechanism for trade relations between the countries, including in Mandatory Palestine. From the early 1920s to the late 1930s, mutually beneficial economic relations developed between the Soviet Union and the Jewish Yishuv. As Agapov emphasizes, "neither Palestine for the USSR nor the USSR for Palestine were strategic trade partners, "but this cooperation contributed to both in the critically important period of building their national economy."

The ideological guidelines of the Comintern on the Arabization of the Palestinian Communist Party, which was to lead the anti-imperialist struggle of the Arab peoples, underwent serious adjustments in the late 1930s. The main reason behind it was the strengthening of nationalist, fascist, and openly anti-Semitic sentiments among the Palestinian Arabs during the Arab revolt of 1936–1939 and the rapprochement of their leaders with Nazi Germany and fascist

[133] *The Communist International, 1919-1943*. Vol. 1 Leningrad., 1960. P. 144.
[134] Agapov, p. 99-110.
[135] Vladimir Lenin, "Report on concessions for the RCP(b) faction of the VIII Congress of Soviets on December 21, 1920", *V. I. Lenin Complete Works*, Vol. 42., p. 101.

Italy. The Soviet leadership still saw the Arab national movement as the leading force capable of resisting British imperialism, which relied on the Jewish Yishuv.

However, amid rising international tensions driven by the revanchist policies of Germany and Italy, the normalization of relations with Great Britain and France emerged as a priority.

Moreover, the Soviet leadership's expectation of intensifying the struggle of the Arab masses was not fulfilled, as the British government eventually yielded to Arab demands and imposed restrictions on Jewish immigration and on land purchases by Zionist organizations." This decision marked a sharp deterioration in relations between the British government and the leadership of the Jewish Yishuv, which was duly noticed by the Soviet government and contributed to the resumption of contacts at the official level with representatives of the Zionist movement. These consultations became regular after Germany invaded the USSR in June 1941.

In the 1920s, there was a gradual increase in anti-Semitic sentiments in the Soviet Union. The historian Boris Mironov cites Leon Trotsky's observation that, between 1923 and 1926, Stalin and his supporters "encouraged the development of anti-Jewish sentiments", at first in a subtle way, as part of his political struggle with intra-party opposition". From 1926–1927 this rhetoric became explicit, and as Mironov writes, "From the second half of 1927, the slogan "Beat the opposition" often took the form of the old slogan "Beat the Jews, save Russia."[136] One of the major factors behind this phenomenon was the significant participation of Jews in the party and state apparatus, thus becoming a matter of concern for the Soviet Union's Communist Party. As early as 1927, Stalin warned of the danger that Soviet power could be perceived as Jewish power.[137] From the point of view of the authorities, the source of these concerns was the population itself, dissatisfied with the "domination" of Jews in government bodies.

At that time, Stalin's concerns stemmed from socio-political stability considerations and not anti-Semitic views. As Kostyrchenko explains: "He could not help but realize that mass anti-Semitism, capable of generating chaos and anarchy in the country, was a serious threat to power."[138] In the 1920s, when Stalin's consolidation of personal power was still incomplete and exclusive reliance on repressive methods was not yet possible, he appeared to seek to regulate

[136] Boris N. Mironov, "The Opportunistic Nature of Soviet Jewish Policy", RUDN Journal of Russian History,
[137] Agapov, p. 216
[138] Kostyrchenko, p. 98.

the 'degree' of anti-Semitism in the country by combining prohibitive and manipulative measures. On the one hand, the Soviet leadership carried out explanatory work and prosecuted manifestations of anti-Semitism in court. In an interview with the Jewish Telegraph Agency in 1931, Stalin stated: "In the USSR, anti-Semitism is strictly prosecuted by law as a phenomenon deeply hostile to the Soviet system. Active anti-Semites are punishable by death under the laws of the USSR."[139] On the other hand, Stalin was sensitive to anti-Semitic sentiments in society and tried to pacify them, as can be seen, for example, in the case of the closure of the Jewish settlement project in Crimea, as described below. An additional way to mitigate the "degree" of public anti-Semitism was the deliberate demonstration of the high percentage of Jews among the defendants in high-profile economic trials of the late 1920s.[140]

By the mid-1930s, overt manifestations of anti-Semitism began to fade, a development attributed to several factors linked to the profound socio-economic transformations of the period.[141] One of them was an accelerated industrialization of the first five-year plan (1929-1933), eradicating unemployment and reducing competition for jobs. In addition, the curtailment of the New Economic Policy physically eliminated the social group of entrepreneurs, among whom there were many Jews. At the same time, the Soviet leadership was not interested in articulating this topic or covering it in the press. Stalin's above-mentioned answer about the absence of anti-Semitism in the USSR was published within the country only five years after the original interview took place when its publication could no longer cause discontent among the masses because of the perceived "domination of Jews" in the government: on the one hand, the

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[139] *Stalin I.V. Works*,Vol. 13 (Moscow: State Publishing House of Political Literature, 1951) p. 28. https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/stalin/t13/t13_05.htm

[140] Kostyrchenko describes in detail these measures to influence public opinion: "… being a populist dictator and therefore sensitively listening to the so-called voice of the people, which demanded more sacrifices, Stalin undertook in the "turning point" years of 1929–1930 a series of repressive actions that satisfied the anti-Semitic itch of the plebs, directed mainly against the NEPmen and speculators from the Jewish environment. On April 1, 1929, for example, the Central Committee ordered the OGPU "to arrest in the coming days 100–150 notorious speculators in Moscow, who were in fact the organizers of the panic in the consumer goods market and 'tails', and to send them to the distant lands of Siberia… …Thanks to the elimination of the so-called NEPmanism from everyday life in the Soviet Union, which in the minds of the average person was associated with Jewry, the authorities managed to significantly dampen anti-Semitic sentiments in society, which they considered disorganizing and destructive. To a certain extent, the same goal was pursued during the repressions against 'bourgeois specialists' accused of sabotage, among whom there were also many Jews." Gennady Kostyrchenko, *Stalin's Secret Policy: Power and Anti-Semitism*. pp. 101–103.

[141] Solomon Schwartz, *The Jews in the Soviet Union* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1951), pp. 292-295.

totalitarian system had already been established and controlled any manifestation of discontent; on the other hand, visible manifestations of Jewish life in the USSR had been eliminated.[142]

Many historians consider the period of the "Great Terror" of 1936–1939, when Stalin got rid of almost all representatives of the old party elite and most of the high army command, to be the turning point in the transition to a new form of anti-Semitism. Jews constituted a high percentage in both groups and were accordingly subjected to broader repressions.[143] Moreover, the organizations charged with the Jewish question in the USSR were disbanded, and their leadership was repressed. During these years, there was a sharp decline in the proportion of Jews in the Soviet representative bodies: according to Schwartz, although the Jewish population was not the only minority whose political and cultural elite was decapitated during the "Great Terror", "in the case of the Jews, the destruction went farther. Many prominent Jewish communists (Leon Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev) were all part of the early revolutionary elite. Stalin believed that in eliminating the opposition associated with the 1917 revolution it will erase Trotsky's legacy and support, which had gradually become a symbol of resistance to his power. In parallel, Jews were overrepresented among the elites (*intelligentsia*) particularly in fields like literature, science, education etc., and denounced as "bourgeois". The Great Purge virtually terminated the organized life of the Jewish group as a recognized cultural and ethnic minority."[144]

Last but not least, the gradual shift from Lenin's principles of internationalism to Stalin's doctrine of 'socialism in one country' marked a fundamental transformation of Soviet ideology. During World War II, Soviet patriotism became essential for national consolidation, and the Russian people were placed at the center of the new Stalinist narrative as 'the guiding force of the Soviet Union' and 'the cement that holds together the other peoples of the empire.'[145] The new generation of Stalin's elite, which replaced the 'old guard' of the Bolsheviks, was purged of Jews and readily embraced the leader's patriotic ideology.

[142] Ibid.
[143] Mironov, p, 503-505.
[144] Ibid. p. 298.
[145] Ibid, p.158.

3. World War II and the tightening of antisemitic policy in the USSR

The war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany had catastrophic consequences for the Jewish population of the USSR. Between 2 to 2.5 million Jews were exterminated in the territory of the Soviet Union occupied by the German authorities;[146] most of them died in systematically organized executions, which Father Patrick Desbois called "Holocaust by bullets."[147] The systematic extermination of the Jews took place before the eyes of the Soviet population, which reacted passively to the tragedy of the Jewish genocide. Cases of hiding and saving Jews by the local population were sporadic, both in absolute terms and in comparison, with other occupied countries - France, Belgium, Holland, and Poland, where Nazi terror was no less cruel than in Ukraine or Belarus. About 2,000 individuals from the former USSR have been recognized as Righteous Among the Nations by the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem. Among the explanations for the passive attitude to the extermination of Jews, Solomon Schwartz cites the submission and deep-rooted fear of the Soviet population, accustomed to violent actions by their government against the "enemies of the people" and their family members.[148] It should be noted that the German authorities were able to attract accomplices among the local population, mainly in the areas annexed by the USSR shortly before the German invasion – Lithuania, Latvia, and Western Ukraine, where aggressive anti-Semitism was a central element of hatred of the Soviet regime.

The war with Germany effectively exposed not only the mostly indifferent attitude of the Soviet population towards the Jews but also the manipulative nature of Stalin's policy on the "Jewish question." The Soviet leadership was aware of the anti-Jewish character of the Nazi regime even before the German invasion, and in the first years of Nazi rule even tried to use the theme of anti-Semitism in its anti-Nazi propaganda. It also had information about the mass extermination of Jews that began immediately after the invasion. However, no special measures were taken to save the Jews or alleviate their situation. The authorities did not organize the

[146] "The Holocaust in the Soviet Union", Illinois Holocaust Museum, https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/the-holocaust-in-the-soviet-union/
[147] Patrick Desbois, *La Shoah par balles : la mort en plein jour* (Paris: Plon, 2019).
[148] Schwarz, pp. 318-319.

evacuation of Jews, with rare exceptions, and as Schwarz writes, "The story of the Soviet government's rescue of the Jews was concocted for foreign consumption."[149]

While neglecting the needs of the evacuated Jewish population, the Soviet government simultaneously ignored the tragedy of the Jewish people in the occupied areas[150]. Not only did the Soviet leadership fail to condemn or expose the crimes against the Jewish population, but on the contrary, it adopted a policy of silence and concealment of Nazi crimes against the Jews, informing the population only in vague terms about the suffering of the "Soviet people." The Soviet government's approach stemmed from a fear that condemning anti-Semitic crimes could only confirm the messages of the Nazi propaganda about the "Judeo-Bolshevik dictatorship" and thus undermine the spirit of the Soviet people and army.[151] Throughout the war, the Soviet government adhered to an unspoken but consistent policy of silence and ignoring the Nazi atrocities towards Jews, which testified to "a certain emotional predisposition to ignore the Nazis' anti-Jewish offensive; this grew out of that disguised and stealthy anti-Semitism which had penetrated the ruling class of Soviet society after the Great Purge and in the years before the outbreak of war."[152] At the same time, this policy had a detrimental effect on the population, as it accustomed them to the idea that "there was nothing particularly harmful in the anti-Jewish aspects of Nazi philosophy and action."[153] Thus, during the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet government demonstrated indifference to the tragedy of the country's Jewish population and, through its inaction and silence about the reality of systematic genocide, contributed to the strengthening of anti-Semitic sentiments within the country.

However, in the international arena, the Soviet leadership played the Jewish card, trying to enlist political and military support from Jewish communities in Western countries, primarily the United States. For this purpose, it established the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) in 1942. Its members, well-known representatives of the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia, appealed to international Jewish solidarity and acted as conductors of Soviet propaganda. The JAC was subordinated to the Soviet Information Bureau, the USSR's chief propaganda agency during the

[149] Ibid., p. 197
[150] Ibid., p. 196
[151] Schwarz, p. 342.
[152] Ibid., p. 342. Agapov refers to this as well, speaking about the official propaganda that sowed the seeds of "state anti-Semitism" before the war: Agapov. p.223.
[153] Ibid.

war, while there were KGB informants among the committee's leadership.[154] From the point of view of the Soviet authorities, JAC's main task was to defend the interests and policies of the USSR and not to protect the Jewish population. While the Soviet government kept silent about the crimes of the Nazis for the domestic audience, in the speeches of JAC representatives abroad, this topic, as well as false information about the role of the Soviet authorities in saving and caring for the Jews, was in the foreground. During their foreign visits, members of the JAC took part in rallies and met with prominent representatives of the Jewish community and leaders of Jewish and Zionist organizations. Thanks to its activity, the JAC raised more than 30 million dollars for the Soviet army, cooperating with Jewish organizations, including the Joint Distribution Committee, whose activities in the USSR were banned in 1938. Moreover, the Soviet secret services tried to obtain information about the US atomic program using meetings of the JAC's leaders with prominent American scientists.[155]

The post-war period saw an intensification of anti-Semitic tendencies, and the foundations of a new Soviet anti-Semitism have taken shape. On the one hand, Soviet Jews returning from evacuation sites faced local discontent, primarily in Ukraine, which often resulted in anti-Semitic actions, including a spontaneous pogrom in Kyiv in September 1945[156]. On the other hand, the Soviet leadership was concerned about the growth of Jewish national consciousness among the JAC members and their demands to combat anti-Semitism. These developments were exacerbated by Stalin's growing paranoia, fearing a Jewish conspiracy, including within his own family.[157]

Stalin's obsessive suspicion of Jews as agents of imperialism was linked not only to internal but also to external events. Disagreements between the allies of the anti-Hitler coalition began to manifest themselves after the end of World War II in connection with attempts to expand Soviet influence in Europe and Asia. These contradictions began to develop into an ideological and political confrontation between the USSR and the USA and Great Britain, which resulted in

[154] Pavel Sudoplatov, *Intelligence and the Kremlin*, (Moscow: Alistorus,1996) p. 390.
[155] Ibid., p. 391.
[156] Kostyrchenko, p. 307-310.
[157] From 1944, Stalin's daughter Svetlana was in a romantic relationship with a Jewish student, Morozov. See Kostyrchenko, pp. 373–375.

Stalin's decision to isolate the Soviet Union from the West, which Winston Churchill called the "iron curtain".

Within the USSR, this decision resulted in a campaign to combat cosmopolitanism and "worship of foreign culture" that, according to Stalin's assertion in May 1947, was particularly strong among the so-called "middle-range intelligentsia".[158] From a formal point of view, this campaign did not target Jews, but the authorities did everything possible to emphasize its anti-Jewish nature. One of the authorities' methods was the systematic 'exposure' of the original Jewish names of so-called 'cosmopolites,' which provoked antisemitic sentiment in society and sent a clear signal throughout the state-party apparatus. This practice underscored the double game of the Soviet authorities, which, in previous years, encouraged assimilation of Jews by changing their names and surnames from Jewish to Russian. Stalin's anti-Jewish measures were carried out covertly and stealthily, which became the hallmark of the Soviet approach to the Jewish question. According to former employees of the Ministry of State Security, from the end of 1947 onwards, there emerged a "tendency to regard persons of Jewish nationality as enemies of the Soviet state."[159] During the period of the anti-cosmopolitanism campaign (1948-1953), 71% of those convicted of cosmopolitanism were Jews.[160]

In the post-war years, the activities of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee raised concerns among Soviet authorities, as the organization began to articulate the growing needs of Soviet Jewry in the wake of the Holocaust and amid rising anti-Semitic sentiments in society." Having exhausted its propaganda role during the war, in the eyes of Stalin, the Committee became a superfluous and even dangerous organization. Led by the charismatic theater director Solomon Mikhoels, its leaders aspired to renew Jewish autonomy in Crimea. Those ambitions clashed with Stalin's intentions towards Jews. The JAC's ties with international Jewish organizations, which had strengthened during the war with the encouragement of the Soviet secret services, now contradicted the new ideological course of isolation from the West. In January 1948,

[158] Quoted from Kostyrchenko, p. 310.
[159] Ibid, p. 385.
[160] Having studied fifty-six Soviet periodicals published in 1948-1953, Benjamin Pinkus calculated that 71% of those accused of "cosmopolitanism" were Jews. This figure is given in: Batyrina G.S., Devyatko I.F., *The Jewish Question: A Chronicle of the Forties," Bulletin of the Russian Academy of Sciences*. (Moscow, 1993), Vol. 63. No. 1., p. 69.

Mikhoels was brutally murdered by MGB officers, but his death was staged by the authorities as a car accident to avoid international condemnation[161].

4. The Soviet Union's attitude to the creation of the state of Israel

Despite a certain increase in state anti-Semitism within the country, the Soviet Union paradoxically supported the Zionist movement after the Second World War. Between 1946 and 1948, Moscow provided precious diplomatic and military aid to the Zionist movement, with the aim of undermining British influence in Palestine. However, after the creation of Israel and its rapprochement with the West, the Soviet enthusiasm quickly faded, leading to restrictive and repressive measures towards the Jewish community and further deterioration of Soviet-Israeli relations in the context of the Cold War confrontation.

Soviet support included diplomatic, military, and emigration efforts of the Jewish Yeshuv in Palestine, despite ideological differences with its leadership and the minor influence of the Israeli Communist Party on the political leadership of the Zionist movement. In November 1947, the USSR voted for the partition plan for Palestine, and in May 1948, it was the first country to officially recognize Israel. Moreover, in the first half of 1948, the Soviet Union permitted Czechoslovakia to supply large-scale arms to the Jewish Yeshuv despite the UN embargo, which became a critical element in Israel's victory in the War of Independence.

This Soviet policy was driven by the growing confrontation between the Soviet Union and Great Britain, which resumed after the end of World War II. In the late 1940s, the Soviet leadership viewed the Jewish Yeshuv in Palestine as a real force capable of undermining the status of Great Britain. This policy stood in stark contrast to the Soviet position of the 1930s, which initially favored Arab forces in their struggle against Great Britain but shifted course following their political rapprochement with Germany and Italy. Thus, the status of the mandatory Palestine became one of the levers of Soviet policy to infringe on British interests and attempt to sow discord in London's relations with Washington. The United States insisted on softening the British position on the issue of Jewish immigration to Palestine following the

[161] Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (Yale University Press, 2001), p. 145.

pressure from the American Jewish organizations.[162] During these years, the Soviet leadership encouraged the emigration of Jews from the countries of the new socialist camp in Eastern Europe, primarily from Poland, to Palestine. In this way, the USSR attempted to influence Western public opinion, while achieving its geopolitical goals.[163] At the same time, the Soviet secret services did not miss this opportunity to send their secret agents and military specialists to Palestine disguised as emigrants.[164]

However, having achieved the withdrawal of Great Britain from Palestine, the Soviet Union could not take advantage of this victory. Just a few months after the proclamation of the State of Israel, the Soviet leadership became disillusioned with the pro-Western course of the young Jewish state and the strengthening of its economic cooperation with the USA.[165] This discontent escalated into alarm following the enthusiastic reception of the new Israeli ambassador, Golda Meir, by Moscow's Jewish community.[166] Many Soviet Jews, encouraged by the official position of the USSR, not only openly expressed their support for Israel but also sent requests for permission to emigrate and participate in its war for independence. The national awakening of the Jews in the USSR and their solidarity with Israel not only contradicted the Soviet doctrine of their assimilation; considering Stalin's policy of self-isolation and confrontation with the West, it made the Jewish population a suspicious and potentially hostile element destabilizing the Soviet ideological cohesiveness.

From this point on, for the Soviet leadership, the "Jewish question" turned from a purely internal problem into a source of diplomatic tension with the newly created Jewish state. For Israel, and later for the United States, the situation of Soviet Jewry, and especially the demand for free emigration, would become one of the elements of political tension with the USSR;[167] the Soviet authorities, for their part, would see this pressure as an attempt to interfere in internal affairs, denying any connection between the Jews of the USSR and Israel.

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[162] Mead, Walter Russell, *The Arc of a Covenant: The United States, Israel, and the Fate of the Jewish People* (New York: Alfred A. Kopf, 2022) , p. 313.
[163] Albert Kaganovitch, "Stalin's Great Power Politics, the Return of Jewish Refugees to Poland, and Continued Migration to Palestine, 1944–1946", Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Vol. 26, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 59–94.
[164] Sudoplatov, pp. 393-395
[165] Kostyrchenko, p. 369.
[166] Ibid., p. 313.
[167] Ibid., p. 367.

The mouthpiece of the Soviet regime, the famous publicist Ilya Ehrenburg, already in September 1948 published in the *Pravda* an article in which he refuted Zionism as an idea of global Jewish solidarity.[168] Relations between Israel and the USSR began to cool from the beginning of 1949, in the context of the strengthening of Israel-American relations and the constant demands of the Israeli government to allow Jewish emigration from the USSR. At the same time, the Soviet leadership mounted pressure on the Jewish population inside the county. In November 1948, the Soviet government dissolved the JAC, arresting its leaders and all those who supported or simply sympathized with the activities of the committee. The Soviet authorities could not allow the transformation of the Jewish Anti-Corruption Committee from a propaganda organization into an organ of Jewish national autonomy. The Israel factor made it truly dangerous: "Under the influence of the foreign policy factor (the formation of Israel), this conflict on national grounds escalated to such an extent that, frightened by the influx of previously unseen Jewish national enthusiasm, the authorities moved to the practice of massive terror against Jewish public figures, while simultaneously eradicating Jewish culture as such."[169]

A wave of repression against Jewish culture followed the dissolution of the Jewish Anti-Zionist Committee. Yiddish newspapers and Jewish theaters were closed, and the organization of Jewish writers was banned, many of whom were sent to the Gulag. Representatives of the administration and intelligentsia of the Jewish Autonomous Region were subjected to repression as well, which "finally buried the propaganda project of turning Birobidzhan into a prosperous 'Red Zion."[170] In the early 1950s, Stalin initiated a large-scale anti-Zionist campaign in Eastern Europe, the goal of which was Sovietization and strengthening the Soviet control over the political leadership of these countries. The Soviet authorities carried out a "purge" in the ranks of the Communist Parties of Czechoslovakia and Romania, accusing their leaders of aiding "international Zionism."

The Soviet Union's anti-Semitic policies reached their peak in early 1953 with the so-called "Doctors' Plot," when a group of Jewish doctors was accused of attempting to liquidate Soviet leaders. Soviet propaganda deliberately whipped up anti-Semitic hysteria, which created the grounds for the spread of rumors about the forced deportation of Jews to Siberia. The anti-

[168] Ibid., pp. 359-361.
[169] Kostyrchenko, p.447.
[170] Ibid. p. 436.

Semitic campaign in the USSR worried Western countries and entailed a wave of international condemnation. According to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), immediately after the Doctors' Plot was announced in early 1953, it "provoked alarm among Jews throughout the world because of its outspoken anti-Jewish character. It was considered an indication of the beginning of a virulent anti-Jewish course in the USSR and in the Soviet satellite countries."[171]

Moreover, the accusations helped fuel other anti-Semitic trials - such as the Slánský trial in Czechoslovakia - and contributed to the spread of anti-Jewish sentiment broadly. In Israel, as expected, the socio-political reaction was particularly acute, and on February 9, a bomb was thrown at the Soviet embassy in Tel Aviv, injuring several people. In response, the Soviet Union broke off diplomatic relations with Israel four days later.

After Stalin's death, the "Doctors' Plot" was closed, and diplomatic relations with Israel were restored. Throughout the 1950s, the rehabilitation of victims of political repression, including Jews, took place. However, the main elements of the state anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism policy created by Stalin survived until Gorbachev's perestroika shortly before the collapse of the USSR. The punitive and repressive methods of state anti-Semitism gave way to tacit discrimination against the Jewish population and restrictions on emigration. Relations with Israel were one of the factors in this policy. In the mid-1950s, the Soviet leadership returned to support the Arab nationalist movements, this time in opposition to the United States, and allowed its satellite, Czechoslovakia, to begin supplying weapons to Egypt; this support increased after the joint Sinai operation of Israel, France, and Britain in 1956. From this point on, there was a sharp increase in Soviet anti-Israeli propaganda: Israel was branded as an "accomplice of American imperialism" and accused of an expansionist policy. For Soviet propaganda, Israel became one of the archenemies of the USSR, which automatically increased the level of suspicion of the authorities towards the Jewish population, especially since at least part of it showed a growing interest in Israel.

The issue of the emigration of Soviet Jews to Israel remained an ideological taboo throughout the post-war years and was increasingly dependent on USSR's foreign policy. It is important to note that the issue of Jewish emigration was primarily discussed in the context of

[171] Jewish Telegraphic Agency, "Khrushchev's Failure to Mention Stalin's Anti-semitism Noted in U.S.", June 6th, 1956.

Soviet-American relations, not in dialogue with Israel. Before the severance of diplomatic ties with Israel, emigration opportunities for Jews were effectively closed. Paradoxically, it was only after relations with Israel were broken off that the doors to emigration were periodically reopened, precisely because the issue had become part of the agenda in U.S.-Soviet relations.[172]

5. Soviet anti-Zionist campaign and anti-Semitism in 1960s–1980s

Between the 1960s and 1980s, the Soviet Union intensified its anti-Zionist campaign. On official level it rejected any connection between Zionism and Judaism. However, the anti-Zionist narrative served as a pretext for anti-Semitic policies. Zionism was presented in Soviet propaganda as an instrument of Western imperialism, leading to discrimination and repression against the Jews collectively suspected of Zionist sympathies. This policy aimed not only at Jewish cultural and religious expression, but also at limiting or even prohibiting the emigration of Jews.

Relations with Israel, restored a few months after Stalin's death, were severed again in 1967, this time until 1991. The reason for this was the military victory of the Jewish state in the Six-Day War over the Arab countries, which the USSR actively supported. The USSR's reaction to the defeat in the Six-Day War was not limited to closing embassies and curtailing bilateral relations between the countries. Following the crushing defeat of the Arab armies, which dealt the USSR heavy reputational blow, the Soviet leadership began to see Israel as an enemy state, interpreting its policies as expressions of American imperialism and colonialism. While the United States remained the USSR's main rival in the Cold War, Israel was now assigned the role of the United States' most loyal and dangerous ally in the Middle East.

Between the years 1952-1956, the Soviet propaganda machine launched its first large-scale anti-Zionist campaign, primarily in the Arab world, to delegitimize Israel and the United States and whip up anti-Israeli sentiment and anti-Semitism.[173] At the same time, the KGB[174] of the USSR, with the cooperation of the secret services of satellite countries, actively engaged in

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[172] "Soviet Union. Ethnic Demography of Soviet Jewry", *Jewish Electronic Library*, https://eleven.co.il/jews-of-russia/history-in-ussr/15423/

[173] Eli Cohen, Elizabeth Boyd, "The KGB and anti-Israel propaganda operations", International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline, Vok. 22, 2019, pp. 158-182.

[174] "Committee of the State Security", Soviet secret security agency.

training militants from Palestinian terrorist groups and coordinating terrorist attacks against Israel and the United States, which led to a surge in terrorist activity in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s.[175] At the same time, it was on the propaganda front that Soviet diplomacy was able to achieve significant success, increasing pressure on Israel from the Non-Aligned Movement countries and ensuring the adoption of a UN resolution in 1975 stating that Zionism was a form of racism and racial discrimination. On the other hand, the severance of relations with Israel and the reliance on radical forces in the Arab world led to a weakening of the USSR's position in the Middle East and a gradual strengthening of the role of the United States in this region.

The anti-Zionist campaign accelerated in the late 1960s and then again in the early 1980s when the Soviet Union established an official Jewish organization aimed at combating Zionism and imperialism. The Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet society, established in 1983, closely followed the model of JAC, bringing together prominent public figures of Jewish origin to boost Soviet propaganda efforts against Israel and the United States while countering the Western and Israel narratives about the discrimination of the Soviet Jews. The Jewish composition of the Anti-Zionist committee was intended to emphasize that the anti-Zionist position of the USSR had nothing to do with anti-Semitism.[176]

By doing so, Soviet authorities attempted to correct the antisemitic character of anti-Zionist propaganda that took place in previous years. As early as 1963, a book by the Soviet propagandist, "Judaism Without Embellishment," was published in the Soviet Union. Its openly anti-Semitic content led to negative responses from the leaders of the international communist movement,[177] and even the Soviet leadership was forced to renounce the book.[178] However, after the Six-Day War, the anti-Zionist campaign became one of the central directions of Soviet propaganda, using a wide range of anti-Semitic stereotypes and theories.

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[175] Ion Mihai Pacepa, "The Arafat I Know", *Wall Street Journal*, January, 10, 2002, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1010628554948102920

[176] William Korey, "Russian Anti-Semitism, Pamyat, and the Demonology of Zionism" (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 88-92.

[177] Nora Levin, «*The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917», Paradox of Survival (New* York, 1988), Vol. 2., pp. 599-622.

[178] Charny S.A. ,"Soviet counter-propaganda on the "Jewish question" during the anti-religious campaign of 1958-1964," , *New Historical Bulletin*, 2007. No. 15, pp. 108-116.

In the 1970s, a whole cohort of anti-Zionist propaganda specialists emerged in the USSR, many of whom were attracted by the opportunity to pronounce anti-Semitic mythologemes in the Soviet public space with impunity.[179] This group of authors "specialized in criticizing Judaism and Zionism while emphasizing in every way the identity of religion and political movement. Many of them discussed, with impunity, such taboo topics in the USSR as biological racial theories, neo-paganism, and conspiracy theories."[180] In the publications of this group of propagandist authors,

> "anti-Semitic clichés were presented in a barely veiled form, with the caveats that it was not about "Jews in general" but about "Zionists" or "Judaism"... Zionism was not only implied or openly held responsible for the rise to power of Nazism, both world wars and the Shoah, as well as the cruel treatment of the Arab population, but also for the connection of Zionists with the Freemasons, Trotskyists, terrorist organizations of all stripes, the special inhumanity of Judaism to non-believers, the role of Jews in the circles of financial capital, the destructive influence of assimilated Jews on national cultures."[181]

The arguments of these authors inspired readers with the idea of the existence of a worldwide conspiracy directed by Zionism and Judaism. Between 1970 and 1971, 59 anti-Zionist books were published in the Soviet Union, with a total circulation of two million copies.[182]

In summary, the policy of state anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, despite the evolution of methods, focus, and intensity, became the hallmark of the Soviet system. While anti-Semitism was an unannounced but consistent policy of discrimination against Jews as the most disloyal group in the population, anti-Zionism was at the center of the propagandistic, diplomatic, and subversive efforts of the Soviet regime. At the same time, the anti-Zionist campaign, initially founded on the communist doctrine of Leninism and Stalinism, gradually acquired an anti-Semitic character, including elements of conspiracy, racism, and other anti-Jewish myths common in Tsarist Russia, the main enemy of the founders of the Soviet state. Almost until the collapse of the USSR, the "Jewish question" remained a sore point for the Soviet leadership, both

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[179] Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Intellectuals and Political Power: The Posy-Stalin era* (Princeton, 1990),p. 218
[180] Evgeniy Kazakov, "In search of the “Soviet Jewish”: late Soviet national politics", *New Literary Review*. *Emergency Ration*, No. 122, 2018, pp. 190-215.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Nosenko T.V., Semenchenko N.A., *Vain hostility. Essays on Soviet-Israeli relations 1948-1991* (Moscow, 2015), p. 171.

in domestic and foreign policy. Despite the hidden nature of state anti-Semitism, the Jewish population suffered from systematic discrimination, which contradicted the communist principles of equality and equal rights, exposing the widening gap between Communist ideology and Soviet realities. In terms of international politics, the "Jewish question" became a stumbling block between the USSR and Western countries, damaging the reputation of the Soviet regime; at the same time, the irreconcilable anti-Israeli policy weakened Moscow's influence in the Middle East.

As the Soviet Union entered the final years of its existence, entrenched patterns of state anti-Semitism and ideological anti-Zionism, deeply rooted under Lenin, Stalin and their successors, began to face increasing pressures, both internally and externally. The rigid policies of the postwar period, shaped by Cold War geopolitics and domestic political paranoia, seemed increasingly incompatible with the changing dynamics of the late 20th century. In the mid-1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power and the launch of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (transparency) marked a significant turning point. These reforms, aimed to breathe new life into a Soviet system in decline, also made it possible to reopen sensitive questions long kept silent, notably that of the status of Soviet Jews. The evolution of relations with the West, internal debates and the increase in requests for Jewish emigration converged to call into question the foundations of previous Soviet policies, thus opening a complex and often contradictory phase in the management of the "Jewish question".

B. Gorbachev’s perestroika, rapprochement with the west and the Soviet “Jewish question”

Under Gorbachev, profound transformations and the dismantling of the Soviet system began, already in 1987. Those changes had a dramatic impact on the situation of Soviet Jews. The main elements of Gorbachev's reform course, including permission for emigration and diplomatic rapprochement with Israel, have been preserved in the post-Soviet period. At the same time, the revival of anti-Semitism in the late 1980s as a socio-political phenomenon became possible due

to the abolition of censorship and the policy of glasnost, in the context of political competition and a departure from the model of state anti-Semitism that characterized the Soviet period.

During the first year of Gorbachev's rule, the state's anti-Jewish policy did not change. The Jewish population of the Soviet Union at that time numbered about 1.5 million people, demonstrating a steady downward trend since the late 1940s.[183] In the 1980s, there was a sharp decline in Jewish emigration, from 51 thousand emigrants per year in 1979 to 896 emigrants in 1984. In the year of Gorbachev's rise to power, only about a thousand Jews left the USSR.[184] All forms of Jewish community life - synagogues, Jewish schools, cultural institutions – were inaccessible to most Jews in the USSR.[185] Jewish dissidents served long prison terms, and they were joined by those convicted of teaching Hebrew, which was equated with illegal activity.

1. Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in the early period of Gorbachev's rule

In January 1985, TASS, the official news agency of the USSR, published an interview with Lev Korneyev, a leading propagandist of anti-Semitism, who, in his book "The Class Essence of Zionism", quoted Black Hundred authors and identified Jews with Zionism: "In the interview, he accused Zionist-Jewish bankers and industrialists of financing the Nazis. He also charged … that Zionists prevented Jews from joining the struggle against Fascism and that they shared responsibility for the Nazi extermination of Jews."[186] As part of the genre of anti-Semitic propaganda, in 1985 in Minsk, Savely Pavlov's book "Vendetta, American Style" highlighted the crucial role of Freemasons in advancing the interests of American imperialism and Zionism, considered as a racist ideology.[187] At the time of Gorbachev's rise to power, the ideology of anti-Zionism was the driving force behind Soviet anti-Semitism.

The Soviet propaganda machine operated at all levels, including the new head of state. In his interview with "L'Humanité", the press organ of the French Communist Party, Mikhail

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[183] "Soviet Union. Ethnic Demography of Soviet Jewry", *Jewish Electronic Library*, https://eleven.co.il/jews-of-russia/history-in-ussr/15423/
[184] Vyacheslav Konstantinov, *Jewish population in the former USSR in the 20th century (social and demographic analysis)*, (Jerusalem: Lira, 2007), p. 271.
[185] See in this Part chapter II, section A.
[186] Korey, p. 109.
[187] Korey, p. 68.

Gorbachev, spoke publicly for the first time about anti-Semitism in the USSR. In response to a journalist's question, he said that anti-Semitism was "impossible" in the Soviet Union since it was illegal and constituted a crime.[188] In an interview with French television in October 1985, Gorbachev said that Soviet Jews had more rights than anywhere else in the world.[189] Thus, in his first year in power, Gorbachev repeated the traditional cliches of Soviet propaganda, first voiced by Stalin in 1931. Nevertheless, unlike Stalin, who was known for his manipulative use of the topic of anti-Semitism, Gorbachev's commitment to Soviet anti-Zionist propaganda reflected his conviction in the correctness of Soviet ideology after more than half a century of indoctrination and banalization of anti-Semitism.

In this context, a striking example of Gorbachev's ideological thinking is his statement at a Politburo meeting dedicated to the fate of one of the dissident movement leaders, academician Andrei Sakharov. At the meeting on August 29, 1985 (six months after taking up the post of General Secretary), Gorbachev raised the issue of Sakharov's wife, Elena Bonner, who requested a permit to travel abroad for medical treatment. In discussing the issue of Bonner leaving the country for humanitarian reasons, the Politburo members discussed the reputational losses of such a step, fearing "bourgeois propaganda" and the undesirable impression of a "concession" that could be perceived as a sign of weakness in the West. Bonner was Jewish; in response to KGB chief Chebrikov's remark about Bonner's pernicious influence on Sakharov's behavior, Gorbachev remarked: "That is what Zionism is."[190] Another Politburo member, Zimyanin, called Bonner "a beast in a skirt, a protégé of imperialism" and expressed concern "that Bonner will be used against us in the West." Like other Politburo members, the General Secretary of the CPSU[191] Central Committee automatically identified the Soviet citizen of Jewish origin with Zionism. Gorbachev was also not averse to the anti-Semitic view of good and bad Jews. During the visit of the US Secretary of State Shultz to Moscow in April 1987, Gorbachev responded to

[188] *L'Humanite,* 25 February 1986.
[189] Allan Kagedan, "Gorbachev and the Jews", *Commentary,* May 1986, https://www.commentary.org/articles/allan-kagedan/gorbachev-and-the-jews/
[190] Protocols of the Politburo Meeting on August 29, 1986. Quoted from National Security Archive of George Washington University, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Perestroika/1985.08.29%20Politburo%20Session,%20Sakharov.pdf
[191] Abbreviation of Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

the guest's meeting with Jewish refuseniks: "How is it that every time you come here you meet these indecent Jews? Why don't you meet other people? We have good Jews, too."[192]

Under Gorbachev, the Anti-Zionist Committee of Soviet Public (AKSO) continued its activities. The goal of AKSO was "to "attack Zionism in the most violent terms and to insist that most Jews were normal, well-adjusted Soviet citizens with no interest in emigrating. This also served the purpose of justifying the end of emigration…"[193] One of the propagandistic functions of the Anti-Zionist Committee was to divert attention from the Jewish question in the USSR by accusing the United States of anti-Semitism." Relying on the Anti-Defamation League's annual report on anti-Semitic incidents in the United States, the Anti-Zionist Committee sent a statement to the US Congress in early 1985, which said: "It is a feeling of great concern that moves us to appeal to you, members of the US Congress. We have learned from an Associated Press report that 715 cases of anti-Semitic acts of vandalism, insults, threats, and attacks on individual Jews and Jewish organizations were rebsoptered in your country in the past year."[194]

The Anti-Zionist Committee's role continued to grow under Gorbachev. In the summer of 1985, a new version of the so-called "White Book" was published - a propaganda work jointly published by the Anti-Zionist Committee and the Association of Soviet Lawyers, another instrument of the USSR in its ideological confrontation with the West during the Cold War. The "White Book" was intended to serve as an authoritative indictment of Zionism and included numerous documents, photographs, and illustrations. It received maximum coverage in the Soviet press. The book sold 200,000 copies. TASS issued a statement citing the book's main points, which included an accusation that Zionism collaborated with Nazism: "Zionist leaders are responsible for the deaths of thousands of Jews annihilated by the Nazis. It is precisely the Zionists who assisted the Nazi butchers by helping them to make up the lists of the doomed inmates of ghettoes, escorted the latter to the places of extermination, and convinced them to resign to the butchers."[195] The Committee also used for propaganda purposes an American expert known for his anti-Zionist views, Alfred Lilienthal, who visited the USSR at the invitation of the

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[192] Yuli Kosharossky, *We are Jews Again* (Jerusalem, 2007), chapter 53.
[193] Gal Beckerman, When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) p.433.
[194] David Greenberg, "A Step Forward for the Anti-Zionist Committee," *Radio Liberty Research,* RLI07/85, 9 April 1985.
[195] Report of TASS, 15 August 1985.

Committee and, in an interview with a Soviet newspaper, accused the Zionist lobby of influencing the American president.[196]

2. The Shift Towards Change, American Pressure, and the Surge in Jewish Emigration

During his years in power, Mikhail Gorbachev made a rapprochement with the West and adopted a more positive attitude towards the Soviet Jewish community. This new approach can be explained by a combination of internal reasons, including domestic reforms, as well as external pressures. His policies of glasnost and perestroika aimed to modernize a political and economic system that was on its last legs. Improving relations with the West was essential to obtain economic aid, technology transfers, etc.

The United States of Ronald Reagan and then George H. W. Bush exerted constant diplomatic pressure on the USSR regarding human rights, with particular emphasis on the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate. American Jewish organizations and many elected officials have conditioned trade agreements (Jackson-Vanik Amendment for example) on freedom of emigration. Faced with an unprecedented economic crisis, Gorbachev understood that relaxing restrictions targeting Jews could improve the image of the USSR and thus promote Western cooperation.

Domestically, glasnost expanded freedom of expression, which fostered a resurgence of Jewish identity and cultural practice. Under these conditions, many Soviet Jews emigrated as soon as it became possible.

Thus, Gorbachev's reforms, which were primarily motivated by economic and diplomatic imperatives, coincided with the aspirations for freedom of Soviet Jews. The evolution of the "Jewish question" thus became both a symbol and an instrument of the transformation of Soviet society as a whole and its image in the world.

As early as 1985, events were unfolding that ran counter to the Soviet Union's anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist propaganda, reflecting the new leadership's efforts to explore alternative

[196] *Arguments and Facts*, November 19, 1985, https://archive.aif.ru/archive/1659050

channels of communication and adopt a fresh approach to foreign policy; yet, most of the events were unreported. As Beckerman writes, "In the spring and summer of 1985, one had to look hard for signs of change. But for those who cared to see them, it was possible to discern slight differences."[197] In retrospect, more than 30 years later, these signals appear to be a very definite new vector in the policy of the Soviet leadership.

In February 1985, a month before Gorbachev's appointment, the Chairman of the Board of the State Bank of the USSR, Vladimir Alkhimov, told the US trade delegation that "if good relations with the United States restored, 50,000 Jewish émigrés annually would be no problem."[198] In May 1985, a meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Accords) took place in Ottawa, three months after Gorbachev came to power. The Helsinki Accords included a section on civil rights, which, initially, was not taken too seriously by the Soviet leadership. Daniel Thomas explains that "the Soviet Union and its allies were slow to ratify international human rights covenants in the 1960s and 1970s and actively resisted the inclusion of human rights norms in the Helsinki Final Act."[199] The worsening human rights situation in the USSR, particularly restrictions on emigration, gradually became the central issue of the Helsinki process. International criticism of the Soviet Union grew louder, while its counterarguments were reduced to demands for non-interference in its internal affairs. But at the Ottawa conference, Soviet representatives unexpectedly entered dialogue, responding to claims from European countries by accusations of economic and social rights violations in the West and the growth of anti-Semitism in America. Although this change was perceived as a tactical move on the part of the USSR, it opened the possibility for more substantive negotiations and more significant pressure on the USSR.[200]

While the change in Soviet rhetoric on human rights at the Helsinki process "did not feel like progress," an important step had occurred in another direction.[201] In May 1985, Izvestiya, the official organ of the Soviet government, published a congratulatory message from Israeli President Isaac Herzog on Victory Day, in which he expressed the gratitude of the Jewish people

[197] Beckerman, p. 465.
[198] Kagedan, “Gorbachev and the Jews”.
[199] Daniel C. Thomas, Human Rights Ideas, the Demise of Communism, and the End of the Cold War», *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Spring 2005), p.131
[200] Beckerman, p. 469.
[201] Ibid. p. 470.

to the Soviet Army for defeating the Nazism. As Beckerman aptly noted, "considering how often Izvestiya had characterized Israel itself as "Nazi scum," this was an interesting development."[202]

Two months later, a secret meeting between the ambassadors of Israel and the Soviet Union in France took place in the apartment of the famous Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim, the first meeting of high-ranking officials since the severance of diplomatic relations between the countries in 1967. According to a report of the meeting published on Israeli radio, Soviet Ambassador Vorontsov proposed the resumption of diplomatic relations and unlimited emigration of Soviet Jews in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from the Golan Heights; a commitment that the Jewish emigrants would go to Israel rather than the United States; and a demand that American Jewry stop its "anti-Soviet" campaign on the issue of Soviet Jews.[203] The Soviet leadership denied both the content and the fact of the meeting, but the Israeli Foreign Ministry officially confirmed that it had occurred.[204]

Contacts and exchanges of opinions between the Israeli and Soviet leadership also took place with the help of an independent intermediary - the American millionaire and president of the World Jewish Congress Edgar Bronfman. In September 1985, he visited Moscow, where he conveyed to the Foreign Ministry representative a message from Shimon Peres to Gorbachev: "Israel is not an enemy of the USSR." At Peres's request, Bronfman discussed with Soviet officials' proposals for Jewish emigration, including an airlift of 20,000 Soviet Jews via Poland using French aircraft. Despite the idea's eccentricity, Peres confirmed the airlift plan to journalists and announced that France was prepared to provide the aircraft needed for the operation after his meeting with President Mitterrand.[205] A meeting between Peres and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze took place during the UN General Assembly, and the atmosphere was friendly. A month later, Poland unexpectedly announced the resumption of diplomatic relations with Israel, a move that could not happen without Moscow's consent.

Despite the sensational nature of the Israeli-Soviet contacts, from Gorbachev's point of view, the primary recipient of these signals was Washington. In his first summit in Geneva with U.S.

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[202] Ibid. p. 471.
[203] "Israeli radio reports a Soviet offer on new ties", *The New York Time*, July 20, 1985 https://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/20/world/israeli-radio-reports-a-soviet-offer-on-new-ties.html
[204] "Israelis Fear Setback on Soviet Contacts : Peres Reportedly Dispatches a Hopeful Message to Gorbachev", *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1985, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-07-22-mn-6093-story.html
[205] Beckerman, p. 473.

President Ronald Reagan in November 1985, Soviet leader focused on issues of security and the balance of power, particularly in light of the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative, which had raised serious concerns among the Soviet leadership. However, the human rights, especially Jewish emigration, came to the fore despite the best efforts of Soviet propaganda. In preparatory meeting with the US Secretary of State George Shultz in Moscow the latter, quite unexpectedly, suggested he take back two of the most famous Jewish dissidents, Anatoly Sharansky and Ida Nudel. This proposal was met with cold incomprehension.[206]

During the summit with Reagan, the issue of Jewish emigration received extensive press coverage due to protests by American Jewish organizations, with participation of Sharansky's wife, and direct pressure from other summit participants not associated with the Jewish issue. Thus, Jesse Jackson, one of the leaders of the civil rights and disarmament movements, known for his anti-Semitic statements, at an impromptu meeting with Gorbachev, first asked him about the plight of the Jews in the USSR. The Soviet leader's answer echoed standard Soviet propaganda: "Jews are a part of the Soviet people. They are a fine people. They contribute a lot to disarmament. They are very talented people, and they are very valued in the Soviet Union. The problem, the so-called problem, in the Soviet Union does not exist. Perhaps this problem only exists with those who would like to mar our relations, who cast doubts and aspersions."[207] The fate of Soviet Jewry was also addressed during the Reagan-Gorbachev meeting. However, no agreement was reached there either, aligning with the low expectations of most observers before the summit.[208]

Since the mid-1970s, the issue of Jewish emigration had been consistently raised by the American administration in its negotiations with the USSR. However, Ronald Reagan turned it into one of the fundamental demands. In this context, it is important to note the role of the American Jewish community. The mid-1980s saw the peak of support for Soviet Jewry among American Jews, despite the pessimism felt by the organizations involved in this struggle, primarily the National Conference and the Union of Councils. Here is how Beckerman explains it:

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[206] Ibid., p. 475.
[207] Ibid., p. 477.
[208] "Vain effort to free Shcharansky is described", *The New York Times*, October 10, 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/10/10/world/vain-effort-to-free-shcharansky-is-described.html

"…The movement became an institution. Bracelets engraved with the names of "Prisoners of Zion" were popular accessories – even Reagan had one with Begun's name... Solidarity Sunday was a regular fixture; every spring at least a hundred thousand people turned out to march in Manhattan. American politicians competed fiercely to be included on the list of speakers. No Passover Seder was complete without a "matzo of hope" and a special prayer for refuseniks. In 1985, an extremely successful national pairing programed up thousands of Jewish boys and girls approaching the bar or bat mitzvahs with a Soviet Jewish "twin" who was barred from participating in the rite of passage."[209]

Unlike his predecessors, Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter, Reagan used this issue both as an ideological tool and a diplomatic strategy, making it a kind of barometer of trust in the Soviet leadership. In his words, "If the Soviet Union cannot be trusted to keep its word with respect to existing international obligations on emigration and other Jewish rights, it cannot be trusted to keep its word with respect to arms."[210] The new Soviet leadership, interested in creating a favorable atmosphere between the countries, decided to respond to these signals from the American administration: in February 1986, the Soviet Union exchanged Anatoly Shcharansky and several West German citizens for intelligence officers from the USSR, Czechoslovakia, the GDR, and Poland. That same year, the most famous Soviet dissident, Andrei Sakharov, who, together with Shcharansky, fought for freedom of emigration from the USSR, was released from exile.

Gorbachev's goodwill gestures towards dissidents were controversial and were perceived as a more sophisticated Soviet policy to maintain the ban on emigration. According to his critics at the time, by selectively releasing the most prominent dissidents from prison and manipulatively using human rights rhetoric against Western countries, Gorbachev was trying to improve the reputation of the Soviet Union and distract attention from the human rights abuses in the USSR, which allowed him to continue traditional Soviet policies.[211]

[209] Beckerman, p.433.
[210] Ibid. p. 478.
[211] Kagedan, "Gorbachev and the Jews".

3. Jewish emigration - Gorbachev's dilemmas and concessions

The issue of emigration from the USSR presented the Soviet leadership with an urgent dilemma of both ideological and practical nature. The Soviet state was based on communist ideology, according to which the socialist system would inevitably win in competition with capitalism; at the same time, being totalitarian in its structure, it prohibited any views that contradicted the dominant doctrine. Already in the 1960s, the leadership of the USSR, represented by Nikita Khrushchev, was concerned about the USSR's technological and economic backwardness compared to the West. Granting permission to emigrate to the Western countries could have led to a mass exodus of Soviet citizens, which would have signified a defeat for Soviet ideology. The mass departure of emigrants was dangerous not in itself but because of its destabilizing effect on those who remained in the country. Another argument was related to the national question. If Jewish citizens of the USSR were to get the opportunity to emigrate, representatives of other ethnic groups who experienced discrimination based on their nationality could demand the same. Such a scenario would be another ideological blow to the Soviet system, which preached the gradual erasure of national differences and the creation of a new national group – the Soviet people.[212]

However, even in the absence of emigration demands, raising the issue of national rights ran counter to the core tenets of Leninist doctrine, which opposed proletarian internationalism to bourgeois nationalism. The fact that Jews were demanding these rights was another insurmountable contradiction since, according to Lenin's prognosis, the Jewish people had lost all national characteristics; therefore, they were a natural candidate for rapid assimilation. An additional factor complicating the question of the emigration of Soviet Jews was their final destination – the United States, where the overwhelming majority of them were going. From the Soviet standpoint, the move of Jews to Israel was less problematic from an ideological point of view, although it could increase tensions between the USSR and its Arab allies. However, their choice in favor of America represented proof of the ideological fiasco of the Soviet ideology.[213]

Another objection of a more practical nature was the high professional and educational level of the majority of the Jewish population. The danger of a "brain drain" was one of the reasons

[212] 22nd Congress of the CPSU (October 17 - 31, 1961): Verbatim report. Volume 1. P. 153. M.: Gospolitizdat, 1962
[213] Kagedan, “Gorbachev and the Jews”.

why, in 1972, the Soviet authorities began to require potential emigrants to pay compensation for education received in the Soviet Union, making it more difficult for them to emigrate.[214] The Soviet authorities took additional measures to reduce the demand for emigration. Among these measures were jamming Western media broadcasts within the country, which cut off Soviet citizens from alternative sources of information, and intensive propaganda within the country to create a negative perception of life in the West. However, in the 1970s, the Soviet Union agreed to a limited Jewish emigration as part of the policy of détente initiated by Brezhnev. In order to minimize the negative impact of emigration on the Soviet economy, permission was granted mainly to Jews living on the socio-economic periphery - in the Caucasus and Baltic republics, whose level of education was generally lower than that of the Jewish population of Moscow, Leningrad, Kyiv, and Minsk. As a result of this decision, the Jewish population in the peripheral regions began to decline, and the continuation of even limited emigration would have meant the exodus of the more educated groups of Jews whose exit the authorities wished to avoid.[215]

Nevertheless, contrary to the forecasts of critics and their worst expectations, Gorbachev opted for a gradual recognition of Jewish rights. Apparently, the contradictory trends of 1985 were not intended to divert the West's attention but rather reflected a feverish search for solutions to the Soviet Union's urgent problems. The USSR leadership became aware of its economic development problems and unbreachable technological backwardness from the West in the late 1960s.[216] Gorbachev and his associates were determined to reform the Soviet Union, but they were walking in uncharted territory without a clear vision of the final goal and a plan for transformation.[217] Thus, Gorbachev's actions were dictated primarily by an understanding of the need to normalize relations with the West in light of the worsening economic situation in the USSR and the need to find a compromise between the two competing systems: "If we do not back down on some specific, maybe even important issues, if we do not budge from the positions we have held for a long time, we will lose in the end. We will be drawn into an arms race that we cannot manage. We will lose because right now we are at the end of our tether."[218]

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[214] Beckerman, pp. 363
[215] Kagedan.
[216] E.V. Bodrova, V.V. Kalinov, Factors that determined the USSR's technological backwardness, *Bulletin of Tomsk State University -History.* 2018, No. 52, pp. 63-70.
[217] Vladislav Zubok, Collapse. *The fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), p. 428.
[218] Beckerman, p. 490.

The change in policy on the Jewish question was closely linked to the policy of reducing tensions with the West. Gorbachev's approach to the Jewish problem focused not so much on universal human values, which became one of the principles of the Soviet leader's "new thinking" policy, as on the foreign policy interests of the Soviet Union. Since the late 1960s, the issue of mass Jewish emigration was viewed by Soviet leaders as an integral part of relations with Western countries and was perceived as a bargaining chip in the interests of the USSR.

A collision of Russian history from almost a century ago repeated itself: in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Jewish question became one of the main stumbling blocks in relations between tsarist Russia and the West, primarily the United States.[219] Like the Russian Empire of Alexander III and Nicholas II, the leadership of the USSR found it expedient to encourage the emigration of "problematic" Jews. The only difference was that the "Jewish" policy of the tsarist regime was aimed primarily at solving internal problems, while that of the Soviet Union aimed at external ones. This approach was preserved in the early period of Gorbachev's rule, and negotiations between Soviet and American diplomats may have resembled real bargaining. Indirect confirmation of the nature of these negotiations can be found in the book by Yossi Beilin, the political director of the Israeli Foreign Ministry in the Shimon Peres government. In his book, "The Long Road to Peace," Beilin recounts his meeting in 1986 with Richard Murphy, whom he described as one of the key figures in the US State Department on Middle East issues. Here is how Beilin describes his reaction when Murphy raised the issue of the quota for the Jewish emigration from the USSR:

> "Murphy asked everyone present to leave us alone. Everyone, of course, was thinking about some top-secret issue related to Israel's security. And then he asked how much exactly I would like this quota to be. I shuddered. I realized I could not utter any number, even an approximate one. If I had named any number, even an astronomical one for those times, I would still have felt like a traitor. How can you count something that cannot be counted, how can you define the boundaries of what was my and not only my life's dream: for all Jews

[219] In 1911, the United States abrogated the US-Russia Treaty of Navigation and Commerce to protest Russia's suppression of religious and ethnic minorities, particularly Jews, an act that set a historic precedent. See more in Max Laserson, *The American Impact on Russia*, (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 431-439

from the USSR to be able to come to Israel in peace? I refused to answer. Murphy decided to make my task easier. "Will 20,000 annually suit you?" he asked. I almost fell off my chair. At that time, at best, 800-900 people came per year. And he was talking about 20 thousand! "30 thousand?" the American continued. I was silent again. "40 thousand?"… The conversation ended with me saying that I did not have the appropriate authority to decide such an important issue."[220]

The number of Jewish emigrants in 1985 and 1986 did not exceed a thousand people per year, among the lowest figures in the Soviet period. But in 1987, there was a tenfold increase in this figure - 8,155 Jews left the country, which reflected the positive dynamics of Soviet-American negotiations. In 1988, Jewish emigration from the USSR had already doubled compared to 1987 and amounted to 18,961 people, which, according to many experts, was a turning point. So, in 1989, this figure grew to almost 72,000 people, and in 1990, emigration acquired an avalanche-like character - 205,000 Jews left the USSR that year. In 1991, the year of the collapse of the USSR, - 195,000. Thus, the borders of the Soviet Union were opened entirely to Jewish emigration four years after Gorbachev came to power.[221]

While Gorbachev's reforms aimed to modernize the Soviet system and improve the country's relations with the rest of the world, particularly the West, they also exposed deep internal tensions. Jewish emigration and the dilemmas associated with it fit into this framework. This question, which could seem marginal in view of the colossal challenges, particularly economic, of the time, became the symbol of broader struggles within Soviet society.

4. Intra-party and public opposition to perestroika and the Jewish question

Michael Gorbachev's presidency was a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, it was necessary to open the doors to Jewish emigration to ease external tensions, on the other, massive Jewish immigration risked provoking the ire of the most radical elements of the Communist Party, who saw these concessions, particularly on migration, as a betrayal of Soviet sovereignty and

[220] Yossi Beilin, *A Long Road to Peace* (Tel Aviv: Kniga-Sefer, 2012), p. 91
[221] Konstantinov, pp. 257-271.

ideology. Between these two imperatives, Gorbachev had to adopt a gradual approach. Procedures for issuing exit visas have been relaxed, along with the official anti-Zionist narrative. However, these measures remained limited for a long time, or unevenly applied, demonstrating the Kremlin's caution in the face of resistance from the Party and certain sections of public opinion.

The sharp increase in emigration after 1987 was also a result of the democratic reforms that began that year. After two years in power and becoming increasingly aware of the inherent problems of the Soviet political and economic system, Gorbachev and his closest associates - Politburo member Alexander Yakovlev, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, and the General Secretary's assistant Anatoly Chernyaev - saw the need for a profound change: "During 1986, Gorbachev concluded that the Party apparatus was incapable of being the main instrument to pull the USSR from the swamp of "stagnation." After Lenin, Trotsky, and countless Party reformers, Gorbachev began to speak about the "bureaucratization" of the Party apparatus at all levels as being a major obstacle to his transformation."[222] In January 1987, the Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee officially confirmed the course toward perestroika – profound reforms of the USSR's economic and political system. In the summer of that same year, as he reflected on the flaws of the Soviet system, Gorbachev concluded that overcoming Stalin's legacy was essential, as it had distorted the democratic foundations of socialism.

The implementation of political governance reforms began in 1988.[223] The logic of increasing liberalization also extended to emigration policies, which were eventually eased as perestroika advanced. Starting in 1987, the Soviet government gradually simplified the procedures for allowing citizens to leave the country for family reunification, leading to a sharp increase in emigration.[224] While Jews represented the majority of emigrants, in the last years of the USSR, many ethnic Germans and Greeks also emigrated from the Soviet Union.[225] In 1987, about 40 thousand people left the USSR for permanent residence, of which only a fifth were

[222] Zubok, p.27.
[223] Ibid. p. 41.
[224] "Emigration from the USSR in 1980 - 1990", in I.G. Kalabekov, *USSR and countries of the world in numbers*, https://su90.ru/emigration.html
[225] "Emigration from the USSR in 1980 - 1990",

Jews.[226] In May 1991, USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev signed a law allowing Soviet citizens to travel abroad without an exit visa, thus lifting the "iron curtain" for all citizens of the country.

The main achievement of perestroika from the point of view of the Soviet Jews was the abolition of the policy of state anti-Semitism, practiced since the late 1940s. However, alongside the normalization of Jewish life and the abolition of state-sponsored anti-Semitism in the USSR, the Gorbachev era also gave rise to new forms of anti-Semitism, often with the support of state structures.

Founded in the 1980s, the 'Pamyat' Society became a symbol of the late Soviet Union's anti-Semitism. In late 1987, Pamyat's leaders began accusing pro-democratic figures associated with perestroika, including high-ranking Gorbachev allies such as Alexander Yakovlev, of pursuing anti-Russian policies.[227] 'Pamyat''s ideology was in complete contradiction with Gorbachev's course toward democratization, putting forward the conservative anti-Semitic tradition of the Tsarist regime as a political ideal (discussed in detail in chapter 3 of Part I)

The rejection of democratization brought *Pamyat* and the nationalist segments of the Soviet elite closer to the conservative circles of the CPSU, who demanded an end to perestroika. Amid worsening socio-economic conditions and a loss of control over political processes, the CPSU leadership became divided, and resistance to Gorbachev's policies grew stronger. The first public expression of this split was a letter from a chemistry professor from Leningrad, Nina Andreeva, published in March 1988 in the newspaper "Sovetskaya Rossiya" under the title "I cannot compromise my principles."[228] Andreeva's letter, published with the sanction of Yegor Ligachev, Gorbachev's main opponent in the Politburo, and with the help of journalists close to him,[229] received extensive coverage and became the first anti-perestroika manifesto. Andreyeva condemned the attacks against Stalin and his methods of governance, blaming the Jews, who, in her opinion, at the current stage constituted a "counter-revolutionary nation" due to their cosmopolitanism and "refusal to accept socialism."[230] Thus, the anti-perestroika intra-party

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[226] "In 1987, about 40 thousand people left the USSR to live abroad. Departure abroad", *Argumenty I facty*, May 28, 1988, https://archive.aif.ru/archive/1649637

[227] Vadim Belotserkovsky, "The Nazi Movement in the Soviet Union," *Them,* September 1988, 6-7.

[228] Nina Andreeva, "I cannot compromise my principles", *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, March 13, 1988, p. 2, quoted from: Revolucia.ru. https://revolucia.ru/nmppr.htm

[229] Dusko Doder and Louise Branson, *Gorbachev:Heretic in the Kremlin,*(Penguin Books, 1991) pp. 304-310.

[230] Nina Andreeva, «I can't compromise my principles", S*ovetskaia Rossiia,* 13 March 1988.

opposition contained a significant anti-Semitic element from the very beginning. Gorbachev temporally neutralized Ligachev's opposition, having secured the support of most of the Politburo members. However, Andreyeva's anti-Semitic statements remained unanswered, and she continued to make them with impunity, enjoying unlimited access to the Soviet media.

The consolidation of the reactionary forces, despite their electoral defeats in 1989-1990, caused understandable concerns among Gorbachev and his associates. However, faithful to their course of democratization, they considered it necessary to continue the open and uncensored discussion in the party and society. At the same time, Gorbachev's opponents in the country's leadership did not limit themselves to disputes in the Politburo and the Central Committee of the CPSU. They tried to influence the situation by interacting with anti-perestroika forces in society. During the election campaign for the Congress of People's Deputies in 1990, leaflets with anti-Semitic content were found in the Leningrad City Committee of the CPSU, whose primary goal was to discredit anti-system candidates. Moreover, information leaked out about the close ties of party organs in Moscow and Leningrad with extremist nationalist and anti-Semitic organizations.[231]

By the end of 1990, the situation in the country had become so tense that the possibility of a reactionary coup and a rollback of the perestroika became one of the main issues on the agenda. Gorbachev's close associate, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, speaking at the Fourth Congress of People's Deputies, unexpectedly announced his resignation:

> "Dictatorship is coming! I do not know which kind, who will be a dictator … I am resigning … Let it be my contribution, my protest against the advancing dictatorship."[232]

On July 6, 1990, KGB Chairman Kryuchkov gave an interview on the central channel of Soviet television, where he was asked about the KGB's attitude toward "Pamyat". Kryuchkov did not express any concern about the antisemitic activities or ideology of "Pamyat"; on the contrary, he said there were several "Pamyat" groups, and one of them was very "patriotic and useful."[233] Without mentioning the name of this "useful" “Pamyat”, the KGB Chairman made it clear to the public that, from his point of view, radical anti-Semites not only did not pose a danger but even

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[231] Korey, p. 199.
[232] Zubok, pp. 176-177.
[233] Pavel Gutionov, "What is Wrong with My 'Memory?'" *Izvestiia,* 12 July 1990.

deserved approval.[234] The reticence of Kryuchkov's statements was complemented by the overt propaganda of anti-Semitism within his organization. "Pogranichnik", the press organ of the KGB border troops, in December 1990 accused the liberal democratic press of aiding the Zionists.[235] At the same time, a former high-ranking KGB official, Valentin Korolev, confessed to the media about the central role of anti-Zionism in the KGB's thinking and activities.[236]

Similar sentiments prevailed in the Soviet Army General Staff. Defense Minister and Politburo member Dmitry Yazov sought to introduce antisemitic ideology into the ranks of the army. On Yazov's orders, the most odious anti-Semitic magazines, "Nash Sovremennik" and "Molodaya Gvardiya", were distributed in the libraries and reading rooms of all military units.[237] "Voenno-Istorichesky Zhurnal", the official organ of the Defense Ministry, published excerpts from Hitler's Mein Kampf; Yazov issued a "mild reprimand" to the magazine's editor-in-chief, Filatov, for this publication. This response did not stop Filatov from telling the New York Times about his plans to publish "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion", which he considered "a normal piece of literature, like the Bible or the Koran."[238]

In June 1990, two months before the anti-democratic putsch, the Defense Ministry supported the publication of a brochure "The Black Hundred and the Red Hundred". The brochure, published in a circulation of one million, turned the history of 20th-century Russia on its head and presented an apology for the Black Hundred movement, arguing that it defended the peasantry and workers "against the animal-like, carnivorous and insatiable Jew."[239] On July 7, 1991, the Minister of Defense ordered all military units to subscribe to the "Nash Sovremennik" magazine;[240] two army printing houses were handed over to the Union of Writers of the USSR, known for its anti-democratic and anti-Semitic agenda.[241] At the congress of the Union of Writers, which took place in the Soviet Army Theater in December 1990, anti-Semitic literature

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[234] Korey, p. 195.
[235] *Pogranichnik,* 12 December 1990, cited in Adrian Karatnycky, "Soviet Diplomacy's Smiles Tum to Snarls," *Wall Street Journal,* 21 February 1991.
[236] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Daily Report,* 22 October 1990.
[237] *Ogonek,* 1 (1991), as reported in Institute of Jewish Affairs, *Intelligence Report* 1 (February 1991).
[238] Bill Keller,"For a Soviet Military Editor, Battling Changes, Even Hitler Serves The Cause", *New York Times*, January 7, 1991.
[239] Viktor Ostretsov, *Black hundred and red hundred* (Moscow: Military Publishing House, 1991).
[240] The directive was published in *Moskovskaia pravda,* 4 October 1991.
[241] *Literaturnaia Rossiia,* n. 5, 1990

was open on display, from Hitler's "My Struggle" to The Protocols of the Elders of Zion", while the speakers emphasized that only the army and the communists could save the country.[242]

The putsch organized in August 1991 aimed to curtail the course of democratization and perestroika. However, the putschists' indecisiveness, disagreements among the generals and the intelligence services, and active public protest in Moscow and Leningrad led to the failure of the coup attempt. Notably, there were many Jews among the opponents of the putsch: "Had the coup of August 19–21 succeeded, it would have placed in power those forces determined to crush an emerging democracy. Anti-Semitism would have been greatly strengthened. Not surprisingly, Soviet Jews displayed a very deep sense of anxiety, and their younger members played activist roles in the resistance movement. Public demonstrations on behalf of Yeltsin included numerous Jews."[243]

5. Gorbachev and the fight against anti-Semitism

As the policy of perestroika took shape, Gorbachev faced growing opposition from conservatives, worried about losing control. The Jewish question had become a point of tension, used by some to demonstrate that the reforms weakened Soviet identity and opened the door to Western manipulation. This resentment would lead to a new rise in anti-Semitism, against a backdrop of economic crisis.

Without underestimating the importance of Gorbachev's contribution to the democratization of politics and society and the containment of reactionary forces in the party and state apparatus, his attitude to the fight against anti-Semitism can be characterized as indecisive, half-hearted, and belated. Over the course of several years, representatives of Jewish organizations, liberal politicians and journalists, called on him to condemn manifestations of anti-Semitism, to adopt corresponding resolutions in parliament, and to stop support for anti-Semitic organizations by party and state institutions. But only in July 1990, a month before the putsch, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the CPSU published a lengthy article analyzing anti-Semitic tendencies in the Soviet Union, sharply condemning "Pamyat", as well as

[242] *Maariv,* (Tel Aviv) 4 January 1991
[243] Korey, p. 200.

literary magazines that spread hatred of Jews.[244] The article emphasized the anti-Semitic orientation of Soviet propaganda of past years, its "Black Hundred and fascist origins", and refuted most of the anti-Semitic arguments of those years. The article's main conclusion was that "Pamyat" and other reactionaries had "resurrected anti-Semitism as a weapon against perestroika."[245] However, Gorbachev rarely addressed anti-Semitism, and when he did, his remarks were “brief and seriously flawed."[246] In 1987, Gorbachev was still comparing Zionism with anti-Semitism in his book "Perestroika", calling them forms of national chauvinism. According to Korey:

> “This came very close to linking Zionism with racism and providing the UN resolution with appropriate legitimization. Thus, even when the Soviet leader appeared to condemn anti-Semitism, he offered a protective cloak for those who engaged in anti-Jewish bigotry. All that they had to do was frame their assertions and actions in anti-Zionist terms. The demonology of Zionism was more than sufficient to cover a multitude of vicious stereotypes."[247]

Gorbachev did not take advantage of the moment of triumph over the putschists to decisively condemn antisemitic fanaticism and suppress its odious manifestations. He kept avoiding clear statements on anti-Semitism and showed inexplicable tolerance for repugnant escapades, such as the participation of supporters of "Memory" and a new populist figure, the populist Vladimir Zhirinovsky, in the OSCE conference in Moscow (10.9-4.10.1991). Indicative in this regard is Gorbachev's conversation with the executive director of the American National Conference on Soviet Jewry, Shoshana Cardan, in October 1991. Passing off wishful thinking as reality, Gorbachev declared that "the atmosphere in society with respect to Jews has changed for the better", emphasizing that "the problem exists, but it is not widespread… society, in principle, is not infected." When asked to explicitly condemn anti-Semitism, he declined, offering the following explanation:

> "We live in a country of 120 languages. Even in Russian-Ukrainian relations, there are problems. If I were to mention one nation, it would start [a problem]! Today, to single out

[244] Sergei Rogov, “Is there a Jewish problem here?”, *Pravda,* 22 July 1990.
[245] Ibid.
[246] Korey, p. 177.
[247] Ibid.

someone would provoke the division of nations into first-class, second-class, and so on. And how can we divide people living side by side?! In my recent speeches, I have condemned chauvinism, nationalism, as well as anti-Semitism and Zionism. When appropriate, I do so. But specifically?! We have a very complex interethnic situation."[248]

As this example demonstrates, Gorbachev once again equated Zionism with "chauvinism," a recurring motif in Soviet ideological discourse. But during the same conversation he informed his interlocutor, with satisfaction, about "establishing close ties with Israel".[249]Although he condemned antisemitic expressions, he sought to downplay the significance of anti-Semitism by referring to other conflicts and stressing the need to maintain impartiality and a fair balance in a multiethnic state.

Before stepping down from the presidency of the USSR, Gorbachev made two symbolic gestures toward the Jewish people and Israel, reflecting his long-standing efforts to reshape the Soviet Union's image both internally and internationally, and break with the ideological legacy of Soviet systemic anti-Semitism. His special message on the 50th anniversary of the Babi Yar tragedy was the first official Soviet recognition of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's aide Chernyaev later wrote that this message and the preceding meeting with leaders of American Jewry intended to "put an end to Soviet state anti-Semitism."[250] A few days before the dissolution of the USSR, the Soviet delegation to the UN supported a decision repealing the 1975 resolution equating Zionism with racism, one of the main "achievements" of the Soviet anti-Zionist campaign. Unable to effectively counter the rise of anti-Semitism at home, Gorbachev at least contributed to reversing one of the most ideological UN decisions.

The turning point initiated under Gorbachev marks a profound break with decades of Soviet policies marked by anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. The reforms of perestroika, along with rapprochement with the West, redefined the Soviet approach to the 'Jewish question,'

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[248] "*Mikhail Gorbachev condemns any manifestations of anti-Semitism along with other forms of national chauvinism"*, Interfax, October 1, 1991.
[249] «Mikhail Gorbachev "condemns any manifestations of anti-Semitism along with other forms of national chauvinism", *Interfax*, October 1, 1991.
[250] Anatoly Chernyayev, *Diary of an assistant to the President of the USSR (Moscow: TEPPA, 1997), cited from* Interfax, October 1, 1991, https://www.interfax.ru/30years/789833

emphasizing openness, the right to emigration, and the beginning of normalization.This trend continued to assert itself after the fall of the Soviet Union. As Boris Yeltsin attempts to build a new democratic order, the Jewish question continues to play a significant role, this time as a test of the break with the authoritarianism of the past.

C. Yeltsin's attempt at democracy, its failure and the role of Jewish factor

Despite their political rivalry, Gorbachev and Yeltsin shared views and approaches, being products of communist ideology and the party apparatus. Unlike Gorbachev, Yeltsin was able to go further in denying the communist legacy. However, he also stopped halfway, failing to implement key democratic reforms, such as dismantling the Soviet secret services, while allowing the Communist Party to continue to exist. The inconsistent path of democratization, combined with failed social policies, economic hardship, and unchecked corruption during privatization, strengthened both the anti-democratic opposition and authoritarian tendencies within the government. The Russian government consolidated an important achievement of perestroika – the abolition of the policy of state anti-Semitism. However, the state failed to mount a consistent fight against the rise of post-Soviet anti-Semitism, assuming that the abolition of state-sponsored anti-Semitism was a sufficient safeguard against its resurgence.

1. The Yeltsin era: from hopes for democracy to failures in the fight against anti-Semitism

With regard to anti-Semitism and attitudes toward the Jewish population, the patterns established during the perestroika era persisted throughout the presidency of Boris Yeltsin (June 1991–December 1999). On the one hand, state anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism were finally abolished, leading to the revival of Jewish community life, equal participation of Jews in legislative bodies and the executive branch, free emigration, and the strengthening of relations with Israel. On the other hand, anti-Semitism, in its racist and vulgar interpretations, became widespread in the media and in Russian society and turned into a means of the political struggle of the anti-liberal opposition, which organized a new coup attempt in 1993. In the mid-1990s, anti-Semitism became an integral part of the parliamentary landscape of the country, which was

the result of continuous inaction on the part of the authorities. State officials explained their inaction by pointing to the abolition of state anti-Semitism and to the need to preserve freedom of speech as part of the democratic commitment of the new Russian government."

President Yeltsin demonstrated leniency for manifestations of anti-Semitism in the country throughout his term in office, even when he personally and members of his government were the target of anti-Semitic accusations. Yeltsin supported Gorbachev's perestroika and the democratization of society, but in his rivalry with Gorbachev, he advocated for a more rapid pace of reform, positioning himself as the leader of the pro-democratic opposition to the Soviet government. Despite their political competition, the two shared a common background as CPSU leaders, as well as a mutual desire to break with Soviet ideology. Both envisioned the USSR, and later Russia, as part of Western civilization and sought to establish closer ties with Europe and the United States. However, the absence of a clear strategy for the country's future, combined with missteps in building a state based on democratic principles and the rule of law, contributed to the rise of anti-liberal currents, including militant anti-Semitism, during both Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's tenures. In the final years of Yeltsin's presidency, serious disagreements began to emerge between Russia and Western countries over foreign policy fueling nationalist and even revanchist sentiments among segments of the political elite and giving renewed momentum to antisemitic attitudes.

2. The rise of antisemitic movements: political calculations and government inaction

Boris Yeltsin's first encounter with the issue of anti-Semitism resulted from his meeting with the "Pamyat" leaders in 1987 when he was first secretary of the Moscow City Committee of the CPSU. Signaling openness to dialogue with informal public associations, Yeltsin allowed *Pamyat* supporters to stage a rally in Moscow and met for two hours with the movement's leaders, Vasiliev and Yemelyanov. The very fact of a meeting with the head of the Moscow committee of the CPSU was perceived as semi-official recognition of the organization known for its anti-Semitic propaganda.[251] The press also reported Yeltsin's intentions to help the organization with official registration.[252] Yeltsin's actions were sharply criticized by the editor-in-

[251] Felicity Barringer, "Russian Nationalists Test Gorbachev", *The New York Times*, May 24,1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/24/world/russian-nationalists-test-gorbachev.html
[252] William Korey, *Glasnost and Soviet Anti-Semitism* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1991).

chief of the liberal magazine "Ogonyok, Vitaly Korotich, who expressed alarm over the favorable attitude towards the "dangerous people" from "Pamyat", whom he called "our Le Pens".[253] According to Western diplomats working in Moscow, "Pamyat" strain have some protection in the ruling circles of the Communist Party… They are really talking about very basic issues that go very deep in their culture and very deep in their history"; as a result, the Soviet leadership "does not want to come down too hard on "Pamyat" because some of the ideas they espouse are popular and respectable and supported by some of the leadership."[254]

It is possible that Yeltsin's meeting was part of his populist credo and took place without due preparation - and, as one observer put it, "Yeltsin just did not know who he was dealing with."[255] This ambivalence and lack of a complete understanding of the ideology of "Pamyat" was also characteristic of Gorbachev. His early favorable stance toward the *Pamyat* Society reflected Gorbachev's strategy of backing national movements across the Soviet republics, including the Russia[256], as a means of rallying public support for perestroika, glasnost, and democratization. Noting the desire of "Pamyat" to preserve cultural heritage, Gorbachev said once: "Somewhere, someone said something, and they started buzzing - help! Here is "Pamyat". [They have] questionable crowd rules [in the organization], a thin layer with a monarchist bias, not to mention everything else. But the masses joined the movement for completely normal reasons. They want to preserve ancient monuments. You must differentiate between these. You have to know how to work."[257]

Unlike Gorbachev, Yeltsin was quicker to recognize and respond to the threat posed by anti-democratic movements such as 'Pamyat'. At his first press conference as President of the RSFSR in 1990, he argued that the absence of appropriate legislation was to blame for the worsening situation. He warned that if the Supreme Soviet of the USSR failed to take the necessary steps to ban fascist movements, the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR would act instead.[258] However, Yeltsin's opposition to "Pamyat" was rather political than ideological and constituted part of his power struggle with Gorbachev and the federal center. Although his stance reflected a clearer

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[253] Ibid.
[254] Felicity Barringer, "Russian Nationalists Test Gorbachev".
[255] Ibid.
[256] Acronym of the Russian Soviet Fedarative Socialist Republic.
[257] Anatoly Chernyaev, *Joint outcome: Diary of two eras (1972-1991)* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2008), p. 737.
[258] *Jewish Chronicle* (London), 8 June 1990.

understanding of the threat posed by 'Pamyat' and other radical movements, Yeltsin failed to move from words to action once in power. He took no measures against these organizations, which would later participate in the coup attempt of October 1993.

During the putsch of August 1991, Yeltsin played a key role in organizing the resistance, allowing him to take decisive steps that Gorbachev could not dare to take. Two days after the suppression of the putsch, the activities of the CPSU were suspended in the Russian Federation by a decree of the President of the RSFSR, and in November, they were formally banned. In December 1991, with the collapse of the USSR, the KGB was formally dissolved. Both the Communist Party and the KGB had been central pillars of the Soviet system, and their dismantling was a necessary precondition for building a new democratic Russia. The Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee had overseen antisemitic policies and anti-Zionist propaganda, while the KGB was responsible for their implementation, including the suppression of the domestic dissident movement, the promotion of anti-Semitism in the West and the Middle East, and support for Palestinian terrorist groups in their anti-Israeli activities.[259] The dissolution of these two institutions, along with the exposure of their actions, could have made an invaluable contribution to the fight against anti-Semitism.

However, Yeltsin's initiatives were not implemented, and a historic opportunity was missed. The Communist Party was able to reorganize itself, and although it did not return to power, it emerged in the 1990s as one of Russia's most significant opposition party. The KGB was formally dissolved, but the successor organizations underwent only a superficial reorganization instead of a profound reform that did not include the establishment of public control over their activities. As Waller wrote in 1992:

> "Four years after Mikhail Gorbachev took power … Boris Yeltsin complained, "In four years there has been no radical restructuring in the work of the KGB." Now, as President of Russia, Yeltsin appears to be repeating one of Gorbachev's near-fatal mistakes, which was to build a power base on security forces free of meaningful checks and balances (…)

[259] J. Michael Waller, "When Will Democrats Control the Former KGB? Opportunities for Russian-U. S. Cooperation",*The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 1992, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 29

> Yeltsin has named members of the Communist old guard to reshape - but not reform - the apparatus."[260]

Having taken the helm of the new Russia, Yeltsin chose political expediency over the risks of a deep reform of the intelligence services.

The failure of the August putsch and the temporary retreat of the reactionary forces gave the leaders of the USSR and Russia an opportunity to strike a blow against anti-Semitic ideology. But Yeltsin chose ambiguity instead. During a teleconference organized by ABC, when asked about the anti-Semitism in Russia and the future of the "Pamyat", Yeltsin responded: "... I have had dealings with "Pamyat" for quite a long time, more than one year, at least. I think its work is becoming different. It is not as extreme as it was when it started in 1987, so it seems to me that, in general, this process will be eased. It will ease off. Intuitively, I feel this."[261] Korey called Yeltsin's answer "mystifying and disturbing":

> "Dismaying ... was the revelation that the President of Russia was maintaining ongoing contacts with an uninhibited hate organization. Why, and with what consequences? Since the teleconference, Yeltsin has never disclosed why he answered as he did. Was he seeking, at this early stage, to build bridges to rightists and especially strong nationalists with whom "Pamyat" enjoyed a frequently symbiotic relationship? This seems altogether likely and probably explains his continuing failure later to speak out against bigotry."[262]

Apparently, Yeltsin estimated that the anti-democratic movements had lost their influence, and thus, their ideology could be tolerated within the framework of freedom of speech. It is possible that Yeltsin was guided by pragmatic considerations: as the new KGB chairman, Vadim Bakatin, wrote, imprisoning all the fascists in Russia would have required building more camps than Stalin did.[263]

Yeltsin ignored the scandalous manifestations of anti-Semitism that took place in the country's capital at international fora. A month after the attempted coup, a meeting of the

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[260] Ibid., p. 27.
[261] «Soviet Turmoil; Gorbachev-Yeltsin Session: 'Committed to Common Work'», New York Times, September 7, 1991.
[262] William Korey, *Glasnost and Soviet Anti-Semitism* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1991), p.202
[263] James Billington, "The True Heroes of the Soviet Union," *New York Times,* August 30, 1991.

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) turned into a platform for the most ardent Soviet anti-Semites, the supporter of "Pamyat" Alexander Romanenko and the leader of the new Liberal Democratic Party of the USSR, Vladimir Zhirinovsky. In his speech dedicated to the genocide of the Russian people, Romanenko called for the unification of Russians with communists and Christians against the Zionists but warned against "Christians who are baptized Jews" and stated that Yeltsin's real name was "Borukh," not Boris.[264] Zhirinovsky was given the opportunity to communicate with journalists and conference participants and make xenophobic and anti-democratic statements. Moreover, leaflets of anti-Semitic content were distributed at the conference, with slanderous accusations against Gorbachev and Yeltsin, as well as cartoons and other materials calling on Russians and Muslims to fight the Jewish devil together.[265] The head of the American delegation to the CSCE issued an official protest in connection with the manifestations of anti-Semitism at the conference, but there was no reaction from the authorities.[266]

The complete disregard of the Russian authorities for manifestations of anti-Semitism led to the virtually uncontrolled spread of the anti-Semitic press. According to an investigation by the International Jewish Newspaper, published in August 1992, publications with an anti-Semitic orientation were regularly published in Russia between August 1991 and July 1992, including 27 newspapers and three magazines in Moscow, and 10 newspapers in St. Petersburg.[267] Some of these publications sold in impressive print runs, for example, “Sovetskaya Rossiya” - about a million copies, “Nash Sovremennik” - 164 thousand copies.[268] In the center of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other cities, well-known anti-Semitic forgeries were sold without hindrance: "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," "The Catechism of a Soviet Jew,"[269] as well as books denying the Holocaust. A few government officials who expressed concern about this

[264] Korey, p. 203.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Statement by J. Kenneth Blackwell of the US. Delegation to the Moscow CSCE Meeting, 27 September 1991.
[267] “Russia. Jews of Russia after 1991”, *Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia*, https://eleven.co.il/jews-of-russia/general/15445/
[268] Institute of Jewish Affairs, *Intelligence Report,* 17 (December, 1992).
[269] «Catechism of the Jew in the USSR" is a forged anonymous document allegedly published in Tel Aviv in 1958 as instructions for Soviet Jews. It first appeared in 1989 in Chelyabinsk, according to Korey, with involvment of “Pamyat”. In 1991 it was published in the newspaper “Russian Vedomosti” and then widely circulated in various anti-Semitic publications.

phenomenon pointed to the chaotic atmosphere of the time, exacerbated by a severe economic crisis.[270]

However, there was another explanation for government's inaction. In one of the rare testimonies about the reasons for the unhindered spread of anti-Semitism, the Director of the Department of Human Rights in the Russian Foreign Ministry, Vyacheslav Bakhmin, speaking before members of the American Congress, pointed to the lack of strong democratic institutions and the inconsistent actions of the judicial authorities, some of whose representatives sympathized with nationalists and anti-Semites.[271]

Amid a climate of complete impunity, antisemitic expressions in the press and society continued to escalate. "Sovetskaya Rossiya" newspaper published in February 1993 an interview with Metropolitan John of St. Petersburg, who warned against the pernicious influence on Russia of the conspirators from the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion."[272] Even the central organ of the Communist Party, the newspaper Pravda, published an article in April 1993, "The Satanic Tribe: Who is behind the murderer of monks", in which it made a new accusation of blood libel against the Lubavitch Hasidim for presumably killing three monks in the famous Optina Pustyn' monastery. The murder took place on the eve of Passover, and the article linked this story with centuries-old blood libels against Jews. The newspaper also claimed that the books of Habad's Rebbe Schneerson, which American Hasidim were trying to smuggle out of Russia, contained evidence and instructions for carrying out barbaric rituals.[273] The article's publication caused widespread public condemnation in Russia and abroad. US State Department confirmed that the article had been the subject of discussions with Russian authorities through diplomatic channels,[274] and only after that did the newspaper issued an apology.

The escalation of anti-Semitism was not limited to the Russian press. In the first two years of independent Russia, numerous incidents occurred, including the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and graves. On October 13, activists from Pamyat raided the editorial office of the newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, tied up a security guard, and held staff members hostage while

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[270] Jewish Telegraphic Agency, *Daily News Bulletin,* 19 November 1992.
[271] «Witnesses Warn End to Anti-Semitism Will Take A Long Time", *Radio Liberty Wire,* 11 March 1993.
[272] S*ovetskaia Rossiia,* 27 February 1993.
[273] "The Satanic Tribe: Who is behind the killer of monks", *Pravda*, May 5, 1993.
[274] *State Department Press Briefing,* 20 May 1993.

demanding an apology to the "Russian people" and the disclosure of all journalists critical of the "patriotic forces." The attackers left behind leaflets branding the newspaper as *Masonic Kom-Zhidovets*, implying it was controlled by Jewish Masons. 'Pamyat' leader Dmitry Vasiliev openly accused the newspaper of promoting "prostitution, homosexuality, and Nazism."[275] In July 1993, the Moscow Choral Synagogue was attacked: its windows were shattered, and a swastika was painted on the walls. Russia's Chief Rabbi, Adolf Shayevich, reported that police responded only several days after the incident.[276]

3. The place of anti-Semitism in the constitutional crisis of 1993

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the start of a period of instability in Russian politics, characterized by a rapid transformation of the state, but also by a rise in extremism. In this climate, the creation of the National Salvation Front (NSF) in 1992 represented a potentially dangerous fusion between nostalgia for communism, fueled by the difficult economic situation, and an ultraconservative nationalism. "This 'red-brown' coalition managed the unlikely task of uniting former communists with far-right, even monarchist, elements around a shared opposition to the liberal reforms led by Boris Yeltsin. Under the guise of Soviet patriotism, the NSF quickly revealed an openly anti-Semitic character, serving as a mouthpiece for radical figures, recalling Stalinist conspiracy theories in their narrative.

It is therefore essential to analyze how anti-Semitism, and more generally the "Jewish question", became both an instrument and a symbol of identity within the political opposition of the Yeltsin years, particularly during the constitutional crisis of 1993.

A year after the failure of the August 1991 coup, the formal banning of the CPSU, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the National Salvation Front (NSF) was created in the fall of 1992, as a new union of the communist-nationalist opposition with a goal of reversing the course to democratization. Among the co-chairs of the Front was Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the

[275] Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, *Anti-Semitism, Persecution of Jews, and Renewed Fear in the New Independent States ofthe Former Soviet Union* (Washington, DC: Union of Councils, 1992), 4; «Security forces in Russia", Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada, August 1, 1994, https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/irbc/1994/en/30160.
[276] *Associated Press,* 15 June 1993

Communist Party of the Russian Federation, who gave the party a national-patriotic rather than communist character. While Zyuganov adhered to the traditional Soviet anti-Zionist ideology, distinguishing between "Zionists" and Jews, many of his associates would later become known for their overt anti-Semitic views, such as Albert Makashov, the leader of the Russian Communist Workers' Party, and Nikolai Kondratenko, the future governor of Krasnodar Krai. The Front's political council included writers and journalists, also known for their anti-Semitic views.[277]

Yeltsin's government was aware of the political danger posed by the FNC and tried to ban it, but a court decision overturned it.[278] The Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation found the presidential decree unconstitutional, explaining that the right to the association can only be restricted by a court decision and criticizing the lack of legal clarity in the decree's language. This decision reflected the judiciary's reluctance to take extreme manifestations of nationalism seriously, an approach that would persist in the years to come. On the other hand, the executive's invocation of laws against incitement to national hatred was not part of a coherent, value-driven strategy to combat anti-Semitism, but rather a political tool aimed at weakening the opposition.

Activists of anti-Semitic organizations, including "Pamyat", participated in the demonstrations and actions of the FNS, distributing leaflets and literature of the corresponding content. At a rally near the government building in March 1993, slogans appeared: "Down with the Jews" and "Jews out of the government";[279] On May 9, during the celebration of Victory Day, anti-government actions took place with the slogans: "Stalin brought us up to be loyal," "Save Russia from international capitalism!", "Yeltsin reforms are a Zionist diversion," "We defeated Hitler; we will defeat Yeltsin."[280] The ideological closeness of the FNS and "Pamyat" was also evident in other initiatives, such as demands to send Russian volunteers to Serbia to counter Western intervention on the side of Bosnia.[281]

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[277] Maxim Shrayer, *Anti-Semitism and the decline of Russian village prose. Astafiev, Belov, Rasputin* (Moscow: BiblioRossika, 2020)
[278] «Presidential Decree No. 1308 of October 28, 1992 "On measures to protect the constitutional system of the Russian Federation», *Yeltsin Center*, https://yeltsin.ru/archive/act/35035/.
[279] National Conference on Soviet Jewry, *Newswatch,* 22 March 1993, and Korey, p. 210
[280] «Veterans and Yeltsin Foes Are Allowed to March, Peacefully», *The New York Times*, May 10, 1993, https://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/10/world/veterans-and-yeltsin-foes-are-allowed-to-march-peacefully.html
[281] *Pravda,* 21 January 1993.

Numerous manifestations of anti-Semitism in the period from August 1991 to October 1993 did not receive the appropriate rebuff from the Russian authorities. Russian authorities were preoccupied with a deep economic crisis, an escalating political confrontation between the President and the Supreme Soviet, and problems related to regional separatism. When Russia's Chief Rabbi, Adolf Shayevich, raised the issue of open and organized anti-Semitism during a meeting with Yeltsin in April 1993, the President avoided a direct response, merely noting that anti-Semitism did not exist at the state level.[282] This position of the Russian leadership greatly worried representatives of the Jewish community in Russia and abroad, who accused authorities of the "deafening silence" in the face of the problem.[283] This policy was publicly criticized by the Council of Europe, Europe's most influential intergovernmental organization on human rights.[284] A few days before the Council of Europe seminar, the Russia's Supreme Council's Human Rights Committee organized parliamentary hearings on anti-Semitism, which provided a detailed analysis of anti-Semitic tendencies in Russian politics and society.[285] But no action followed.

The political crisis turned into an armed confrontation in the autumn of 1993 after President Yeltsin's decision to dissolve the Congress of People's Deputies and the Supreme Soviet of Russia and to call elections for a new parliament. Contemporary Russian historian Vladimir Gelman defines Yeltsin's decision as a coup d'état that ended the constitutional confrontation between the president and parliament, in which both sides refused to seek a compromise, highlighting the authoritarian tilt under Yeltsin administration.[286] However, back in 1993, in the eyes of many in Russia and the West, the threat posed by the Supreme Soviet leaders, who had attracted to their side the most extremist nationalist movements and organizations, justified the brutal option chosen by Yeltsin.

Among the defenders of the Russian parliament there was a group of militants from the Russian National Unity (RNE) - a neo-Nazi, fascist and Russian Orthodox fundamentalist organization founded by Alexander Barkashov. In interviews with the media, the defenders of

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[282] *RFE/RL News Brieft,* 2, no. 18 (19-23 April 1993).
[283] Korey, p. 214.
[284] "Report on the Seminar on Racism, Xenophobia, and Anti-Semitism Held in Moscow", Council of Europe, 31 May-1 June, 1993.
[285] "Report on the Parliamentary Hearings on Anti-Semitism Sponsored by the Human Rights Committee of the Russian Supreme Court," 26 May 1993.
[286] Vladimir Gelman, *Authoritarian Russia. Flight from freedom, or Why democracy does not take root in our country* (Moscow: Hovard Roark, 2021), Chapter 1.

parliament explained that power in Russia had been seized by representatives of the international Zionist conspiracy led by "Boruch Yeltsin". On October 2, a group of militants stormed the Moscow Choral Synagogue and chanted anti-Semitic slogans. According to Korey, "For Moscow Jews, it was a moment of deep fear and anxiety."[287]

One of the prominent leaders of the opposition, Aleksandr Rutskoy, whom parliament appointed acting president in place of the deposed Yeltsin, later tried to justify the actions of the opposition, including open displays of anti-Semitism. According to Rutskoy, he personally gave the order to "tear down anti-Semitic slogans" in the "White House".[288] In fact, Rutskoy was not trusted by nationalist opposition circles due to his openly positive attitude toward Israel. He visited Israel in 1992 in his capacity as chairman of the Commission on Agrarian Reform. Following his visit, he strongly condemned the activities of nationalist organizations and stated in an interview with a Jewish newspaper, "Israel is a true friend."[289]However, neither he nor other opposition leader, Ruslan Khasbulatov, clearly distanced themselves from their controversial allies in struggle against Yeltsin – an omission that caused lasting damage to both their reputations and political cause.

The potential for a renewed wave of anti-Semitism did not vanish after the events of 1993. "Pamyat" was finally dissolved, but dozens of other movements and groups, including more extremists such as the RNE, continued their activities. The parliamentary elections of 1993 resulted in the victory of nationalist and anti-democratic forces, including the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. "The Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), led by Vladimir Zhirinovsky, a provocateur and proponent of neo-imperial ideology, won about a quarter of the vote, becoming the largest faction in the Duma.[290] From that moment, anti-Semitism gained a degree of parliamentary legitimacy in Russia.

If the Yeltsin administration was able to condemn the FSN as a radical movement, it failed to provide an effective response to the anti-Semitic violence and propaganda. This ambivalence reflects a broader tendency to treat antisemitic sentiment as a given, enabling its manipulation for

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[287] Korey, p. 220.
[288] Mark Deitch, “Year 93”, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets,* October 2, 2003.
[289] «Israel is a true friend», *International Jewish Newspaper*, April 1992.
[290] “The year is 1993: the time of adventurers”, *Kommersant*, September 5, 2011, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1756944

political purposes rather than its suppression. If there was negligence in tackling this revival of anti-Semitism in the early 1990s, can we nevertheless speak of complicity on the part of the authorities? In what way and to what extent did the political decisions of the 1990s prepare the ground for a sort of legitimization of the ideology carried by the extreme right in Russia?

4. Legacy of the Yeltsin era: missed opportunities and the growing influence of anti-Semitism

The events of 1993 became a turning point in the development of the political system in Russia. Having suppressed the parliamentary opposition by force of arms, Yeltsin was no longer prepared to share power, and the new Russian Constitution granted the president excessive powers. Although Yeltsin formally remained a supporter of democracy and liberal values, his subsequent fateful decisions contributed to the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies.

One of these decisions was the beginning of the first Chechen war, which started despite protests from former Yeltsin's associates in pro-democracy camp.[291] Another important milestone was the discrediting of the institution of democratic and fair elections during the presidential campaign of 1996, in which Yeltsin's victory was ensured using administrative resources and support from oligarchic circles that had enriched themselves with the help of the state.[292] In the final years of Yeltsin's rule, Russia's gradual shift away from rapprochement with the West and its changing foreign policy coincided with the growing influence of nationalist forces in domestic politics, which increasingly shaped key appointments and policy decisions.

During Yeltsin's presidency, the achievements of perestroika, such as the promotion of Jewish equality, the freedom of emigration, and the development of relations with Israel, were preserved. Amid the turbulent process of economic reform, many experts of Jewish origin were appointed to senior government positions. However, the rise in antisemitic rhetoric targeting government officials, along with the broader resurgence of anti-Semitism in society, was met with little meaningful response from Yeltsin or his inner circle.

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[291] "The Chechen wars murdered Russian democracy in its cradle", *The Guardian*, December 12, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/12/-sp-chechnya-russia-war-anniversary

[292] Vladimir Gelman, *Authoritarian Russia. Flight from freedom, or Why democracy does not take root in our country* (Moscow: Hovard Roark, 2021), Chapter 3.

In political obituary dedicated to Yeltsin, the famous Russian journalist Leonid Radzikhovsky wrote: "For Yeltsin, the "Jewish question" simply did not exist. Nothing in his biography, not even one of his statements known to us speaks of Yeltsin as a Judeophobe... This is very strange for a big party boss, we are used to considering them all anti-Semites by definition, the policy was anti-Semitic…"[293] Emphasizing the presence of many Jews in Yeltsin's government, Radzikhovsky saw this as a sign of "normalcy" of the Russian president, contrasting it with the anti-Semitism of the USSR and the anti-liberal opposition.[294] While acknowledging Yeltsin's lack of personal anti-Semitism, Radzikhovsky overlooked Yeltsin's responsibility, as head of state, to actively combat anti-Semitism. For Yeltsin, the abolition of state-sponsored anti-Semitism in the USSR was an important, and, in his view, sufficient, achievement. Anti-Semitism as a broader socio-political phenomenon no longer seemed to warrant significant attention. To paraphrase Radzikhovsky, for Yeltsin, there was not only no "Jewish question," but also no anti-Semitism question once the state abandoned its official antisemitic policies. Yet in a country like Russia, with its deeply rooted traditions of Judeophobia, such an approach could only lead to one outcome: the persistence and spread of antisemitic prejudice and expression.

It is important to highlight here the fact that anti-Semitism was not a marginal consequence of the political crisis of the 1990s, but rather an ideological tool consciously mobilized by part of the opposition to unite radical forces around a common enemy. At the same time, the Kremlin's refusal to respond firmly to these radical protests reflects an opportunistic political strategy, where the fight against extremism gives way to political calculations in a fragmented society.

[293] Leonid Radzikhovsky, "Yeltsin and the Jews", *Hebrew word*, n. 338, 2021.
[294] Ibid.

C. Jewish question during Russia's democratic transition: factors of containment of anti-Semitism

Why, despite the deep political and economic crisis of the 1990s, has Russia not experienced massive anti-Semitic violence or a return of official repression against Jews?

It is important to emphasize that there was no state anti-Semitism under the Gorbachev and Yeltsin governments. Unlike previous Tsarist and Stalinist regimes which had institutionalized anti-Semitism, post-Soviet Russia rejected anti-Jewish discrimination and at the same time sought to encourage the revival of Jewish communal life. For the first time in Russian history, the state clearly affirmed that Jews were equal citizens.

Also, the Jewish population has largely identified with the democratic reforms carried out by the power in place and are more politically engaged than the rest of the population.[295]

Finally, it is important to situate anti-Semitism within the broader political context: although it persists in nationalist discourse, it has neither structural support nor broad resonance among the population.

Exploring the trends of anti-Semitism in Russian society in the 1990s, Gibson and Howard noted the following paradox:

> "Russian history is replete with instances in which Jews were identified as the primary source of the country's ills, and the consequence of this scapegoating has often been severe violence and repression directed against Jews…Rarely has there been a period in modern Russian history in which the likelihood of a major outbreak of anti-Semitism has been higher than in the last two decades… Though Russian Jews have been subject to sporadic and unorganized harassment and attacks over the course of the last decade, at the same time, no substantial or sustained pogroms against Jews -state sponsored or otherwise - took place... Furthermore, no legal restrictions were placed on Jews, and no systematic repression of Jews was implemented by the Russian state. Finally, very few Russians blame Jews for the problems the country has experienced...Consequently, a

[295] Gitelman, p. 255-257.

puzzle presents itself. Why have intolerance and repression of Jews not been more apparent in Russia?"[296]

The researchers came to several important conclusions. First, most of the Russian population "are predisposed to reject scurrilous allegations against Russian Jews," and that "blaming Jews for Russia's myriad problems simply lacks plausibility and credibility for most people."[297] Second, "anti-Semitism is primarily a result of people's predispositions, rather than their perceptions of the economic or political changes in their country", which, in their opinion, means that "Anti-Jewish sentiment in Russia thus seems to be both 'irrational' in the sense of reflecting basic psychological processes of prejudices, but also 'rational' in the sense of being resistant to boundless manipulation by opportunistic elites."[298]

Gibson and Howard appear to overlook at least three factors that distinguish the 1990s from other historical periods in Russia. When speaking about the "powerful elites" who incite anti-Semitism, Gibson and Howard equate their status with government circles, and mention sources of anti-Jewish oppression, "state-sponsored or otherwise", without dwelling on the differences between them. These differences are especially significant given the nature of the political regimes in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, which makes the context of the late 1980s and early 1990s fundamentally different from earlier periods of anti-Jewish persecution. It was precisely the role that the state played in them that largely predetermined the nature and forms of anti-Semitic manifestations. Given the personalistic nature of the political regime in Tsarist Russia, in the USSR during the Stalin period, and, albeit to a lesser extent, in post-Soviet Russia, the position of the head of state played and continues to play a primary role in all fundamental political issues, including the "Jewish" question. The last two Russian Tsars did not hide their anti-Semitic prejudices, thus stimulating and directing the activities of their government toward violent methods to solve the "Jewish question." Two decades after the Bolshevik coup, and contrary to Lenin's principle of combating anti-Semitism, Stalin once again made it a political tool, both inside and outside the country, enriching the ideological content of anti-Semitism with the concepts of "cosmopolitanism" and "anti-Zionism." His successors continued the policy of

[296] James Gibson and Marc Howard, "Russian Anti-Semitism and the Scapegoating of Jews", British Journal of Political Science, April 2007, p. 194.
[297] Ibid.
[298] Gibson and Howard, pp. 218-219.

state anti-Semitism within the country, albeit by less brutal methods, mainly using discrimination against the Jewish population of the USSR and the accompanying official policy of anti-Zionism.

The abolition of the state anti-Semitism policy under Gorbachev and Yeltsin's commitment to the same course represented diametrically opposed approach. Their governments did not pursue anti-Jewish policies, did not encourage the activities of anti-Semitic organizations, and condemned anti-Semitism. Discrimination against Jews was abolished entirely, as were restrictions on emigration and the establishment of Jewish organizations. Unlike the first post-revolutionary years, when Jews were given the opportunity to participate in government on the condition of renouncing the Jewish way of life and proving loyalty to Soviet ideology, post-Soviet Russia legitimized Jewish communal life and Jewish self-identification. Thus, for the first time in its history, the Russian state sent to society an unambiguous signal about its position that Jews are equal citizens and their discrimination is unacceptable.

But at the same time, having abolished the policy of state anti-Semitism, the government did not make sufficient efforts to combat its manifestations and the incitement to national hatred. This opened a broad range of opportunities for the dissemination of anti-Semitic propaganda and made the ideology of anti-Semitism one of the permanent factors in the discourse of the nationalist Russian opposition. In the political regime created by Yeltsin after 1993, the role and possibilities of the opposition were significantly reduced. Unlimited freedom of speech did not imply the abandonment of undemocratic methods that created obstacles to the legitimate transfer of power through democratic elections. The authoritarian nature of this regime was reinforced by the new constitution, which granted the president exceptional authority at the expense of parliament. It further consolidated during the presidential elections 1996, in which the extensive use of administrative and media resources allowed Yeltsin's reelection.

The subsequent concentration of powers in the hands of the president made him the sole guarantor of rights and freedoms in Russia instead of democratically elected institutions. This transformation had implications for the government's treatment of anti-Semitism. According to Yeltsin’s logic, as could be seen from his response to the concerns of Rabbi Shaevyich, if the state does not endorse anti-Semitism, it does not represent a real danger. Similar logic appeared in cocksure remarks of Russian Prime Minister Chernomyrdin to his Israeli counterpart Yitzhak

Rabin and leaders of the American Jewish community, that "no Zhirinovsky" can provoke the growth of anti-Semitism in the country.[299]

As noted above, the new Russian government's authoritarian bias was not perceived in those years, with rare exceptions, as a real threat to democracy in Russia since pro-democratic forces, including the president himself, were in power. As Anatoly Sobchak, one of the prominent leaders of perestroika and the mayor of St. Petersburg, once said, the rise to power of democrats meant establishing democracy in the country.[300]

However, the inadequacy of such an understanding of democracy became apparent to the participants and observers of the processes only later. Throughout the 1990s, the government in Russia was perceived as democratic and progressive, while the opposition was associated with reactionary, ultra-conservative, nationalist, and pro-imperial forces united by the ideology of anti-Semitism. Thus, the second important factor that helped to avoid the scenario of pogroms and repressions was the fact that the Jewish population, in its overwhelming majority, saw itself as an ally of the government in strengthening democracy and in the fight against anti-Semitism. From a historical perspective, this was somewhat reminiscent of the Bolsheviks' rise to power and the civil war, when anti-Jewish pogroms by counterrevolutionary and monarchist forces pushed Jews to collaborate with the new government. However, unlike in 1917, the leaders of post-Soviet Russia were supporters of democratic freedoms and opposed the totalitarian ideology of the USSR, in the name of which Jewish minority were discriminated against. In the 1990s, Jews could support the new government without having to identify with an ideology that required them to renounce their national identity. Thus, as in the pre-revolutionary period, the Jewish population supported democratic reforms, but at this point in Russian history it became the policy of the authorities, not just an opposition's demand.

Finally, the third factor that distinguished the situation of the Jews in the 1990s from other periods in the history of the Jews in Russia was unprecedented mass emigration, which led to a sharp decrease in the Jewish population of the country. As described above, in the early 1880s, the Tsarist government encouraged mass emigration of Jews, effectively pushing them out of

[299] Stephen Erlanger, "No Big Danger of Anti-Semitism, Russian Premier Tells Rabin," *The New York Times,* 26 April 1994.
[300] "We are in power, this is democracy", *Radio Liberty*, May 23, 2015, https://www.svoboda.org/a/27029368.html

Russia. However, despite significant emigration waves in the tsarist empire – altogether about one million people – most of the Jewish population remained in Russia, and due to natural growth, its size remained at the level of 5 million people. For the Soviet leadership, emigration was a political problem: the mass departure of Soviet citizens, particularly to the United States, meant defeat on the ideological front of the Cold War. Gorbachev's decision to lift virtually all restrictions on emigration triggered a mass exodus, and President Yeltsin inherited that approach.

During the first post-Soviet decade, emigration reduced Russia's Jewish population by more than half, producing significant demographic and social effects.[301]

Soviet and foreign experts somewhat mistakenly compared the dynamics of the first decade of post-Soviet Russia with the events of the 1930s in Germany. Indeed, a few parameters pointed to this similarity: a sharp deterioration in the economic situation, the weakening of the central government, the polarization of public opinion, and, of course, the legitimization of anti-Semitic views. Vitaly Goldansky pointed out the similarity of the racist views of the Nazis and Russian nationalists and compared "Pamyat" with Hitler's SA or SS.[302] However, there are many critical differences. First, during the perestroika period, there was no political party with anti-Semitic program that would enjoy serious electoral support from the population. Unlike Weimar Germany, political struggle in the USSR in the late 1980s was in its infancy, and extremist movements did not have significant parliamentary representation. Moreover, the crisis in the USSR was not a consequence of defeat in the war, as was the case in Germany; its collapse resulted because "the ideas and designs underpinning … reforms were … fatally outdated, economically flawed, and led to the destruction of the existing economy and polity from within."[303] It is important to emphasize that nationalist circles did regard the collapse of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical defeat in the Cold War equivalent to defeat in a regular war.[304] However, neither the country's political leadership under Gorbachev and Yeltsin nor most of the

[301] Konstantinov, pp. 257-271.
[302] Vitaliy Goldanskiy, "Anti-Semitism, The return of a Russian Nightmare", *The Washington Post*, February, 17, 1990, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1990/02/18/anti-semitism-the-return-of-a-russian-nightmare/281515e7-8a20-43ed-9764-47ef311eaf66/
[303] Zubok. p. 427.
[304] Vladimir Ryabtsev and Stanislav Smagin, "Perestroika 1985-1991 and its geopolitical aspects", *Zavtra*, May 20, 2025, https://zavtra.ru/blogs/erestrojka_1985-1991_gg_i_ee_geopoliticheskie_aspekti, and also Aleksandr Bubnov and Maria Savelyeva, "The memory of the collapse of the Soviet Union in the context of the fractures of the public consciousness of contemporary Russia (on the materials of Telegram", *Bulletin of the University of Moscow, Political Sciences*, No. 6, 2022.

population shared these views. This resentful interpretation of the events was later officially adopted by the Kremlin.[305]

Despite their limited understanding of the complexity and substance of democratic reform, both Yeltsin and Gorbachev chose to pursue a Western model of development. This path entailed democratizing society, introducing private property, securing the rights and freedoms of all citizens, and ending confrontation with the United States and Western Europe. It also required a complete rejection of the Soviet system and its ideological legacy, in which anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism had played a central role. The abolition of state-sponsored anti-Semitism and anti-Zionist policy was the result of a deliberate decision by the last Soviet leader and the first president of Russia to build a democratic society and seek rapprochement with the West. This transformation created favorable conditions for the revival of the Jewish community and the development of a new model of its relationship with the Russian state.

To understand the post-Soviet transformation of relations between Russia, its Jewish community and the State of Israel, it was first necessary to return to the evolution of Soviet anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, deeply rooted in Russian history, the ideological and political currents that ran through it, and the crises of the 20th century. From Lenin to Stalin, including the ambivalent reactions to the creation of the State of Israel and the anti-Zionist campaigns of the 1960s to 1980s, the Kremlin's policy has tried to established a framework of assimilation, but ended up with repression and discrimination. With the collapse of the USSR, this authoritarian model gave way to a profound reconfiguration.

The following chapter attempts to analyze this new phase: the development of a new model of relations between post-Soviet Russia, its Jewish population and Israel. By examining the Soviet heritage, the question of emigration, the improbable renaissance of Jewish community life, and normalization of Russian-Israeli relations, this part aims to highlight the tensions between rupture and continuity, memory and renewal, in a context of political and geopolitical transition.

[305] "They fooled a fool with four fists": Putin spoke about NATO expansion", *RIA Novosti*, June 14, 2021, https://ria.ru/20210614/obeschanie-1736986456.html

Chapter 2: Formation of a new model of relations between Russia, its Jewish community and Israel

The new model of relations between the Jewish community and the Russian state was a product of new historical circumstances after the collapse of the USSR and the formation of the new Russia. For the first time in Russian history, Jews or Jewish life ceased to be the target of state discrimination. This fundamental change created an opportunity to normalize relations between the Jewish minority and the state, which now officially defined itself as democratic, guaranteeing equal rights and freedoms to all citizens.

The majority of the Jewish population chose to exercise their right to emigrate, and the Jewish population in Russia fell to a historically low level. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, approximately 1 million Jews emigrated from the former Soviet republics during the 1990s, while Jewish population of Russia dropped by more than half during the same period.[306] However, a significant number of Jews remained, now able to express their Jewish identity in a post-Soviet Russia that was undergoing democratization. Efforts to revive Jewish cultural and religious life, and to rebuild community structures, received support from international Jewish organizations and from Israel. Within a short time, Jews assumed important roles in government and state institutions, while successful businessmen capitalized on the transition to a market economy for rapid self-enrichment. This, in turn, laid the financial foundation for the establishment of the Russian Jewish Congress and other Jewish organizations.

Simultaneously, the abolition of anti-Zionist policies created the conditions for restoring relations with the State of Israel. The rapid development of bilateral ties and the expansion of economic cooperation, including through the "human bridge" between the countries, led to a normalization of relations. After decades of anti-Zionist propaganda that had fueled anti-Semitic sentiment, the strengthening of Russian-Israeli ties contributed not only to a more positive perception of Israel but also to a weakening of anti-Semitic stereotypes. A temporary cooling of relations in the late 1990s due to foreign policy disagreements did not signal a return to Soviet-era anti-Zionism.

[306] Konstantinov, pp. 257-271.

A. The Jewish minority and the state: the Soviet legacy

The 1917 revolution and the subsequent civil war placed the Jewish population of the former empire "in the middle." Counter-revolutionary forces targeted them for their alleged association with Bolshevism, which, in turn, drove them further into the hands of the new Soviet government. The Bolsheviks promised equality, end of discrimination and full integration of Jews in the society, in exchange for ideological loyalty, suppression of Jewish communal life and Zionist organizations. This paradox – emancipation in exchange for assimilation – became a defining characteristic of the Jewish experience in the Soviet Union. While the Holocaust decimated Jewish communities, the post-war Stalinist era sought to erase the memory of the Shoah and gradually institutionalized anti-Semitism.

1. Russian revolutions and the Civil war: the Jews of Russia between two fires

The Jewish population of the Russian Empire greeted the February Revolution of 1917, which led to the overthrow of the tsarist regime. The Provisional Government, which replaced the autocracy and was tasked with convening the Constituent Assembly, immediately abolished all restrictions based on nationality and religion. For Jews, the most oppressed national and religious minority in the Empire, this meant the elimination of the Pale of Settlement, the abolition of educational quotas, and the lifting of restrictions on professional activity. This historic decision created the conditions for the complete equality of Jews and led to a massive surge of social activity in the Jewish community, which was no longer forced to resist the anti-Semitism of the Russian state. However, the democratic reforms that had lifted restrictions on Jewish communal life were cut short by the Bolshevik military coup, which overthrew the Provisional Government.

The Russian Civil War, which began following the October 1917 putsch and the establishment of the Bolshevik dictatorship, was a tragedy for the entire country and affected all segments of the population. However, it was the Jewish communities that were the target of cruelty and violence by various opposing forces. Supporters of the monarchy blamed the Jews for the overthrow of the Tsar, although Nicholas II abdicated under pressure from the liberal-minded Russian elite. Other opponents of the Bolsheviks, both inside and outside Russia, pointed to the high percentage of Jewish participation in the leadership of the Bolshevik Party and thus

blamed Russian Jewry for the Bolshevik coup and the fratricidal war, despite the falsity of this claim. In the pre-revolutionary year of 1916, the RSDLPb had only 958 members of Jewish origin, less than 5% of the total party membership; in 1917, only 1,175 Jews had joined the party.[307] The shortage of Jewish Bolsheviks became acute after their rise to power when the party's Jewish cadres were insufficient to conduct propaganda work among the Jewish population.[308] Bolshevik leaders even had difficulty finding an editor for a Yiddish newspaper that could positively portray the new Soviet government.[309]

One of the Bund leaders and later a Bolshevik Party member, Samuil Agursky, explained that despite the availability of funds, the plan to create a newspaper did not work "because the Jewish socialist intelligentsia opposed the October revolution, shunned participation in its activities, and sabotaged the efforts of those who were willing to be active."[310] However, it was precisely the prominent role that Jews played in the Bolshevik leadership that overshadowed the fact that there were relatively few Jews among the RSDLP members in 1917.[311]

The Jews of Russia, being the most discriminated national-religious minority of the empire, welcomed the abdication of the Tsar and the establishment of a democratic republic in February 1917. Most of the Jewish population did not support the October Revolution and the establishment of the Bolshevik government. As one of the journalists of a Jewish newspaper wrote in 1919, "Who can ever forget with what great enthusiasm, what deep spiritual wonder, what ecstatic joy and heavenly pleasure . . . the first Russian revolution aroused in the very depth of our hearts?.. The essence of the February Revolution was freedom; the essence of the October Revolution was dictatorship . . . the premature dictatorship of the minority, over the majority."[312] In addition, the participation of Jews in the RSDLPb did not mean that they expressed or pursued the interests of the Jewish population. As Schwarz notes, "a large number of Bolshevik leaders and active party members were of Jewish parentage; but they had been completely assimilated,

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[307] Zvi Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present* (Indiana University Press), pp. 60-70.
[308] Schwartz, pp. 92-93.
[309] Ibid.
[310] Samuel Agurskii, *Der Idisher Arbeter in der Kommunistisher Bavegung*, 1917-1921 (Minsk, 1921), p. 5.
[311] Schwarz, p. 261.
[312] Cited from Gitelman, Zvi. *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present* (Indiana University Press), p. 64.

had no ties with the Jewish masses, neither read nor wrote Yiddish, and in many cases understood scarcely a word of it".[313]

The Bolsheviks' ambivalent position on the Jewish question, described in the previous chapter, was the main reason why most of the Jewish population of Russia did not see this party as representing their interests. The Bolshevik program rejected the idea of Jewish national autonomy and proposed assimilation as the only solution to the Jewish question. However, for most of the Jewish population, the issue of national oppression was paramount, and after decades of fruitless struggle for their national rights and against state anti-Semitism, many Jews no longer believed that this issue would be resolved within the framework of the Tsarist Empire.

One of the main consequences of this position was the alienation of a significant part of the Jews from Russian politics, which led to the transformation of Zionism, the idea of national liberation of the Jews in their historical homeland in Eretz Yisrael (Palestine), into the most prominent Jewish social and political movement of Russian Jews. At the beginning of 1917, the Russian Zionist movement had 300,000 members, the most popular political organization for Russian Jews. The Balfour Declaration, published in November 1917, aroused great enthusiasm and celebration among the Russian Jews and seemed a far more important event than the Bolshevik putsch to many of them.[314] The socialist Bund movement, which rejected Zionism and advocated only cultural autonomy for Jews, had only 34,000 members; the Socialist Zionist parties, which attempted to combine both ideologies, were a third force competing for influence on the Jewish street, leaving the Bolsheviks no opportunity to attract significant Jewish masses to their ranks.

These nuances were of no interest to the opponents of the Bolsheviks. The fact that key figures in organizing the October Revolution and forming the first Soviet government – Lev Trotsky, Lev Kamenev, and Grigory Zinoviev – were of Jewish origin quickly fueled accusations that Jews had orchestrated the revolution. Thus emerged the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism and the notion of the October Revolution as a purely "Jewish" event, a narrative eagerly adopted by the anti-Soviet opposition. This myth would later spread widely abroad, including in Western Europe

[313] Schwarz, p. 93
[314] Gitelman, p. 63.

and the United States, and would become one of the ideological cornerstones of Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitism.

"In revolutionary Russia, this accusation sparked a third wave of anti-Jewish pogroms. Unlike the pogroms of 1881–1884 and 1903–1906, they remain less known, perhaps eclipsed by the civil war that claimed an estimated 10 to 17 million lives. Historians estimate that between 1918 and 1921, there were about 2,000 pogroms,[315] most of them in what is now Ukraine, where the fiercest battles of the civil war took place. The pogroms were particularly brutal: about 30,000 Jews were killed in them, with the total death toll estimated at between 100,000 and 150,000. Virtually every military force organized pogroms against Jews: the White Guard armies of Generals Denikin, Wrangel, and Kolchak; the Ukrainian National Army of Semyon Petliura; armed detachments of anarchists led by Nestor Makhno; and criminal gangs of local atamans. The White armies enjoyed the spiritual support of the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church, who called for reprisals against Jews and Bolsheviks.[316]

Unlike its enemies, the Red Army did not see the Jewish population as an object of attack but rather as potential supporters. There are known cases of pogroms committed by the Red Army in which more than 700 Jews were killed, but, as a rule, the Red Army command harshly condemned and punished the participants in the pogroms. As Schwarz writes, during the civil war, the Soviet government was determined to crush anti-Semitism, "this dangerous weapon of counterrevolution."[317] It was this factor, much more than the creation of a Jewish section in the Bolshevik Party and a Jewish commissariat in the Soviet government, that proved decisive in the efforts to attract Jews to the side of the Soviet government. In the face of endless pogroms and violence, the Jews did not have any other choice than to side with the only force in Russia that did not blame them for all of Russia's troubles, condemned pogroms, and defended them. Thus, the protection of Soviet power came to mean Jews' protection from their physical extermination, which in turn increased the influx of Jewish youth into the ranks of the Red Army, often for reasons of national survival and identity rather than communist ideology.[318]

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[315] Ibid, p.69.
[316] Ibid., p. 65.
[317] Schwarz, p. 241.
[318] «The organizer of the Red Army, Trotsky, recognized the motivations driving Jews into the Red Army and warned that "these are not the best Communists" and that they needed intensive political education. Indeed, ideological opponents of Bolshevism were joining the Red Army out of Jewish national motivations.» Quoted from

Another important factor in the growing support of the Soviet government by the Jews was their enrollment in the party and state apparatus. The Bolsheviks were interested in this for two main reasons. On the one hand, the work of the state apparatus after the October Revolution was paralyzed due to the elimination of Tsarist officials and sabotage. In this situation, the Bolsheviks were interested in attracting new qualified personnel, which they found among the Jewish population, where the level of education was much higher than average. On the other hand, being the most oppressed minority of the empire, the Jews were ideological adversaries of the Tsarist regime and, therefore, enjoyed greater trust from the new government. As Gitelman notes, "The Bolsheviks could hardly suspect them of pro-White leanings, and Jews were permitted to occupy posts that they could only dream about before 1917. Lenin himself commented that the Jews had saved the revolution by filling the vacuum created by the "deserters and saboteurs" of the old regime.»[319] As noted above, Lenin strongly supported this approach, which continued also in the early years of Stalin's rule. By the early 1920s, Jews constituted the third largest ethnic group in the RCP(b) - 5.2% of the total number of party members, which exceeded their share in the country's population of 1.8%.[320] In the mid-1920s, the share of Jews in the central government of the USSR was about 10%, and in Belarus and Ukraine - more than 30%.[321]

2. Social integration, Soviet style: equality for individual Jews, destruction of Jewish organizations and community life

The history of the Jews in the USSR can be divided into two periods based on the changes in the Soviet leadership's policy on the "Jewish question" discussed in the previous chapter. In the first two decades of Soviet power, from 1917 to the "Great Terror" of the late 1930s, the Soviet Union saw intensive socio-economic integration of Jews. The assimilation of Jews was massive and largely voluntary due to the vast opportunities in the spheres that opened for them under Soviet power and were prohibited in the Tsarist Empire. The downside of encouraging Jewish assimilation was the government's deliberate policy of liquidating Jewish communities, the Zionist movement, and, in later stages, Jewish religious and cultural life. This

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Gitelman, Zvi. *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present* (Indiana University Press), p. 70.
[319] Gitelman, p. 64.
[320] Schwarz, p. 261.
[321] Ibid.

was the new relationship model between the authorities and the Jewish population introduced by the Bolsheviks: the rejection of communal life in favor of successful assimilation and integration. In this period, Jews were allowed to keep a limited form of the national organization conforming to communist ideology and national interests, such as the project of agrarian colonization in Crimea or the creation of an autonomous region in Birobidzhan.

The situation of Jews under Soviet power changed radically compared to the Tsarist regime. It is important to emphasize that the abolition of the Pale of Settlement and other restrictions based on nationality was one of the first decisions of the Provisional Government as early as March 1917, reflecting a broad consensus among anti-Tsarist opposition, of which the Bolsheviks were a part.

However, unlike the liberal democratic Provisional Government, which equalized the rights of the Jews without any conditions, integration into Soviet Russia required their complete submission to communist ideology, their "Sovietization". Thus, Lenin's conception of Jewish assimilation as the sole viable resolution of the "Jewish question" was gradually put into practice. Paradoxically, Soviet policy resembled the policy of Tsars Nicholas I and Alexander II, who saw the assimilation of the Jews as a necessary condition for the abolition of the restrictive rules for them. Under the Tsarist regime, the assimilation of the Jews, despite its apparent successes, did not prevent the policy of discrimination and repression. As it would turn out later, in the Soviet Union, assimilation would also become only a prelude to the policy of state anti-Semitism.

While the Soviet government provided ample opportunities for the more educated and active part of the Jewish population, including their resettlement in Moscow, Leningrad, and other central cities, many Jews lost their means of subsistence during the civil war or due to the new economic realities of socialism. Here is how the chairman of the Yevsektsiya (Jewish section in the Bolshevik party established in 1918), Dimanshteyn, explained it:

> "The majority of Jews even lost from the revolution, rather than won. If we take the general situation of Jews in the shtetls before the revolution and now, it turns out that 15-20% improved their situation after the revolution, 30% remained in the same situation, and 50% saw their situation worsen. The bulk of Jews lived by crafts and trade; now this

has disappeared from their hands ... the Jewish population in the shtetls is dying out, the youth are going into smuggling."[322]

The complete destruction of Jewish communal life and Jewish mutual aid organizations worsened the situation. The temporary improvement during the New Economic Policy (NEP)[323] period failed to solve the problems of the Jewish population, and the curtailment of this policy again hit the private sector of the economy and left many without a livelihood. To solve the problem of pauperization of the Jewish population, the Soviet leadership decided to "reconstruct the social composition of the Jewish population of the USSR", which meant, first and foremost, reorienting Jews to agricultural activity.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet government made several attempts to solve this problem by creating Jewish agricultural settlements, primarily in several regions of Ukraine and Belarus with significant Jewish populations. The government Committee for Land Settlement of Working Jews (KOMZET) and the All-Union Society for Land Settlement of Working Jews (OZET), created for this purpose, coordinated these activities, including through the involvement of international Jewish organizations, which provided financial and technical assistance. In the early 1920s, the centerpiece of this policy became the so-called Crimean Project, which aimed to resettle the Jewish population of the USSR in the Crimean Peninsula to colonize undeveloped land and establish agricultural settlements.[324]

The Soviet leadership actively disseminated information about the Crimean Project in the United States and Europe, achieving significant financial support and reputational success. The American Jewish charitable organization Joint Distribution Committee agreed to provide the Soviet government with a loan of $9 million to implement the program.[325] The development of the Crimean project received a positive response from the American Jewish community and the US government, with Jewish leftist organizations expressing a desire to participate in the Jewish colonization of Crimea.[326] The Soviet leadership used the enthusiasm surrounding the Crimean

[322] Quoted from Agapov, p.214.
[323] NEP, a period of economic liberalization (1921-1928) that included temporary retreat from the principles of communism to rebuild the ruined economy. This policy was initiated by Lenin and discontinued during the Stalin era.
[324] Agapov, p. 226.
[325] Ibid.
[326] Ibid.

project to demonstrate the superiority of communist ideology in solving the Jewish question, putting it forward as an alternative to the Zionist project in Palestine.[327] It is noteworthy that the World Zionist Organization was concerned about the emerging competition for financial assistance from the Joint, which initially gave preference to the Jewish colonization of Crimea rather than the development of a Jewish Yeshuv in Palestine.[328]

Fo a short period of time, several Soviet leaders began to consider the Crimean project as a solution to the Jewish question within the framework of national-cultural autonomy. Such a solution contradicted Lenin's teachings on the Jewish question. However, it reflected ideological changes in the general policy of the Soviet leadership towards national minorities, which now gave preference to a territorial approach instead of assimilation. In 1926, Prime Minister Mikhail Kalinin spoke out in favor of the Jewish people preserving their nationality and supported granting territorial-national autonomy to Jews.[329] According to Kostyrchenko, "The propaganda frenzy surrounding Crimea indicated that the Soviet leadership was not averse to using the Jewish card in its international political game."[330]

However, the Crimean project was terminated, as it began to provoke an adverse reaction from the non-Jewish population, which worried Stalin.[331] Instead of Crimea, the Soviet leadership proposed creating a Jewish autonomous entity in Birobidzhan, a Far Eastern region on the border of the USSR and China, known for its difficult living conditions. Unlike the Crimean colonization, the Birobidzhan project pursued mostly propaganda goals. The government did not bother to ensure assistance from American Jewish organizations, and the resettlement of the Jewish population was insignificant. Practical proposals for the development of Birobidzhan, put forward by a representative of OZET and which included the resettlement of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany there, were rejected by Stalin.

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[327] Ibid., p. 226-227.
[328] Ibid., p. 228-229.
[329] Ibid., pp .224-225.
[330] Kostyrchenko, p. 79.
[331] Here, for example, is a fragment from a letter from a peasant published on August 24, 1928 in the newspaper Trud: "Why are the Jews given the best lands in Crimea? They won't work anyway, but will lease the lands and will walk around with their hands in their pockets, while the Russians will work on them." Gennady Kostyrchenko, *Stalin's Secret Policy. Power and Anti-Semitism*, p. 92.

Having eliminated the state anti-Semitism of the Tsarist regime, the Soviet government encountered manifestations of public anti-Semitism already in the mid-1920s. Following the abolition of the Pale of Settlement, the migration of Jews to major cities and their growing involvement in all areas of life triggered a rise in antisemitic sentiment among the working class, communist youth (Komsomol members), as well as within the Communist Party and administrative institutions[332]. In response, Soviet leadership took measures against the anti-Semitism of the masses, mainly through explanatory work, but also applying legislation and security apparatus.[333] But at the same time, "being a populist dictator and listening attentively to the so-called voice of the people, which demanded further sacrifices, Stalin undertook, in the 'turning point' years of 1929–1930, a series of repressive actions that satisfied the anti-Semitic itch of the plebs, directed mainly against the NEPmen and speculators from the Jewish community."[334]

As noted in the previous chapter, Stalin's 'Great Terror' campaign against the party's old guard had a particularly severe impact on the Jewish population. In addition to targeting the political and cultural elite, it led to the near-total elimination of Jewish national expression in all its forms. By the late 1930s, Jewish organizations and journals had been liquidated, and all Jewish schools were closed, except for those still operating in Birobidzhan. The exodus from the Pale of Settlement accelerated the geographical dispersion of the Jewish population, further weakening the national cohesion and identity of Soviet Jews.[335] The combination of these factors created an atmosphere of suspicion and ambiguity surrounding Soviet Jews.

However, the international situation of the 1930s, mainly the tension with Nazi Germany, required the Soviet leadership to show solidarity with the Jews, given Hitler's anti-Semitic policies.[336] The pre-war official position of the USSR emphasized its internationalist character to strengthen moral authority and boost public support abroad. The prospects of war with Germany seemed to postpone the implementation of Stalin's anti-Jewish course. At the same time, the atrocities of the Nazis revealed the indifference of the country's leadership to the fate of the Jews

[332] Kostyrchenko, pp. 82-85.
[333] Ibid., 89-90.
[334] Ibid.
[335] In 1920-1930 about two fifths of the total Jewish population had moved out of the Pale of Settlement. Schwarz, p. 195.
[336] Kostyrchenko, pp. 153-155.

in the face of the greatest catastrophe of the Jewish people. It essentially explains the ease of the subsequent transition to Stalin's policy of anti-Semitism.

The transition to the second period began in the late 1930s and fully formed in the late 1940s under the influence of internal and external factors. The awakening of national Jewish self-awareness during World War II, shaped by the tragedy of the Holocaust and unfolding amid post-war tensions with the West, was perceived by Stalin as a threat to the regime's stability. The emergence of a Jewish state, which, after a short period of support from the USSR, chose a pro-Western foreign policy and demanded the emigration of Soviet Jews, exacerbated this danger in the eyes of the Soviet leadership.[337]

The Soviet authorities responded to the threat with repressions and banned Jewish organizations and printed media, which resulted in the complete denationalization of the Jews of the USSR. The roller of repression was stopped only after Stalin's death, but the discriminatory anti-Jewish policy continued until the beginning of Gorbachev's perestroika. For four decades, the Jews of the Soviet Union were seen by the authorities as a source of instability and experienced discrimination based on nationality in the education system and terms of employment. They were deprived of the opportunity to express their national identity, including cultural and religious needs. At the same time, the Soviet authorities refused to provide Jews with the opportunity to freely leave the USSR and turned the issue of Jewish emigration into an instrument of control over the Jewish population inside the country and a subject of bargaining with the USA and Israel. Paradoxically, Soviet Jews, to whom the Soviet constitution and communist ideology promised full equality, felt in the USSR in the same position as their ancestors in the Russian Empire – a discriminated and undesirable national minority whose problems the authorities were not interested in solving. Thus, over seventy years of Soviet history, a complete transformation of relations between the state and the Jewish population occurred – from mutual support to mutual rejection.

[337] Ibid., 333-339.

3. The double tragedy of the Jews in the USSR: from Nazi Ccimes to Soviet discrimination

To understand the depth of the tragedy of Soviet Jewry during the war, let us turn to the numbers. At the start of the German invasion on June 22, 1941, around five million Jews were living in the USSR - virtually the same number as at the time of the collapse of the Tsarist Empire in 1917. Before 1939, the Jewish population of the USSR was slightly more than three million people, but at the beginning of World War II, the Soviet Union annexed the eastern regions of Poland, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, where lived in total almost 1.9 million Jews; to them must be added Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, from western and central Poland and Romania - according to various estimates, from 300 to 585 thousand people.[338] Already in the first weeks of the war, Germany took control of large parts of the Soviet Union, where about half of the Soviet Jewish population lived before the war. Practically all the Jews who remained in German-occupied territories perished.[339]

About 2.5 million Soviet Jews died during the war, i.e., 55% of the pre-war level; this figure includes not only the victims of the Holocaust but also about 200 thousand Jews who died at the front, in the partisan movement and the evacuation from hunger and disease.[340] Many experts agree that the total number of Soviet casualties in the war with Germany from 1941 to 1945 reached approximately 27 million. Jews accounted for about 10% of these losses, five times their share of the overall Soviet population.

In addition to the tragedy of the Holocaust, Soviet Jews had to experience another unexpected blow: the complete disregard for their fate on the part of the non-Jewish population and the deliberate policy of silence about the Jewish tragedy on the part of the Soviet government. As Gitelman writes, despite individual cases of saving Jews in the territories occupied by Germany, "a far greater number of Gentiles actively persecuted the Jews, either in the ranks of collaborating paramilitary formations, by turning Jews in to the Germans, or by killing and looting."[341] Moreover, according to numerous testimonies, in the places of evacuation of Soviet Jews - in the republics of Central Asia and in Siberia - there was an increase in anti-

[338] Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia, https://eleven.co.il/jews-of-russia/history-in-ussr/15423/, “The Holocaust in the Sobiet Union”, Illinois Holocaust Museum, https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/the-holocaust-in-the-soviet-union/
[339] Ibid.
[340] Konstantinov, p. 16.
[341] Gitelman, p. 127.

Semitic sentiments, often of an aggressive nature.[342] In the ranks of the Soviet army, as well as among the civilian population, rumors spread under the influence of Nazi propaganda about Jews evading military service. The Soviet government ignored these rumors and, by its inaction, contributed to their intensification. Like the tragedy of the Holocaust, manifestations of anti-Semitism were hushed up by the Soviet authorities and did not receive any reaction; the fate of Jewish refugees did not evoke any sympathy; on the contrary, "their mere presence arouse antagonism".[343]

Not only did the Soviet authorities fail to combat anti-Semitic rumors inspired by Nazi propaganda, but they also concealed the extensive participation and heroism of Jews in the war with Germany. About half a million Jews served in the Red Army, which constituted more than 10% of the entire Jewish population. Thousands of Jews participated in the partisan movement in the territory occupied by Germany. At least 180,000 Jewish soldiers died at the front; about 150 Jews were honored with the country's highest award, Hero of the Soviet Union.[344] Proportionally to its size in general population, the Jewish population of the USSR suffered the most significant losses and made the most significant contribution to the victory over Germany.

The socio-psychological trauma of Soviet Jewry created a new reality in terms of relations between the Jewish minority and the Soviet government and had a profound impact on Jewish self-awareness in the USSR.[345] State anti-Semitism replaced the policy of assimilation of Jewry and thus became the main, and for many Jews, the only factor in strengthening their Jewish identity.

In the post-war period of Stalin's rule, as was said above, an additional impetus was given to these processes. On the one hand, the manifestation of Jewish national identity was made possible by the activities of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, which became the mouthpiece of the aspirations of the Jewish people; on the other hand, the creation of the State of Israel became a catalyst for the strengthening of Jewish national identity. The proclamation of Israel's independence with the support of the USSR aroused great enthusiasm among Soviet Jews, many of whom applied to the JAC with requests to allow them to move to Israel. Jewish veterans of

[342] Schwarz, pp. 342-348.
[343] Ibid. p. 200.
[344] Gitelman, pp. 129-131.
[345] Schwarz, p. 200.

World War II expressed a desire to volunteer for the Israeli army to participate in the war for Israel's independence. The nuances of Stalin's secret geopolitical game regarding Israel could not have been known to the Jews of the USSR, who believed that aid to Israel corresponded to the interests and position of the Soviet Union. They certainly could not have imagined that Soviet support for Israel would very quickly cease, the JAC would be dissolved, and those who submitted a request to move to Israel would be subjected to repressions as Zionists.[346]

In the years that followed, the flywheel of Stalin's anti-Jewish repression would affect the entire Jewish cultural elite, and the "Doctors' Plot" would provoke a wave of public anti-Semitism unseen since the Tsarist era. Eyewitnesses of those years describe anti-Semitic street incidents, a sharp increase in mistrust of Jews on the part of the general population, driven by state propaganda, and a feeling that "the country was ready for murder and pogrom."[347] The destruction of the Jewish intelligentsia and the prohibition of Jewish culture in Yiddish completed the process of denationalization of the Jews that had begun before the war and deprived the Jewish population of any opportunity for national self-expression. The government also initiated "economic" trials in which Jews were accused of theft of state property, speculation, bribery, and economic sabotage; the Soviet press exploited anti-Jewish prejudices about Jewish dishonesty.[348] Between 1948 and 1953, the Soviet government created an image of Jews as the "fifth column" who posed a threat to the country due to their connections with the West and their cosmopolitanism. Thus, after 30 years of relatively successful assimilation and integration, the Soviet government designated Jews as an ethnic minority with unique characteristics that made them a potentially dangerous group of the population that should be removed from the state apparatus and required additional surveillance measures.

It is important to note that the policy of collective punishment based on ethnicity was one of the widespread methods of Stalin's rule. In the 1930s and 1940s, more than 11 ethnic groups were subjected to forced deportation and discrimination (including ethnic Germans, Finns, Chechens, Ingush, Crimean Tatars, and others) who were suspected or accused of collaborating with the enemies of the USSR.[349] These ethnic groups were deported by force from their areas of

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[346] Gitelman, p. 156.
[347] Ibid, p. 154.
[348] Ibid, p. 153.
[349] "Deportation of peoples to the USSR. Reference", *RIA Novosti*, November 14, 2009, https://ria.ru/20091114/193419498.html

dense settlement, and many of them were deprived of the status of national autonomy. Some of them were rehabilitated after Stalin's death, although most were able to achieve complete rehabilitation during the perestroika period. In this context, rumors about the possible deportation of Jews in the 1950s deserve credibility, although some experts insist that such plans did not exist. Unlike other "guilty nations" who were deported as punishment for their "betrayal" during the Great Patriotic War,[350] Jews were punished for their "behavior" in the post-war period as part of the confrontation between the USSR and the USA. As a result, throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union's policy towards Jews and Jewish emigration was dependent on its relations with the United States: a weakening of the confrontation allowed increases in permits for Jewish emigration; in contrast, its intensification led to a reduction in the flow of emigrants.

The policy of state anti-Semitism continued after Stalin's death, but instead of mass repressions, the authorities opted for tacit discrimination. The rejection of Stalin's practice of repression was part of the course of the country's new leader, Nikita Khrushchev, who condemned Stalin's personality cult and decided to rehabilitate hundreds of thousands of repressed people, including representatives of the Jewish intelligentsia. Khrushchev exposed the fabricated nature of the Stalin's trials, including the "doctors' plot," restricted brutal methods of the secret services, and allowed greater freedom in the country's cultural and social life. These changes had a positive effect on the lives of all citizens of the country, including Jews. However, as Gitelman writes, "Jews as individuals benefited from these changes, though Jewish collective rights were only minimally restored."[351] Moreover, despite positive changes, from the point of view of the Soviet regime, Jews were still "no longer seen as equal members of society, but as a tolerated marginal group, excluded from much of the mainstream and best relegated to sectors where they could make some particular contribution and not harm the overall Soviet cause."[352]

Several factors explained the social pariah status assigned to Soviet Jewry. Despite the official denial of anti-Semitism in the USSR, Khrushchev and the country's leadership not only did not prevent but facilitated the spread of anti-Semitic prejudices. As in the Stalin years, Jews

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[350] See the official definition of the deported ethnic groups in Stalin's times in: Naumova E. N., *The role of the NKVD troops in the deportation of the peoples of the North Caucasus (based on materials from the Chechen-Ingush ASSR)*, Problems of Russian History, 2005. Issue 1 (9), pp. 212-213.
[351] Gitelman, p. 159.
[352] Ibid, p. 173.

were the main defendants in "economic crimes" in the high-profile trials of the 1960s.[353] Despite the general cultural upsurge in the country, the development of Jewish cultural life was not encouraged, and the new anti-religious campaign hit Jewish religious life the hardest, including the closure of synagogues and the ban on the production of matzos (Jewish Passover bread) in the USSR. According to Soviet propaganda, synagogues were a nest for speculators and a place where Israeli diplomats engaged in Zionist agitation. Foreign policy factors also played a part in antisemitic discrimination. The pro-Western orientation of the Jewish state and the pro-Arab policy of the Soviet Union increased tensions between the countries, fueling the Soviet regime's suspicion of the Jews.[354]

Moreover, the new generation of Soviet leadership did not have the internationalist approach of Lenin's old guard. It was shaped by an atmosphere of xenophobia, the ideological campaign against cosmopolitanism in the early 1950s, and Stalin's doctrine of building socialism 'in a single country. Khrushchev was the face of the new generation of Soviet leaders, came from a working-class and peasant background, was unfamiliar with life in the West, and treated the anti-Semitic stereotypes of the population with understanding. Khrushchev himself was subject to these prejudices and did not hesitate to explain to foreign delegations that the absence of Jews in the country's governance was since the local population would be unhappy with it. According to Gitelman, "Khrushchev recognized that anti-Semitism was deeply ingrained in Soviet society and accepted it as a "fact of life"; he was unwilling to pay the political and social costs of combating it and trying to uproot it. Given the realities of anti-Semitism and what he qualified as "Jewish characteristics," Khrushchev pursued policies that would not antagonize the population and would not allow the "Jewish traits" to disturb the system."[355]

The above factors determined the attitude of the Soviet leadership toward the Jewish minority until the end of the 1980s, with the foreign policy factor - primarily relations with the United States - acquiring decisive significance in the issue of Jewish emigration. The brief period of Khrushchev's "thaw" was accompanied by some easing of quota restrictions on Jews in higher education, a slight increase in Jewish emigration, and an unexpected openness to the topic of the Holocaust. The publication of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem "Babi Yar" caused a stir among the

[353] Ibid., pp. 167-169.
[354] Ibid. 170-171.
[355] Ibid.

cultural elite and was the first time since the end of the Second World War that the tragedy of the Jewish people received public attention.

However, by the end of the 1960s, hopes for a gradual improvement in the situation of the Jews began to fade as Khrushchev's initiatives were rejected by his successors. In addition to the complete suppression of Jewish cultural and religious life, the elimination of Jews from state and party institutions, security agencies, and the army, discrimination against Jews in higher education and employment increased. Being the most discriminated national minority, Jews were simultaneously deprived of any opportunity to express their national identity in the social, cultural, and religious spheres. The abnormality of the situation of Soviet Jewry was that assimilation tore Jews away from Jewish culture but, at the same time, did not ensure their full integration into Soviet society. Having destroyed all forms of Jewish life, the Soviet government treated Jews as a separate ethnic group, identifying them with internal passports that indicated their nationality, determined by that of their parents. Thus, the national identity of Jews in the USSR was shaped not by their way of life, connection to the Jewish community, culture, or religion, but by official classification, state-sponsored discrimination, and the persistent reality of everyday anti-Semitism.

The hopelessness of Jewish existence in the USSR arose from the understanding that both the rejection of national identity and the revival of Jewish culture were impossible due to the state policy. This awareness of the impasse matured during the years of the halt of the Khrushchev thaw, pushing Jews to search for alternatives and new solutions. Some tried to hide their Jewishness by changing their surnames and first names; many preferred mixed marriages to "dilute" the Jewish identity for their children; others tried to secretly observe Jewish customs or went into "internal emigration," a retreat into privatism.[356]

B. The improbable rebirth of the Russian Jewish community

The demographic decline of Soviet Jewry in the second half of the 20th century resulted from multiple factors, depending on various policies but also social dynamics. The legacy of state anti-Semitism, particularly under Stalin, worked to erase public recognition of Jewish suffering

[356] Gitelman, pp. 157-158.

during the Second World War, but also had long-term consequences, with the gradual establishment of new discrimination, and more generally official indifference to the fate of Soviet Jews. While the overall population of the Soviet Union increased by 60% between 1945 and 1989, the Jewish population fell by almost 40%, from 2.3 million to 1.48 million.[357]

This fall can be explained by the demographic stagnation of the post-war period, but also, from the 1950s, by the increase in mixed marriages, assimilation, and the growing refusal to register newborns as Jews. This assimilation into which Soviet Jews were forced "erased" more than 500,000 Jews from official Soviet statistics before 1989. High rates of intermarriage, exceeding 70% in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in the 1980s, combined with increasing emigration, accelerated this demographic erosion.

From 1989 until the early 2000s, emigration was the main factor in the decline in the Jewish population. As mentioned above, in the last three years of the Soviet Union, Jewish emigration amounted to almost half a million people. According to estimates by Israeli demographers, in 2021, the Jewish population of Russia was estimated at around 150 thousand people; in 2022 - 145 thousand; in 2023 - 132 thousand; and in 2024 - 123 thousand.[358] The share of the Jewish population in the country's total population has dramatically decreased compared to the pre-revolutionary (4% of all population in 1897) and even the late Soviet period (0.5% in 1989) and today is less than 0.1%

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 marked both the culmination of this demographic crisis and the beginning of a new era, opening up new possibilities. Although assimilation trends continued, the disappearance of systemic anti-Semitism allowed for a renaissance of Jewish cultural, religious and communal life.

1. Revival of Jewish cultural and community life

Despite the mass outflow of the Jewish population, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the democratization processes of the 1990s gave a significant boost to the revival of Jewish

[357] Mark Toltz, "Jewish Demography: From the Soviet Past to the Post-Soviet Present", in History of the Jews in Russia, ed. by Israel Bartal, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Mosty kultury, 2016), pp. 437-439.
[358] Research data from Professor Sergio della Pergola of the University of Jerusalem, commissioned by the Jewish Agency. https://www.jewishagency.org/il/rh-2021/ https://www.jewishagency.org/il/jewish-population-report-2023/ https://www.ynet.co.il/judaism/article/skpbvg6zj https://www.maariv.co.il/news/israel/article-1137371

communal and cultural life in Russia. This revival had to begin from scratch. In 1984, only 113 synagogues operated with any regularity across the Soviet Union, and just half had a rabbi.[359] Most of these rabbis were elderly, and only 58 were officially recognized throughout the entire country.[360] Even this small group, responsible for preserving the few remaining religious institutions, was compelled to cooperate with the Soviet propaganda apparatus, publicly condemning Zionism and denying the existence of anti-Semitism.

Another small group of Jews worked for the only Yiddish magazine in the USSR, "Sovietishe Geymland". The magazine was established during the Khrushchev "thaw" to imitate the appearance of Jewish cultural life in the USSR. The writers and journalists of the magazine "tried to introduce Jewish content into their works, but most of these writers were over sixty years old, and this means that they belonged to the generation that had managed to visit prisons and camps before the mid-fifties and were careful in expressing any national feelings."[361]

During the years of perestroika, the situation with the revival of Jewish communal and cultural life began to change radically. As early as 1986, Hebrew teachers were subject to criminal prosecution, but in 1987, early releases from prison began.[362] In 1988, the first seminar for Hebrew teachers was organized in Chisinau, and in Moscow a group of Hebrew teachers proclaimed the creation of a Hebrew teachers' union called "Igud Morim".[363]

Jewish organizations opened throughout the country. From 1988 to 1989, about 50 organizations conducted Jewish cultural activities. In December 1989, an all-Union conference of Jewish organizations and communities convened for the first time, with representatives of 204 local organizations from 77 cities. At this conference, it was decided to establish a central Jewish organization, the Vaad, formed on federal principles to address the concerns of representatives of

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[359] Mordechai Altshuler, «The Jews of the CIS on the eve of the third millennia", Journal of Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, Volume 16, 1998.
[360] Ibid.
[361] Chone Shmeruk, "Twenty-five Years of "Sovetish Heymland": Impressions and Criticism," in: Y. Roxi, A. Beker (eds.), *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union, New York,* 1991, pp. 191-207.
[362] For example, The trial of Hebrew teacher Alexei Magarik in Tbilisi sentenced him to three years in prison for "drug possession." Magarik will be released early in 1987. See "Soviet Jewish Affairs, Chronicle of Events", vol. 16, no. 3, 1986, p. 95; Prisoner of Zion Yuli Edelstein has been released before completing his three-year sentence. The Edelstein family will arrive in Israel in July 1987. See "Soviet Jewish Affairs, Chronicle of Events", volume 17, no. 3, 1987, p. 97.
[363] «Newsletter on issues of repatriation and Jewish culture", Jewish Information Center in Moscow, Volume 19, No. 1, 1989, p. 95.

the republics about being too dependent on Moscow. The second Congress of the Vaad was held in January 1991, convening representatives of 283 Jewish organizations from 85 cities.[364]

The main areas of activity of the Jewish organizations were the development of Jewish public life, the fight against anti-Semitism, establishing relations with world Jewry, and emigration to Israel and other countries.[365] In this context, it should be noted that the Jewish organizations did not oppose emigration but saw it as a legitimate choice for each person; this approach differed from the position of Jewish organizations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who feared that emigration could negatively affect the image of Jews in the eyes of the authorities and society. In the last years of the Soviet Union, the desire to emigrate from the country was met with understanding by both the population and the authorities.[366] The disagreements between Jewish organizations during the perestroika years usually concerned the choice between a secular and a religious worldview.[367] Jewish international organizations played a key role in revitalizing Jewish life in Russia, chief among them the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and two Israeli organizations: the non-governmental Jewish Agency and Nativ, which operated under the auspices of the Israeli embassy. The latter two focused on preparing individuals for repatriation, promoting Jewish culture, and strengthening Jewish identity.

During this period, permission and support from relevant government agencies were crucial for the creation and operation of cultural and community organizations. Interestingly, compared to other Soviet republics, Jewish cultural organizations in the RSFSR received less official support, and public Jewish activities were more restricted.[368] It is also worth noting that the inertia of Soviet administrative practices persisted almost until the final collapse of the USSR, including continued state oversight of the Jewish organizations and its initiatives.[369] In September 1987, for example, the Moscow City Council banned a rally against anti-Semitism,

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[364] Altshuler, «The Jews of the CIS on the eve of the third millennia".
[365] Ibid.
[366] According to the results of a survey conducted in Soviet Ukraine in November 1990, 83% of respondents believed that Jews should have the right to choose their country of residence, and only 5% of respondents had a negative attitude towards the emigration of Jews. See: E. Golovakha, N. Panina, "Jewish Cultural Activity in the Ukraine: Public Opinion and the Attitude of Local Authorities," Jews and Jewish Topics in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, No. 2(18), Summer 1992, p. 6.
[367] Altshuler, «The Jews of the CIS on the eve of the third millennia».
[368] David Prital*, Jews of the Soviet Union,* (Jerusalem,1989), Volume 12, p. 203-221.
[369] Semyon Charnyi, "Captured by time», *L'Haim*, n. 9, September 2004, https://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/149/charniy.htm.

and its organizers were arrested. Moreover, the Anti-Zionist Committee continued to operate without altering its ideological agenda. In 1989, it officially condemned the opening of a branch of the World Zionist Organization in Moscow.[370] Its stance was increasingly out of step with Gorbachev's policies, which aimed to normalize relations with Israel and the Jewish people. The committee's ideological rigidity ultimately rendered it obsolete, and it was dissolved following the collapse of the USSR.

On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were already about 500 Jewish organizations operating on its territory and about 90 Jewish newspapers and magazines.[371] Interestingly, the first official Jewish organization in the USSR, the Vaad, established in 1989 to unite all Jewish communities, declined an offer to join the Democratic Russia political movement and place its representatives on the movement's electoral list, despite the movement's broad support for the Jewish causes and the Vaad leadership's general alignment with the pro-democracy agenda. Thus, the Vaad leadership preferred not to participate in the political life of the USSR and to maintain political neutrality.[372] This choice differed from the Jewish community leaders' decision during the 1905 revolution, particularly the Jewish People's Group, which openly cooperated with political parties and had representatives in the State Duma.[373] The neutral position of the Vaad was possibly a result of their concern that more active participation of Jews in political life could contribute to the strengthening of anti-Semitism.

The revival of Jewish life in Russia was also connected with the gradual renewal of Judaism. As Gitelman notes, "In light of the strong suppression of religious practice and education by the Soviets, it may not be surprising that religious life has been slow to revive in the FSU. When over three thousand Jews in Russia and Ukraine were asked to identify the most important ingredients of Jewish identity, only 3 percent named Judaism. Among the few who defined themselves as religious, observance of Jewish ritual and customs was not significantly greater than among the others."[374] During perestroika, the Soviet authorities began allowing rabbis from

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[370] «Soviet Jewish Affairs, Chronicle of Events", Volume 20, No. 1, 1990, p. 93
[371] Michael Beyzer, "Jewish Newspapers and Periodicals in the USSR, 1990-1991," *Jews and Jewish Topics in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, No. 3*(19), Winter 1992, pp. 62-77.
[372] Charny, «Captured by time».
[373] «Union for the Achievement of Full Rights for the Jewish People», Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia, https://eleven.co.il/jews-of-russia/movements-parties/13914/
[374] Gitelman, p. 240.

abroad, previously banned under Soviet law, to enter the country and help revive religious life. Among the most active were representatives of the Orthodox Lubavitch-Chabad movement, who received official permission from the Council for Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers of the USSR to conduct religious activities in the Soviet Union.[375] One of the first emissaries of Chabad in the USSR was Berel Lazar, who was to play an important political role from the early 2000s.

The growth of Jewish self-awareness was also expressed in events commemorating the Holocaust, which the Soviet authorities had tabooed for many years. In 1987, the authorities allowed Holocaust memory rallies in Jewish sections of cemeteries in Moscow and Leningrad.[376] Ceremonies of obedience to the victims of the Holocaust were held in Rumbuli, near Riga, in 1986 and even earlier, but no more than a few dozen people took part in them.[377] Interestingly, in several cases, local authorities demonstrated greater openness on the issue of public recognition of the Holocaust. For example, the authorities of the city of Lviv approved a project to erect a monument to the victims of the Holocaust, which was financed by the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation.[378]

Renewal of the Jewish community life was part of the country's democratization process. It developed through multiple aspects and activities, including establishing Jewish newspapers and organizations and opening synagogues and Jewish schools. During this period, the first Jewish universities were inaugurated - the Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies at the Russian State Humanitarian University and the St. Petersburg Jewish University. In 1992, the St. Petersburg Jewish University began publishing the journal "Jewish School", and since 1993, the "Bulletin of the Jewish University of Moscow" has been published (since 1998 - jointly with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

Describing the flourishing of Jewish cultural life in the 1990s, historian Semyon Charny notes:

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[375] Alexander Fishman, Diana Rossokhovatskaya, Jewish Life Born in the USSR, LeHaim, August 21, 2016, https://lechaim.ru/academy/evrejskaya-zhizn-v-sssr/
[376] «Soviet Jewish Affairs, Chronicle of Events", Volume 17, No. 3, 1987, p. 96.
[377] «Soviet Jewish Affairs, Chronicle of Events", Volume 16, No. 3, 1986, p. 95.
[378] «Soviet Jewish Affairs, Chronicle of Events", Volume 18, No. 2, 1988, p. 97.

"In general, recalling the late 80s - early 90s, we can safely talk about a kind of "Jewish Renaissance". Hundreds of thousands of people felt like Jews for the first time and, most importantly, stopped fearing that they would suffer from the state for this. Many took an active part in cultural and educational events organized by both local organizations and representatives of the Jewish agency and the JDC. For example, more than two thousand people gathered for the Passover celebration in Novosibirsk in 1991 without any significant efforts on the part of the organizers. According to one of those present, "an Israeli flag and a madrich (instructor) who came from the Holy Land and spoke Hebrew were enough to bring people into complete rapture."[379]

The revival of Jewish community life in post-Soviet Russia quickly became part of the broader context of the profound societal transformations that followed the fall of the USSR. With the gradual reopening of synagogues, Jewish denominational schools and community organizations were founded. The public expression of Jewish identity became possible again after decades of discrimination and repression. During these same years, many Jews began to play a more visible role in the public, political, and economic life of the new Russia. This growing participation can be explained by a combination of factors: an effort towards greater transparency of political institutions, the gradual privatization of the economy and the desire to lead the country towards a Western-inspired pluralism. Many Jewish figures have thus become involved, on the one hand in community reconstruction, on the other hand in public life, accessing influential positions in government, the economy and the media. The next section looks at this interplay between Jewish identity renewal and public engagement in a changing Russia.

2. Jews in the politics and economy of post-Soviet Russia

While Jewish emigration continued during these years, those who chose to stay encountered new opportunities, not only to preserve Jewish culture and identity, but also to actively participate in the country's social and political life. The move toward democratization and the dismantling of Soviet-era anti-Jewish discrimination helped break another significant taboo: Jewish participation in state institutions. More than thirty Jews were elected to the

[379] Charnyi, "Captured by time».

Congress of People's Deputies, which convened in March 1989. Fifteen were elected to the Supreme Council, the upper chamber of the Congress, and another twenty to republican councils.[380]

'The striking novelty of post-Soviet Russian politics was the sudden, meteoric rise of individual Jews to positions of power,'[381] as Gitelman accurately noted. In the mid-1990s, Jews were appointed to ministerial posts in the government, occupying key positions related to economic reforms: Grigory Yavlinsky, Deputy Chairman of the Government of the RSFSR and the author of the first reform program; Anatoly Chubais, Deputy Prime Minister, who is considered one of the main ideologists of privatization in Russia; Yevgeny Yasin, Minister of Economy; Alexander Livshits, Minister of Economy and Deputy Chairman of the Government; Georgy Satarov, assistant to the President; Boris Nemtsov, Governor of Nizhny Novgorod, Minister of Fuel and Energy, Deputy Chairman of the Government, one of the leaders of the democratic opposition in the 2000s.

Simultaneously, formation of a market economy and privatization created extensive opportunities for Jewish entrepreneurs, some of whom were involved in the black-market activities in Soviet times, which provided them with initial market experience and capital. Almost all of Moscow's largest private banks were established by Jews: Stolichny Bank by Alexander Smolensky, Most-Bank by Vladimir Gusinsky, Menatep by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russian Credit by Vitaly Malkin, Alfa-Bank by Petr Aven and Mikhail Fridman. Among the most successful Russian entrepreneurs were Vladimir Berezovsky, Roman Abramovich, and Vladimir Resin, who managed to translate their managerial and financial success into political influence.

The high percentage of Jews among the political and economic elite during these years is comparable to the significant participation of Jews in the state apparatus after the Bolshevik coup of 1917. In both cases, Jews turned out to be the group of the population that enjoyed greater trust from the new authorities due to their negative attitude toward the Soviet regime. During the late Soviet period, Jews were removed from high positions in the government, the Soviet army, and security services. However, they could engage in science, including in the field of

[380] Alexander Vdovin, "New national policy in the USSR", Bulletin of Moscow University, 1990. No. 4. p. 3-26; V. Kunin, "Jews in Soviet Legislatures: The Elections of 1990," Jews and Jewish Topics in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, No. 3(19), Winter 1992, p. 30-35.
[381] Gitelman, p. 445.

economics, which turned out to be in high demand during the transition to a market economy.[382] Thus, despite the sharp decline in the Jewish population of the country, Jews were widely represented among the Russian elite of the 1990s: "Jews may have been seizing opportunities denied to them in the Soviet regime, ironically just as they had done after the fall of the tsarist regime."[383]

It should also be noted that many of the high-ranking officials and entrepreneurs came from mixed families, and not even in the first generation, because of the assimilation processes described above. As a result, despite their remoteness from their Jewish roots, the antisemitic segments of the political class and the general public perceived them as Jews, which became fertile soil for antisemitic conspiracy theories that spread in the country by the end of the 1990s. One such prominent leader of the new Russia was Yegor Gaidar, who led Russia's transition to a market economy and privatization. Gaidar did not consider himself a Jew, but as the grandson of a Jewish woman, he was called a "halakhic Jew" by the antisemites.[384]. This conspiratorial and manipulative attitude continues to feed on Russia's new generation of antisemites who search for the Jewish roots of the politicians to embarrass and discredit them

The political context of the 1990s inevitably pushed Jews to support a government that pursued a liberal economic and political course and opposed anti-Semitism, albeit insufficiently. In the 1996 presidential election, in which the communist leader Zyuganov stood as a real alternative to Yeltsin, representatives of the Jewish elite expressed unequivocal support for the incumbent president. A group of influential businessmen, the "oligarchs," provided significant financial and media support for Yeltsin's campaign. This group included prominent Jewish oligarchs - Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, Alexander Smolenskin, Mikhail Fridman, and Mikhail Khodorkovsky.[385] The oligarchs and the Jewish population at large voted mainly for democratic candidates and parties, rejecting both the communists and nationalists. The participation of the Jewish population in elections was much higher than that of the rest of the population, which, according to Gitelman, was due to the fact that "Jews perceive greater

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[382] Aron Katsenelinbogen, *Soviet poliitcs and economy* (Benson: Chalidze PuЬlications Benson, 1988), pp. 153-186
[383] Gitelman, p. 255.
[384] For example, see this: "The History of Yegor Gaidar's Surname", https://dzen.ru/a/XMbGgIS7LQC0dzon
[385] "Heroes of 1996. Kommersant continues its series of publications on the 1996 presidential elections.", Kommersant, February 9, 2016, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2911542

dangers than others in remaining passive and feel they must make sure that democratic forces are supported."[386]

Jewish entrepreneurs took part in the country's political life and the development of the Jewish community life. In May 1992, Jewish businessmen from several cities created the Convention of Jewish Entrepreneurs of Russia, which by the beginning of 1994 attracted about 600 members[387] and whose declared goals were to promote the country's economic revival, cooperate with Jewish business abroad, and support Jewish institutions in Russia. In 1996, a group of prominent Jewish bankers and entrepreneurs headed by Vladimir Gusinsky founded the Russian Jewish Congress (RJC). Over the course of three years, the RJC emerged as the leading Jewish organization in Russia, establishing around 40 regional centers. With support from business leaders, the RJC was able to secure $25 million in funding for educational, cultural, and charitable programs between 1996 and 2001.[388] Its largest project was the construction of a Memorial Synagogue on Poklonnaya Hill in Moscow, which was inaugurated in 1998 in the presence of Russian President Boris Yeltsin.

By the mid-1990s, Jews constituted a considerable part of the Russian elite – political, commercial, artistic and intellectual. Here is how the journalist Leonid Radzikhovsky tried to explain these changes in the status of Jews in post-Soviet Russia:

> "The Jewish and near-Jewish intelligentsia were among the main bearers of Western liberal ideology in Russia and became the ideologists behind this revolution. "Business Jews" … were the real bearers of the capitalist spirit. And although Russian nomenklatura capitalism is built not from the bottom up but from the top down, although the economic elite is dominated not by self-made men but by the same former party and economic nomenklatura and its "authorized representatives", the Jews were able to achieve success here too. On the one hand, they were more active than the traditional "Oblomovs"; on the other, they relied on new - their own - political elites"[389].

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[386] Gitelman, p. 256.
[387] "Russia. Jews of Russia after 1991", *Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia*, https://eleven.co.il/jews-of-russia/general/15445/
[388] Ibid.
[389] Leonid Radzikhovsky, "*Jewish happiness*", New Russian Word, January 17, 1996.

While Jews were prominently represented among elite circles in the early 1990s, the situation changed significantly over the following decade, due to a combination of political, social, and ideological shifts that reshaped the post-Soviet Russia landscape. Widespread corruption fueled public resentment against the *oligarchs*, a small group of powerful businessmen who benefited from the privatization. Several of these figures (Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky) were of Jewish origin, which contributed to the revival of antisemitic stereotypes. In addition, when Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, he gradually reinstalled state control over media, but also industry. Putin's campaign to "neutralize" the oligarchs disproportionately targeted Jewish businessmen, weakening Jewish visibility.

C. Normalization of Russia-Israel relations and its internal and geopolitical consequences

The normalization of diplomatic relations in the early 1990s between Russia and Israel marked a major turning point after decades of open hostility during the Cold War. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia sought to redefine its alliances and foreign policy priorities. Israel, for its part, saw in this development an opportunity to renew dialogue with Russia freed from its ideological demons. However, the road to normalization was tumultuous. The historical alignment of the USSR with the Arab states, a tradition perpetuated by post-Soviet Russia, complicated the first attempts at rapprochement.

This chapter examines the complex nature of normalization between Russia and Israel, as well as its internal and geopolitical consequences. The first section explores ideological and political obstacles, old and new. The second section analyzes the Israeli perspective on this process, highlighting the mediating role and strategic interests of the United States. The third section assesses the geopolitical fallout from this rapprochement, notably the brief period of intense cooperation described as a “honeymoon”. Finally, the fourth section returns to the anti-Western turn in Russian foreign policy.

1. Difficulties in normalizing relations: political and ideological contradictions

The normalization of bilateral relations between Israel and the Soviet Union took six years due to numerous factors. On the one hand, the aspirations of Gorbachev and his supporters in the Politburo encountered resistance from conservatives not only in the upper echelons of the Party but also at all levels of the Soviet foreign policy elite - members of the International Department of the CPSU Central Committee, diplomats, the KGB, as well as academic institutions, which for four decades had seen Israel as an accomplice of the United States. This opposition was a result of the anti-Semitic sentiments common among most of the Soviet leaders. In addition, they were concerned that the gradual improvement of Soviet-Israeli relations would lead to tensions with the USSR's Arab allies.[390] The sharp increase in Jewish immigration to Israel dealt a heavy blow to the PLO leadership, significantly weakening the demographic advantage of the Palestinians. On the other hand, disagreements over the attitude towards the Soviet Union also characterized the Israeli leadership and society after decades of Soviet anti-Zionist propaganda and Moscow's support for Israel's most implacable enemies. The multi-layered nature of the two countries' interests and the complex dynamics in the USSR-Israel-USA triangle were additional factors in the drawn-out normalization.

It is interesting to point to three stages of normalization of relations under Gorbachev. In the first two years (1985-1986), the first diplomatic contacts between the countries took place, initiated by the Soviet side. In pursuing these initiatives, Gorbachev relied on like-minded members of the Politburo, including the new Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and the new Secretary of the Central Committee for International Affairs, Anatoly Dobrynin, who also headed the International Department of the Central Committee. Both replaced more conservative party officials associated with anti-Zionist ideology. The Central Committee of the CPSU decided in July 1985 to send a group of Soviet diplomats to Israel to discuss issues related to the status of Soviet citizens and the protection of the property interests of the USSR, primarily the land holdings of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem.

However, these intentions encountered resistance from the Israeli side. No results were achieved also at a second meeting of Israeli and Soviet diplomats in Helsinki in August 1986.

[390] Nosenko, Semenchenko, p.198

The Soviet representatives rejected the demand for the principle of reciprocity, which would have allowed Israel to send a group of diplomats to Moscow. Moreover, they ignored the fundamental importance of the issue of Jewish emigration for the Israeli government and society. The Israeli delegation raised the issues of allowing the emigration of 11,000 refuseniks, releasing all "prisoners of Zion," ending the persecution of Jewish activists, and establishing direct flights from the USSR to Israel. The Soviet delegation rejected Israel's right "to speak on behalf of Soviet citizens of Jewish nationality."[391]

Thus, the first normalization attempts did not lead to a breakthrough in relations and were limited to sensational publications about contacts between the countries after 20 years of open confrontation. However, it highlighted the main topics of bilateral relations and the contradictory nature of the interests of both countries. The new leadership of the Soviet Union was interested in strengthening its influence in the Middle East and adjusting its one-sided support for Arab regimes (Egypt, Syria, Libya, the PLO) to counter American dominance in the region. The Israeli government saw its main task as discussing the Jewish question in the USSR, which in itself was taboo for the Soviet authorities; at the same time, the return of Soviet influence in the region could not but arouse suspicion on the part of Israel after decades of anti-Israeli policy by the USSR.

The level of mutual trust between the USSR and Israel increased after the extraordinary events of December 1988, demonstrating to the country's leadership and the Soviet public a positive image of Israel that did not fit into the usual propaganda framework. A Soviet plane landed at Israel's international airport after being hijacked by a group of robbers who hoped Israel would refuse to extradite them.[392] Contrary to their expectations, the Israeli authorities detained the hijackers and promptly handed them over to Soviet representatives. A few days later, a powerful earthquake in Armenia destroyed several cities and killed about 25,000 people. Three days after the tragedy, the first group of Israeli rescuers arrived in Armenia, later joined by a delegation of 120 people to organize a field hospital. In the new conditions of glasnost and freedom of information, these events received wide publicity in the Soviet press; the meeting of

[391] *Haaretz*, 21 July, 1985.
[392] Alexander Lokshin, "A Four-Year Journey: From the History of the Restoration of Diplomatic Relations between the Soviet Union and Israel", *LeHaim,* December 17, 2019, https://lechaim.ru/academy/doroga-v-chetyre-goda-iz-istorii-vosstanovleniya-diplomaticheskih-otnoshenij-mezhdu-sovetskim-soyuzom-i-izrailem/

Shevardnadze, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, and his words of gratitude to the representatives of the Israeli delegation were broadcast on central Soviet television.[393] Criticism of the Soviet government was heard from pro-democratic journalists that the time had come to restore relations between the countries. Gorbachev had to respond to this wave of criticism, stating that the absence of bilateral relations was "abnormal" but that the Soviet Union would be ready to resume them as soon as Israel agreed to participate in an international peace conference.[394]

Gorbachev's words indicated that the Soviet leadership had overcome an important perceptual barrier on the issue of Israel. It is worth noting that just two years earlier when Israeli President Chaim Herzog offered the Soviet leadership assistance in eliminating the consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident, members of the Politburo, including Gorbachev, voted against accepting the assistance.[395] At the same time, small but important shifts were taking place in the Soviet position at the UN: In the fall of 1989, for the first time in many years, the Soviet delegation abstained from voting on a resolution to suspend Israel's participation in the General Assembly session, which was introduced annually by the bloc of developing countries.[396]

However, the growth of mutual trust and a friendlier atmosphere between the two countries, as reflected in the press and public discourse, were not enough to overcome the political barrier. In December 1989, the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee approved a note "On our future line concerning Israel," which confirmed the correctness of the gradual, "dosed" development of contacts and political dialogue with Israel, forcing "the Israeli leadership ... to take a more realistic, balanced position on the Middle East conflict."[397] At the same time, the note emphasized that "Our steps in the Israeli direction may cause a certain concern among political forces and the public in several Arab and other Muslim states, in particular in Iran,

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[393] Ibid.
[394] Gerald Nadler, “Israel sends assistance to Armenia quake victims”, UPI, December 14, 1988.
[395] National Security Archive, The George Washington University, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/chernobyl/1986-06-11%20Israel%20offer%20of%20doctors%20for%20Chernobyl%2006.11.1986.pdf
[396] Nosenko, Semenchenko, p. 215.
[397] “The Central Committee of the CPSU: On our future line in relation to Israel”, November 3, 1988, quoted from *L’Haim,* October 2006, https://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/174/zavesa.htm

Syria, Libya, and complicate the development of Soviet-Arab relations. It will be necessary to take measures to neutralize such a reaction."[398] The note also recommended "it would be appropriate to inform the leadership of the socialist and friendly Arab countries, as well as the PLO" about the USSR's actions against Israel. The note also recommended refraining from economic and trade relations at the intergovernmental level but encouraged direct contact between private companies and advocated cooperation between scientific and cultural institutions and interparliamentary and interparty exchanges.[399] It is noteworthy that the issue of Soviet Jewish emigration, which had already increased significantly at that time, did not receive the attention of the authors of the note.

The dosed nature of Gorbachev's normalization reflected a combination of the traditional Soviet policy of forcing Israel into peace negotiations, on the one hand, and the pragmatism of the perestroika period, which required a revision of outdated doctrines, on the other. However, while it suited the initial stage of perestroika, it revealed its half-heartedness and lag in the face of rapidly changing realities. This slowness looked like indecisiveness and sometimes even "a less worthy maneuvering of Soviet diplomacy."[400] The issue of repealing the UN's infamous resolution equating Zionism with racism serves a point in the case. It was adopted in 1975 to isolate and embarrass Israel. However, during the perestroika period, the Soviet Foreign Ministry and the media criticized this document as an anachronism of the Cold War. "Some Soviet diplomats have already allowed themselves to speak unofficially to the effect that, by recognizing a state that gathers Jews from all over the world, one cannot help but recognize the ideological movement on which it is based."[401] However, due to the reluctance to confront its Arab allies, the Soviet Union constantly postponed this decision. It was only on December 16, 1991, that the Soviet delegation voted with most UN members to repeal this resolution, two months after the Madrid Conference on the Middle East and two weeks before the collapse of the USSR.[402]

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[398] Ibid.
[399] "The Central Committee of the CPSU: On our future line in relation to Israel", November 3, 1988, quoted from *L'Haim,* October 2006, https://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/174/zavesa.htm
[400] Nosenko, Semenchenko, p. 215
[401] Ibid.
[402] Ibid.

2. The Israeli perspective on normalization and the role of the United States

The unexpected openness of the Soviet leadership to resuming dialogue with Israel and the United States created the conditions for a positive dynamic in relations during the second stage of normalization of relations (1987–1989). Two additional factors that contributed to these changes deserve special attention: the positions of Israel and the role of the United States.

The new Israeli national unity government received a mandate to resolve the deep political and economic crisis created by the Lebanon War of 1982. However, Prime Minister Shimon Peres had a much more ambitious program of action, which aimed to begin peace talks with Jordan and the Palestinians. Peres believed that Soviet participation in the peace process could convince Arab leaders to begin negotiations. In July 1985, even before direct contact during the Cold War started, Peres publicly stated, "The Russians were never our enemies."[403] In February 1985, before Gorbachev took office, Peres approached the leader of socialist Romania, Nicolae Ceausescu, asking for assistance in restoring diplomatic relations with the USSR, in the absence of which it would be impossible to advance an international conference on the Middle East.[404] The energetic diplomacy of Shimon Peres clearly reflected his interest in improving relations with USSR, but not a coherent position about the conditions it should involve: he "fluctuated" between demanding restored relations or only authorization of Jewish emigration as a price for Moscow entry into the Middle East peace process.[405]

Peres' efforts in the matter of a peaceful settlement and the restoration of relations with the USSR as an element of this process encountered resistance within the government from his deputy and the leader of the Likud party, Yitzhak Shamir, who was to replace Peres as prime minister. Shamir ultimately rejected the idea of the USSR participating in an international conference on the peace process in the Middle East, even in the event of the resumption of diplomatic relations between the countries. Peres' contacts with the Soviet leadership, including the mediation of American Jewish philanthropist Edgar Bronfman, president of the World Jewish Congress, aroused suspicion among the more conservative part of the Israeli political

[403] "Peres Says the Israelis Want To Renew Ties With Moscow", New York Times, July 16, 1985.
[404] "Peres Asks Romania to Help Israel Get Soviet, Chinese Ties", LA Times, February 12, 1985
[405] Robert O. Freedman, Soviet Policy towards Israel under Gorbachev (New York: Praeger, 1991), p.19.

establishment, especially in the context of publications about Peres's offer to return the Golan Heights to Syria in exchange for the restoration of relations.[406]

The breathtaking metamorphoses within the Soviet Union also caused serious concerns among the Israeli leadership. The above-mentioned disagreements between leaders Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Shamir reflected two opposing approaches to the Soviet Union. While the Labor leader viewed Gorbachev's rise to power as a real chance to change the paradigm of relations between the countries, using it as a lever for advancing the Middle East settlement, the head of Likud had no confidence in the new rhetoric of the Soviet leadership. For him, Peres was too optimistic and overrated the effectiveness of his contacts with the USSR.[407] Having formed a new right-wing government in 1989, Shamir called Peres's ideas about an international conference "a nightmare that Peres dreamed of" and a "national suicide."[408] The irony of history was that Shamir's government had to participate in the Madrid conference under enormous pressure from the United States, leading to the government's fall. While Peres' approach arose from an exaggerated optimism, Shamir's worldview had a "pessimistic-apocalyptic" coloring in everything that concerned the future of the Jews in the USSR.[409] The following example accurately sheds light on this approach.

The sharp deterioration of the situation in the USSR following the numerous outbreaks of violence on ethnic grounds and the loss of control by the government caused deep concern in Jerusalem. In early 1988, ethnic clashes occurred in the city of Sumgait (Azerbaijan)[410]; in 1989 - in Fergana (Uzbekistan)[411] and Sukhumi (Georgia)[412]; and in 1990 - armed clashes in Dushanbe (Tajikistan).[413] The emergence of anti-Semitic organizations in Moscow, Leningrad, and other cities increased the fears of the Jewish population in the context of the undecisive reaction of the authorities. In these circumstances, Prime Minister Shamir gave the order to create a top-secret

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[406] Ibid.
[407] Ibid., p. 210
[408] Ibid.
[409] Avi Kfiri, “More than Entebbe: The huge operation to save Jews in the USSR Exposed”, *Makor Rishon*, October 10, 2014, https://www.makorrishon.co.il/nrg/online/1/ART2/630/633.html
[410] Thomas de Waal, *The Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan between Peace and War* (Moscow: Text, 2005), Ch.2.
[411] Alexandr Osipov, *Fergana Valley: Ethnicity, Ethnic Processes, Ethnic Conflicts* (Moscow: Nauka, 2004).
[412] “Chronicle of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict 1989-2008. Reference paper”, Ria-Novosti, August 12, 2008, https://ria.ru/20080812/150313916.html
[413] Vladimir Mukomel, “Demographic consequences of ethnic and regional conflicts in the post-Soviet space”, *Demoscope.ru*, https://web.archive.org/web/20090630061400/http://demoscope.ru/popul/popul22.html

task force with the participation of the IDF, Mossad, and Nativ to prepare a special operation to evacuate Soviet Jews in the event of an immediate threat.[414] According to one of the group's leaders, Brigadier General Ami Morag, Prime Minister Shamir explained to its members that the Israeli government had a responsibility to prevent a repeat of the Holocaust and must be ready to take this extreme step.[415] Modern Russian historians tend to see these plans of the Shamir government as "a pipe dream and detachment from historical reality."[416] However, this assessment does not consider the broader historical context of that period. In 1984–1985, Israel carried out a series of special operations to urgently evacuate Jews from Ethiopia and Sudan.

Thus, crucial national interests – Jewish emigration and the peace process - as well as internal political debates conditioned Israel's approach to normalization process and its duration.[417]

The second decisive factor in normalizing relations was the close coordination between the United States and Israel. The American administration and the Israeli government had a common position, according to which the Soviet Union would be able to become a participant in the Middle East negotiation process if it fulfilled two conditions: renew diplomatic relations with Israel and stop discriminating against Jews. According to Shultz, the Soviet leadership should "treat Jews in the Soviet Union decently and those who wish to leave ought to be allowed to leave."[418] President Reagan openly stated his position on this issue: "The United States government remains deeply concerned about the plight of Soviet Jewry, and this subject will continue to be an important part of our dialogue with the Soviet Union."[419] The joint American-Israeli position pushed the Soviet leadership to gestures of goodwill, primarily allowing refuseniks to emigrate.

While placing the normalization of relations with Israel on the back burner, the Soviet Union became ready to accommodate U.S. demands regarding Jewish emigration in order to improve ties with Washington, Gorbachev's top foreign policy priority. Although the growing wave of emigration caused tensions with Arab allies, the Soviet leadership, eager to eliminate one of the thorniest issues in its relationship with the United States, chose to make concessions

[414] Avi Kfiri, "More than Entebbe: The huge operation to save Jews in the USSR Exposed".
[415] Ibid.
[416] Nosenko, Semenchenko, p. 207
[417] Interview with Arkady Mil-Man, Ambassador of Israel to the Russian Federation between 2003-2006.
[418] Peres and Shultz Agree on Basis for USSR Participation in Mideast Forum, JTA, September 1986.
[419] Peres: Israel to Continue Search for Peace After Rotation of Government, JTA, September 18, 1986

on this matter. The Soviet authorities tried to reassure Arab allies and PLO telling them that the right to emigrate applied to all Soviet citizens, not just Jews. Arab leaders warned of the potential resettlement of Soviet emigrants in Israeli-controlled territories, a possibility envisaged by senior Israeli officials.[420] Eventually, the Soviet leadership effectively distanced itself from this issue, hoping to secure Most Favored Nation status from the United States, critical for alleviating its economic situation.[421]

However, the main reason for the long period of normalization was Gorbachev's indecisiveness and secondary nature of this issue in his eyes. As Freedman writes, "Gorbachev delayed the reestablishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel … until literally the last minute."[422] According to Arye Levin, former head of the Israel delegation in Moscow, Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy announced the resumption of diplomatic relations with Russia after meeting with his Soviet counterpart Boris Pankin without the latter receiving explicit approval for this in Moscow. Explaining the slowness and unwillingness of the Soviet authorities to speed up the normalization process, Levin quotes his private conversation with Yakovlev, a high-ranking party leader and associate of Gorbachev: "… during the years of perestroika, it was the Politburo that opposed the resumption of relations with Israel, mainly for anti-Semitic reasons. However, Gorbachev did not have the drive and determination to take such a step alone. For him, restoring relations with Israel was a secondary task."[423]

3. Geopolitical Consequences of Normalization: between the "honeymoon" and reassessment of the relations between Russia and Israel

The normalization of relations between the Soviet Union, then Russia, and Israel marked a geopolitical turning point with profound consequences, both regionally and internationally. The process initiated under Gorbachev caused a series of major transformations in Russian foreign policy, modifying the strategic balances in the Middle East, and allowing Israel to emerge from a

[420] "Israelis set new policy on Soviet Jews", *The Washington Post*, June 24, 1990, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/06/25/israelis-set-new-policy-on-soviet-jews/2188843c-e5b3-4ceb-b20d-84b895d35f7a/
[421] Robert O. Freedman, "Israeli- Russian relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union", in *Jerusalem Letter*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, January 15, 1995, pp. 198-199.
[422] Ibid. p. 307.
[423]

period of relative isolation. The normalization process has generated considerable geopolitical benefits for both countries. The image of Russia has greatly benefited from the opening of the country to Russian Jews wishing to emigrate to Israel.

The main argument developed here is twofold. On the one hand, the normalization of relations between Israel and Russia has redefined Israel's regional position by weakening the anti-Israeli consensus within the Arab states allied with the USSR and by encouraging dialogue, even if timid, while strengthening its demographics (massive immigration from the territories of the former USSR) and its national security. On the other hand, the beginning of the 1990s was marked by what some describe as a “honeymoon” in bilateral relations. This period was characterized by symbolic gestures and pragmatic diplomacy around common interests, despite certain tensions, particularly around Russian-Iranian relations.

By examining these developments, this section highlights the importance of the rapprochement between Israel and the USSR in its final years, and then Russia, as part of broader geopolitical realignments in the post-Cold War era.

From Isolation to Integration: The Impact of Soviet Policy Shifts on Israel (1989–1991)

Although the process of normalizing relations under Gorbachev dragged on for 6 years, the changes in Soviet policy dramatically impacted Israel and the general geopolitical situation in the Middle East. The relocation of about 400,000 Jews to Israel over three years (1989–1991) radically changed the demographic situation of the Jewish state, which had a positive impact on its national security. The USSR's readiness to cooperate with the United States during the Gulf War and in convening the Madrid Conference benefited Israel's efforts to normalize its status in the Middle East and beyond the region. The changes in foreign policy and the economic weakness of the USSR forced its Arab allies to reassess their foreign policy priorities and pushed them toward dialogue with Israel. At the same time, Israel could renew relations with the Soviet Union's Eastern European satellites after Moscow's ban was lifted. Israel's international and regional isolation became a thing of the past at an unpredictably rapid pace.

The "Honeymoon" Period: Diplomatic and Cultural Convergence under Yeltsin (1992–1993)

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise to power of the pro-democratic opposition, the process of normalizing relations between Russia and Israel accelerated significantly. The new Russian leadership continued Gorbachev's course of rejecting the Soviet foreign policy legacy while no longer being burdened by intra-party struggle and communist ideology. Russia confirmed the preservation of diplomatic relations with Israel, and the Soviet Ambassador to Israel, Alexander Bovin, was reappointed as the first Ambassador of the Russian Federation. Bovin, a Soviet international journalist known for advocating the restoration of relations between the USSR and Israel and for criticizing the Soviet leadership's indecisiveness on this issue, played an important role in fostering a favorable atmosphere between the two countries during the initial period of renewed relations.[424] According to one expert, the first year after establishing diplomatic relations, 1992, became a "Russian-Israeli honeymoon."[425] The Russian leadership continued the policy of free emigration, took a strictly neutral position in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and, as a rule, followed in the path of American policy. Several friendly steps taken by Russia helped form trusting relations. Yad Vashem received permission to copy materials from the archives of the Communist Party devoted to Jewish issues; Natan Sharansky was declared innocent of spying for Israel, and the Russian Ambassador to the UN asked Israel to co-author the decision on the accession of former Soviet republics to the United Nation.[426]

In April 1992, Russian Vice President Alexander Rutskoy officially visited Israel. There, he signed a memorandum on cooperation in agriculture and expressed hope for the prosperity of Russian-Israeli relations. Rutskoy was one of the first Russian officials to point to the presence of the Russian-speaking community of immigrants from the USSR in Israel as a human "bridge" that should facilitate the development of ties between the countries.[427] The main supporting element of this "bridge" was the cultural ties between the countries. The cultural and linguistic

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[424] Yuri Kaner, "Relations between states are relations between peoples", Thirty Years of Full Diplomatic Relations Between Israel and Russia: Past, Present, Future, editors: Zvi Magen and Daniel Rakov (INSS, December 2021), p. 50
https://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/2004-05-05/ty-article/0000017f-dc70-df9c-a17f-fe7868ef0000
[425] Robert O. Freedman, "Russia and Israel under Yeltsin", *Israel Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring, 1998), p.149.
[426] Ibid.
[427] Freedman, "Russia and Israel under Yeltsin", p. 150.

bridge factor would become an important part of the rhetoric of the leaders of both countries over the next decade.

Economic relations were also not long in coming. In 1989, contracts were signed for the joint production of medical equipment and cooperation in agriculture. In 1990, the Israeli Ministers of Finance and Energy visited Moscow and signed trade and economic agreements with the Soviet government; in the same year, the countries signed an agreement on establishing trade missions in Tel Aviv and Moscow. According to one of the Israeli ministers, in these negotiations, the Soviet representatives even requested financial assistance from Israel but received a negative response.[428] While bilateral trade between the countries did not exceed $12 million in 1990, it reached $123 million in 1992 and rose to $308 million in 1993. Trade volume grew steadily, reaching $867 million in 1995, but fell to $600 million by the end of the 1990s.[429]

The reasons for the sharp warming of relations with Israel in 1992 were connected with broader trends in Russian foreign policy of that period. The main factors of this policy were the rejection of the Soviet totalitarian legacy and the course toward strengthening strategic partnerships with the USA and Western countries. New Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Kozyrev, adhered to a pro-American orientation and opposed the imperial legacy of the USSR in international relations. In 1992, Russia joined the regime of American sanctions against Iraq and Libya, actively supported efforts for an Arab-Israeli settlement,[430] and began to build equal relations with the former republics of the USSR. After the putsch of 1991 and the collapse of the USSR, Yeltsin's liberal and pro-Western course was perceived positively by society, and the anti-democratic opposition had not yet formed.

Complex Alignments: Russia's Evolving Foreign Policy and Its Implications (1993–1995)

The only exception to Russia's pro-Western course of those years was its relations with Iraq. The warming of relations began during the Gorbachev era. In June 1989, during a visit to Moscow by Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, several significant agreements were signed,

[428] Nosenko, Semenchenko, p. 202.
[429] Maria Makhmutova, “Transformation of Russian-Israeli relations in the 1990s”, *Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences*, vol. 3, 2019, p.181.
[430] Freedman, p. 149-190.

including one regarding military cooperation. Exhausted by an eight-year war with Iraq, the Iranian leadership was interested in Soviet military equipment, including high-tech MIG-29 and Su-24 aircraft. This motivation was reinforced in light of the Gulf War, which led to a more substantial American presence in the region and arms supplies to Saudi Arabia, one of Iran's main rivals. Moreover, during the collapse of the USSR and the beginning of separatist movements in the North Caucasus, Iran, as one of the leaders of the Muslim world, played a moderating role from the point of view of the Russian leadership, which explained Russia's willingness to continue arms supplies to Iran despite US protests.[431]

The strengthening of Russian-Iranian relations took place, among other factors, within the context of a fragmented Russian foreign policy and the overall weakness of the central government during the first post-Soviet decade. According to Friedman, throughout the 1990s, Russia's actions in the international arena were carried out by several players in the absence of complete control by the government. Among these players were Yeltsin himself and his team of reformers; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; energy companies associated with Prime Minister Chernomyrdin; large Russian banks; the Ministry of Defense; the Ministry of Atomic Energy; the Ministry of Economic Development; and Rosvooruzhenie, the state corporation for arms export.[432] Players representing private or industry interests acted outside the framework of the state's official position, sometimes coming into conflict with it.

The Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy was one of the important players in relations with Iran. It was interested in going much further than the government in selling Iran nuclear equipment that would allow it to accelerate the production of nuclear weapons.[433] On the one hand, these differences complicated other players' understanding of Russian policy. They increased tensions with the United States and Israel while creating the possibility of plausible deniability for Russia. On the other hand, such excesses of the performer did not contradict the general vector of Russian policy aimed at developing cooperation in the nuclear sphere (the original agreement of August 1992) and constructing a nuclear power plant in Bushehr in southwestern Iran, according to the 1995 agreement. Russian-Iranian cooperation in the nuclear

[431] Nosenko, Semenchenko, p. 202.
[432] Freedman, p. 145.
[433] Ibid., p. 146.

and military spheres will become later one of the stumbling blocks in developing Israeli-Russian relations.

As mentioned above, during Yeltsin's first year, Russia's position on the Arab-Israeli settlement followed American policy. In addition to striving for maximum coordination and cooperation with the United States, the Russian leadership paid less attention to the problems of the Middle East; thus, in January 1992, Yeltsin preferred to visit the Black Sea Fleet base in Crimea instead of attending the Arab-Israeli negotiations in Moscow.[434] Conservative communist circles harshly criticized Yeltsin's openly pro-Western foreign policy. To reduce opposition pressure, Yeltsin dismissed the liberal Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, appointing the more conservative Viktor Chernomyrdin. Already in early 1993, the first cooling of Russian-American relations occurred. Russia condemned the American bombing in Iraq,[435] and Yeltsin publicly disagreed with Kozyrev's position, emphasizing the "Eurasian" nature of Russia. In 1993, he ordered increasing arms sales to Iran.[436] Yeltsin also took a tougher stance on protecting Russians living in the former Soviet republics, stating that Russia should have "special powers there as a guarantor of peace and stability."

Despite these trends, the positive dynamics in relations with Israel continued in 1993, as was seen during the visit of the speaker of the Supreme Soviet, Ruslan Khasbulatov, to Israel and Russia's restrained reaction to the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The situation changed after the armed confrontation between Yeltsin and the parliament in late 1993. Following the military suppression of the anti-presidential revolt, the Duma elections of December 1993 led to a significant strengthening of nationalist opposition, forcing Yeltsin to take a more independent stance in foreign policy.[437]

In this context, there was also a sharp increase in Russian involvement in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Following the Cave of the Patriarchs incident in Hebron, in which an Israeli

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[434] "The First Months of U.S. Relations with the New Russia, 1992", *National Security Archive*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-01-30/first-months-us-relations-new-russia-1992#:~:text=It%20is%20striking%20to%20read,fairly%20routine%20problem%20for%20Yeltsin.%E2%80%9D

[435] "Yeltsin: US likes to dictate", *The Washington Post*, January 25, 1993, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/01/26/yeltsin-us-likes-to-dictate/966fae2c-5fb5-4e2f-b0b5-9e354d289edf/

[436] "Digest, March 30, Tuesday, 1993", *Yeltsin Center*, https://yeltsin.ru/day-by-day/1993/03/31/

[437] Freedman, pp. 153-155.

settler killed 29 Arabs, Russia invited the leaders of Israel and the Palestinian Authority to Moscow, stepped up its diplomatic activity in the Middle East, and demanded a reconvening of the Madrid Conference to "save the peace talks," without prior coordination with the US.[438] These steps by the Russian leadership did not achieve diplomatic results and did not lead to a change in the balance of power in the Middle East. However, from Yeltsin's point of view, they were intended to demonstrate to the domestic nationalistic opposition Russia's independent foreign policy and reject accusations of betrayal of Russian interests.

It is important to note that despite disagreements between Russia and Israel, even on issues fundamental to both countries, their relations remained friendly. Neither side was interested in prolonging tensions, let alone returning to hostility. This atmosphere of normalization, and even sympathy, was also reflected in public sentiment, which only five to six years earlier had been shaped by the USSR's anti-Zionist propaganda. According to Levada Center data, by 1988 Israel already enjoyed a positive image in the USSR. From the mid-1990s and over the following 25 years, approximately 60% of respondents consistently reported no hostility or animosity toward Israel.[439] About one-fifth expressed positive sentiment or interest in the country, while on average only one in ten held a negative view. One key conclusion drawn by Russian sociologists is that "in the absence of state-driven anti-Israel or anti-Semitic sentiment, Russian public opinion toward Israel was predominantly neutral or mildly positive."[440]

4. Anti-Western U-turn in Russian Policy and Primakov's Role in the Cooling of Russia-Israel relations

As we saw previously, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian-Israeli relations experienced a prosperous period, marked by a renewal of diplomatic ties, an intensification of cultural and economic exchanges, as well as a significant wave of Jewish emigration to Israel. However, this period of rapprochement was relatively brief. As Russia

[438] Ibid., p. 154.
[439] Vladimir (Ze'ev),"Israel, the Middle East, and the Russian Public Opinion Part 2: What Russians Think of Israeli War with HAMAS and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, October 30 2024, https://besacenter.org/israel-the-middle-east-and-the-russian-public-opinion-part-2-what-russians-think-of-israeli-war-with-hamas-and-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict/
[440] "Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia in Contemporary Russia. Analytical Report on Sociological Research", Yuri Levada Analytical Center and RJC (Moscow, 2020), pp. 85-87.

began to reorient its foreign policy in an anti-Western direction from the mid-1990s, there was a gradual cooling of relations with Israel.

At the heart of this turnaround, was former head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, Evgeni Primakov. Yet despite this cooling and the broader anti-Western turn initiated by Russia at this time, this change neither led to a breakdown in diplomatic relations with Israel nor to a resurgence of state anti-Semitism. We will seek to examine the root causes of the cooling of Russian-Israeli relations, with particular emphasis on the role of Primakov. At the same time, we will analyze why this development did not lead to a real crisis with Israel or to a breakdown in the trust gradually built in Russia's relations with Israel and the Russian Jewish community.

From Post-Soviet Rapprochement to Strategic Divergence

A symbol of the authoritarian turn in domestic policy was Yeltsin's decision to suppress the independence of the Chechen Republic by military means in late 1995. Russian foreign policy also took on a more confrontational character concerning the countries of the so-called "near abroad", the former Soviet republics, from which Yeltsin demanded a more "friendly" approach to Russia. At the same time, despite protests from the United States and Israel, Russia continued preparations to build a nuclear reactor in Iran. The "honey moon" in Russia-Israel was over. Nevertheless, the two countries learnt to expand their cooperation despite the disagreements on thorny issues. In post-Soviet Russia, economic and geopolitical interests have entirely supplanted the ideological legacy of the USSR.

The outbreak of the first Chechen war deeply divided the liberal elites and Yeltsin when Russia's Choice party, associated with liberal and democratic reforms, declared its transition to opposition to the government.[441] It was this Party that adhered to a pro-Western orientation and advocated strengthening relations with the United States and Israel. However, at this stage, the weakening of liberal forces in parliament and the government had not yet hurt attitudes toward Israel. The place of the liberals was taken by traditionally minded centrists, represented in the government by Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, who also supported strengthening bilateral relations. In 1994-1995, there was a significant increase in economic ties between the countries.

[441] "Yegor Gaidar's address to all those who oppose the war in Chechnya", Yegor Gaidar's archive, http://gaidar-arc.ru/file/bulletin-1/DEFAULT/org.stretto.plugins.bulletin.core.Article/file/3657

Important steps in the Middle East settlement - a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan (1994) and the Oslo 2 agreement with the Palestinian Authority (1995) - received support from Russia, positively impacting the relations.[442]

According to Freedman, the visit of Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev to Israel in December 1995 became "the high-water mark in Russian-Israeli relations during the entire 1991–1997 period."[443] Based on the Israeli experience, the Russian leadership sought to transform the cumbersome structure of its army inherited from the Soviet past. During this period, the two countries began laying the groundwork for military-technical cooperation, including the possibility of joint projects.[444] However, Russian Ambassador to Israel, Alexander Bovin, gave a more modest assessment of the military cooperation visit:

> "Grachev's visit was useful from all points of view. Politically, it once again made it clear that Russia would not return to the unilateral policy of the past. In military-economic terms, it outlined the path to cooperation in the weapons modernization field that would benefit us. Psychologically, it contributed to the creation of a new image of Israel. Unfortunately, we did not benefit as much from Grachev's visit as we could have."[445]

The Israeli Ambassador to Russia, Arkady Mil-Man, who worked in Moscow during those years, notes that relations between Israel and Russia in the 1990s, both in the military and other spheres, were unsystematic and benefited mainly due to their novelty.[446] While the Russian side was absorbed in internal problems, it was important for the Israeli government to ensure the continuation of Jewish emigration.

Political Shifts in Russia and the Rise of Anti-Western Sentiment

The further strengthening of the communist and patriotic opposition forced Yeltsin to adjust again his position and the government's course. In the State Duma elections in December 1995, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation won the majority of votes (22%), while the populist Zhirinovsky's Party gained slightly more than the pro-government Our Home is Russia

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[442] Freedman, pp. 155-156.
[443] Ibid., p. 155.
[444] Maria Makhmutova, "Transformation of Russian-Israeli relations in the 1990s", *Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences*, vol. 3, 2019, p. 181.
[445] Alexander Bovin, "5 Years Among Jews and Russian diplomats," (Moscow: Zakharov, 2002), p. 363.
[446] Inteview with Ambassador Arkady Mil-Man conducted by the author.

(11% and 10%, respectively). In the 1996 presidential elections, Yeltsin narrowly defeated the Communist leader, Zyuganov, having secured the support of the popular General Alexander Lebed. As the influence of liberal democratic forces in the government declined and anti-Western sentiment increased, supporting a pro-Western orientation became politically unwise.

The appointment of Yevgeny Primakov, a former head of a Foreign Intelligence Service, as Foreign Minister was widely regarded as marking a significant turning point in Russia's foreign policy. After Kozyrev's cozying up with the West, Primakov began promoting a "polycentric world" concept in which Russia, China, and India present an alternative to the West: "At its core, Primakov's idea assumed the US-led global order put Russia at a disadvantage where it could no longer compete alone, but it could contend as part of a Russia-China-India triangle. Indeed, Russia, as a great power, needed a pushback against the West, including in the Middle East, and Primakov was eager for Russia to return to the arena."[447] In this worldview, Russia was to regain its influence in the regions that it considered its sphere of interest. Thus, Yevgeny Primakov laid the foundation for the foreign policy of post-Soviet Russia, which would find its full expression in the following decades during the rule of Vladimir Putin.

Primakov's Influence on Middle East Policy and the Cooling of Ties

Primakov could not implement all of his ideas due to the complex balance of political forces in the presidential administration and the government, in which democratically minded leaders continued to play a significant role.[448] However, his background as a professional in international relations undoubtedly influenced the development of post-Soviet Russia's new anti-Western course. The famous "Primakov loop" - the U-turn of his flight en route to Washington to protest NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia - became a symbol of this transformation. Primakov's long-standing involvement in Middle East affairs, including his relationships with Arab leaders and deeply rooted views, largely predetermined his approach to the region.

Hence, it should not be surprising that Russia's Middle East policy, particularly its relations with Israel, has become one of the sources of friction between different groups in the Russian leadership. The honeymoon in relations between the two countries ended after Primakov

[447] Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Evolution of Russian Strategy toward Israel", Washington Institute for Near East Policy Strategic Assessment, Vol. 25, No. 1, March 2022
[448] Freedman, p. 156.

took office in January 1996. Already in February, an Israeli diplomat at the embassy to Russia was accused of espionage and expelled from the country.[449] The Russian Foreign Ministry tried to downplay the significance of the incident and its public exposure. In April, a public scandal erupted surrounding the Jewish Agency's activities in Russia, as nationalist and anti-Israeli media accused it of promoting Zionist propaganda and cooperating with the Russian mafia.[450] The Russian government revoked the Agency's license and banned its activities in the country, which had great negative symbolic significance in the context of Soviet anti-Jewish policy. This conflict was resolved a few months later, thanks to the intervention of influential members of the Yeltsin administration, especially the well-known businessman Boris Berezovsky, who was appointed deputy head of the Security Council.

On the diplomatic front, the cooling of attitudes towards Israel was evident during Israel's "Operation Grapes of Wrath" in Lebanon, when President Yeltsin condemned the actions of the Israeli army fighting the pro-Iranian terrorist group Hezbollah. Russia's position provoked a sharp reaction from the Israeli leadership, which disdainfully treated Russia's offer of mediation.[451] While on other contentious issues – the status of the Jewish Agency in Russia or the ownership of the Russian Church in Israel – the Israeli government was open to dialogue and confidential agreements, Russia's position on Israel's security issues was seen as a violation of Israel's "red lines."

The Russian supply of missile technology to Iran was another such "red line". Responding to this decision, Prime Minister Netanyahu froze the gas deal with Gazprom,[452] the Russian state monopoly associated with Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, which played a central role in Russia's economy and strategic interests. Despite the proofs presented by Israeli intelligence, Primakov systematically denied the transfer of Russian missile technology to Iran, which, from the point of view of Israel, posed a direct threat to its national interests.

[449] Ibid.
[450] Ibid.
[451] Freedman, p. 157.
[452] Ibid., P. 162.

Strategic Divergences and Parallel Cooperation

Another factor was the anti-Israeli bias of the Russian leadership, both on the part of Primakov and Yeltsin himself, in matters of the Middle East settlement. Each notable escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict triggered heightened diplomatic engagement from the Russian Foreign Ministry, including Primakov's regional tour, the appointment of a special envoy for the Middle East, anti-Israel votes at the UN, and statements blaming Israel for rising tensions, sometimes echoing the hostile rhetoric of the Soviet era.[453]

Under Primakov, the differences between the two countries became more pronounced and public, reflecting a broader shift toward a more independent Russian foreign policy and aligning with the renewed patriotic discourse in Russian politics. Restoring Russia's influence in the Middle East, including strengthening ties with Arab countries, was one of the key directions of this policy. However, for Primakov, this did not imply a rupture in relations with Israel. On the contrary, unlike in the Soviet period, these differences did not nullify other aspects of bilateral relations, since both sides were interested in strengthening relations. Israel sought to maintain close relations with the Russian authorities, opting for Yeltsin's administration over the openly anti-Semitic opposition parties. The cooperation between the law enforcement agencies intensified in the context of combatting money laundering by the Russian mafia in Israel.[454] It is important to note the beginning of military cooperation, including a joint project to install an advanced Phalcon radar system on Russian aircraft commissioned by China.[455] There were discussions on including Israeli companies in the modernization efforts of the Russian Air Force. In fact, relations with Israel were strengthening Russia's influence in the Middle East highlighting its ability to talk to all states in the region.

In his book on the Middle East, Primakov notes that despite the differences in views, "it is still possible to do business with Netanyahu," contrasting him with Peres and Rabin, who were oriented exclusively toward the United States. This positive assessment of the role of the Israeli leader prompted Primakov to take an unprecedented step in his policy towards Israel. A few days before the early elections in Israel in 1999, the Israeli press published Primakov's words at a

[453] Ibid.
[454] Ibid., p. 160.
[455] Ibid., p. 161.

banquet in honor of Netanyahu's visit to Moscow: "If I were an Israeli citizen, I would vote for Mr. Netanyahu."[456] Primakov's support was unexpected, as he favored an Israeli politician with a far more hardline position on the Palestinian issue than the dovish candidates from the Labor Party, primarily because he viewed him as more open to dialogue and negotiation. As a former intelligence officer, it cannot be ruled out that Primakov saw a new instrument of influence.

Friendly gestures from both sides did not help to overcome differences on the issue of nuclear proliferation in Iran, which acquired paramount importance for Israel. Netanyahu's attempts to persuade the Russian government to abandon cooperation with Iran in exchange for the benefits of an economic partnership with Israel have been unsuccessful, as has the American administration's pressure on Russia. As former Mossad chief Efraim Halevy says, "Russia did not stop aiding Iran, but over time, the Iranians stopped depending on the Russians and had other sources for aid."[457]

But despite fundamental differences over the topics like Iran, Hezbollah and the peace process with Palestinians, by the end of the first decade of post-Soviet Russia relations with Israel marked important milestones. By the end of 1996, Russian-Israeli trade had exceeded a half billion dollars a year, and Israel had become Russia's second most important trading partner in the Middle East after Turkey.[458] As noted above, the governments of both countries sought new areas of cooperation, but it was the human dimension that gave their bilateral relations a unique character. The large Russian-speaking community in Israel served as a platform for intensive cultural exchange between the two countries. Tourism to Israel increased sharply, initially due to visits by relatives of new immigrants and gradually expanding to include non-Jewish segments of the population. This dynamic influenced social processes and attitudes in both countries.

In less than 10 years, relations with Russia have become significant in Israel's domestic political context. The Russian-speaking population of Israel was interested in strengthening relations with Russia. The head of the Israel B'Alya (Immigrants' Party), Natan Sharansky, received the post of Minister of Trade in the Netanyahu government and aspired to boost

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[456] Flore de Preneuf, "Israelis court the Russian vote", Tampa Bay Times, May 7, 1999.
[457] "Interview with Ephraim HaLevi", in *30 Years of Full-Form Russian-Israeli Diplomatic Relations: Past, Present, and Future*, edited by Zvi Magen and Daniel Rakov, INSS, 2021, p. 48.
[458] Freedman, p. 164

economic relations between the countries. In the 1996 elections, the victory of Netanyahu and the Likud party was ensured, among other things, by the votes of this group of the population. Already during his first visit to Russia in 1997, Netanyahu especially emphasized the contribution of immigrants from the USSR to the economic growth of Israel. Notably, in his interactions with the Jewish community in Russia, Netanyahu, unlike his predecessors, avoided persistent calls for immigration, which might have been negatively received given the ongoing normalization of Jewish life in the country.[459] During the election campaign in Israel in 1999, Netanyahu again paid a visit to Moscow, during which he spoke about the importance of bilateral relations and emphasized his sympathy for Russia and the support he received from the Russian-speaking electorate of Israel. In an interview with a Russian newspaper, Netanyahu even tried to convince the journalist that he was a Russophile to the same extent as an Americanophile.[460]

The presence of the Russian-speaking community in Israel and the growth of direct contacts between the populations of the two countries influenced the formation of a positive image of Israel in Russian society. Two main factors, highly valued in Russian public opinion, shaped this image: the effectiveness of the Israeli army and the unity of the people in defending their country from terrorists, as well as "the conviction that Israel has created an effective and accessible system of social protection and provision for the population … based on a developed, high-tech economy and democratic state institutions."[461] The second factor was directly related to informal channels of communication, since this kind of information does not come from the official media, but through stories from relatives or visiting Israel. According to surveys of those years, for a fifth of Russians, Israel was a country where their Jewish acquaintances were leaving.[462] An even larger percentage of respondents, 27-29%, had relatives and friends among the emigrants in Israel. Positive attitudes toward Israel grew even further in the early 2000s, influenced by the "emerging public partnership between Jerusalem and Moscow in the fight against terrorist groups" during the war in Chechnya.[463] Temporary surges in anti-Israeli sentiment occurred during military clashes in the Middle East, such as the Second Lebanon War.

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[459] Alessandra Stanley, "Yeltsin and Netanyahu Meet and Talk Business", *The New Your Times*, March 12, 1997, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/03/12/world/yeltsin-and-netanyahu-meet-and-talk-business.html
[460] "Russian revolution in Israel", *Kommersant*, March 19, 1999, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/215146
[461] "Russians about Israel", Levada-Center, June 15, 2011, https://www.levada.ru/2011/06/15/rossiyane-ob-izraile/
[462] Ibid.
[463] Ibid.

While this did not alter the overall trend, it reinforced researchers' assessments of the public's high sensitivity to the official position of the authorities.[464]

The normalization of relations between the two countries also affected the Russian Jewish community's attitude toward the Israeli government. As community institutions gained strength and independence, Israeli government appeals for immigration increasingly came to be seen by the Jewish community leaders in Russia as interference in internal affairs. When Prime Minister Netanyahu issued such a call during a period of rising anti-Semitism in Russia, Chief Rabbi Adolf Shayevich publicly rebuked him, arguing that repatriation should be motivated by the heart, not by fear of anti-Semitism.[465] This improved self-confidence was a result of a more pronounced position against the rising anti-Semitism expressed not only by democratically-minded President Yeltsin, but also prime-minister Primakov,[466] a representative of conservative revanchist circles in Russian politics, who was seen as his possible successor.

While the Russian leadership welcomed the strengthening of bilateral relations and viewed the normalization of Jewish life as one of its achievements, antisemitic rhetoric from the nationalist-communist opposition was gaining momentum. The 1998 economic default triggered a new wave of anti-Semitism, revealing the persistence and resilience of antisemitic attitudes across broad segments of the political elite and Russian society. This rhetoric combined elements of pre-revolutionary Judeophobia, Stalinist anti-cosmopolitanism, and Soviet anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. The resulting "combustible mixture" of post-Soviet anti-Semitism was formed in the 1990s and will be analyzed in the next chapter of this study.

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[464] Ze'ev Khanin, "Israel, the Middle East, and the Russian Public Opinion Part 1: Russian View of the Jewish State", The Begon-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Octiber 23, 2024, https://besacenter.org/israel-the-middle-east-and-the-russian-public-opinion-part-1-russians-view-of-the-jewish-state/

[465] "Primakov to Jewish officials: Anti-Semitism to be combated", *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 23, 1999, https://www.jta.org/1999/03/23/lifestyle/primakov-to-jewish-officials-anti-semitism-to-be-combated

[466] Michael Gordon, "Primakov Says Russia Will Fight Anti-Semitism", *New York Times*, March 23, 1999, https://www.nytimes.com/1999/03/23/world/primakov-says-russia-will-fight-anti-semitism.html

Chapter 3: Rapid and robust re-emergence of the Russian anti-Semitism

The abandonment of state-sponsored anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism put an end to official discrimination against Jews and the demonization of Israel. However, it did not eliminate anti-Semitism itself. During the transition period, anti-Semitism in Russia was, so to speak, “privatized", shifting from official policy to an ideological current, alongside right-wing radicalism, national chauvinism, and even fascism. These ideologies laid the foundation for the emergence of political movements, media outlets, and other organizations that took openly anti-Semitic positions. Pavel Polyan, a leading scholar of Jewish history in Russia and the USSR, has characterized this transformation as the emergence of "corporate," or organized, anti-Semitism. According to Polyan, the rise of organized anti-Semitism in post-Soviet Russia was enabled by the absence of a legal framework to combat antisemitic manifestations. He argues that what makes “corporate anti-Semitism” particularly dangerous is the state's passive stance: “its combination with the state ‘turning away’ at the right moment is the most important prerequisite for shifting all the troubles and failures of the government onto the Jews and, as a result, Jewish pogroms.”[467]

The main breeding grounds of anti-Semitism in the 1990s were opposition parties, both communist and ultra-right populist, as well as the media outlets, radical movements within the Orthodox Church and Islam, and neo-Nazi and neo-fascist groups. During this period, organized anti-Semitism also began to spread widely across the Russian segment of the Internet. Anti-Semitism in post-Soviet Russia reproduced many elements of Soviet-era anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, while also drawing on pre-revolutionary tradition of Judeophobia.

[467] Pavel Polyan, “Anti-Semitism in Russia: the day before yesterday, yesterday, today, tomorrow...”, *Historical expertise, 2023*, https://www.istorex.org/post/полян-п-м-антисемитизм-в-россии-позавчера-вчера-сегодня-завтра

A. Pre-revolutionary sources of Judeophobia and anti-Semitism in Russia and its influence on a post-Soviet anti-Semitism

The re-emergence of anti-Semitism in post-Soviet Russia draws heavily on historical precedents rooted in the country's pre-revolutionary past. From the first religious prejudices that appeared in Kyivan Rus - the medieval East Slavic state, cultural ancestor of both Russia and Ukraine, which existed from the 9th century until the mid-13th century - Judeophobia gradually evolved into a system of discrimination institutionalized under the Russian Empire. At the end of the imperial period, anti-Semitism became a central ideological tool, used to defend autocracy and reject liberalism, the symbol of seditious modernity.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these pre-revolutionary myths resurfaced, redefining anti-Semitism in a new political context. This section examines the lasting legacy of Russian Judeophobia through four axes: its medieval origins, its imperial institutionalization, its ideological function in Tsarist Russia, and its resurgence in post-Soviet Russia.

1. The origins of Judeophobia: from Kyivan Rus to Principality of Moscow

The ideological legacy of the USSR had a huge impact on post-Soviet anti-Semitism. At the same time, paradoxically, Soviet anti-Jewish policy absorbed many elements of pre-revolutionary Judeophobia. The Soviet anti-Zionist campaign widely used the conspiracy of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" and other ancient anti-Semitic prejudices. The concepts of Judeophobia and anti-Semitism, despite their frequent interchangeable use, have specific semantic differences. Judeophobia is a cultural and religious, often irrational fear and hatred of Jews as non-believers who are distinguished by their appearance, behavior, and rituals. Anti-Semitism is a broader and politicized phenomenon: it includes not only prejudices but also discriminatory practices, including violence on the part of society, the state, or both. While the concept of Judeophobia usually describes ancient forms of anti-Jewish prejudices, the term anti-Semitism was introduced in the late 19th century and reflects a broader set of its expressions. In addition to the religious, ethnic, cultural, and social aspects of Judeophobia, anti-Semitism includes political and ideological elements, which in the last 150 years have led to the most brutal crimes against humanity. The Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union were among the

instigators and propagators of modern anti-Semitism, and their legacy has had a direct impact on its manifestations in the post-Soviet era.

Elements of Judeophobia are found in the chronicles of Kyivan Rus in the earliest period of Russian history, during the 11th and early 12th centuries. At that time, the religious identity of Kyivan Rus was in the process of formation. Representatives of the Christian Church viewed Judaism as an undesirable competitor. However, researchers argue that there was "some tolerance" towards Judaism in Rus'.[468] Throughout the 12th century, waves of anti-Jewish religious violence, unprecedented in its scale and cruelty, shook the countries of Western Europe. However, there is no evidence that it reached Kyivan Rus'.

A sharp increase in Judeophobia in Russian history occurred during the formation of the Moscow Principality as an independent state, with the Orthodox Church acting as its primary source. The Russian Orthodox Church received religious teachings in an already formalized, canonized form from Byzantium, thus bypassing the long process of religious formation characterized by disputes and disagreements. As a result, the Church leadership preferred dogma to debates, putting traditions above reform and demanding unquestioning adherence to the canon.[469] In consolidating its spiritual power over society, the Church waged a struggle against various "heresies," primarily the "Judaizers" - a name adopted in the Russian Orthodox Church to designate religious groups that had spread in Russia since the second half of the 15th century and were accused by churchmen of leaning towards Judaism. The danger of these sects for the Russian Church was not so much in their departure from the dogmas of Orthodoxy but in the growth of its influence among the population, including the relatives and advisers of the Moscow Grand Prince himself.[470] Opposition to this movement became an important factor in the development of the Judeophobic tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Beginning in the last quarter of the 15th century, the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church tried to convince the Moscow princes of the need for a strict policy towards the "Judaizers" sects and other heresies. However, during this period, their efforts were unsuccessful,

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[468] Alexander Peresvetov-Murat, “Christian Anti-Judaism and Jewish-Orthodox Relations in Eastern Slavia in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period (before 1570)”, in *History of the Jewish People in Russia - From ancient times to the early modern period*, ed. Israel Bartal, Vol,1., p. 426.
[469] Richard Pipes, Russia under the Old Regime (London: Penguin Books< 1995), pp. 221-243
[470] Juli Gessen, *History of the Jewish People in Russia* (Petrograd, 1916), p. 22.

mainly due to the conflict between the Church and the princes over the issue of church property, which increased significantly during the Horde period. For example, the Great Prince Ivan III (1462-1505) did not resort to harsh measures against the "Judaizers," allowing their activities to continue for several decades, including at the Prince's court. According to some evidence, Ivan III himself was under the influence of heresy for some time.[471] Moreover, researchers cite examples of Ivan's positive attitude towards influential Jews, who helped him to conduct negotiations with the Turkish Sultan.

Positioning itself as an impeccable ally of the Moscow Princes in their desire to strengthen their power, the Church could enlist their support in the fight against heresy and reformists.[472] The Church gradually increased its influence on the views of the rulers of the Moscow Principality, including their attitude towards Jews and Judaism, which began to manifest itself at the end of the reign of Ivan III and during the reign of his successor Vasily.[473] As a result of Church propaganda against the "Judaizers," "the Jew was viewed as the Antichrist, he was considered a sorcerer, a warlock and a seducer, and they experienced superstitious fear of him."[474] In this sense, the next Russian Tsar, Ivan IV the Terrible, was the absolute embodiment of the Judeophobic prejudices laid down by the Church in the ideological foundation of the Russian state.

Ivan the Terrible is known for his radical religious views, which included the adoption of the doctrine of the divine right to unlimited power and of Rus' as the New Israel, which reproduced the main principle of the theology of replacement, widespread in Eastern Christianity.[475] In his view, the presence of Jews in the territory of Holy Rus', who did not recognize Jesus Christ, posed a danger to the sanctity of the country and the safety of its population and was simply impossible. Explaining the ban on the entry of Jews into his Kingdom, this is what he wrote to the Polish king Sigismund: "We have already written to you many times about the vile deeds of the Jews, who turned our people away from Christianity, brought poisoned medicines to our state and caused much harm to our people... We cannot allow Jews to be in our state because we want to avoid evil; we want God to grant the people of our

[471] Kandel, essay 7.
[472] Pipes, p. 224
[473] Peresvetov-Murat, p. 441.
[474] Kandel, essay 7.
[475] «Восемь слов против иудеев Иоанна Златоуста», “Svyataya Rus”, https://rusidea.org/250972006

country a life of peace without any unrest."[476] Ivan the Terrible's Judeophobia, coupled with his sadistic inclinations, was expressed in the actions of mass extermination of the Jewish population of Polotsk and other cities captured by the Russian army.

During the reign of Ivan the Terrible, state Judeophobia, in its irreconcilable and militant expression, became the official policy of Russia.[477] This worldview would have a profound impact on the formation of anti-Semitic views and approaches of the Russian state, the Orthodox Church, and Russian society throughout the subsequent history of the country. It is important to remember that anti-Semitism in Russia became official policy in the virtual absence of Jewish community life. This "anti-Semitism without Jews" represents, according to Polyakov, a special kind of anti-Semitism characteristic of some countries that expelled Jews from their borders, such as Spain, France, and England. In those countries where the state decided to expel the Jews, this happened after a long period of coexistence between Christians and Jewish communities.[478] Russia, as it were, skipped this phase of coexistence with the Jews and accepted anti-Semitism in its abstract form based on myths, rumors, beliefs, and a radical interpretation of Christian texts. The entry and residence of Jews on the territory of the Kingdom were prohibited, except for Jewish merchants.

Judeophobia became widespread in all strata of the population. Even during the period of Peter I, who modernized the country, turning it into the Russian Empire, and whose personal attitude towards the Jews was relatively tolerant, anti-Jewish restrictions were not abolished, and the Church further intensified its Judeophobic propaganda.[479] The main difference between Peter's reign and the previous period in terms of the position of the Jews was the legitimization of the presence of baptized Jews in the highest positions of the imperial court and the army.

It is important to emphasize that as contacts between the Muscovite Kingdom and its western neighbors, primarily the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, intensified, the Russian tsars began to reap the economic benefits of trade with Jewish merchants. In the 17th century, a small Jewish community appeared in Moscow, consisting of Jews captured during the Russo-Polish

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[476] Lev Polyakov, *History of antisemitsm. The age of belief* (Moscow: Mosty kultury, 2008), p.482.
[477] Lev Berdnikov, "The Fierce Hater. Ivan the Terrible and the Jews", *Jewish Panorama*, No. 6 (108), June 2023.
[478] Ibid., p. 272.
[479] For example, during the Peter the Great period, "Archimandrite Ioanniky Galyatovsky published a work, which became "the first large-scale anti-Jewish work in Russian literature." See more in: Efim Terletsky, Popularizer with Jews in a Time Machine (Moscow: Letniy Sad, 2018), pp.350-353.

wars and Jewish traders. The Jewish population further grew following the annexation of territories in present-day Belarus and Left-Bank Ukraine, which had previously been under Polish-Lithuanian control.

The annexation of Ukrainian territories to the Muscovite Kingdom gave rise to Judeophobic sentiments that prevailed among the Ukrainian Cossacks and clergy. During the bloody war led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky, the Cossack Hetman, against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the mid-17th century, a mass extermination of Jews took place – an event some historians have compared to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.[480] The Ukrainian secular and spiritual elite did not hide their anti-Semitism, which mixed religious and social elements and led to countless acts of merciless violence. According to Jewish history expert Dubnow: "The descendants of Khmelnytskyi had succeeded in importing into Russia what was at that time a fashionable article in Poland, the charge of ritual murder, and these obscure rumors may have affected injuriously the attitude of the Russian Tzar towards the Jews."[481] This influence continued under Peter I, who relied in his fight against the Church on Ukrainian priests, who, unlike the Russians, showed greater readiness to implement his plans.

Despite Peter's relatively neutral attitude, anti-Jewish sentiment remained an integral part of the worldview of both the Russian Orthodox Church and the state as a whole: "Peter's reforms effected a change for the better in the attitude of the isolated, unenlightened Empire towards foreigners, but this change did not extend to the Jews."[482] During the reign of Elizabeth Petrovna (1741–1762), the daughter of Peter I, anti-Jewish policy reached a level comparable in its religious intolerance and uncompromising nature to the era of Ivan the Terrible. In 1742, Elizabeth ordered the immediate expulsion of all Jews on Russian territory, except those who agreed to convert to Orthodoxy. It is noteworthy that the local authorities of Riga sent a petition asking to cancel the Empress's decree, given the important role that Jews played in trade with Poland. In response to the petition, Elizabeth wrote: "I do not wish any profit from the enemies of Christ."[483]

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[480] Kandel, essay 10.
[481] Simon Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* (e-artnow., Kindle Edition), pp. 239-240
[482] Ibid., p. 238.
[483] Gessen, p. 82.

2. Institutionalization of anti-Semitism in the Russian Empire

Empress Catherine II, brought up in the spirit of the progressive ideas of the Enlightenment, implemented a series of reforms aimed at modernizing the Russian Empire. Not infected with the fanatical intolerance of her predecessor towards the Jews, she intended to lift the ban on the entry of Jews into Russia upon her accession to the throne. However, she was forced to abandon her plan under pressure from her anti-Semitic environment, and not being able to act openly, Catherine decided to resort to conspiracy. One of the Empress's main ambitions was the settlement and development of Novorossiya, and for this, she tried to attract Jewish entrepreneurs, bypassing her own decision. Catherine followed the steps of her predecessors in secretly using the Jewish population to achieve economic and other interests of the state.

As a result of the partitions of Poland between 1772 and 1795, between 800,000 and a million Jews became subjects of the Russian Empire. Catherine's initial policy of granting equal rights to all new subjects of the Empire, including Jews, while preserving their privileges and form of self-government (the so-called Kahals) encountered resistance from the local non-Jewish population.[484] In 1791, under pressure from Moscow merchants who complained about unfair competition from Jews, Catherine signed a decree that prohibited Jews from "registering in Russian merchant cities," limiting their residence to the provinces of Belarus and Ukraine. This decision is considered the beginning of the Pale of Settlement policy, which became one of the symbols of anti-Jewish discrimination;[485] it was abolished only 125 years later, in the course of February 1917 Revolution, which resulted in the fall of the Tsarist regime.

The Pale of Settlement and other anti-Jewish measures of the last years of Catherine's reign would determine the attitude of the Russian authorities towards the so-called "Jewish question."[486] Pressure from the urban population and local elites of the captured territories, coupled with the archaic religious anti-Jewish tradition of the Moscow principality and state structure of the Russian Empire, pushed the Russian government towards an anti-Jewish policy. Explaining the status of the Jews in the Russian Empire and its similarity to the status of serfs,

[484] Ibid., pp. 129-136.
[485] Gessen, pp. 175-176.
[486] Dubnow, p. 312.

Dubnow wrote: "The result of this policy was the creation of a special class of territorially limited urban serfs in a monarchy based on [countryside] serfs."[487]

Anti-Jewish sentiments in the western regions of Russia had to deal with economic competition and a desire to take over the production and sale of alcohol from the Jews. At the same time, the former population of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth "imported" new anti-Jewish prejudices to the Russian Empire, one of which was the blood libel.[488] The emergence of trials in Russia accusing Jews of religious crimes was preceded by the emergence of literature on the blood libel that circulated in the new territories. These prejudices influenced the Tsarist administration, as seen from a special report prepared by Senator Gavriil Derzhavin, which became a vivid expression of the Judeophobia dominant in government circles. Derzhavin's report officially voiced the accusation that the Jews were getting the peasants drunk and contributed to "the spread of belief in the bloody legend and the inculcation of a view of the Jews as the sworn enemies of Christians."[489] Thus, Derzhavin formulated the main theses of the "Jewish Question" in Russia, which from then on was based on two premises - "Jewish fanaticism" and "Jewish exploitation."[490]

These prejudices, as well as a distorted understanding of Jewish society, its difficult economic situation and unique social structure, became the basis of tsarist policy. Even the liberal-minded government of Tsar Alexander I, interested in improving the situation of the Jews, resorted to forceful resettlement from villages to cities, which, according to their plans, was helpful in reducing the "harmful" influence of the Jews on the peasants. Alexander I's government laid down new principles for solving the Jewish Question, many of which were implemented by his successor: the need to transform the Jewish way of life to make Jews useful citizens for the country; the use of violent and repressive methods in pursuing this policy; preference for the interests of the Christian population at the expense of the Jewish population; preservation of the Pale of Settlement.[491]

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[487] Dubnow, pp. 307-308.
[488] Kandel, essay 22.
[489] Gessen, p. 289.
[490] Ibid.
[491] Dubnow, pp. 392-410.

Using the ideas of his predecessor, Nicholas I, whose reign became the personification of despotism, rejected the previous "soft" methods of persuasion and consultation in favor of overt coercion and repression. The Tsar did not hide his hostility towards the Jews, calling them "leeches," sucking out all the strength and energy of the "unfortunate Russian people" to complete exhaustion.[492] Nicholas I and his government saw the Jews as a dangerous independent religious group, whose influence on the surrounding society was dangerous.[493] The high birth rate among Jews, in his opinion, represented a significant threat to the country and required a reduction in the Jewish population. The first step was the introduction of military service for Jews, to take away a significant part of the Jewish community's young population, cutting it off from Judaism and forcing them to convert to Christianity.[494]

Along with the policy of evicting Jews from rural areas, the government decided to select Jews based on their usefulness to the state. The Russian authorities considered those Jews who had a settled status and sufficient means of subsistence to be "useful"; the poor part of the population, the Jewish proletariat, were defined as "useless" or "harmful" and envisaged severe restrictions, including the expansion of military service and forced labor. By the mid-19th century, the Jewish population had become the most discriminated religious and national minority in Russia.

3. Anti-Semitic policy and ideology of late imperial Russia

Nicholas I's successor, Alexander II, also treated the Jews with distrust and hostility, stemming from the prejudices prevalent in Russian society, including the belief in ritual murders of Christians by Jews. However, on the advice of officials and given the need to attract Jewish capital for the country's modernization, Alexander was forced to lift some restrictions and allowed the wealthiest and most educated representatives of Jewry to integrate into Russian society. The merging of Jews with the Russian population, which the government of Nicholas I had tried to achieve through repressive methods, was now seen as possible through rewards for

[492] Ibid.

[493] Ibid., pp. 417-470
[494] Ibid.,

the correct, "moral" behavior of Jews, the meaning of which was their rejection of the Jewish way of life, and de facto, their Russification.[495]

Despite the gradual and partial nature of the lifting of restrictions on the Jewish population, in a very short period, enormous changes occurred in the lives of Russian Jews. It was associated with a sharp acceleration in the country's economic development generated by Alexander's reforms. Jewish entrepreneurs were at the origins of many industries, including the establishment of banks and joint-stock companies, the construction of railways, the development of shipping, the laying of the country's first oil pipeline, and the creation of a modern food industry.[496] For the first time in years of government experimentation with the Jewish community using repressive methods, the use of a non-violent, encouraging policy brought its first positive results, one of which was the cooperation of the Jewish intelligentsia and the government in implementing the Russification policy.[497]

However, most of the country's Jewish population remained restricted in their rights and did not trust the government. Prominent representatives of the Jewish community recommended that the Tsar complete the process of emancipation, following the example of Western European countries. Alexander II did not agree with these demands.[498] Gessen explains: "Having decisively rejected the idea of civil equality of the Jewish people with the corresponding groups of the so-called indigenous population, the government did not agree to make concessions in this matter even concerning the wealthiest and educated Jewish circles. It was ready to allow only partial concessions, mainly those that promised immediate material benefits to the state, and even then, with extreme caution."[499]

The cultural elite of Russia, including its most famous writers and poets, shared anti-Semitic prejudices and contributed to their spread in Russia. According to literary critic Zaslavsky, "Gogol, like Pushkin, can be called anti-Semites. The literature of their time did not consider it necessary to hide or disguise its feelings towards Jews. It expressed them frankly, simply and freely, called the Jews kikes and did not ask itself whether such an attitude towards

[495] Dubnow, p. 551.
[496] Kandel, essay 28.
[497] Dubnow, p. 603
[498] Gessen, p. 150
[499] Ibid., p.151

the people was offensive."[500] To this attitude was added an element of cynical exploitation of the Russian peasants by the Jews: the poet Nikolai Nekrasov, a singer of the suffering of the Russian people, contrasted it with "a financier Jew who exploits and robs without hesitation in order to invest the fruits of his extortion in a foreign bank."[501] Fyodor Dostoevsky openly spoke out against the Jewish people, accusing them of hatred towards the Russian people and warning of the danger of Jewish control over the world.

The government and the ruling elites accused the Jews of both the capitalist exploitation of the local population and the preparation of the revolution, of "merging" too slowly with the local population, and of the danger of an excessive Jewish presence. The government did not hide its dual attitude towards the Jews, which was expressed in maintaining their unequal position and demanding their assimilation as a condition for emancipation. Alexander III fully shared anti-Semitic prejudices, accusing Jews of "exploiting Russians," and privately reported: "Deep down in my heart, I am always glad when they beat Jews."[502] More traditional religious Judeophobia was also present in Tsar's worldview: "We must not forget that it was the Jews who crucified our Lord and spilled his priceless blood."[503]

The anti-Jewish pogroms of 1881-1884 became a turning point both in the history of the Jewish people and in the history of Russia itself. According to Dunow, the pogroms were carefully prepared and planned, and the authorities' inaction was deliberate.[504] During this period, the government decided on the goal of anti-Semitic policy - the gradual displacement of the Jewish population in the Pale of Settlement from Russia. Pobedonostsev, the ideologue of the regime, gave a laconic and exhaustive description of the government's plans for the Jews: "One-third will die out, one-third will move out, one-third will disappear without a trace into the surrounding population."[505] Beginning in the 1880s, the tsarist government encouraged Jewish emigration, trying to enlist the support of Jewish philanthropists from Western countries for this purpose, and even discussed this issue with the leader of the Zionist movement, Theodor

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[500] David Zaslavsky, Jews in Russian Literature (1923), Reprinted in *L'Haim*: https://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/133/zaslav.htm
[501] Polyakov, *History of antisemtism. The age of knowledge*, p. 352.
[502] Lev Berdnikov, "Alexander III and the Jews", *Notes on Jewish History*, No. 5-6 (223), May-June 2020, https://z.berkovich-zametki.com/y2020/nomer5_6/berdnikov/
[503] Dubnow, pp. 773-774.
[504] Ibid., p. 640.
[505] Kandel, essay 38.

Herzl.[506] The Russian press also made proposals to resettle Jews to Siberia or Central Asia, which the Minister of Internal Affairs had hinted at the time.[507]

The reign of the last Russian Tsar was marked by both the bloodiest and most sophisticated manifestations of anti-Semitism. Pogroms became a means of the government's struggle not only against the Jewish population but also against the revolutionary movement. Secret government agents were involved in organizing pogroms, the police printed leaflets calling for pogroms, and local authorities and military garrisons supported the pogromists. Nicholas II saw the Jews as the main enemies of his regime. He supported the creation of the Black Hundred movement, "Union of the Russian People," which aimed to fight revolutionaries and Jews. In a letter to his mother, Nicholas wrote: "The people were outraged by the impudence and audacity of the revolutionaries and socialists, and since 9/10 of them are Jews, all the anger fell on them - hence the pogroms."[508]

The attitude of the Tsar and his advisers towards the role of Jews in organizing the revolutionary movement in Russia was conspiratorial. In January 1906, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Count Lamsdorf, submitted a "Note on the Anarchists" in which he pointed out the leading role of Jewish capital in organizing unrest in Russia through financing, supplying weapons, and providing intellectual support to Jewish revolutionary organizations. According to him, these efforts aimed to overthrow the monarchy in Russia.[509] This report echoes another document fabricated by the Russian secret police, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." "The Protocols," whose central theme is a worldwide Jewish conspiracy to destroy Christianity and gain world domination through political, economic, and social manipulation, were conceived as one of the means to incite hatred against Jews. This forgery would gain worldwide significance after its publication in Europe and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s and was used in Nazi propaganda. The Soviet Union also used them in its subversive activities against the United States and Israel during the Cold War.

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[506] Yitzhak Maor, *The Zionist movement in Russia* (Jerusalem: Aliyah library, 1977), pp. 154-157.
[507] "I have already suggested to the Jewish Committee [attached to the Ministry] [2] to indicate those localities which, being thinly populated and in need of colonization, might admit of the settlement of the Jewish element… without injury to the original population." Dubnow, p. 686.
[508] Edward Bing, The Secret Letters of the Last Tsar (New York: Lohgmans, Green and Co, 1938), pp. 187-188.
[509] Vladimir Lamsdorf, "Note on Anarchists", *The Great Russian Encyclopedia*, https://bigenc.ru/b/zapiska-ob-anarkhistakh-511466

The final chord of the anti-Semitic policy of the tsarist regime was fully revealed in the case of Beilis, a Kyiv Jew accused of the ritual murder of a Christian teenager. Beilis's trial was accompanied by gross interference and manipulation by the authorities, who tried to prove his guilt and turned into a political struggle between the liberal part of society and the government backed by the Black Hundreds. By acquitting Beilis, the court did not reject the fact of the murder for ritual purposes, allowing the Tsar and other anti-Semites to accept the outcome of the trial with satisfaction.[510]

B. Evolution of anti-Semitism as political force in post-Soviet Russia

Pre-revolutionary ideas continue to exert influence in post-Soviet Russia, where elements of old myths, xenophobic narratives, and ideologies have been revived. The collapse of the Soviet Union dismantled the ideological and social frameworks that had long restrained mass sentiment. In the vacuum of post-Soviet identity, and amid the economic and political crises of the 1990s, xenophobia, nationalism, and various conspiracy theories quickly gained traction. Antisemitic prejudice reemerged with renewed legitimacy, albeit in new forms.

As Zvi Gitelman writes “the main themes of anti-Semitism in post-Soviet Russia include notions of Jewish privilege, dominance, a global conspiracy, and the idea that Jews were both the driving force of Bolshevism and the oligarchs who ruined Russia during the era of wild capitalism”.[511] One of the leaders of the anti-Semitic organization “Pamyat” , Konstantin Ostashvili, claimed that "the Zionist trade and financial mafia is taking over the spiritual and economic life of the country." He accused Jews of being "overrepresented in all spheres of power and public life" and demanded "proportional representation of peoples in all hierarchies."[512] In a widely discussed article, "Rusophobia," mathematician Igor Shafarevich wrote that the "Jewish question" dominates public debate, while the "Russian question" is not even acknowledged. He argued that the "ideology of small nations" threatens to destroy "the religious and national foundations of life."[513]

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[510] Polyakov, *History of antisemtism. The age of knowledge*, pp. 397-398
[511] Gitelman, pp. 207–208.
[512] Ibid.
[513] Igor Shafarevich, Rusophobia (Moscow: Alistorus, 2013).

The return to images and stories that circulated in tsarist Russia was indicative. The "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" were increasingly disseminated among nationalist circles and in "alternative" media, and myths about ritual murders and a global Jewish conspiracy were revived. In the 1990s, the "Protocols" were published multiple times. Modern anti-Semites used the entire arsenal of tools tested by their tsarist predecessors: the distribution of anti-Semitic leaflets, anti-Semitic articles in the central press, the organization of marches and street actions, physical violence against Jews, attacks on Jewish institutions, including synagogues, Jewish schools and cultural centers, threats and attempts to carry out pogroms.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, the state of anti-Semitism in 1999 was considered critical due to its transformation into a politically legitimate phenomenon.[514] Pre-revolutionary forms of Judeophobia, based on religious and ethnocultural ideas, as well as the Soviet "anti-Zionism," disguised as a "political" position, merged to create an ideological mix of post-Soviet anti-Semitism. In the modern antisemitic "ecosystem," nationalist rhetoric coexists with religious intolerance, anti-capitalist ideology, anti-Western narratives, and conspiracy theories.

Anti-Semitism as a political force in post-Soviet Russia finds its source and inspiration in the final years of the Soviet period, particularly the era of perestroika, which saw a resurgence of openly anti-Semitic ideologies. The ultranationalist “Pamyat” movement played a key role in the formation of post-Soviet political anti-Semitism. It’s ideology combined classic conspiracy theories and nationalist rhetoric. Anti-Semitism has also found fertile ground on the political terrain, on the right but also on the left, within the Communist Party and its ideological allies. On the far right, it will find new legitimacy among nationalist and imperialist groups. This section explores how these various currents transformed anti-Semitism into a political tool.

1. The emergence of political anti-Semitism in the context of perestroika: the ideology of ‘Pamyat’ movement and its influence

The progenitor of political anti-Semitism in the post-Soviet period was the ultra-nationalist movement "Pamyat", which emerged in the USSR in the late 1980s. The organization

[514] Stella Rock, “Russian revisionism: Holocaust denial and the new nationalist historiography”, *Patterns of prejudic*e, February 2011,p. 74.

openly declared its ideological kinship with the Black Hundreds and the Union of the Russian People of the early 20th century, developing radically anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist, and anti-democratic rhetoric. The key element in "Pamyat" ideology was the gradual movement toward the complete idealization of monarchy - "the embodiment of the power of the people" according to its leader Dmitry Vasiliev - including the tsarist attitude towards Jews. Everything that followed the overthrow of the tsars - democracy, communism, liberalism - was perceived as a distortion of the Russian essence and a result of a Zionist conspiracy. In this context, democracy and "cosmopolitanism" became associated with Jews, and the October Bolshevik Revolution was portrayed as the result of a Zionist conspiracy.

The central place in the propagandist efforts of "Pamyat" was dedicated to the popularization of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion." Vasilyev actively propagated its central conspiracy theories—such as a supposed plot by the Jewish elite to enslave humanity, undermine cultural and moral values, and destroy Russian statehood—through his speeches, publications, and lectures. This doctrine became a universal explanation for all troubles, from economic turmoil to spiritual and identity crises and Chernobyl nuclear disaster.[515]

The second most important element of "Pamyat" activities was the strategy of intimidation.[516] With the relaxation of censorship in the era of glasnost, the organization began to actively use direct pressure - rallies, threats, late-night phone calls, and violent attacks on the apartments of Jewish intellectuals and journalists. In an atmosphere of growing hostility and the absence of an effective state response, the level of fear among the Jewish population of the USSR reached its highest level since Stalin's' era Doctors' Plot; as Korey put it: «Pamyat» was the focus of Jewish fears. An extremist expression of Russian nationalism, it was rooted in a social soil that had been nourished by rich nutrients of bigotry during 1967-1986. The vicious antisemitic chauvinism with the demonology of Zionism at its core, so pervasive in the propaganda of the Brezhnev era, took on a life of its own during glasnost. Pamyat was the most definitive expression of the new extremism.»[517]

[515] Korey, pp. 129-130.
[516] Goldanskiy, "Anti-Semitism, The return of a Russian Nightmare".
[517] Korey, pp.125-126.

"Pamyat" rhetoric was openly totalitarian. They demanded to limit Jewish participation in public life, created lists "of "hidden "Jews," and put forward a slogan "Get rid of all the Jews."

The organization actively promoted the idea of" "de-Zionization" of the USSR, opposing Jewish emigration and demanding to restrict Jewish participation in cultural and scientific life[518]. According to their official platform, Jews (including so-called "half-Jews" and "quarter-Jews") were subject to exceptional control. One of the tasks of new "Pamyat" members was to provide information about Jews who were allegedly hiding their nationality. Although the Soviet authorities were mostly inactive, Jewish activists appealed to state structures with a call to stop the growth of anti-Semitic aggression. Nevertheless, until 1990, the reaction was sluggish.

Despite its radical rhetoric and mass street activity, “Pamyat” showed extremely weak election results.[519] In the elections to the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR in 1989, candidates supported by the organization did not win a single victory. In 1990, in the elections to the Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR, out of seventy supporters of the patriotic bloc, which included ultra-nationalists, only two got elected. In national campaigns, the organization and its allies received 7 to 11% of the votes, thus falling of significant political representation. Thus, despite its loudness and aggressiveness, Pamyat remained a marginal movement in institutional politics, unable to convert street mobilization and radical slogans into electoral success.

Although the ‘Pamyat’ movement failed to gain significant public support at the ballot boxes, its ultranationalist and antisemitic ideas found resonance in neo-Stalinist and nationalist circles, including within the military, laying the ideological groundwork for the antisemitic rhetoric that would later emerge among Russia’s opposition political parties.

2. Anti-Semitism from the left: Communist party and its ideological allies

By the end of the 1990s, anti-Semitism had finally become an integral element of the ideology and propaganda of political parties represented in parliament and enjoying mass support

[518] Ibid., p. 138.
[519] Ibid., pp. 171-172.

from voters. The anti-Semitism of the political parties was initially veiled: it was not contained in their official programs, which must be presented to the Minister of Justice to verify their compliance with the Russian constitution and legislation. Nevertheless, as Likhachev emphasizes, "this feature also contains a serious danger: camouflaged version of anti-Semitism thereby acquires "respectability," legitimacy within the political field."[520] Political anti-Semitism in Russia has found expression both in parties founded on communist ideology and in parties with a right-wing radical orientation.

As mentioned above, after the collapse of the USSR and the suspension of the CPSU, Gennady Zyuganov became the new leader of the Communist Party of Russia. Under Zyuganov's leadership, the CPRF became a conservative-patriotic party that appealed to Soviet nostalgia and rejected the principle of internationalism and radical left-wing views on economic issues: "The anti-Semitic position fits quite logically into modern communist ideology. Moderate anti-Semitism in domestic policy and loudly declared anti-Zionism in foreign policy are often associated (and quite justifiably) with the late Soviet regime by both ordinary people and politicians."[521]

The leaders of the CPRF openly adhered to a nationalist ideology borrowed from the Stalinist legacy of National Bolshevism, which emphasized the central role of the Russian people. At the same time, the CPRF continued the course of radical anti-Zionism of the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1990s, the CPRF initiated broad coalitions - with the participation of nationalist movements such as the Russian National Cathedral, National Salvation Front, and People's Patriotic Union of Russia. Politicians of the most extremist persuasion took part in this coalition, including neo-Nazi RNE and radical antisemitic figures such as Krasnodar Krai Governor Kondratenko. The CPRF was the largest and most organized party (half a million members), which took part in all election campaigns, gradually increasing its faction in the State Duma. In the parliamentary elections 1993, the CPRF received 12.4% of the votes, in 1995 - 22.3%, and in 1999 - 24.29%.[522] However, since the 2003 elections, the party has not received more than 12% of the vote. Under Putin's authoritarian regime, it has become what is called in

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[520] Vyacheslav Likhachev, *Political anti-Semitism in modern Russia*, (Moscow: Human Rights Bureau, Academia, 2003) p. 8.
[521] Ibid. p. 10.
[522] "What were the results of the State Duma elections of the previous convocations?", *Ria-Novosti*, December 8, 2007, https://ria.ru/20071208/91519653.html

Russia "systemic opposition" - a party that is allowed to participate in elections in exchange for complete loyalty to the authorities.

The leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Gennady Zyuganov, preferred to avoid open anti-Semitic statements and generally used more abstract terms, such" as "subversive forces" and "the global backstage."[523] However, his associates did not shy away from anti-Semitic expressions, blaming "Yids" "and "Zionists" for Russia's woes. In 1998, the crude anti-Semitic statements of the Communist Party member, General Albert Makashov, who proposed creating" a "Movement against the Yids," caused a wide resonance in Russia and abroad. However, his statements were neither condemned by parliament nor subjected to official investigation.[524] Makashov called for establishing quotas on the number of Jews allowed in government positions and criticized the media for being under Jewish/Israeli influence. Responding to criticism, Makashov told a meeting of Russian National Unity that "the reason the Jews are so impudent… is that none of us has knocked on their door, none of us has ever peed in their window..." At a conference in Novocherkassk, he defiantly declared, "We will be anti-Semites, and we will win!"[525] The Communist Party refused to criticize or disavow Makashov, although Gennady Zyuganov, its leader, later agreed that Makashov's remarks had been intemperate. He insisted, however, that Zionism is "the theory and practice of the most aggressive imperialist circles striving for world domination. In this respect, it is akin to fascism. The only difference between them is that Hitler's Nazism… sought world domination openly, while Zionism… operates covertly."

In December 1998, the another member Communist Party and the Chairman of the State Duma Security Committee, Viktor Ilyukhin, argued that the "large-scale genocide" of Russians would have been less massive if "the president and the government had representatives of other nationalities, and not exclusively Jews, although this is a talented group"[526]; the next day, the Duma rejected a motion to condemn Ilyukhin.[527]

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[523] Ibid, p. 11.
[524] "Anti-Semitism is legalized. Makashov has been rehabilitated", *Kommersant*, n. 41, March 16, 1999. https://archive.ph/20130417001739/http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/214918/print#selection-95.7-95.45
[525] Ibid.
[526] Gitelman, pp. 433-434.
[527] Ibid.

While the Duma refused to condemn anti-Semitic politicians, their rhetoric did not attract Russian voters. In the 1999 elections, Makashov ran on a separate list to the Duma, whose goal was to fight against "Zionists," but was not elected. Other left-wing parties, such as Anpilov's "Labor Russia" and Terekhov's "Officers' Union," known for their anti-Semitic views, were also unsuccessful. According to Likhachev, "practice has shown that focusing on anti-Semitism is not profitable. In cases where left-wing patriots have tried to openly exploit this theme as a basis or an essential component of their propaganda, they have been disappointed. Electoral support for open radical anti-Semitism is minimal, and the risk of being subjected to public ostracism is quite significant."[528] It is important to emphasize that openly anti-Semitic parties oriented toward communist ideology and the Soviet past, such as Trudovaya Rossiya and the Union of Officers, have ceased to play a significant role in politics and have not been elected to the State Duma since the early 2000s. "Thus, the communist parties of post-Soviet Russia continued the traditions of anti-Semitism inherited from both the Soviet era and Tsarist Russia. At the same time, they serve as a link between Soviet anti-Semitism, disguised as anti-Zionism, and modern far-left ideology, in which the anti-Zionist agenda plays a central role."

3. Anti-Semitism from the right: nationalist, imperialist and ultra-right movements

Another category of parties known for their antisemitic views adheres to the ideology of Russian national patriotism. In the early post-Soviet years, there were two main strands of this ideology. The first is imperial, prioritizing the interests of the state, its military power, and territorial expansion, while emphasizing the state's multinational character. The second places the nation above the state, defining national interests in ethnic terms and viewing the nation as an ethnic community. Vladimir Putin’s worldview reflects a fusion of imperial and nationalist ideologies.[529] However, it was not Putin, but Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the founder and long-time leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, who first emerged as a key forerunner of this ideological synthesis. As early as the beginning of the 1990s, Zhirinovsky, known for his

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[528] Vyacheslav Likhachev, *Political anti-Semitism in modern Russia*, pp. 13-14.
[529] Andrei Kolsnikov, “Blood and Iron: How Nationalist Imperialism Became Russia’s State Ideology”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 6, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/11/blood-and-iron-how-nationalist-imperialism-became-russias-state-ideology?lang=en, also Peter Dickinson, ‘All of Ukraine is ours’: Putin’s Russian imperialism is now on full display”, *Atlantic Council*, June 23, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/all-of-ukraine-is-ours-putins-russian-imperialism-is-now-on-full-display/,

provocative and populist style, had already incorporated elements of imperialism, nationalism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism into his political platform.[530]

In his provocative statements, Zhirinovsky used almost all existing anti-Semitic stereotypes, both Soviet and pre-revolutionary. He blamed the Jews for the 1917 coup, for the establishment of democracy, for the formation of communist ideology, for complete control over the media, and the dominance of American and European politics. In the first years of his political activity and especially after the parliamentary elections 1993, when the LDPR gained almost 23% of the votes, more than other parties,[531] the phenomenon of Zhirinovsky caused serious concerns both in Russia and abroad.[532] Zhirinovsky openly called for the establishment of a dictatorship in Russia and cited Hitler as an example to follow, believing that "in general, his ideology did not contain anything negative in itself."[533] The leader of democratic reforms, Yegor Gaidar, drew a parallel between Zhirinovsky's campaign in 1993 and Hitler's in 1929.[534] One of the leading experts on anti-Semitism and former director of the ADL, William Corey, not ruling out Zhirinovsky's victory in the 1996 presidential elections, warned that it could be a "cataclysmic" event for Russian Jews.[535]

However, these predictions did not come true; on the contrary, Zhirinovsky's party was never able to achieve such electoral success again: in the parliamentary elections in 1995, it received 11.2% of the vote, and in 1999 - only about 6%. In 1994, a VTsIOM poll showed that 63% of voters did not trust Zhirinovsky.[536] Moreover, in the early 2000s, Zhirinovsky was perceived not as a real political threat, but as a figure whose purpose is to generate political provocations and scandals. Thus, in 2003, Likhachev noted that "anti-Semitism is not fundamental for Zhirinovskyites and does not have a clear ideological foundation."[537] After he died in 2022, he was called by the Russian press "the great buffoon of Russian politics" who

[530] Vyacheslav Likhachev, *Political anti-Semitism in modern Russia*, pp. 14-15.
[531] “What were the results of the State Duma elections of the previous convocations?”, *Ria-Novosti*.
[532] Korey, pp. 223-230.
[533] Jacob W. Kipp, "The Zhirinovsky Threat," *Foreign Affairs,* May-June 1995, p. 82.
[534] Michael Specter, "Zhirinovsky and the Motherland," *New York Times Magazine,* 19 June 1994, 33.
[535] Korey, p. 223.
[536] "Zhirinovsky Cult Grows: All Power to the Leader," *New York Times, 5* April 1994, https://www.nytimes.com/1994/04/05/world/zhirinovsky-cult-grows-all-power-to-the-leader.html
[537] Likhachev, p. 16.

"made himself from scratch - with the help of the KGB, of course," and served as "an ideal toilet for draining the discontent of the masses."[538]

Vladimir Zhirinovsky and his party were assigned the role of a simulacrum of a political party, while the KGB determined this role itself. During the years of perestroika, journalistic investigations pointed to Zhirinovsky's connection with the KGB. According to some reports, he was even expelled from the ranks of his own party for collaborating with the KGB. As noted by the well-known journalist and researcher Evgeniya Albats, the goal of the KGB was to create "puppets and political doubles, to oust the democrats from politics using the slogans of perestroika and glasnost."[539] This role of a political double remained in demand in the Russian political system, which by the early 2000s had turned into "an "imitation democracy."[540] The LDPR, like the CPRF, became a party of the "systemic opposition," whose role was to imitate the multi-party system and pluralism to cover up the consolidation of Putin's personalistic regime. Thus, during Putin's rule, Vladimir Zhirinovsky transformed from the leader of a radical opposition party into a legitimate politician who constitutes a part of an authoritarian system, while not losing the right to an outrageous style and scandalous statements. No less interesting is the evolution of society's attitude toward Zhirinovsky. In the last decade, and especially in the three years since he died in 2022, positive assessments of his views have grown significantly in the eyes of Russians to 66%, more than during his lifetime.[541]

In addition to the LDPR, numerous parties and movements espouse an imperial-nationalist orientation, but they lack parliamentary representation and lost their influence in the 2000s. Unlike them, the Eurasianist movement and its founder, Alexander Dugin, managed to become one of the influential players in the public space, contributing to the ideological aspect of Putin's regime. The school of Eurasianism, whose founder, Lev Gumilev, gained popularity in the 1990s, became an alternative doctrine to Westernism and Slavophilism, two traditional

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[538] Vladimir Marchenko,"Zhirinovsky made himself - with the help of the KGB": Who was the "great jester" Russian politics?", *BUSINESS Online*, April 9, 2022, https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/546295.
[539] Evgenia Albats, *Delayed action mine* (Moscow, RUSSLIT, 1992), p. 233.
[540] Liliya Shevtsova, *Lonely Power: Why Russia did not become the West and why Russia has difficulty with the West* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010), p. 15.
[541] "Russians Trust Zhirinovsky More After His Death," RBC, April 3, 2025. https://www.rbc.ru/politics/03/04/2025/67ed70199a794768273f43f4 According to the head of VTsIOM, Valery Fedorov, who conducted the survey: "Vladimir Zhirinovsky, once the most scandalous and outrageous of Russian politicians, after his death strangely turned into a paragon of patriotism and strategic foresight."

schools of thought in Russia since the mid-19th century. As Likhachev explains, "The idea of a global Eurasian civilization, different from both European democracy and Asian despotism, explained the historical path of the Russian Empire - the Soviet Union - the Russian Federation, flattered the Russian citizen, gave him a basis for pride. Vague provisions allowed everyone to understand the ideology of Eurasianism at their discretion."[542]

Dugin began his political activity in the late 1980s in the "Pamyat" movement. Dugin's anti-Semitism comes from his philosophical and esoteric teachings, which define Judaism as an anti-traditional religion, the purpose of which he interprets as follows:

> "Jewish eschatology, taken at the deepest level, not only allows ritual genocide, but insists on it, justifying its necessity with a whole chain of consistent and, in a sense, logical identifications. It is quite natural that, based on such a vision, an Orthodox Jew cannot feel anything towards all other nations except endless, fierce, "sacred" hatred, which, at the same time, is elevated to a "sacred dignity." – After all, the destruction of the nations of the Great Mixture is the guarantee of the coming of the Messiah, the beginning of the great Shabbat."[543]

In his article "Jews and Eurasia" (1997), Dugin puts forward a new concept of Jews, dividing them into two groups: "Eurasian" Jews, useful for Russia, and "Western" Jews. "Eurasian" Jews are distinguished by their mysticism, religious fanaticism, extreme idealism, and self-sacrifice; they include the Hasidim movement, the Orthodox, the Kabbalists, and their secular form, the Bolsheviks and radical Zionists. Western Jews are supporters "of "rational" Judaism, which in its secular version gave rise to capitalism, materialism, and democracy, which does not prevent them "from lashing out at Jewish bankers, politicians, or journalists in the spirit of classical anti-Semitism."[544] "In dividing Jews into 'useful' and 'useless' for Russia, Dugin resurrects the tsarist regime's justification for selective treatment of Jews."

As in the case of Zhirinovsky, Dugin has transformed from a member of marginal parties and an exponent of outlandish views into an influential public figure and respectful

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[542] Likhachev, p. 18.
[543] Altxander Dugin, *Metaphysics of the nation in the Zohar - Conservative Revolution* (Moscow: Arktogeya, 1994) p. 279
[544] Vyacheslav Likhachev, "Mythologem about "two Jews" within the framework of right-wing radical political ideologies of modern Russia", *Tirosh. Works on Judaic Studies. Issue IV* (Moscow: 2000), pp. 279-287.

"philosopher" who is constantly present in the media. Dugin has been invited to teach at the most prestigious Moscow universities. Legitimization of such controversial figures as Dugin, Zhirinovsky, and other "patriots" testifies to the ideological transformation of Putin's regime and its primary vector – neo-imperial, nationalistic, and at the same time profoundly archaic set of beliefs and convictions. This argument will be treated more broadly in the second part of the essay.

At the end of the 1990s, radical parties and movements had become an integral part of the political system of modern Russia, combining participation in parliamentary elections (usually without electoral success) with activities on the edge of the law, and often crossing it. Some radical national patriots focused on non-parliamentary methods of struggle, and some groups did not hide the fact that they allowed for the possibility of coming to power through an armed coup. According to Likhachev, the participation of these movements in election campaigns reflected the fact that radicalism had become the political norm of the first decade of post-Soviet Russia:

> "The entire political system was extremely radical, radicalism was not a marginal phenomenon, but part of the "mainstream" of those years. In this context, it is quite natural that right-wing radicals, ultra-nationalists, and religious fundamentalists existed virtually unhindered…Due to the peculiarities of political tradition, mentality, etc., it is practically impossible to create a movement in Russia that takes an ultra-nationalist position and at the same time does not share anti-Semitic stereotypes to one degree or another."[545]

Alexander Barkashov's "Russian National Unity" was one of such extremist movements. The ideology of the RNE is a mixture of outright Nazism and traditional Black Hundred nationalism. Members of the movement defended the purity of the Russian nation and consistently took anti-communist and anti-liberal positions. The RNE charter states that the movement does not accept Gypsies, natives of the Caucasus region, and Jews, including those

[545] Vyacheslav Likhachev, "Mythologem about "two Jews" within the framework of right-wing radical political ideologies of modern Russia", *Tirosh. Works on Judaic Studies. Issue IV* (Moscow: 2000), pp. 23-24.

baptized.[546] The members of the organization were engaged in training in the use of weapons and power sports to prepare for a civil war.[547] The movement had its newspaper, "Russian Order," the circulation of which sometimes reached half a million copies. In 1999, the court annulled the official registration" of "Russian Order" using a formal pretext. By the end of the 1990s, RNE had about 1,000 branches in 64 regions of Russia and became very popular among young people. When joining the organization, candidates were required to take a "Russian" oath to fight the dictatorship of American-Israeli Zionism."[548] "RNE's attempts to get its representatives into the Duma, including through electoral associations with other parties, ended unsuccessfully.

The National Bolshevik Party (NBP) of Eduard Limonov differed from the RNE in its pro-Soviet orientation and cultural nationalism, as opposed to ethnic and racial nationalism. The leaders of the NBP broke away from Zhirinovsky's LDPR and established a party whose ideology incorporated elements of anti-globalism, "Che Guevarism," and Trotskyism while retaining a nationalist element, which manifested itself mainly in demand to protect the rights of the Russian population in the former Soviet republics. Curiously, Aleksandr Dugin was a member of the NBP until 1998. Likhachev noted the contradictory and eclectic nature of the NBP ideology, as well as the fact that anti-Semitism was not the official policy of the movement but was widespread among its members and sometimes appeared in the party press.[549] In the early 2000s, NBP branches existed in Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Thanks to successful propaganda and the style of its actions, the NBP attracted young people. However, due to repeated registration refusals, the NBP could not run in the elections.

At the extreme of the far-right spectrum were racist parties such as the People's National Party (NNP), the Freedom Party (PS), and the Russian National Union (RNS). The first two parties worked closely with skinheads, a relatively large youth movement whose main activity was beating up members of various national minorities. Anti-Semitism is part of the ideology of these movements, along with Islamophobia, neo-Nazism, white racism, and fascism. These and other movements of a similar nature have attempted to unite to participate in elections. For

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[546] "Anti-Semitism in the 1990s–2000s", *Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia, https://eleven.co.il/diaspora/judeophobia-anti-semitism/15533/.*
[547] Yuri Petukhov, «Hope of Russia [interview with Nikitenko K.]», *Voice of the Universe*, 1994 No. 3.
[548] "Anti-Semitism in the 1990s–2000s", *Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia.*
[549] Vyacheslav Likhachev, *Political anti-Semitism in modern Russia*, pp. 28-29.

example, the National Sovereign Party of Russia was granted election registration in 2002, only to have it revoked a few months later due to technical reasons.[550]

In addition to radical nationalist movements, anti-Semitic ideology characterizes a wide range of Orthodox-fundamentalist and Black Hundreds organizations that prefer to deal with historical rather than current political issues. The Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods (SPB), the Union of Orthodox Citizens, the Union of Christian Revival, the Union of Orthodox Banner-Bearers, and the party "For Sacred Rus'" generally did not conduct political activities. However, their leaders did not refrain from openly anti-Semitic statements.[551]

While many of these extremist parties failed to achieve lasting political success, their rhetoric normalized anti-Semitism in public discourse and created a fertile environment for its gradual penetration into the worldview of the political elite and wider segments of Russian society, a phenomenon explored in the next sections.

C. Evolution and Dissemination of Antisemitic Sentiments in Russia

1. The role of the press in the dissemination of antisemitic rhetoric in post-Soviet Russia

Despite the end of official state support for anti-Semitism in post-Soviet Russia, vulgar and aggressive Judeophobia continued to circulate in Russian media. According to the "Evreiskaya Gazeta," from August 1991 to July 1992, at least 56 Russian newspapers and magazines published materials with anti-Semitic content, including large-circulation papers such as "Sovetskaya Rossiya" with a million readers and "Nash Sovremennik" with a circulation of 164,000 copies. The Anti-Fascist Center of the Russian Federation made similar estimations: according to its data, in Moscow alone in August 1992, 36 newspapers published blatant Judeophobic materials. "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" reported that racist rhetoric was present in 35 "nationalist-patriotic" newspapers in Moscow, 14 in St. Petersburg, and 13 in other cities of Russia and Belarus.[552]

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[550] Ibid, p. 34.
[551] A. Simonovich, “Birthday of the Leader “, Era of Russia, n. 11-12, June 2002.
[552] Korey, p 206.

During Gorbachev's perestroika, the so-called literary magazines controlled by the Union of Writers of the RSFSR, such as "Nash Sovremennik," "Molodaya Gvardiya," "Moskva," and "Literaturnaya Rossiya" played a leading role in the dissemination of antisemitic prejudices. These publications reproduced the rhetoric of the Russian Judeophobic press in the late 19th century. Thanks to glasnost, they significantly expanded their audience, and the combined circulation of these magazines reached almost 2 million copies. The magazines "Molodaya Gvardiya" and "Nash Sovremennik" published articles that described Jews in derogatory and mocking language.[553] Curiously, the publications themselves rejected accusations of anti-Semitism. In September 1989, to answer accusations of spreading anti-Semitism, 300 members of the Writers' Union sent a letter to Mikhail Gorbachev arguing that the magazines were "fighting the plague of Russophobia," accusing "some Jews" of arrogance and readiness "at any moment to choose a more dignified life abroad."[554]

"Nash Sovremennik" editor Sergei Vikulov openly defended the “Pamyat” movement and criticized other media outlets for exposing its anti-Semitic ideology. Similarly, "Molodaya Gvardia" claimed that Jewish organizations "openly cultivate a sense of superiority" and "instill Russophobia and chauvinism."[555]" "Nash Sovremennik" published materials by Vladimir Begoun, a Soviet anti-Semitic propagandist who borrowed text for his publications from Adolf Hitler's Mein Kampf. In 1990, "Molodaya Gvardiya" went even further: the June issue contained an article accusing Soviet reformer Alexander Yakovlev of leading a Masonic lodge that had colluded with “global Zionism”.[556] The ideological orientation of right-wing magazines was aptly characterized by Gennady Kuznetsov, an actor and journalist, who described them as embodying “reactionary romanticism that promotes patriarchy and isolation from the world at the end of the 20th century.” According to him, "neo-Slavophile slogans" aimed at fighting foreigners and the intelligentsia are "close to the position of neo-Stalinists," and the positions defended by "Nash Sovremennik" and "Molodaya Gvardia" are "a form of neo-Slavophilism, nationalistic utopianism, behind which rabid bureaucracy easily hides."[557]

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[553] Korey, pp. 149-150.
[554] Korey, p. 152.
[555] Ibid., p. 150.
[556] *Molodaya gvardia,* n. 6 (1990), pp.184-94.
[557] Josephine Woll, "'Glasnost' and Soviet Culture," *Problems of Communism*, November-December 1989, p. 47.

"Sovetskaya Rossiya," which became the platform of the conservative wing of the CPSU, claimed that "Zionists are penetrating the highest echelons of the state," and a few weeks later, "Pravda" noted that among the 1.5 million Jews in the USSR, it was impossible to determine how many were Zionists. The same Pravda, which remained the official organ of the CPSU, published an article entitled "A Satanic Tribe?", which claimed that Hasidim allegedly practiced ritual murders based on "top-secret data" it received from the KGB. This publication provoked only a mild reaction from the Foreign Ministry, which expressed "astonishment and confusion" but did not take any action. The US State Department described the article as "virulently anti-Semitic" and reported that the issue was raised with the Russian authorities.[558]

Many famous Russian writers supported the campaign in defense of "Pamyat" and used virulent anti-Semitic rhetoric. Viktor Astafyev accused Jews of organizing the murder of the royal family as a "ritual act." Valentin Rasputin, a literary celebrity of the late 1980s and early 1990s, was convinced that "Jews played a major role" in the Bolshevik Revolution and the Red Terror that followed. He claimed: "In this country, these are Jewish sins, because many Jewish leaders took part in the terror, in the repressions against the kulaks, the peasants..."[559] Stanislav Kunyaev, editor-in-chief of Nash Sovremennik, declared in June 1989 that “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion “was "a genuine document, written by a brilliant intellect and an almost satanic will."[560]

Journalist Alexander Prokhanov also exploited anti-Semitic imagery: in his journalism, Jews were depicted as destroyers of the "Russian soul." On television, theater director Sergei Kurginyan systematically exploited anti-Zionist stereotypes. The leaders of the antisemitic propaganda in media were the weekly conservative nationalist newspaper "Zavtra" (circulation of up to 100 thousand copies) and pro-communist "Duel" (up to 12 thousand). According to Vyacheslav Likhachev, "Duel" became the leading publication in Russia promoting the mythology of Holocaust revisionism.[561] Prokhanov utilized the Internet as a platform to

[558] Korey, pp. 212-213.
[559] Bill Keller, "Russian Nationalists: Yearning For An Iron Hand," *The New York Times Magazine*, 28 January 1990, 18-21, 45-50.
[560] Korey, p. 155.
[561] Likhachev, *Political anti-Semitism in modern Russia,* p. 51.

disseminate Holocaust revisionism.[562] The nationalist press - "Nashe Otechestvo," "Era Rossii," "Slavyanin," and "Alex-Inform" - published xenophobic materials, including phantasmagoric theories about "Jews who descended from swamp monkeys."[563]

Radical nationalist parties also owned newspapers, among which a special place of "honor" belonged to the "Russian Order" of RNE with a circulation of up to 500 thousand copies. The paper accused Jews of promoting a "god-fighting civilization."[564] The racist newspaper "I am Russian" spoke of "Yeltsin's Jewry" pursuing "anti-Russian policies."[565] The neo-pagan newspaper "Russian Truth" called Christianity "a religion invented by Jews for slaves" and accused the Old Testament of "animal hatred for everything non-Jewish.[566] On the other end of the spectrum, "Orthodox nationalist newspapers portrayed the Jewish Messiah as the Antichrist and called for violence, claiming that "killing Jews is good and right."[567]

Civil society, mainly representatives of the Jewish community, tried to resist the uncontrolled circulation of anti-Semitic literature. "Mezdunarodnaya Evreiskaya Gazeta" (MEG), founded in 1990 in Moscow, published a list of anti-Semitic newspapers in 1991, using as a primary criterion the publication of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion." The "Pamyat" movement, included in this list, filed a libel suit against MEG. The trial turned into a discussion of the authenticity of the Protocols; all three experts invited to the trial acknowledged the forged nature of the Protocols, but the court's final decision shocked representatives of the Jewish community: the claim was rejected on the grounds of freedom of speech. According to the participants in the process, the court chairperson made the decision after consulting with higher authorities.

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[562] Pavel Polyan, "Anti-Semitism in Russia: the day before yesterday, yesterday, today, tomorrow...", *Historical expertise, 2023, https://www.istorex.org/post/полян-п-м-антисемитизм-в-россии-позавчера-вчера-сегодня-завтра*

[563] *Era of Russia,* No. 12 (80), June 2002.

[564] Likhachev, *Political anti-Semitism in modern Russia,* p. 53.

[565] V. Baryshenko, "On criminal immigration policy", *I am Russian*, No. 11 (93), June 2002.

[566] *Russian guerilla*, № 14, March 2002. Typical quote from the newspaper: "So, comrade, with all your might, bring closer the day when, under the boot of a pogrom, the crystal tinkling of the glass of Jewish houses and shops will be heard, when the last synagogues will disappear in the ruins and over the chimneys of the cremation furnaces of new Auschwitzs and Sobibors will once again rise into a cheerful smoke. Bring closer the great day of reckoning of the Jewish people for all the evil they have caused to humanity. The day of the Jewish "Final Solution" is approaching!"

[567] Likhachev, *Political anti-Semitism in modern Russia,* p. 54-55.

Other court decisions also demonstrated a tolerant attitude towards manifestations of anti-Semitism. For example, in May 1993, a Moscow court found one of the “Pamyat” militants guilty of participating in a raid on the “Moskovsky Komsomolets” newspaper; the judges ruled a suspended sentence.[568] Judicial leniency towards manifestations of anti-Semitism is reminiscent of the ambiguous decisions of the courts in the Russian Empire. The ambivalent approach of courts on disseminating the "Protocols" and other manifestations of anti-Semitism was among the reasons for the continuation of the phenomenon.

The anti-Semitic press of the 1990s was not a marginal phenomenon. Its ideological roots go back to the pre-revolutionary tradition and the Soviet anti-Zionist campaign. Thanks in large part to the ongoing efforts of anti-Semitic media outlets, anti-Semitism has never left the public space in Russia.

2. Faith and hatred: the confessional diversity of antisemitic ideology

In the 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) became one of the active propagators of anti-Semitism in Russia - a fact recognized by several priests.[569] The leadership of the ROC has never revised the "Jewish question" following the example of the Catholic and Protestant churches. The concepts that form the core of the Orthodox faith are not subject to rethinking, and any innovations are seen as compromising the "purity" of faith. The Church's long-term dependence on the tsarist and then, to an even greater extent, Soviet power hindered the development of theological thought and increased the servility of the church leadership.[570]

Likhachev identifies three ideological groups within the Orthodox Church: "liberals," "fundamentalists," and the "nomenklatura-clerical center ."The "liberal" movement, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s under the influence of the dissident movement, advocated a return to the ideas of the General Council of 1917-1918 - the abolition of synodal governance and the separation of Church and state. Representatives of this wing also called for a revision of

[568] *Forward,* 7 May 1993, and «Security forces in Russia”, Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada, https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/irbc/1994/en/30160
[569] A. Borisov, On nationalism in the Russian Orthodox Church - Does Russia need Hitler? (Moscow: Pik, 1996) p. 194.
[570] Likhachev, *Political anti-Semitism in modern Russia,* p. 71.

the anti-Judaic provisions of Orthodox teaching along the lines of Western churches. However, remaining in the minority, they had no real influence on church policy.

The second group - the "fundamentalists"- is much more influential and criticizes the church leadership for excessive modernism. One of the recognized authorities in this camp was the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg and Ladoga Ivan (Snychev), known for his extreme views. Likhachev describes the ideology of Orthodox fundamentalism as follows: "The main anti-Judaic mythologemes of Orthodox fundamentalism are the assertion of the vicious and immoral nature of Judaism, the thesis of a nation-deicide, the idea of the "blood libel" and the statement of the metaphysical opposition of Judaism to Christianity... Since the Jews, awaiting the Antichrist-Mashiach, can in some way be called Satanists, Christianity must oppose them as enemies of Christ."[571]

Priest Alexei Ostayev wrote in the newspaper "Chernaya Sotnya" (Black Hundred): "From the point of view of fundamentalists, 'Orthodoxy is the only faith that has nothing in common with Judaism and directly opposes itself to Judaism.'[572] Deacon Andrei Kurayev, an unofficial propagandist of the Russian Orthodox Church, warned about the "harmful influence" of Jews on the Church.[573] However, his anti-Semitic statements did not receive a proper reaction from the church leadership. Moreover, accusations of ritual murders against Jews periodically appear in the religious press, with the clarification that this allegedly does not apply to all of Judaism, but only to certain of its "sects," primarily Hasidic.[574] Orthodox fundamentalists reject attempts to reconcile Christianity with Judaism as "an absolutely unacceptable compromise between Holy Orthodoxy and Christ-hating Talmudism."[575]

The third group—the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church—was oriented toward cooperation with the state. Dependent on the authorities, it avoided pursuing reforms or strict adherence to dogma. Officially, the Church sought to demonstrate moderation and tolerance toward other religions, including Judaism, but it consistently avoided addressing "uncomfortable" issues, such as the Jewish question. As Likhachev emphasizes: "No one from

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[571] Ibid, pp. 73-74.
[572] A. Ostaev, "A rebuke to the neo-pagans", *Black Hundred*, n. 2 (32), 1996, p 5.
[573] Andrey Kuraev, *How they make you an anti-Semite (*Moscow: Odigitria, 1998) pp.79-83
[574] *Black Hundred*, No. 11 (18), 1994.
[575] V. Osipov, "Church under siege", *National* newspaper, n. 4, 1997.

the church hierarchy has taken upon themselves the responsibility to disavow anti-Jewish concepts, and they remain a valid, although not actualized, part of the church ideology... It can be argued that, despite some liberal and "philosemitic" tendencies in Russian Orthodoxy, the Church continues to adhere to the medieval position, which, with a certain degree of simplification, can be characterized as Christian anti-Semitism."[576]

At the same time, the strengthening of the institutional role of the Church in post-Soviet Russia has not led to an increase in everyday anti-Semitism. One plausible explanation of the phenomenon is society's superficial perception of religion: "We can talk about an ever-widening gap between the increasing ideological role of religion, intolerance towards new religions and anti-religious ideologies and a very low level of religiosity..."[577] An additional factor is the state's instrumental use of the Church, which deprives it of independence and undermines the public's trust in it.[578]

A religious revival in the post-Soviet period also occurred among the Muslim population, which was estimated to be 14.5 million people in 2002 (about 10% of the population). Along with the formation of Islamic structures loyal to the state emerged a layer of unofficial Islam with a fundamentalist and, in some cases, anti-Semitic ideology. The war in Chechnya led to the radicalization of part of the Muslim population and the penetration of Islamist doctrines from abroad. Thus, under the influence of Arab emissaries, anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic motives intensified in the ideology of Chechen separatists.[579] According to Likhachev, "There are two main and interconnected directions in the development of the anti-Semitic ideology of modern Russian Muslims: strictly religious, dogmatic anti-Judaism and anti-Zionism, based on a sense of pan-Islamic solidarity."[580]

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[576] Likhachev, *Political anti-Semitism in modern Russia*, pp. 77-78.
[577] K. Kaariainen, D. Furman, *Religiosity in Russia in the 90s - Old churches, new believers: Religion in the masses consciousness of post-Soviet Russia* (Moscow: Summer Garden, 2000) pp. 7-48.
[578] A.Verkhovsky, E. Mikhailovskaya E, V. Pribylovsky, *National Patriots, Church and Putin. Parliamentary and presidential campaigns 1999-2000* (Moscow: Panorama LLC, 2000) p. 82.
[579] According to the FSB report published on October 17, 2000, representatives of an extremist organization Muslim Brothers were active in 49 regions Russia. In October 1999, the Russian government demanded that Syria, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait stop interfering in the internal affairs of the country by stopping the various assistance that Muslim extremist circles in these countries provided to Chechen separatists and Muslim extremists in Russia. Anti-Semitism in the 1990s–2000s", *Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia.*
[580] Likhachev, *Political anti-Semitism in modern Russia*, p. 82.

Although initially framed as a secular initiative under Dzhokhar Dudayev, Chechnya's independence movement had increasingly adopted Islamist ideology, along with anti-Israeli and antisemitic elements, by the late 1990s. After the victory of the separatists in 1996-1999, Chechnya effectively became a "region of victorious anti-Semitism, demonstrating the possibility of the existence of anti-Semitism in a society without Jews."[581] When Chechen militants invaded neighboring Dagestan in 1999, they declared it was a continuation of the struggle not with Russia but with "world Zionism," with the ultimate goal of "liberation of Jerusalem."[582]

Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism serve as a common ideological denominator uniting Islamist radical, the Communist Party, nationalists, imperialists, and Orthodox fundamentalists. A typical example of such an alliance was the participation of Russian Islamist leader Geidar Dzhemal on the electoral list of General Makashov's "Movement in Support of the Army," known for its antisemitic rhetoric during the 1999 State Duma elections.[583] Not coincidentally, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, the website *Islam.ru* promoted a conspiracy theory accusing Israel of orchestrating the attacks.[584]

Neopaganism was one of the nationalist movements of the 1990s, viewing Christianity as a "Jewish project" to enslave other peoples. Although the movement did not gain widespread support, some aspects of its ideology - particularly Slavic-Aryan mythology - took root in radical circles. As one study emphasizes: "Russian Neo-paganism explicitly represents itself as an ethno-national movement, which distinguishes it from Western Neo-paganism. It is also distinguished by its imperialistic goals of rescuing and restoring the 'Russian Empire,' hence the emphasis on the historiosophic myth that claims the vast territories of Europe and Asia are part of the 'Slavic-Rus' empire of ancient times. The 'Aryan Myth' serves this end, as well as depicting world history as an eternal struggle of 'Slavic Aryans' against the malicious 'Semites.'[585]

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[581] Ibid.
[582] I. Rotar, *Under the green banner of Islam. Islamic radicals in Russia and the CIS – Scientific reports and discussions. Topics for the twenty-first century*. Vol. 12. (Moscow: IRO-XX, 2001) p. 40.
[583] Likhachev, *Political anti-Semitism in modern Russia*, p. 87.
[584] Ibid, pp. 87-88.
[585] Victor A. Shnirelman, Russian neo-pagan myths and anti-Semitism (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1998).

One of the ideologists of Soviet anti-Zionism, Valery Yemelyanov, founded the neo-pagan wing of the Pamyat society. His book, “De-Zionization”, published in 1979 at the behest of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, narrates the demise of Aryan civilization because of the activities of "criminal hybrids of different races" – "Zionists." These ideas found a positive response in nationalist circles in the 1990s and circulated in popular culture. As one researcher notes: "Russian neo-paganism includes a significant anti-Semitic tendency."[586]

The post-Soviet religious revival was accompanied not only by the institutional strengthening of traditional faiths but also by the reproduction of archaic, anti-Jewish narratives. While the influence of Orthodox fundamentalism remained limited due to the weak religious affiliation of the population, Islam demonstrated growing dynamics, especially in the context of the radical Islamization in the North Caucasus. This **set the groundwork** for the further spread of antisemitic rhetoric within politicized religious communities and for the strengthening of ideological ties between religious, nationalist, and anti-Western movements.

3. Public opinion and sociological characteristics of anti-Semitism

The beginnings of sociological research into attitudes toward Jews in the USSR are associated with the perestroika era. Until the late 1980s, no representative studies could objectively capture public sentiment. Nevertheless, the existence of everyday anti-Semitism was acknowledged by both Jewish and non-Jewish populations.

The first major survey, conducted in 1989 with the participation of Der Spiegel and the Institute of Sociology of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, showed that 80% of Muscovites knew about the "Pamyat" movement, with 31% expressing positive opinions about it.[587] Support was higher among workers, people with limited education, Komsomol members, and opponents of Gorbachev's perestroika. The following attitudes - "authoritarianism, anti-Westernism, anti-Semitism, and extremist Russian nationalism" - formed an interrelated cluster.[588]

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[586] Andrey Beskov, PARADOXES OF RUSSIAN NEOPAGANICITY (Nizhny Novgorod: State Pedagogical University, 2014) pp. 11-23.
[587] Korey, p. 137.
[588] Korey, pp.137–138

In 1990, the Soviet Center for Public Opinion and Market Research conducted a survey of 4,200 people in 10 republics, exposing the widespread prevalence of anti-Zionist ideology and the prevailing contradiction in respondents' views on Israel.[589] Half of respondents believed that the USSR should "be more decisive in the fight against Zionism", for 22% Zionism was associated with a "global conspiracy". At the same time, 64% supported the restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel, and 44% would like to visit it.[590]

Hostile opinions resulted from ignorance: 50% had no opinion on Zionism; 27% had heard of a "global conspiracy," but 68% found it difficult to answer whether it existed. 61% could not name one prominent Jew and 43% did not know any Jews.[591] Particularly alarming was the fact that anti-Semitism was expressed also among highly educated urban residents. Respondents with academic degrees were one and a half to two times more likely than respondents with completed secondary education, and two to three times more likely than respondents with incomplete secondary education to hold Jews responsible for the "catastrophes" of the Bolshevik revolution and the current problems of the USSR. These data reflected the impact of the cultural elite who dominated the Union of Russian Writers and controlled the nationalist media.[592]

Regional specificity increased anxiety: the highest proportion of anti-Semitic attitudes was recorded in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine (former areas of the Pale of Settlement) - almost 30%. However, in Russia itself, the level of hostility was lower. In 1992, 56% of Muscovites expressed a positive attitude towards Jews, 8% - a negative one, and 36% - had no clear opinion. At the same time, about a third of respondents would not want an interethnic marriage with a Jew, which demonstrated the continuing cultural distance.[593]

The events surrounding the "Makashov case" (see section B of this chapter) in 1998 showed that despite growing concerns, there was no mass outbreak of aggression. A VTsIOM poll recorded that 66% supported punishment for insults against Jews and 75% - granting equal educational rights.[594] However, 34% supported restrictions on Jews for senior leadership

[589] Korey, pp. 190.
[590] Ibid., pp. 190-191.
[591] Ibis., pp 191-192.
[592] Ibid.
[593] Ibid.
[594] Gitelman, pp. 435–436.

positions, and 52% opposed Jewish political organizations. It is worth mentioning that even among Jews in Russia (22%) and Ukraine (30%), only a few wanted to see a Jewish president in their respective countries.[595]

The survey also showed that a significant part of the USSR population - about 40% - displayed some form of negative attitudes towards Jews, most often in the form of persistent stereotypes. Particularly alarming was the group of 10% of respondents whom analysts characterized as "strongly anti-Semitic" as they placed the primary responsibility for national tragedies on Jews. Another 6% of respondents openly declared that they advocated the elimination of Jews from public life.

A low level of adequate information and historical memory played a significant role in forming such attitudes. 61% of respondents could not name a single Jew who "made a major contribution to world culture and science," reflecting the deliberate exclusion of positive images of Jews from the official Soviet narrative. Questions about the Holocaust revealed a similar pattern: 73% of respondents said they did not know how many Jews were exterminated by the Nazis. This figure demonstrates how successfully the Soviet education and propaganda system ignored the topic of the Shoah and prevented the formation of adequate historical consciousness.[596]

Lev Gudkov's studies (1990, 1992, 1997) recorded a weakening of anti-Semitic tensions after the end of the state's anti-Semitic policy. According to three measurements of public opinion, "the presence of anti-Semitism did not particularly worry public opinion."[597] In 1997, 18–20% expressed a negative attitude towards Jews, the same number had a positive attitude, and the rest were neutral. Most respondents described Jews as good family men (71%), kind (48%), honest (42%) and hard-working (59%). 88% would not object to living next to a Jewish family. 86% were against restrictions on admission to universities. However, opinions polarized on issues of power and politics: 34% supported restrictions on leadership positions, and more than half were against Jewish presidents and parties. According to Gudkov, the general attitude

[595] Ibid.
[596] Korey, pp. 191-192.
[597] Lev Gudkov, "Parameters of anti-Semitism. Attitude towards Jews in Russia, 1990-1997", Public opinion monitoring, n. 2, March-April 1998, p. 35.

can be characterized as "the prevalence of positive or tolerant attitudes," with the majority remaining neutral.[598]

The researcher paid special attention to the relationship between anti-Semitism and Russia's socio-cultural modernization. He characterized the society of the 1990s as resisting modernization imperatives. Anti-Semitism acted as "an irrational defense of the particularistic status quo" and reflected "the strengthening of traditionalist rhetoric, cultural ritualism, and anti-modernist speeches." Two groups demonstrated particularly high levels of defensive mindset: (1) elderly and poorly educated groups and (2) representatives of the educated middle class, seeking to limit the access of the "outsiders" to senior positions. Those two groups represented up to 35–52% of the population, while the group with strongly pronounced anti-Semitism comprised between 15–18%.[599]

However, even the most hostile respondents did not support the aggressive slogans of antisemitic politicians: "The provocative nature of these speeches, threatening to destabilize the social order, seems dangerous to the majority of society, and this, in turn, causes persistent rejection by the majority of the population and explains the weak effectiveness of purely anti-Semitic rhetoric and demagogy." According to Brim, "The fate of Russian Jewry depends not so much on the level of anti-Jewish sentiment among the population as a whole, but on who controls the presidency and the Duma."[600] Two decades later, in 2020, REC President Yuri Kanner confirmed the same assessment: "Anti-Semitism in Russia is the lot of the marginalized... the so-called "popular anti-Semitism fades away in the absence of state anti-Semitism. Without administrative support, anti-Semitism does not find support in broad sections of society."[601]

A 2020 Levada Center study found that anti-Semitism exists in a "latent, routine form." While radical groups have been defeated, prejudices persist through everyday socialization, especially in the provinces. According to this study, 64% had no Jewish acquaintances, and the perceived number of Jews (up to 4.7 million) greatly exceeds the real one (150,000–160,000).[602]

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[598] Gudkov, p. 36.
[599] Ibid, pp. 41-42
[600] Robert Brim, “Russian Anti-Semitism”, Public Opinion Monitoring, No. 3 (41) May-June 1999.
[601] Yuri Kanner, “Relations between countries are relations between peoples” in *Thirty Years of Full Diplomatic Relations between Israel and Russia: Past, Present, Future,* ed.by Zvi Magen and Daniel Rakov, INSS, December 2021.
[602] Levada, 2020.

Levada discerned three levels of anti-Semitism: (1) the core layer, 8–20% - ideologically motivated; (2) the intermediate layer (35%) – bearers of persistent stereotypes; (3) the outer layer (up to 60%) - bearers of weak and unconscious attitudes.[603] The mass image of Jews remains stable and constitutes a combination of positive traits (rationality, culture) with negative ones (egoism, hypocrisy). Among young people, the attitude is less hostile, which indicates a decrease in the influence of Soviet stereotypes.

Most Russians have heard of the Holocaust, but do not know the details: 58% found it difficult to name the number of victims, and 12% learned about the tragedy for the first time from a survey.[604] Young people are especially poorly informed: a quarter of 18-24-year-olds heard about the Holocaust for the first time, and 3% did not believe in the fact itself. Only 55% considered it important to talk about the Holocaust in schools, while 31% were against such lessons, consider unnecessary for the education of patriotism. These sentiments reflect "the contradiction between liberal-humanistic and state-nationalistic ideologies."[605]

The interpretation of the category of Jewish “specialness,” recorded in several surveys, warrants particular attention. In a 2020 study, for example, 71% of respondents agreed with the statement that Jews are a “special people.” However, this perception of “specialness” in the public consciousness did not necessarily carry a positive or neutral connotation. In some cases, it was linked to notions of elitism, separateness, or even “secret power.” As such, this perception can rather serve as a platform for antisemitic views, including ideas of a “global conspiracy” or “disproportionate influence.”

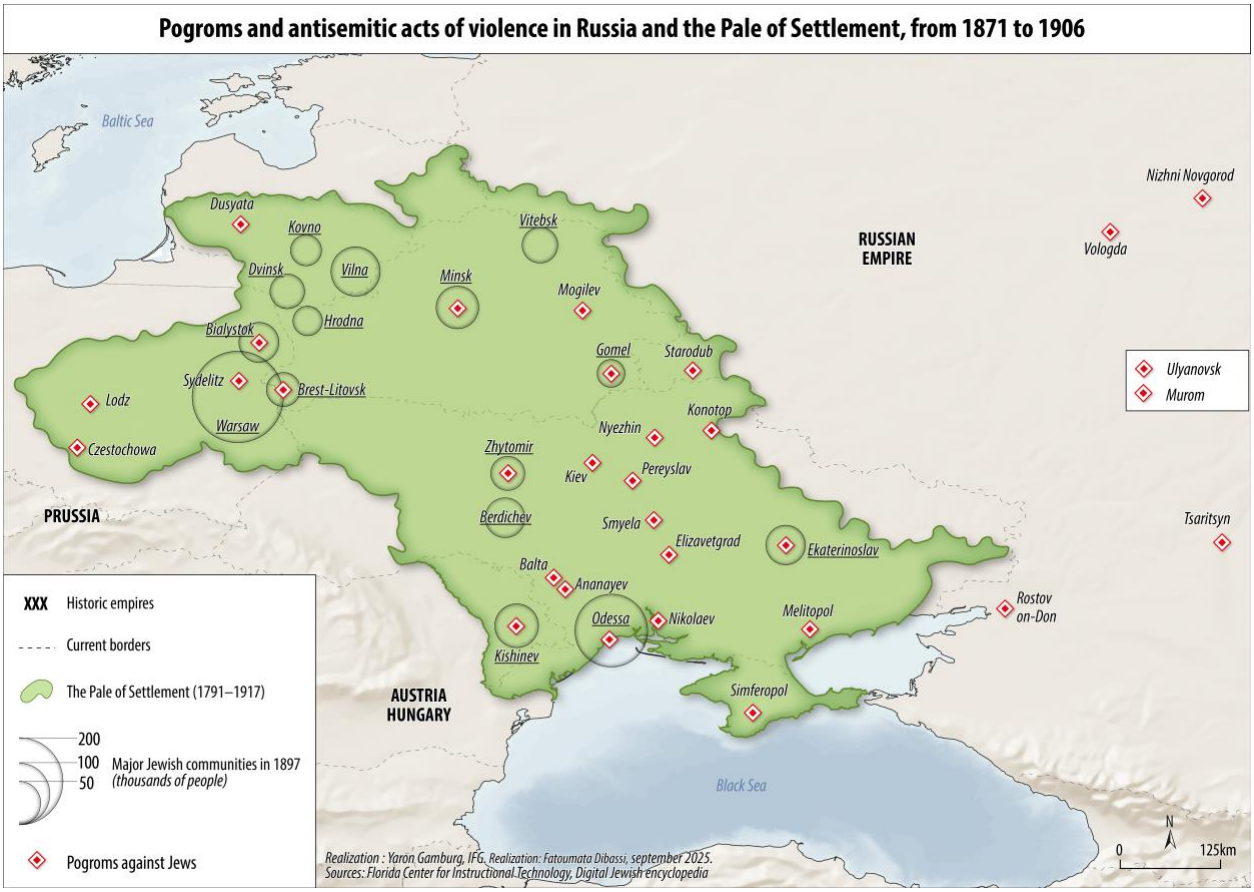
The main conclusion of researchers and representatives of Jewish organizations was that anti-Semitism in Russia remains in the form of a "dormant" social phenomenon, and without institutional support, it is not capable of transforming into open aggression. However, researchers have paid less attention to the issue of regional differences in manifestations of anti-Semitism.

[603] Ibid.
[604] Ibid.
[605] Ibid.

4. Territorial dynamics of Anti-Semitism: traditional patterns, new forms, and regional features

Anti-Semitism in post-Soviet Russia reflects a deep historical continuity, inherited from both imperial and Soviet anti-Jewish policies. At the same time, it has also assumed new forms shaped by the evolving political, cultural, and informational landscape. The geography of antisemitic incidents in the first post-Soviet decade spanned nearly all regions of the country, highlighting not so much the areas where Jews resided, but rather those marked by political and ideological radicalization and a weakening of the rule of law.

Historically, the geography of anti-Semitism in the Russian Empire was closely linked to the Jewish Pale of Settlement, established at the end of the 18th century. This territory covered the southern and southwestern provinces of the Empire - Kyiv, Kherson, Podolsk, Bessarabia, Minsk, and Vilnius. It was here that the most massive and brutal Jewish pogroms took place: Yekaterinoslav (1881), Kishinev (1903), Odesa (1905), and Kyiv (1905). Anti-Semitic



Map 1: Pogroms and antisemitic violence in Russia and the Pale of Settlement, from 1871 to 1906

aggression in the Russian empire was related to the high density of the Jewish population, economic competition, religious prejudices, and political instability.

In the pre-revolutionary period, manifestations of anti-Semitism extended beyond the Pale of Settlement to cities where Jewish populations had emerged. Pogroms occurred in Nizhny Novgorod, Simbirsk (now Ulyanovsk), Rostov-on-Don, and other Russian cities. In Moscow, Jews were forcibly expelled. Unlike the pogroms, this eviction was initiated by the authorities, who, in honor of the arrival of the new governor-general, the brother of Alexander III, decided to "cleanse" the city of Jews. Between 1891 and 1892, around 20,000 Jews were expelled from Moscow.[606]

Thus, anti-Jewish violence occurred both within the Pale of Settlement and beyond it, in areas where Jews had settled. After the 1917 Revolution, the Pale of Settlement was abolished, and the majority of the Jewish population moved to major cities in the RSFSR, Ukraine, Belarus, and other Soviet republics. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, no territories of the former Pale of Settlement remained within the Russian Federation, where most Jews had lived before the 1917 revolutions. In post-Soviet Russia, the main centers of Jewish life became Moscow and St. Petersburg, while in other cities, the Jewish population typically numbered between a few hundred to a few thousand people. As a result of mass emigration from the USSR, the Jewish population declined significantly across the country, sometimes dropping from several thousand to just a few hundred in certain cities. In the autonomous republics of the North Caucasus, the decline was particularly dramatic; in some, such as Chechnya, the Jewish population disappeared entirely.

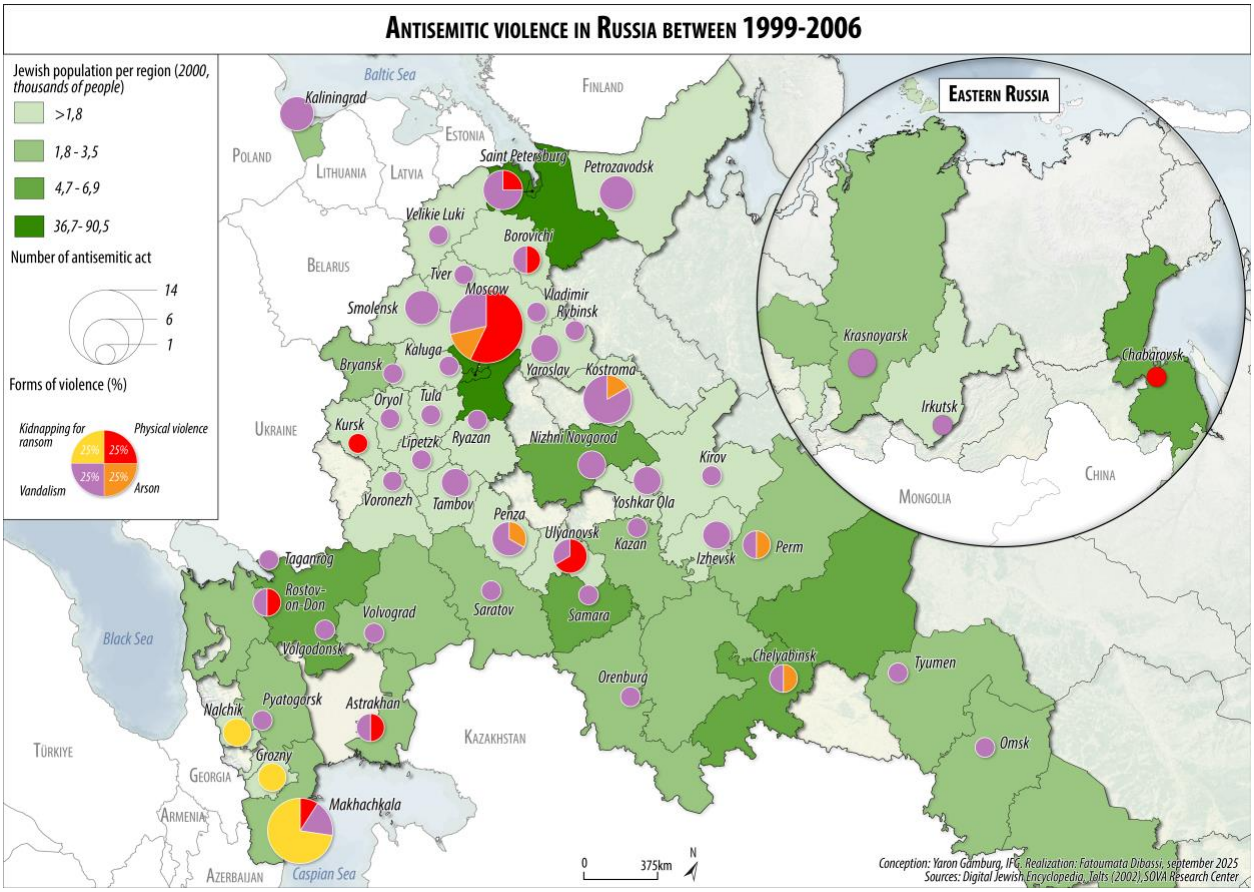
In post-Soviet Russia, the geography of antisemitic acts follows a similar pattern. Moscow and St. Petersburg have the largest Jewish populations and are home to the main Jewish organizations and cultural centers. These cities experienced the highest levels of anti-Semitism and acts of aggression. However, it is important to emphasize that the cultural visibility of Jews and the symbolic significance of their presence became the main targets, regardless of the size of the community. Thus, the vandalism against Jewish sites was on the rise across the country. In

[606] Kandel, essay 33.

2001, the number of incidents increased sharply, with 35 anti-Semitic acts in 19 Russian cities.[607] In 2002, this figure reached a record high of 73 incidents, including physical violence, arson, explosions, and mass distribution of antisemitic propaganda.[608] During this period, new, previously unheard-of forms of aggression emerged, such as "booby-trapped posters" – devices disguised as anti-Semitic posters and equipped with explosives. By the end of the year 2002, at least 18 such cases had been recorded. In 2003 and 2004, similar incidents occurred in Kaliningrad, the Moscow region, and other cities.[609] This form of violence – performative, public, and terrorist in essence, demonstrated the fusion of street aggression with ideological radicalization.

Simultaneously, symbolic aggression became increasingly offensive and demonstrative: pigs' heads left near synagogues, damage to Hanukkahs, and anti-Semitic inscriptions on Jewish holidays. Similar incidents occurred in the Moscow region, St. Petersburg, Yoshkar-Ola, Kostroma, Perm, and other cities. Particularly alarming were the celebrations of Adolf Hitler's birthday. In 2001 and 2002, on this day, synagogues were set on fire in Perm and Kostroma,[610] attacked in Ulyanovsk, and mass demonstrations and vandalism took place in Krasnoyarsk, Yoshkar-Ola, Petrozavodsk, Ulyanovsk, Orenburg and Kostroma. Antisemitic mobilization was also observed in the Urals and Siberia, particularly in Yekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk, Irkutsk, and Novosibirsk, where incidents included arson attacks on synagogues, assaults on rabbis, mass desecration of cemeteries, and the distribution of antisemitic leaflets.[611] Neo-Nazi groups and skinheads took part in these actions, often acting openly and with minimal reaction from law enforcement agencies. Insufficient response from the state and dynamics of political radicalism contributed to the expansion of local branches of extremist movements.

[607] "Anti-Semitism in the 1990s–2000s, *Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia*, https://eleven.co.il/diaspora/judeophobia-anti-semitism/15533/
[608] Ibid.
[609] Ibid.
[610] Ibid.
[611] Ibid.



Map 1: Antisemitic violence in Russia 1999-2006

Russian National Unity and similar groups opened local branches in Orel, Vladimir, Ryazan, Kostroma, and Nizhny Novgorod.[612] One of the most prevalent manifestations of anti-Semitism in the early 2000s was the systematic vandalism of Jewish cemeteries. In 2004, incidents of desecration were recorded in Irkutsk, Astrakhan, Kaluga, Makhachkala, Petrozavodsk, St. Petersburg, and several other cities[613]. By 2011, the number of officially registered antisemitic incidents ranged between 20 and 25, including physical assaults, acts of vandalism, and the dissemination of antisemitic propaganda. While the number of direct attacks declined in 2012, symbolic violence and ideological propaganda intensified. In 2013, both direct violence and

[612] Ibid.
[613] "Anti-Semitism Worldwide 2004" report, World Jewish Congress and The Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism and Racism at Tel-Aviv University, 2006.

vandalism were documented in Syktyvkar, Pechora, Krasnodar, St. Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg.[614]

As mentioned before, Islamic fundamentalism developed as an important vector of anti-Semitic ideology. According to the FSB report of October 2000, the organization "Muslim Brotherhood" operated in 49 regions of Russia, receiving support from Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Muslim countries.[615] Islamic indoctrination and anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli propaganda took place in mosques and summer camps that opened in Moscow, Tyumen, Orenburg, Samara, and Tatarstan (Kazan, Almetyevsk, Naberezhnye Chelny). Young people who completed this training could continue their education in the Middle East, and some participated in the Chechen war. Rebel Chechen leaders openly disseminated anti-Israeli rhetoric. Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov claimed that certain “international Zionist centers” had united against his government.[616] The North Caucasus remained a territory where anti-Semitism was an integral part of religious and political extremism. Attacks on rabbis, explosions at synagogues, and kidnapping of Jews were not unusual phenomena in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Certain Chechen groups openly declared their right to seize Jewish property, calling it an "ideologically justified form of justice." Participants in Muslim camps and youth organizations participated in kidnappings for ransom, often targeting Jews wishing to repatriate to Israel.[617]

A comparison of the post-Soviet and imperial periods reveals both continuity and significant transformation in the geography of anti-Semitism. In the Russian Empire, anti-Semitism was embedded in official policy, and acts of antisemitic violence, most notably pogroms, were concentrated primarily in the Pale of Settlement. Unlike the imperial era, antisemitic incidents in post-Soviet Russia have occurred across the entire country, including in regions with minimal or no Jewish population.

The geography of anti-Semitism in post-Soviet Russia no longer reflects the actual distribution of Jewish communities; instead, antisemitic acts target symbols, visible Jewish presence, and ritual objects, regardless of demographics. Anti-Semitism has thus become

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[614] “Anti-Semitism in Russia in 2013”, Research Center "Sova", January 28, 2012, https://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/publications/2014/01/d28899/?print=1
[615] Ibid.
[616] “Descendants of Hitler in the North Caucasus”, Jewish.ru, April 12, 2001, https://jewish.ru/ru/events/world/5290/
[617] Ibid.

geographically dispersed, media-amplified, with synagogues, cemeteries, educational institutions, and public spaces functioning as symbolic "maps" of antisemitic expression, from St. Petersburg to Derbent, and from Novosibirsk to Yoshkar-Ola.

While the level of anti-Jewish violence has varied, from stabbings to the use of explosives and firearms, it has remained largely limited to attacks on individuals or communal property and has not escalated into mass violence on the scale of imperial-era pogroms. A distinct manifestation of anti-Semitism emerged in the North Caucasus: the kidnapping of Jews for ransom, based on entrenched stereotypes about Jewish wealth.[618] Combined with the region's broader process of re-Islamization, this raised serious concerns about the viability of Jewish communal life in the North Caucasus.

The history of anti-Semitism in Russia, from medieval Judeophobia inspired by religious doctrine to politically motivated anti-Semitism in the late imperial and Soviet periods, demonstrates the resilience of anti-Jewish prejudices and their manipulation by the state. Russian history, with rare exceptions, offers an example of 'anti-Semitism from above,' that is, state-driven anti-Semitism imposed by the authorities. The state, initially through the Church, and later through segments of the population that feared competition from Jews, deliberately pursued anti-Semitic policies, fostering prejudices and exploiting them to achieve political objectives. This was the case in the Russian Empire where pogroms occurred with the tacit or explicit approval of the tsars and their governments. Massive Anti-Semitic pogroms took place during the Civil War, when the state had effectively collapsed and Jews were left at the mercy of the warring factions. In the Soviet period, anti-Semitism once again became an instrument of power, as Stalin's machinery of repression and propaganda branded Jews as "rootless cosmopolitans" and "enemies of the Soviet state."

Like the tsarist government in the early 20th century, the political opposition in post-Soviet Russia widely used anti-Semitism for political purposes. But here lays a fundamental difference between post-Soviet and pre-revolutionary Russia: in the 1990s, the government and the opposition switched places. Anti-Semitism became a weapon of the nationalist wing of the opposition in its fight against the government, and not vice versa. Unlike the tsarist government,

[618] "Jewish hostages", Nasledie.ru, 2001, http://old.nasledie.ru/terror/25_4/article.php?art=10

the Gorbachev and Yeltsin administrations were associated with democratic aspirations and opposed the legacy of state anti-Semitism, making the Jewish population a natural government supporter. They also rejected the anti-Zionism ideology of the Soviet Union and normalized relations with Israel.

However, the collapse of the Soviet Union, accompanied by the destruction of the centralized state and the exacerbation of socioeconomic problems, created conditions for the reappearance of anti-Jewish prejudices in the public and political space. The identity crisis, the heightened sense of vulnerability, and loss of Soviet-style social safety net – all this contributed to the surge of xenophobia and anti-Semitism as a legitimate element of the political and ideological agenda. This surge in anti-Semitism could be expected in transitional periods, when old values and institutions collapse, and new ones have not yet gained legitimacy. In this sense, the post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s is one of the key examples of how political anti-Semitism returned to the public discourse of a society gripped by existential anxiety.

However, the pessimistic forecasts did not come true: anti-Semitism did not gain political support from the population in the 1990s, and the threat of pogroms never materialized. Openly antisemitic movements and politicians were not successful at ballot box, and some of them, including the most infamous, rejected accusations of anti-Semitism, hiding behind "legitimate" criticism of anti-Zionist ideology.[619] In fact, the anti-Semitic ideology of the communist and nationalist parties was a factor that impaired its reputation.[620] Despite several years of aggressive campaigning by 'Pamyat' and similar organizations, four decades of official anti-Semitism in the USSR, and the mass dissemination of anti-Zionist propaganda, the violent events of 1991 and 1993 did not trigger a wave of anti-Jewish violence. Russia avoided the scenario of pogroms, mainly due to the position of the state, which, unlike the tsarist and Soviet regimes, did not see the Jews as its enemy. Another critical factor was relatively neutral and even positive perception of the Jewish population by broad segments of society, which created a gap between the rhetoric of anti-Semitic politicians and the real sentiments of most Russians.

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[619] "The leader of "Memory" has nothing against Jews", Kommersant, July 29, 1993, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/55125, and "Unknown Zhirinovsky. What he said about Jews, Israel and the Holocaust", Jewlife, April 11, 2022, https://jewlife.ru/neizvestnyj-zhirinovskij-chto-on-govoril-o-evreyah-izraile-i-holokoste/

[620] "Political scientist: The Communist Party of the Russian Federation should stop supporting anti-Semites", Vzglyad, August 2, 2021, https://vz.ru/news/2021/8/2/1111987.html

The new wave of anti-Semitism that emerged in the late 1990s in post-Soviet Russia also did not result in the worst-case scenarios feared by Jewish organizations. As during the perestroika period, the government and state institutions did not actively promote antisemitic sentiment, in contrast to the policies of the tsarist and Soviet regimes. Although the state's response to anti-Semitism was inconsistent and inadequate, the overall departure from explicitly antisemitic policies was sufficient to prevent mass violence against Jews. At the same time, the Russian government fully abandoned the anti-Zionist campaign and showed little interest in unnecessarily aggravating relations with Israel. Although tensions over contentious Middle East issues persisted, the desire to maintain and strengthen bilateral ties helped mitigate them, contributing to more favorable public attitudes toward Israel and, indirectly, toward the Jewish population in Russia.

In this context, it is important to highlight the role of the Russian secret services, the successors of the KGB, in relation to anti-Semitism during the 1990s. Like other state institutions, the security services faced significant financial and structural difficulties, leading to a reduction in their operational capacity. Many KGB officers were forced to leave the agency for other employment opportunities, Vladimir Putin among them. The abandonment of state-sponsored antisemitic and anti-Zionist policies rendered the services' previous activities in this domain largely obsolete. These factors contributed to the relative passivity of the security agencies on the “Jewish question” during the first post-Soviet decade. However, this did not imply a complete absence of involvement. As previously described, both “Pamyat” and Zhirinovsky were accused of collaborating with the KGB during perestroika. In any case, the Russian security services never underwent meaningful reform, and their professional experience in managing “the Jewish question” would again become relevant in later years.

Thus, in the first decade of post-Soviet Russia, the main driving force behind anti-Semitism was the political opposition, which brought together communist and national-patriotic parties and movements. This coalition received support from radical elements within the cultural elites, the Orthodox Church, and parts of the media, united by an anti-liberal, anti-Western, and antisemitic agenda. This 'corporate', or organized form of anti-Semitism exploited the gains of democratization and the weakness of the state. The government's efforts to combat organized

anti-Semitism in the 1990s were inadequate and inconsistent, allowing this discourse to persist in the public sphere, albeit in a more limited form.

The authoritarian tendencies in the Russian government that emerged during the final years of Yeltsin's rule would lead to a new transformation of the regime. Yeltsin's chosen successor, Vladimir Putin, would inherit this authoritarian approach to governance and, by the end of his second decade in power, establish a personalist regime with elements of totalitarianism. Authoritarian methods of governance will reduce, temporarily, the impact of organized anti-Semitism. But the flip side of Putin's "vertical of power" would be Kremlin's interference in the affairs of religious communities, including the Jewish community, resulting in the loss of its independence and the imposition of control over the Jewish population through a loyal Jewish organization.

Moreover, after restoring the country's economic base through high energy prices and cooperation with the West in the early 2000s, Putin would set a course toward reasserting Russia's 'traditional sphere of influence,' confronting the West, and waging wars against Georgia and Ukraine. He would revive the anti-Western and anti-liberal discourse of the 1990s opposition and transform it into the political credo of his regime. This policy, driven by revenge and imperial ambition, would lead to distortion of the history of World War II and Holocaust for political purposes, the manipulation of anti-Semitism as part of operations of influence, and the revival of anti-Semitism in Russia in both rhetoric and action. At the same time, Putin's assault on democracy and his war in Ukraine will prompt the emigration of tens of thousands of Jews, bringing the Jewish population in Russia to a historic low.

Part II:

The Kremlin's strategy under Putin – exploiting anti-Semitism, Holocaust narratives, and Jewish ties

Vladimir Putin's tenure, now extending over a quarter of a century, has inevitably undergone significant transformations, shaped both by the internal evolution of his regime and external circumstances. Upon assuming power in 2000, Putin inherited a precarious economic situation following the 1998 financial default; political instability caused by President Yeltsin's withdrawal due to health issues and factional struggles within the presidential administration and government; and a marked decline in Russia's international status.

Putin's political agenda pursued two primary objectives: on the one hand, consolidating domestic authority through strengthening the vertical of power, neutralizing political opposition and independent media, and establishing full control over the country's major economic resources and public opinion; and on the other, restoring Russia's status as a full-fledged actor on the international stage and expanding its influence both within the post-Soviet space and in key regions such as Europe, the Middle East, and the United States.

During the early years of his rule, Putin focused predominantly on internal consolidation, while maintaining political cooperation and enhancing economic relations with the West culminating in cooperation with the US after 9/11and Russia's cooperation with NATO. Domestically, Russia shifted gradually from a trajectory of democratization toward authoritarianism - described through a concept of "sovereign democracy". Externally, the course moved progressively from cooperation with the West to overt confrontation, information warfare, and operations of influence. Many scholars consider Putin's Munich speech in 2007 as the official turning point towards an anti-Western policy. Nevertheless, Putin had already in 2005 described the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century," lamenting the fate of 25 million ethnic Russians who found themselves outside Russia's borders.

As authoritarian tendencies and anti-Western rhetoric intensified, the regime's ideology and methods evolved accordingly. Distorted version of the World War II history was crafted by the Kremlin political technologists into an instrument of mass mobilization and a tool of foreign policy.

This development reveals a clear paradox: the regime has moved from a ostentatious favoritism towards Jews, intended to cultivate international legitimacy and defuse internal criticism, to a resurgence of anti-Semitism integrated into state propaganda. This shift

culminated in a revisionist rewriting of the Holocaust, allowing for the instrumentalization of its memory for geopolitical purposes, primarily aimed at discrediting Western and Ukrainian narratives. Anti-Semitism and distorted version of Holocaust history were part of Kremlin operations of influence, or "active measures", a well-established KGB tactic involving information and psychological warfare. The most common form of operation of influence remains disinformation: concoction of falsehoods, plausible enough to be laundered through sympathetic media, casting democracies in a negative light.[621]

The normalization of relations with Israel gained new momentum under Putin, aimed at bolstering Russia's international standing, securing mutually beneficial cooperation, and strengthening Russia's influence in the Middle East, a region where Moscow claimed to speak with all sides.[622] In the period of Putin's rise and consolidation of power, it was crucial for him also to enlist at least part of the Jewish community's support to deflect accusations of anti-Semitism. Like many of Putin's major political endeavors, his approach to the Jewish question unfolded in the style and logic of a KGB "special operations," where Jewish engagement served as a manipulative tool to craft an advantageous political image and promote foreign policy agenda.

The first chapter analyses the formation of Putin's Judeophile image for political purposes. The second chapter focuses on Russia's manipulations, vulgarization, and distortion of the Holocaust discourse as part of its anti-Ukraine and anti-Western policies. The final part explains how the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East had further deteriorated Russia's antisemitic rhetoric and Holocaust distortions with severe ramifications for domestic stability and straining Russia's relations with Israel.

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[621] Michael Weiss, "The KGB Playbook for Turning Russians Worldwide Into Agents", *Daily Beast,* December 29, 2017, https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-kgb-playbook-for-turning-russians-worldwide-into-agents/
[622] Aleksander Shumilin, "Russian Diplomacy in the Middle East: A Return to Geopolitics", *Ifri*, May 2016, No. 93, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/rnv93_version_ru_final_protege.pdf

Chapter 1: Putin's image as a friend of the Jewish people: sources, mechanisms and benefits

The creation of Putin's image as a friend of the Jewish people was closely tied to his power grab and resulted in intervention in the internal affairs of the Jewish community. This strategy involved actively shaping Putin's image as a Judeophile, interfering with the Jewish communal leadership, and promoting an alternative leadership structure that was later co-opted into the political regime. Such interference adversely affected the independent development of the Jewish community and undermined the credibility of its leaders by associating them with the authoritarian system, thereby diminishing their effectiveness in combating anti-Semitism.
At the same time, transactional relations with Israel reached a new level of cooperation, wherein Israel became increasingly dependent on Russia's positions in the Middle East. Israeli leadership was compelled to adapt to Putin's rules of engagement, offering concessions in bilateral relations in exchange for Russian flexibility on critical issues such as Syria.

This chapter will first examine president Putin's engagement with the Jewish community, aimed at improving his image both domestically and on the international stage. Playing the "Jewish card" allowed him to establish a certain degree of legitimacy abroad while consolidating his power at home. To maximize the impact of this strategy, he launched a charm offensive toward Israel.

A. Personal biography and engagement with Jewish community as tools of Putin's political image-making

In the context of the political transition of 1999–2000, as Vladimir Putin emerged from obscurity to assume the presidency, shaping a favorable public image became a strategic priority. Among the various facets of this image-building campaign, the construction of a Judeophile persona played a particularly important role, both to counter suspicions of anti-Semitism and to improve international legitimacy. Putin's personal biography was carefully framed to highlight positive associations with the Jewish community, while his administration engaged systematically with American and international Jewish organizations. This multidimensional

strategy helped reinforce a narrative of tolerance and pragmatism, instrumental in securing both domestic support and international approval during his early years in power.

1. The role of personal biography in building the Judeophile image

The creation of Vladimir Putin's public image from the moment of his appointment as Prime Minister of Russia was a critical, although not the only, condition for ensuring his victory in the 2000 presidential election. This necessity was a result of the transformation in relations between society and the country's political elite, which occurred as part of the democratization process in post-Soviet Russia. The secrecy, secretiveness, and alienation of the Soviet leadership were replaced by greater accessibility, openness, and public exposure of the activities of politicians, first and foremost, the first President of Russia, Yeltsin. The emergence of independent media, the formation of civil society, and the intensification of political competition made the issue of public popularity of politicians critically important. In the run-up to the first presidential election in 1990, Yeltsin made a great deal of effort to create his image as a politician of a new generation who had rejected the ideology of communism in favor of democratic values. Yeltsin promoted a similar brand of himself in the 1996 elections, in which his main rival was the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. It was precisely during these elections that the new "political technologies" were tested on Russian voters, which included massive financial and media support from oligarchs, as well as the "idea of a controlled transition of power," that allowed for the imposition of a leader on the nation.[623]

Yeltsin's campaign experiences proved valuable when shaping the image of his successor, which was developed by members of the administration and the confidants of the first Russian president. The methods of popularizing Putin largely corresponded to those of Yeltsin. For example, on the eve of the 2000 elections, the book "From the First Person" was published - a series of interviews with Putin and his close associates, in which a group of well-known journalists presented a detailed biography of the presidential candidate. In style and content, it was in many ways reminiscent of Yeltsin's pamphlet book, "Confession on a Given Topic",

[623] Andrei Kolesnikov, “Fall of sin 1996”, Carnegie Endowment, June 14, 2016, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2016/06/the-road-from-1996-russias-failure-of-democracy?lang=ru

published ahead of the first presidential elections in 1990 and intended to demonstrate his personal qualities, emphasizing his democratic nature, modesty, and peasant origins.[624] The book about Putin contained an almost identical set of personal qualities of the future Russian president, emphasizing his humble origins and difficult childhood in post-war Leningrad. Putin's image included not only his "purposefulness, toughness, and strong character," but also his perception as a person "like us," caring not for his interests, but for the country."[625] According to sociological research, this purposefully crafted image of Putin gained popularity in Russia and elicited a positive response abroad.[626]

Despite all the similarities in the models of image formation, in Putin's case, a new, previously unseen element emerged - the Jewish theme, presented in an exclusively positive light. Yeltsin did not touch on the Jewish theme at all when forming his image; in fact, he had to explain to his supporters in the democratic movement, somewhat apologetically, why he held a meeting with the leaders of the anti-Semitic "Pamyat".[627] For Yeltsin, as for Gorbachev, representatives of the old Soviet party elite, the Jewish theme was an inconvenient topic for public discussion. Unlike them, Putin could talk about Jews confidently, without any complexes, and with deep knowledge of the matter. It was due to his childhood and youthful memories, which he shared in detail already on the first pages of his first biography:

> “In our communal apartment... there lived a Jewish family: an elderly grandfather and grandmother and their daughter Khava. She was already a grown woman, but, as adults said about her, her life did not work out. She did not get married and lived with her parents. Her father was a tailor and, despite the fact that he seemed very old to me, he spent all day sewing something on a sewing machine. They were correct Jews: they did not work on Saturdays, and a grandfather was obliged to mumble the Talmud from morning until night: boo-boo-boo... Once, I could not stand it and asked what he was mumbling. He explained to me what kind of book it was, and I immediately lost interest in it.”[628]

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[624] Boris Yeltsin, “A confession on a given topic” (Moscow, “Ogonyok”: 1990), pp. 12-20.
[625] Foundation of Public Opinion (“FOM”), “The Image of V. Putin”, FOM’s database website, March 21, 2022, https://bd.fom.ru/report/map/special/90_13412/dd021127
[626] Ibid.
[627] Boris Yeltsin, p. 52.
[628] "First Person: Conversations with Vladimir Putin", Moscow, "Vagrius", 2000)

It is striking how freely, even somewhat familiarly, Putin talks about the details of the Jewish life of his neighbors, without hiding his sympathy for them. Putin emphasizes his "very good relations with the old men": "They loved me, I often played on their side." We should also note his remark about the "correctness" of the Jews, which in his understanding is connected with their religiosity.

Acquaintance with the neighbors was the first, but the only meeting of young Putin with Jews. As we learn from his biography, in his youth, Putin was surrounded by Jews, who had a significant influence on the formation of his character and the development of his skills and talents. Among them are his German teacher in elementary school, Vera Gurevich, his German teacher in high school, Mina Yuditskaya, and his judo coach, Anatoly Rakhlin. Knowledge of German would prove an important asset in his appointment to the post in Dresden as part of the KGB's Fifth Directorate, which was "one of the happiest periods of Putin's early life."[629] Putin's athletic achievements in judo had a profound influence on his character: "My coach probably played a decisive role in my life. If I had not taken up sports, I don't know how things would have turned out. It was Anatoly Semyonovich who actually pulled me out of the yard."[630] The influence of his coach and teachers is also emphasized in Putin's second biography, "Vladimir Putin: A Life Story", published in 2001. Even as President, Putin continued to show respect for his teachers. One of the most sensational stories in this context is related to his meeting with Mina Yuditskaya in Israel, after which he instructed one of his close oligarchs to arrange the purchase of an apartment for her in Tel Aviv.[631]

In his biographies, Putin, of course, did not mention directly the Jewish origin of the teachers, but it is evident from their names, which was a red flag in the eyes of anti-Semitic circles. It is worth mentioning that suspicion and even obsession with Jewish names was one of the legacies of the Stalin era, which in turn has its roots in pre-revolutionary Russia. Thus, Putin's revelations about his Jewish environment, and in a purely positive context, sent an

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[629] "Belkovsky's Time": Putin and the Jews", *Ekho Moskvy*, September 16, 2023, https://echofm.online/programs/vremya-belkovskogo/vremya-belkovskogo-putin-i-evrei
[630] «First Person: Conversations with Vladimir Putin» (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), p. 20-21.
[631] "Abramovich purchased the apartment for Putin's teacher in Tel Aviv", Kan 11, April 2, 2023, https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/global/219476/

unambiguous signal to society about his commitment to the policy of abolishing state anti-Semitism. It is important to note that in his biographies, Putin makes no comments on the issue of anti-Semitism, neither in the Soviet period nor in modern Russia. Nevertheless, his open sympathy for Jews was enough for radical nationalist circles to immediately accuse him of defending the interests of Zionism, and for some to classify him as a "spiritual Jew" and "Judaizer," attributing to Putin the most incredible, sometimes crazy myths.[632] A vivid representation of such anti-Semitic mythologemes about Putin can be found in the article of the editor-in-chief of the radical nationalist newspaper "Zavtra", by Alexander Prokhanov.[633]

The leaders of the Jewish community were the central addressees of the "pro-Jewish" element of his public image. In November 1999, when Yeltsin had already decided to appoint him as "successor," Putin met with the leaders of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FJCR) and told them about his Jewish environment, as it was later published in his biographies. Lechaim, the FJCR newspaper, described the meeting: "Unexpectedly for those gathered, Mr. Putin announced that he had long been familiar with the menorah and Hanukkah. He spent his childhood in a communal apartment in which a Jewish family lived who observed Jewish traditions, and the boy often dropped in on the neighbors, usually finding the father of the family studying the Talmud."[634] Also at the meeting, Putin expressed his support for the revival of Jewish life in Russia, mentioning his role in approving the opening of the first Jewish school in St. Petersburg.

Interestingly, Putin's biographies do not mention his Jewish friends, who climbed to positions of influence in the Russian system of power. For example, the brothers Arkady and Boris Rotenberg, with whom he practiced judo, are among Putin's richest oligarchs (Forbes estimates their combined wealth at $6.2 billion[635]), or the Kovalchuk brothers, with whom Putin created a construction cooperative in the 1990s, and who will have significant influence on the

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[632] «The President of Russia in the Mirror of the Mythological Consciousness of Radical Nationalist-Religious Groups», *SOVA Research* Center, January 18, 2004, https://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/publications/anti-Semitism/articles-reports/2004/01/d1632/

[633] Alexander Prokhanov, “THE “PUTIN” EPIDEMIC IS SPREADING ACROSS RUSSIA”, Zavtra, January 17, 2000.

[634] “Meeting of Jewish leaders with the head of the Russian government”, L’Haim, December 1999, https://web.archive.org/web/20210811231426/https:/lechaim.ru/ARHIV/92/fede.htm

[635] “Rotenbergs' Departure: One of the Richest Families Earned $2.7 Billion on Asset Salehttps”, Forbes. Ru, April 10, 2023, https://www.forbes.ru/milliardery/487173-uhod-rotenbergov-odna-iz-bogatejsih-semej-zarabotala-2-7-mlrd-na-rasprodaze-aktivov

president's views and even decision-making.[636] Exposure of such connections and relationships could not contribute to the formation of Putin's image as a "fighter against the oligarch system"[637] but only show that he has oligarchs of his own who would replace the others.

Putin's open and genuine sympathy for Jews was in itself an unprecedented event in Russian history. Never in the entire history of Russia has a single head of state since the creation of the Moscow Principality openly spoken of Jews with such sympathy. The words and actions of the new Russian president, who was breaking down the centuries-old complexes of the Russian government, aroused the admiration of the overwhelming majority of Jews, both in Russia and abroad. Inspired by the appearance of the first "pro-Jewish" president in the history of Russia, they preferred not to pay serious attention to the real political motives that stood behind the promotion of the pro-Jewish image of Yeltsin's official successor.

2. The political context of 1999–2000 and the need to foster Putin's Judeophile image

Putin's rise to the top echelon of Russian power occurred in a remarkably short period, spanning just over two years following his appointment to work in the Yeltsin administration in 1998. In July 1998, he was appointed Director of the FSB; in August 1999, he became Chairman of the Government; and on December 31, 1999, he assumed the role of Acting President of Russia. Putin's rapid rise can be attributed to Yeltsin's decision, whose health was deteriorating rapidly, making his continued stay in power impossible. Yeltsin and his entourage were interested in quickly appointing an acceptable successor who would continue his political course and, at the same time, provide security guarantees for the first president.[638] The choice fell on Vladimir Putin, who provided such guarantees and demonstrated determination to use force to resolve the

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[636] Accroding to Wall Steet Journal, one of the brothers, Yuri, reinforced Putin's idea of invading Ukraine. See "The Russian Billionaire Selling Putin's War to the Public", WSJ, December 2, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-billionaire-selling-putins-war-ukraine-11669994410

[637] Vladimir Putin, " Democracy and the quality of the state", *Kommersant*, February 6, 2012, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1866753; also "Yavlinsky: Putin's fight against the oligarchs is a settling of personal scores", *Segodnya (Kiev)*, July12, 2001, https://www.yabloko.ru/Publ/2001/2001_7/010713_seg_kiev_yavl.html, and Florian Hassel, "Putin's Fight Against the Oligarchs: The Kremlin's Wrath", *Frankfurter Rundschau*, November 13, 2003, quoted from: https://inosmi.ru/20031113/199200.html

[638] Joel M. Ostrow, Georgiy A. Satarov, Irina M. Khakamada, "The Consolidation of Dictatorship in Russia: An Inside View of the Demise of Democracy", (Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), p. 77-99.

Chechen problem, one of the most intractable during Yeltsin's presidency. As early as September 1999, Yeltsin informed Clinton in a telephone conversation of his choice of Putin as his successor.[639]

While the appointment of a "successor" to the post of acting President was Yeltsin's prerogative and was intended to facilitate Putin's formal election to this post, the administration faced the difficult task of transforming Putin from an unknown functionary into a popular politician in the few months before the parliamentary elections in December 1999 and the presidential elections in March 2000. The Chechen war, which began after a series of apartment bombings in Russian cities in September 1999, was officially presented by the Kremlin as a response to terrorism. The attacks, blamed on Chechen separatists, served as a key justification for launching the second Chechen war and played a crucial role in boosting Vladimir Putin's popularity as a strong and decisive leader ahead of the 2000 presidential elections. According to many experts, it was a secret "false flag" operation leaded by FSB[640], that brought Putin the highest rating among Russian politicians and party leaders: from 2% in August 1999, when he was appointed Prime Minister, to 42% in November.[641] The wave of widespread popularity made Putin unattainable in the presidential elections, and the Kremlin successfully used "political technologies" against other contenders.

After the victory of pro-Kremlin parties in the parliamentary elections in December, which created virtually complete confidence in Putin's election as president, the next goal of the Putin-Yeltsin tandem was to quickly strengthen the Kremlin's power, primarily by "pacifying" the political ambitions of Russian oligarchs, many of whom were Jews. The oligarchs' influence on the presidential administration and political processes in the country increased significantly in the late 1990s, as Boris Yeltsin's health condition deteriorated. A group of oligarchs led by Boris Berezovsky and Roman Abramovich, interested in preserving their interests and privileges, did everything possible to ensure a smooth transfer of power to Putin, taking a direct part in the

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[639] Declassified Documents Concerning Russian President Boris Yeltsin", Clinton Digital Library, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569

[640] David Satter, "Vladimir Putin & 1999 Russian Apartment-House Bombings -- Was Putin Responsible?", Hudson Institute, August 17, 2016, https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/vladimir-putin-1999-russian-apartment-house-bombings-was-putin-responsible

[641] Всероссийский центр изучения общественного мнения ВЦИОМ, November 12-15, 1999, https://www.yabloko.ru/News/Votes/VTSIOM/press_162.html

selection of possible candidates for this position. They had to confront another influential oligarch, Vladimir Gusinsky, whose media empire provided critical information support to Yeltsin in the 1996 presidential elections. Gusinsky came into conflict with Berezovsky and the presidential administration over economic preferences for his media business. This confrontation moved into the political arena when Gusinsky's media resources, mainly the popular NTV television channel, began to criticize Yeltsin and Putin, including for the war crimes of the Russian army in Chechnya, while supporting the Kremlin opposition party led by Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and former Prime Minister Primakov.

This confrontation had a broader "Jewish" dimension, not only due to the Jewish origin of the oligarchs. This aspect worried the presidential administration due to the potential threat to the Kremlin's reputation for persecuting the Jewish community. In parallel with the development of his business projects, Vladimir Gusinsky initiated the creation of the Russian Jewish Congress (RJC) in 1996, aiming to unite all Jewish communities in Russia and represent the interests of the Jewish population at the national level. American Jewish organizations served as a model for Gusinsky, and even the name he chose for the unification of Russian Jews resembled the name of the influential Canadian-American magnate Edgar Bronfman's organization, the "World Jewish Congress".[642] Under the organizational roof of the RJC, the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organizations of Russia ("KEROOR") was founded by the Chief Rabbi of Russia, Adolf Shaevich. As Israeli investigative journalist Yossi Melman writes:

> "Gusinsky understood the enormous importance and social and personal benefits of being the head of the Jewish community in Russia. He planned to establish an umbrella organization for all movements, institutions, and groups in the Jewish world in Russia, encompassing both religious and secular entities. Among those who joined his organization were Chabad, the Moscow Jewish Religious Community headed by Rabbi Goldshmidt, the Chief Rabbi of Russia Adolf Shaevich, and oligarchs… REC received recognition from Israel, the Jewish Agency, the Joint, and other Jewish organizations worldwide. For a time, Gusinsky became the number one Jew in Russia."

[642] Yossi Melman, "The Complete Guide to the Battles of the Jewish Oligarchs in Russia", *TheMarker*, November 27, 2005, https://www.themarker.com/misc/2005-11-27/ty-article/0000017f-df85-db5a-a57f-dfef6ecc0000

Gusinsky's acquisition of the status of "the first Jew" of Russia, recognized throughout the world as the primary representative of Russian Jewry, especially at a time of escalating political and economic confrontation, did not suit either Berezovsky and Abramovich's plans, or those of Putin and his administration - they all saw Gusinsky as a dangerous rival. To undermine the status of RJC, pro-Kremlin oligarchs turned to the leader of Chabad, Berel Lazar, and the main sponsor of this movement in Russia and other CIS countries, an Israeli businessman of Uzbek origin, Levi Leviev. Leviev and Lazar established an alternative Jewish organization supported by the Kremlin as a counterweight to Gusinsky's RJC. Following Putin's inauguration, the Kremlin completed a special operation to alter the leadership of the Jewish community, as is described below. Putin's repressions against oligarchs of Jewish origin made him vulnerable to criticism from Jewish organizations, Israel, and the United States, at a critical moment of consolidating his power. As the well-known publicist Vitaly Portnikov explained directly at the moment of confrontation between Putin and Gusinsky, "thanks to the position of president of the RJC, any attack by the Russian authorities against Gusinsky was automatically perceived by the West as a manifestation of anti-Semitism."[643] In order to avoid unwanted tension in relations with international Jewry, Putin needed to show that his conflict with the Jewish oligarchs had nothing to do with anti-Semitism and was only a "dispute between business entities."

Additionally, the Kremlin needed not only to craft a pro-Jewish image of Putin based on the facts of his biography, but also to reinforce this image with concrete examples of support for the Jewish community and alternative Jewish organizations. In the early years of his rule, Putin became a regular participant in official and festive events organized by the Federation of Jewish Organizations of Russia. For example, in September 2000, he took part in the opening ceremony of the Moscow Jewish Community Center "Maryina Roshcha"[644], and in December of the same year, he attended the Hanukkah celebration organized by Chabad.[645] During the first six months of his rule, Putin made more visits to the Jewish community center than any other previous

[643] Vitaliy Portnikov, “The Jewish question”, *Vedomosti*, March 2, 2001.
[644] “Jews now have somewhere to go - Putin opens their community center”, *Kommersant*, September 19, 2000, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/158287
[645] “How Vladimir Putin congratulated all of us on the holiday of Hanukkah”, *Kommersant*, December 23, 2000, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/166337

Russian leader.[646] Moreover, Putin made it a rule to congratulate Russian Jews on Jewish holidays.[647]

The need to strengthen Putin's image as a friend of the Jewish people was caused not only by the fight against Gusinsky, but also by the growing concern of international Jewish organizations and Israel about the growth of anti-Semitism in Russia that began in the late 1990s. According to the results of research by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), in 1999, 44% of respondents supported anti-Semitic views[648]; anti-Semitic statements by members of the State Duma became a subject of discussion in the US Congress.[649] During a visit to Moscow in March 1999, the Prime Minister of Israel called on Russian Jews to repatriate to Israel in the face of the growing anti-Semitism. After Putin came to power, on the one hand, there was a temporary decline in anti-Semitic sentiments in society, "not as the result of governmental action but because of the more authoritarian tendencies of the Putin administration.»[650] On the other hand, manifestations of anti-Semitism have taken on a violent character, such as attacks on religious Jews, vandalism of Jewish cemeteries, and kidnappings of Jews for ransom, usually in the North Caucasus region. These trends intensified in 2002, with attempts to blow up and burn synagogues, attacks on rabbis, and numerous incidents involving booby-trapped anti-Semitic posters. The dissemination of anti-Semitic literature and press, including under the auspices of the Orthodox Church, has increased, but the authorities have shown reluctance to counter the propaganda of anti-Semitism.[651]

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[646] It is known that Peter the Great once visited the synagogue in Mstislavl, and Catherine the Second and Nicholas II visited the Karaite synagogue in Crimea once, although it is worth noting that the Karaites were not considered adherents of Judaism.

[647] For example, in 2001 and 2002, Putin published Pesakh blessings on the official site of Kremlin: “Vladimir Putin congratulated Russian Jews on Passover”, April 10, 2001, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/41033, and “Vladimir Putin met with representatives of Russian Jewish communities”, March 19, 2002, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/26985/print

[648] “Survey attaches ‘troubling’ numbers to Russian despair and anti-Semitism’, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, September 22, 1999, https://www.jta.org/1999/09/22/lifestyle/survey-attaches-troubling-numbers-to-russian-despair-and-anti-semitism

[649] “Concerning Anti-Semitic Statements by Members of the Duma of the Russian Federation, Hon. Christopher H. Smith”, House of Representative, 106th Congress, First Session

[650] ‘Anti-Semitism Worldwide 2000/1’, ADL and WJC report prepared by Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism and Racism of the Tel Aviv University, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2002).

[651] Anti-Semitism Worldwide 2002/3’, ADL and WJC report prepared by Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism and Racism of the Tel Aviv University (Tel Aviv University, 2004).

In this unfavorable context, President Putin and his administration have consistently condemned acts of anti-Semitism to preserve his pro-Jewish image. However, as the 2001–2002 Anti-Semitism Report notes, "despite Putin's strong condemnation of nationalist and religious xenophobia and extremism, the reaction of the authorities to anti-Semitism and racism was irresolute."[652] An effective fight did not match these condemnations against anti-Semitism. In the early 2000s, the authorities undertook several legal steps to suppress anti-Semitic propaganda, such as sending warnings to the editors of ultra-nationalist daily newspapers and attempts to prevent the convening of chauvinist congresses in some cities. On the other hand, there was an evident reluctance to use legal measures against the dissemination of anti-Semitic material, while perpetrators of violent incidents were generally not punished. Anti-Semitic activist Nikita Krivchun, who attacked the director of a Jewish cultural center in Moscow on July 13, 1999, and attempted to set fire to a synagogue, was found insane by a Moscow court on February 23, 2000; he was sent for counseling and did not receive a prison sentence. The attack on a Jewish school in Ryazan by young Nazis on September 17 and the damage they caused were considered by local authorities as an act of hooliganism.[653]

It is important to note that in the context of anti-Semitism, the Putin administration was primarily concerned with preserving its reputation. The following incident demonstrates the Kremlin's heightened sensitivity to its image. Following the Kremlin's interference in the Jewish community affairs, the Chief Rabbi of Russia, Adolf Shayevich, who represented Gusinsky's Russian Jewish Congress, sent a letter to President Putin, complaining about the pressure being exerted on him by Administration officials to renounce his title of Chief Rabbi, freeing it up for Rabbi Berel Lazar. Shayevich's letter fell into the hands of journalists and was published in the press, including outside Russia. In it, Shayevich refused to submit to the dictates of Kremlin officials and warned, "I consider as unacceptable the interference by the state into the internal affairs of religious communities."[654]

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[652] "Anti-Semitism worldwide 2001-2002", The Stephen Roth Institute for the study of contemporary anti-Semitism and racism (Tel Aviv University, 2003), p. 141.
[653] "Anti-Semitism Worldwide 2000/1", p. 182.
[654] "Rabbi Says Kremlin Pressed Him to Quit", *The Washington Post*, June 2, 2000, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2000/06/02/rabbi-says-kremlin-pressed-him-to-quit/146cabe1-92c8-4232-b8cc-382ab8526a82/

The world's leading media outlets widely covered this story, highlighting the political context of the confrontation between the Kremlin and Gusinsky and his media business. On June 2, The Washington Post covered the story in detail, quoting Russian Jewish leaders who condemned the Kremlin's gross interference in the affairs of the Jewish community and pointing to the political underpinnings of the pressure on Shayevich. In the pages of one of the most influential American publications the Chief Rabbi of Moscow, Pinchas Goldschmidt, declared: "This latest event creates much doubt within the Jewish community as to the commitment of the new government to the freedom of belief in today's Russia."[655] Gusinsky, for his part, accused "certain political forces" of exploiting nationalism and anti-Semitism.

The Kremlin's reaction was immediate. First, on June 6, Shayevich unexpectedly told journalists that there was no pressure from the Kremlin on him and called everything that was happening "a mistake, a misunderstanding and speculation." A few days later, the main channel of Russian television, controlled by the Kremlin, aired a report that described the situation as a "new round of information warfare against Russia," initiated by Rabbi Shayevich.[656] The report emphasized that Russian Jewish communities "have concluded that they must resolve their problems themself and that Western interference in the internal affairs of Russian Jews is inappropriate." Thus, with the help of Jewish leaders acting on the instructions of the Putin administration, the central state television channel accused Western media of interfering in the affairs of the Jewish community at the very moment the Kremlin was doing it.

Analyzing the direct interference of the Kremlin in the affairs of the Jewish community, the well-known French expert on Russia, Françoise Thom, noted that Putin "in a typical KGB way, attempts to control all religious groups in Russia with the help of hand-picked leaders."[657] Establishing complete control over the Jewish community was part of the strategy of his Kremlin entourage in the context of the confrontation between the authorities and the oligarchs in the early 2000s. The image of a Judeophile was a necessary cover in this struggle. As Tom prophetically wrote already in July 2000, "The Gusinsky affair indicates the beginning of a

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[655] Ibid.
[656] "In Moscow there was an attempt to play the anti-Semitism card", *First Channel*, June 11, 2000, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2000-06-11/287665-v_moskve_popytalis_razygrat_kartu_antisemitizma
[657] Francoise Thom, "An assessment of Putin's first months in power", *European security*, July 23, 2000, https://european-security.com/assessment-putins-first-months-power/#by-strong-dr-francoise-thom-strong-strong-strong-july-23-2000

process… not the elimination of the oligarchs in Russia, but the elimination of the Yeltsin oligarchs and their replacement by a new Putin oligarchy – an oligarchy forged by the KGB, nationalist, anti-Western and ambitious."[658]

The Jewish theme resurfaced in the context of the fight against oligarchs in 2003, during the Kremlin's crackdown on the Yukos company and its president, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who had begun to support the opposition to Putin's regime. The Washington Post once again accused the Kremlin of reviving official anti-Semitism, raising the bar of accusations even higher: "Since Putin was elected president in 2000, every major figure exiled or arrested for financial crimes has been Jewish. In dollar terms, we are witnessing the largest illegal expropriation of Jewish property in Europe since the Nazi seizures during the 1930s."[659] However, these serious accusations remained without consequences. By that time, Putin had already established his "vertical of power" and enjoyed a reputation as a friend of the Jewish people, while Khodorkovsky did not have the status of "the country's first Jew."

It is important to mention one more aspect of the Kremlin's position on anti-Semitism in the early 2000s. In the above-mentioned Kremlin TV report, Chechnya was mentioned as "the only place in Russia where anti-Semitism has become an official ideology."[660] It is true that during this period, Chechen criminal groups were kidnapping Jews for ransom, and the leader of Chechnya, Maskhadov, made harsh anti-Semitic statements. However, antisemitic sentiments also spread in other republics of the Caucasus.[661] Moreover, anti-Semitism reigned in the State Duma of the Russian Federation; but official media preferred to describe it as individual manifestations of "everyday anti-Semitism." For Putin, the war with Chechnya turned this rebellious republic into absolute evil, the source of all Russia's problems, including anti-Semitism. This manipulative practice of discrediting Russia's enemies with the help of accusation of anti-Semitism would become a valuable tool in Russian foreign policy when addressing external, not internal, enemies of the regime.

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[658] Ibid.
[659] Bruce Jackson, "The Failure of Putin's Russia", *The Washington Post*, October 28, 2003, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2003/10/28/the-failure-of-putins-russia/ecc6aa96-f300-4024-9398-4a5889e653ff/?isMobile=1,1
[660] "In Moscow there was an attempt to play the anti-Semitism card", *First Channel*
[661] "Kidnapping of Jews on rise in Caucasus", *The Jewish News of Northern California*, October 1, 1999, https://jweekly.com/1999/10/01/kidnapping-of-jews-on-rise-in-caucasus/

3. Engagement with American and international Jewish organizations

During the early 1990s, Putin's personal biography was carefully constructed to underscore favorable connections with the Jewish community, and he systematically engaged with American and international Jewish organizations.

As anti-Semitism grew in Russia in the late 1990s and early 2000s, American Jewish organizations and international media outlets closely monitored both its manifestations and the government's response, capitalizing on the openness of Russian society that emerged from the democratic transformation of the 1990s. The rise to power of an unknown candidate with a background in the KGB, as well as the manipulations of the Jewish community's leadership with the Kremlin's participation, were incomprehensible to Western audiences and raised understandable concerns. While the Russian Jewish community and Gusinsky personally were not perceived by the government as a serious threat in itself to its reputation, frequent publications in the foreign press and statements by American, Israeli, and European politicians were fraught with negative consequences for the Kremlin, which was interested in maintaining favorable relations with the West in the early years of Putin's rule. As one investigator of Russia put it in a nutshell: "When Putin came to power, he had to get rid of Gusinsky, but he was very concerned not to be called an antisemite."[662]

While Putin's biography predetermined his sympathy for Jews and negative perception of anti-Semitism on a personal level, it is his affiliation with the KGB that is key to understanding his long-term efforts to maintain a pro-Jewish image and personal close relationships with representatives of international Jewish organizations. In one of the first books about the KGB published after the collapse of the Soviet Union, its author, a well-known journalist, Yevgenia Albats, quoted the words of a GRU officer: "Anti-Semitism is one of the generic features of the KGB."[663] Conspiracy theories, which traditionally contained an anti-Semitic element, as well as the idea of the existence of "powerful Jews" who allegedly ruled the entire Western world, were strongly influential among KGB agents. According to one of the Israeli rabbis who worked in the

[662] David Klion, "Our Oligarch", *Jewish Currents*, March 3, 2022,
[663] Evgeniya Albats, *Time Bomb* (Moscow: RUSSLIT, 1992), p. 38

USSR during Gorbachev's perestroika, "KGB officers were generally convinced that the Jews rule the world and that during that transitional period it would be nice to have good relations with the Jews. Moreover, this idea of theirs played a positive role in the fate of the Jewish community of the country."

The anti-Semitic vision of the world is still characteristic of representatives of the Russian special services, the successors of the Soviet KGB, which gives grounds to define this type of anti-Semitism as "professional" or official.[664] According to Russian opposition figure Alexander Belkovsky, who was once an associate of Boris Berezovsky, Putin, like most KGB officers, shares this opinion. Here is how he characterizes this attitude of Putin in his ironic style:

> "Since childhood, of course, Putin knew that the Jews rule the world. The Jews themselves ... do not think so at all, but Putin thinks so. And therefore the Jews are a remedy for the Anglo-Saxons. Only with the help of the Jews can we deal with the damned America and its satellite, Great Britain. That is why the Jews are still important."[665]

This mythologized attitude towards the Jews on the part of Putin and his KGB comrades relates to their perception of the KGB's defeat in the confrontation with the Jewish world during the Cold War. In retrospect, many of the organization's officers consider the Jewish policy of the KGB and the USSR a strategic mistake. Thus, Putin's strategy since assuming power has been to maintain friendly relations with the international Jewish community. The primary method for achieving this goal has been his acquaintance with and building trust among senior figures of the Jewish world. The professional skills he acquired in the KGB proved to be an indispensable aid in creating and maintaining these relationships. The same Belkovsky wrote: "Putin is a recruiter. Not just a KGB recruiter, but a recruiter by the nature of his work. His task is to seduce a person. When he succeeds, he is happy and joyful. When he fails, he feels a deep sense of failure."[666] In his approach to Jewry, Putin was guided by the vision and skills instilled in him in the KGB, using his biography as a trump card in the process of manipulation and recruitment.

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[664] Interview of Abbas Gallyamov by the author of the article.
[665] Stanislav Belkovsky, "Putin and the Jews", Echo Moskvy, September 16, 2023, https://echofm.online/programs/vremya-belkovskogo/vremya-belkovskogo-putin-i-evrei

[666] Stanislav Belkovsky, "Putin and the Jews", Echo Moskvy, September 16, 2023, https://echofm.online/programs/vremya-belkovskogo/vremya-belkovskogo-putin-i-evrei).

A month after the incident with Rabbi Shayevich, on July 13, 2000, Putin held his first meeting with Ronald Lauder, an American businessman who was then the president of the Jewish National Fund, one of Israel's most prominent public benefit corporations. The details of the meeting were not made public, and the meeting itself was described in the press as "secret," although information about it appeared two days later.[667] Several factors suggest the context and background of the meeting. Lauder was one of the Jewish leaders who demanded an end to the persecution of Gusinsky, which was especially significant due to his high public profile and direct ties to the top leadership of the United States and Israel. At the same time, Lauder had personally maintained close business ties with Gusinsky, primarily in projects related to the Israeli media market, since the late 1990s. Moreover, Berel Lazar was present at the meeting between Putin and Lauder, apparently serving as a representative of Russian Jews. A personal meeting with Lauder became a critical element in Putin's efforts to create a trusting relationship with one of the most influential representatives of world Jewry. Having reassured him on the issue of Gusinsky and the Jewish community, he now had the opportunity to influence the opinions of the leaders of the USA and Israel. After this meeting, the trust between the American Jewish establishment and the Kremlin significantly improved.

In 2003, the Russian president met with the leaders of leading Jewish organizations in the USA, including: Mortimer Zuckerman, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the editor in chief of US News and World Report;[668] James Tisch, chairman of the United Jewish Communities; Jack Rosen, president of the American Jewish Congress; and Ronald Lauder himself. Rabbi Berel Lazar was again present at the meeting, and among its mediators, according to the FJCR newspaper, were Levi Leviev and Natan Sharansky, who was then a minister in the Israeli government. Representatives of Jewish organizations highly praised Putin's openness to dialogue with them, noting "fundamental changes that allow the development and growth"[669] of the Russian Jewish community. They emphasized their desire to promote the improvement of Russian-American and Russian-Israeli

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[667] “The President met secretly with Rabbi Lazar and the President of the Jewish National Fund”, *Lenta.ru*, July 15, 2000, https://lenta.ru/news/2000/07/14/jews/.
[668] "Putin Meets With U.S. Jewish Leaders in Moscow”, *Haaretz*, June 11, 2003, https://www.haaretz.com/2003-06-11/ty-article/putin-meets-with-u-s-jewish-leaders-in-moscow/0000017f-f49c-d47e-a37f-fdbcbb390000
[669] “The President received US Jewish leaders in the Kremlin”, *LeHaim*, August 2003, https://lechaim.ru/ARHIV/136/fede.htm

relations. The range of issues discussed at the meeting indicated an increased level of trust, including the supply of Russian nuclear technology to Iran, international terrorism, a Middle East settlement, and the repeal of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment. From Putin's perspective, the meeting was a great success. One of the participants, James Tisch, told journalists, "We give our word that we will do everything possible to finally resolve this issue in relations between Russia and the United States."[670]

Personal meetings with representatives of American Jewry, as well as Israeli leaders, as discussed below, strengthened his image as a friend of the Jewish people. The actual split of Jewish organizations in Russia and the loss of their independence, caused by the Kremlin's interference, were quickly forgotten. Manifestations of anti-Semitism in Russia, which had increased by the mid-2000s, continued to draw criticism from Jewish organizations, but this criticism was no longer directed at the Kremlin. Putin's open support of the efforts aimed at reviving the Jewish community was perceived as a critical factor. At the same time, anti-Semitism began to be viewed as a more marginal phenomenon ("everyday anti-Semitism"). Putin's Judeophile image stuck with him for many years and received support from American Jewish leaders even during the period of Putin's international isolation, when the Kremlin's handling of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust began to acquire a manipulative character.

Ron Lauder has become one of Putin's preferred interlocutors among the American Jewish establishment. Meetings with him gained even more significance after Lauder was appointed president of the World Jewish Congress, which has a reputation as the "diplomatic organ of the Jewish people." In these meetings, Putin and Lauder discussed international policy issues of particular importance to the Jewish people and Israel, as was reflected in official statements from the Kremlin. The very fact of holding these meetings after the Russian occupation of Crimea and the Ukrainian territories of Donbas was one of the means for legitimizing the Putin regime in the context of international pressure on Russia because of its aggression in Ukraine. Moreover, at a meeting with Putin in 2016, Ron Lauder voiced messages aligned with the Kremlin's propaganda, while ignoring the new wave of nationalism and anti-Semitism in Russia:

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[670] Ibid.

"Sometimes we forget to say 'thank you,' but today I would like to say thank you for everything you do for the Jewish people. When we first met, there was still quite a strong wave of anti-Semitism… And we discussed this with you, and you assured me that you would change this trend. And you did what you promised. As far as I understand, there is now a minimal level of anti-Semitism in Russia, and the Jewish population lives very well, and the synagogues are in complete prosperity… Moreover, as far as I understand from Mr. Berl Lazar, the life of the Jewish people is improving more and more, while now in Europe anti-Semitism is still very much raising its head."[671]

Lauder's words indicated, on the one hand, the inaccuracy of the data on trends related to the Jewish population in Russia and manifestations of anti-Semitism, which he received, judging by his words, from Lazar. Anti-Semitic statements have been openly aired on Russian state channels since 2014, the year of Crimea annexation. It also overlooked the troubling context of Russia's intensifying political confrontation with the West; just a few weeks after this meeting, the scandal related to the interference of Russian intelligence services in the 2016 US presidential campaign erupted, which led to a rethinking of the level of Russian hostility towards the United States.

Lauder's next meeting with Putin took place in 2019, but this time it received very laconic coverage in the Russian press, which could indicate disagreements. The Orthodox community's news channel in Israel reported only that "the meeting discussed the situation of the Jewish community in Russia, and Rabbi Lazar and Ron Lauder thanked the president for his work on behalf of Jews."[672] However, in September of that year, speaking at the annual reception of the Russian Jewish Congress in Moscow, Lauder, although repeating that "anti-Semitism has virtually disappeared throughout Russia," called on Russia to ratify the IHRA's international definition of anti-Semitism in order to send "a powerful message to the world."[673] Perhaps this

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[671] "Meeting with the President of the World Jewish Congress Ronald Lauder", Kremlin website, April 19, 2016, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51751

[672] "Russian President Meets with Rabbi Lazar and Ron Lauder", *Ladaat*, March 20, 2019, https://ladaat.co/archives/23231

[673] "WJC President Lauder urges Russia to adopt universal definition of anti-Semitism", *WJC website*, September 16, 2019, https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/wjc-president-lauder-urges-russia-to-adopt-universal-definition-of-anti-Semitism-9-1-2019?print=true

call expressed some disappointment with Russia's long-standing reluctance to ratify the internationally recognized definition of anti-Semitism and join IHRA. In any case, only after the Russian invasion of Ukraine will the WJC, like other Jewish organizations, be able to understand the real picture of anti-Semitic sentiments in the highest echelons of the Russian power and the distortion and manipulation of the Holocaust as official Russian policy.

B. The Jewish card as a key element in Putin's power consolidation and pursuit of international legitimacy

In Vladimir Putin's consolidation of power and his quest for international legitimacy, the strategic use of what we can call "the Jewish card" played a crucial role. At the heart of this is the Kremlin's alliance with the Lubavitch (Chabad) movement in Russia, which over the years has become a Jewish organization favored by the state, to the detriment of Russia's other Jewish institutions. This alliance enabled the regime to tighten its control over Jewish community affairs while redefining its official approach to anti-Semitism, which was often downplayed or reinterpreted to serve the political discourse of power. Beyond Russia's borders, FJCR and Chabad has become a diplomatic asset, actively helping to shape Putin's international image and promote Russian national interests around the world. However, the Kremlin's interference in the internal life of the Jewish community is controversial, raising questions about the politicization of religious identity and the long-term consequences for Jewish autonomy and community cohesion.

1. Strategic alliance with FJCR: the creation of an alternative Jewish organization and its consequences on dealing with anti-Semitism in Russia

The political genesis of FJCR and the elimination of Gusinsky

The establishment of an alternative Jewish organization for the political elimination of the first Russian oligarch took place in the shortest possible time, which earned her the title of a "special operation".[674] Economic pressure on Gusinsky began in June 1999, two months before

[674] Vitaliy Portnikov, "The Jewish question", *Vedomosti*, March 2, 2001.

Putin took office as Prime Minister. The emergence of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia coincided with the beginning of the final phase of confrontation between Gusinsky's media resources and the presidential administration. The initiative to establish the organization originated from pro-Kremlin oligarchs Boris Berezovsky and Roman Abramovich, with the latter becoming its primary philanthropist. They turned to Israeli businessman Levi Leviev, who financed the activities of the Chabad movement in the post-Soviet states and offered Chabad a leading role within the FJCR. It was Lazar and Leviev who were to become the true leaders of the FJCR, one on the public front working with the government, and the other as a financier and advisor behind the scenes. However, the famous composer Mikhail Gluz, former head of the Chamber Jewish Musical Theater and director of the Solomon Mikhoels Cultural Center in Soviet times, was formally elected its president.[675]

Since he was appointed, Putin had taken an active part in this "special operation." As Prime Minister, Putin met with the FJCR leaders just ten days after its founding congress in November 1999, indicating official support from the authorities. After Putin was elected president of Russia in March 2000, this support became an integral part of the special operation to remove Gusinsky. First, at the end of May, Berl Lazar quickly received Russian citizenship, which allowed him to hold an official position in Russia. On June 13, at a congress of Jewish communities, attended mainly by representatives of the FJCR, Lazar was elected chief rabbi of Russia. On the same day, Gusinsky was arrested on charges of embezzling state property on a massive scale, was forced to relinquish ownership of his media assets, and was later expelled from Russia. The chief rabbi, according to KEROOR and RJC, Shayevich, was removed by the Kremlin from participating in official events; the Russian Jewish Congress and the KEROOR associated with it lost their independence and influence, yielding the palm to FJCR.

It is important to note that Lazar's election provoked protests from KEROOR rabbis, as well as rabbis within the Chabad movement itself and the president of the Conference of European Rabbis. Shayevich pointed out that of the 26 FJCR rabbis who voted for Lazar, 15

[675] Both organizations were created with the permission of the Soviet authorities. The Chamber Jewish Theater was created by decision of the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR and was a kind of official showcase to demonstrate the existence of Jewish culture, as was the magazine Sovetishe Heymland. These institutions of Jewish life in USSR did not have significant influence and were dependent on the cooperation with the Soviet authorities. Additional information: Gennady Razumov, “YIDDISH OF THEATRICAL AND VARIETY MOSCOW”, NOTES ON JEWISH HISTORY, May-June 2021, https://z.berkovich-zametki.com/y2021/nomer5_6/razumov/

were not Russian citizens, emphasizing the manipulative nature of the appointment.[676] Nevertheless, the Kremlin was on Lazar's side. From that moment on, for the Russian authorities, Rabbi Lazar became the de facto leading official representative of the Jewish community, the "chief Jew of Russia," whose status and influence would steadily grow.

Berel Lazar and the rise of Kremlin-backed Jewish organization

To understand the new type of relationship between the government and the Jewish population, it is necessary to take a closer look at the figure of Lazar and the activities of Chabad in post-Soviet Russia, which have since dominated the Russian Jewish context for a quarter of a century. Berel Lazar was born in Italy to a family of Lubavitch Hasidim sent there as emissaries of the Chabad movement. After receiving a rabbinical degree from a school in New Jersey, Lazar made several trips to the Soviet Union, where he taught Judaism. In 1990, Lazar, with the blessing of a Lubavitch rabbi, was appointed Chabad emissary in Moscow. Lazar's arrival in the USSR, like that of other rabbis in those years, was made possible by the policy of perestroika and the Soviet authorities' desire to demonstrate openness to American Jewish organizations as part of the warming of relations with the United States. This arrival could only take place with special government permission. As the rabbi of the Maryina Roshcha synagogue in Moscow, Lazar maintained close relations with the capital's authorities throughout the 1990s and achieved significant success in reviving the local Jewish community.

However, Lazar's ambitions to strengthen Chabad's influence extended beyond the Russian capital. In 1991, he met with Yeltsin to secure the president's support for legislative initiatives aimed at facilitating the work of Jewish communities nationwide. Lazar also participated in the founding congress of the RJC, created on Gusinsky's initiative in 1996, and joined the presidium of this organization. At the same time, Lazar's activities demonstrated a clear desire for independence from other organizations, as evident in his collaboration with Levi Leviev in creating parallel structures. Thus, in 1993, they established the Association of Rabbis of the CIS, of which he became chairman. In 1998, based on the support of only four

[676] Mikhail Tulsky, “Portrait of Berl Lazar. On the situation in Jewish communities in Russia”, December 13, 2001, https://tulskiy.livejournal.com/26077.html

communities, they founded the FJCR. This organization did not have any real influence until it was called upon by the Kremlin in 1999 to create an alternative to the RJC in the fight against Gusinsky.

The Kremlin's intentions toward FJCR were openly documented in mainstream media publications[677] However, Lazar distanced himself from the support of the authorities: "FJCR was not created against the RJC... Very often one newspaper thought about one intrigue, another - about another. However, we did not think much of this; we wanted to create a normal Jewish community here. All our thoughts and our mentality are idealistic."[678] Later, in justification of his position, Lazar said that he decided to distance himself from Gusinsky because he began a "political campaign."[679] While rhetorically taking distance from politics, Lazar turned out to be part of the Kremlin's political operation:

> "However, there is another version of this story, less innocent than the one retold by Rabbi Lazar. According to this version, Abramovich, who had business ties with Leviev, recruited the Israeli diamond dealer to fight on behalf of Putin and against Gusinsky. In exchange, Leviev received the support of Putin, who was elected president of Russia in 2000. This support made it possible for Lazar to obtain Russian citizenship in record time and to be practically recognized as the chief rabbi of Russian Jewry… The Jewish "federation" of Lazar and Leviev became a favorite of the government."[680]

Loyalty, legitimacy, and the strategic role of FJCR in Putin's Russia

Thanks to the Kremlin's political support, the status of Rabbi Lazar and the FJCR continued to grow steadily. Over the next few years, the FJCR movement, with the help of financial injections from pro-Kremlin oligarchs, primarily Abramovich, gained control over most of the communities in Russia. Often, this was done through direct pressure on the communities - a fact denied by Lazar and Abramovich.[681] In 2001, Lazar joined the board of trustees of the National Fund for Support of Military Personnel, which included prominent representatives of

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[677] Yossi Melman, "The Complete Guide to the Battles of the Jewish Oligarchs in Russia", *TheMarker*, November 27, 2005, https://www.themarker.com/misc/2005-11-27/ty-article/0000017f-df85-db5a-a57f-dfef6ecc0000
[678] Ibid.
[679] Ibid.
[680] Ibid.
[681] Mikhail Tulsky, "Portrait of Berl Lazar. On the situation in Jewish communities in Russia"

the Russian regime, such as the Secretary of the Security Council. Then, by order of Putin, he was included in the Council under the President of Russia for interaction with religious organizations and associations. In 2004, Lazar was awarded orders in the Kremlin for his services in the development of spiritual culture and strengthening of the Russian state. In 2005, by decree of Putin, he was appointed a member of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, one of the Kremlin's instruments for controlling society and simulating democracy.[682] Lazar became the only Jewish leader who regularly met with Putin and maintained direct communication with the presidential administration, which strengthened his status not only within the community but also within Putin's political system.

The new status of "chief Jew" of Russia assigned Berl Lazar the responsibility for representing the interests of the community before the authorities, first and foremost in the fight against anti-Semitism. Lazar did show some activity in this matter, for example, when he appealed to Putin in 2002 with a request not to allow the registration of the National-Sovereign Party of Russia (NDPR), since "the pogromistic nature of the NDPR is not even hidden by its leaders."[683] Berl Lazar sharply condemned a series of terrorist attacks using mined anti-Semitic posters, and provided important assistance to one of the victims of such a terrorist attack on a highway near Moscow, Tatyana Sapunova, who, thanks to him, was sent to Israel for treatment.[684] But at the same time, Lazar invariably made statements about the successes of the Russian authorities in the fight against anti-Semitism. In July 2002, as the antisemitic signs' terrorist attacks increased, Lazar stated that the disappearance of state anti-Semitism was due to Putin and announced that the incidence of "everyday anti-Semitism" was also decreasing in the country.[685] At the same time, in the FJCR newspaper "LeHaim", Lazar spoke about the situation of Jews in Russia: "Now both the Russian president and the regional governors are understanding of the problems of the Jewish community in Russia, providing it with every possible support. The time has come that has not yet had analogues in the centuries-old Russian

[682] "The Public Chamber is a fig leaf covering up the shame of power - V. Ryzhkov", IA Regnum, October 8, 2004, https://regnum.ru/news/338652
[683] Mikhail Tulsky, "Lazar Berl, Chief Rabbi of Russia", Portal-Credo.Ru, December, 20, 2004
[684] "Tatyana Sapunova, injured in the explosion in the Moscow region, has been discharged from an Israeli clinic", Newsru.com, July 2, 2002, https://www.newsru.com/world/02jul2002/sapunova.html
[685] "Interview with Berl Lazar by Radio Liberty", Radio Liberty, May 11, 2003.

history."[686] In connection with such statements, which did not correctly reflect the real situation, Lazar was pressured by Jewish international organizations, demanding that he take a more truthful position on the issue of anti-Semitism.[687]

Moreover, Lazar and other FJCR representatives systematically exaggerated the successes of the Russian authorities in supporting the Jewish community, using unconfirmed information. For example, in 2004, an official representative of the FJCR stated that 50,000 people had moved to Russia from Israel, five times more than had emigrated to Israel; at the same time, it claimed that the Jewish population of Russia was six times higher than the official figures and amounted to no less than a million people.[688] In 2008, Lazar estimated that about one hundred thousand Jews had returned to Russia.[689] More than a decade later, Lazar again spoke of a million Jews in Russia, based on an unsubstantiated estimate by the founder of Chabad, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.[690] When Israeli Minister of Absorption Tzipi Livni requested that the FJCR provide a list of Chabad community members, the organization refused, citing personal confidentiality as the reason.[691]

These inflated, religiously framed figures served to bolster Russia's image as a favorable environment for Jews, while simultaneously emphasizing the vitality of the Russian Jewish community and, therefore, underscoring the pivotal role of FJCR and Chabad in its revival.

With Putin's support, FJCR and Chabad became the country's leading Jewish organization, concentrating in their hands the donations of oligarchs interested in supporting projects that had received the Kremlin's approval.

According to other community leaders, the statements of Lazar and other FJCR representatives served as proof of their dependent status from the Kremlin, which they received

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[686] Berl Lazar, "From destruction to recovery", *LeHaim,* no. 7 (123), July 2002, https://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/123/moscow.htm
[687] Guy Chazan, "In Russia, a Top Rabbi Uses Kremlin Ties to Gain Power", *Wall Street Journal,* May 8, 2007.
[688] "Jews from Israel are returning to Russia", *RBC*, October 26, 2004, https://www.rbc.ru/society/26/10/2004/5703c4969a7947dde8e0c746
[689] "Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar", Oxford Jewish Student Centre, February 27, 2008, https://www.oxfordchabad.org/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/640796/jewish/Chief-Rabbi-of-Russia-Berel-Lazar.htm
[690] "Interview with chief rabbbi of Russia Berl Lazar", 5782 Jewish Journal, April 1, 2017, https://jewishmagazine.ru/articles/intervyu/glavnyj-ravvin-rf-berl-lazar-v-pesah-my-sovershaem-skachok-a-v-techenie-goda-objazany-uporno-dvigatsja-k-realizacii-sobstvennoj-missii/
[691] Yossi Melman, "The Complete Guide to the Battles of the Jewish Oligarchs in Russia", *TheMarker,* November 27, 2005, https://www.themarker.com/misc/2005-11-27/ty-article/0000017f-df85-db5a-a57f-dfef6ecc0000

in exchange for loyalty and cooperation. One of the well-known figures of the Jewish community, Yevgeny Satanovsky, characterized FJCR's instrumental role in Putin's system as follows: "There were always court Jews under the Czars, under the Soviets. Lazar is firmly in that tradition."[692] Lazar had no choice but to respond to these accusations, but his statements, as a rule, only reinforced these suspicions.[693]

The model of "court Jews" under Putin's regime differs from both the pre-revolutionary and Soviet periods. Russian tsars, beginning with Ivan III, used wealthy Jews in financial or foreign policy matters, taking advantage of their connections in European countries.[694] Today's Russian Jewish oligarchs play a similar role.[695] However, in tsarist Russia, there was no position of chief rabbi, and no representative of the Jewish community had formal status at the royal court. The current model of relations is more reminiscent of the Soviet one, established by Stalin when he created the official Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee during World War II, or the Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Public (AKSO), established in the 1980s during the brief reign of Yuri Andropov. Both organizations consisted of prominent representatives of Jewish nationality whose mission was to promote the Soviet government's propaganda. In the case of the JAC, the attempt of its leaders to stand up for the Jewish population and its national interests

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[692] Guy Chazan, "In Russia, a Top Rabbi Uses Kremlin Ties to Gain Power", The Wall Street Journal, May 8 , 2007, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB117858672536595256?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=ASWzDAjuH1sfMQtbnOvQi3l6cOR9NLtTS0MKC6ziHnB-9ehrqq2_1NHdm5jDMuNgsq0%3D&gaa_ts=68406a4c&gaa_sig=O0TOYFCoAoISkfJ4I1BZGNlP0pDp-hsC04u-gUHKXgzmhZF0Rxq8_9ghKZLespI7lzbeMq99KkXrqM9B8ah3AA%3D%3D

[693] For example, in his interview to an Israeli journalist Yossi Melman in 2005 he said: ""I do not know what a court Jew is…There are some people whose only purpose is to speak in condemnation of the government. I try to be objective. The situation in Russia has improved under Putin. People get pensions. The standard of living is rising. There are also negative phenomena, which deserve to be criticized. There is corruption at all levels, though that has been characteristic of Russia in the past 80 years. The reform is in bad shape and there are also many other ills…There is definitely anti-Semitism and manifestations of nationalism. But the government is trying to fight the anti-Semitism. The government is returning assets of Jews. Putin sends me Rosh Hashanah greetings. Jews are getting respect and one can be a Jew and walk the streets as a Jew without fear." See in Yossi Melman, "No Love Lost", Haaretz, December 8, 2005.

[694] Compared to the influence of the "court Jews" of Western Europe, their role in Russian history was less significant. See more in "Court Jews", *Electronic Jewish Encyclopedia*, https://eleven.co.il/jewish-history/new-age-16-18-centuries/13317/

[695] For example, one of Putin's oligarchs, Roman Abramovich, was involved on the Kremlin's behalf in negotiation efforts to end the war in Ukraine. See Stuart Williams,"Sanctions-hit Abramovich is a surprise mediator in Russia-Ukraine talks", *The Times of Israel*, April 5, 2022, https://www.timesofisrael.com/sanctions-hit-abramovich-is-a-surprise-mediator-in-russia-ukraine-talks/

ended tragically for them; the AKSO leadership, entirely subordinate to the authorities, never had such ambitions.

The model created under Putin differs from the Soviet one: thanks to Lazar's status in the Russian government, FJCR and Chabad have been given a mandate to revive religious Jewish life and condemn, within a limit, acts of anti-Semitism, in exchange for refraining from criticizing the Kremlin and providing political support to the authorities in domestic and foreign affairs. Thus, the current model of relations combines elements borrowed from Russia's tsarist and Soviet past, but also demonstrates new features associated with the peculiarities of the Russian political system: its authoritarian essence, personalistic character, and imitation of democratic governance.

2. FJCR's role in promoting Putin's international image and Russia's national interests

Shaping the image: Putin as defender of Jewish communities

Lazar and FJCR's cooperation with the Kremlin continued to flourish well beyond the initial period of Putin's rule and turned out to be a strategic relationship for both sides. The benefits of cooperation with the pro-Kremlin Jewish organization, which emerged at a critical moment in Putin's rise to power, were in demand over the following decades, becoming an integral part of the regime up to the time of writing this thesis. In addition to exercising control over the Jewish community within the country, one of the main advantages of FJCR's cooperation with the Kremlin was, and remains, the foreign policy aspect. In his foreign trips, Lazar promotes the thesis that "Putin is good for the Jews", which allows him to explain or justify the Kremlin's policies in the eyes of the Jewish audience and beyond.[696]

Already at the beginning of Putin's rule, Berl Lazar and Levi Leviev tried to influence the American Jewish community and the US administration in order to advance the interests of the Kremlin. One of their first activities was the attempt to repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendments,

[696] "Berl Lazar praised Putin in Israel", Detaly, March 21, 2018, https://detaly.co.il/berl-lazar-v-izraile-rashvalival-putina/

adopted in the 1970s due to the USSR's refusal to allow Jewish emigration[697]. Just a few days before President Putin's first visit to the United States, Berl Lazar arrived there to discuss the issue with American congressmen. When asked by a journalist why he was interested in the repeal of the amendment, Lazar replied: "The Americans have always asked about this, too. I explained to them that the Jews are very interested in the development of the Russian economy, that this would be the best gift for them."[698] Although not part of the official Russian delegation, Lazar participated in a meeting between Putin and leaders of American Jewish organizations in New York. It is possible that the topic of repealing the amendments was also raised at this meeting, as it was at the next such meeting, this time in Moscow.[699]

What is clear is that Lazar consistently raised this topic at the highest levels of the US government. At a meeting with US President George W. Bush during the latter's visit to Russia in May 2002, Lazar expressed disappointment with the Congress's refusal to repeal the amendments and received a promise from the American president to help resolve the issue. According to Lazar himself, "Bush promised to talk to Congressman Tom Lantos, he is the main guy there on this matter... He said he would go to him specifically and negotiate... And I added: Convey from the Jew Berl Lazar to the Jew Tom Lantos that we no longer have a Jewish question in Russia!"[700] Lazar's efforts, although they did not achieve the desired goal of repealing the amendments, received public approval from Putin, who "expressed gratitude to the leaders of Russian Jewish communities for their active participation in the process of integrating Russia into the international economic space" and noted "a noticeable improvement in the recent policy of US Jewish organizations toward Russia."[701]

The Congress repealed the Jackson-Vanik Amendments in 2012 in exchange for enacting the Magnitsky Act, which allowed sanctions against Russian officials after the warming of

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[697] The Jackson-Vanik amendments were a provision in the 1974 U.S. Trade Act that restricted trade benefits (like *most favored nation status*) to countries with non-market economies, such as the Soviet Union, that restricted emigration, especially of Jews and other minorities. The goal was to pressure the USSR to allow freer Jewish emigration, particularly to Israel.
[698] Andrei Kolesnikov, “Vladimir Vladimirovich, dear, came to them”, *Kommersant*, November 15, 2001, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/292187
[699] See previous section on the meeting of Jewish senior leaders in kremlin in 2003.
[700] Andrei Kolesnikov, “Only George Bush trusts Vladimir Putin”, Kommersant, May 27, 2002, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/324093
[701] “Meeting in the Kremlin on the eve of the Rebbe's 100th anniversary”, LeHaim”, May 2002, https://lechaim.ru/ARHIV/121/fede.htm

relations between Russia and the West had already passed. Thus, although Lazar's efforts to repeal the amendments were in vain, his services in advancing Russian interests were still in demand. In his interviews and public statements, Lazar invariably emphasized that the attitude towards Jews in Russia had changed entirely thanks to Putin. Here is his statement made in 2001 in the United States: "Russia has never treated Jews as well as it does now!.. Today, Putin has changed the view of Jews not only among the authorities. He has changed the view of Russians on Jews! And now his view is the view of the entire country! And you and I know that this is almost impossible to do in a country like Russia! But he did it!"[702]

Glorifying Putin himself and his historical role in restoring Jewish life in Russia was one of Lazar's main themes in his communications with foreign audiences. Speaking about Putin's attitude towards Jews, Lazar often described it in fairy-tale and mystical terms. Speaking to the Chabad community in Oxford in 2008, Berl Lazar said,

> "I will tell you a small story, which took place in St. Petersburg about 50 years ago." A young non-Jewish boy grew up in a very poor family…This boy had poor parents who were barely home. He was fortunate that a neighboring family from another room in the apartment started inviting him over. The father was a professor who helped him with his homework, they babysat for him… The family, who was Jewish, also invited him for the Friday night Shabbat meals…At that time, the boy said, look how impressive these people are. They never fight with each other. There is respect between the husband and wife; a beautiful family to emulate. Many, many years later, the same boy grew up and became the vice-Mayor of St. Petersburg... This boy was Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin... Fifty years ago, a young boy was helped by a Jewish family, and there is no question that the revival and success of Jewish life today in Russia is due to the president of Russia Mr. Putin."[703]

In his speeches, Berel Lazar systematically downplayed the contributions of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, emphasizing Putin's exceptional role in restoring the Jewish community in Russia

[702] Andrei Kolesnikov, “Only George Bush trusts Vladimir Putin”, *Kommersant*
[703] "Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar", Oxford Jewish Student Centre, February 27, 2008, https://www.oxfordchabad.org/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/640796/jewish/Chief-Rabbi-of-Russia-Berel-Lazar.htm

and calling it a "miracle."[704] Lazar delivers the same messages today, promoting Putin's impeccably pro-Jewish image, as he did 17 years ago, as evident in his latest meetings with Putin.[705]

However, Lazar does not limit himself to glorifying Putin's image as the "best friend of the Jewish people," but acts to advance the Kremlin's political interests. Thus, in 2008, during the "castling" of Putin and Dmitry Medvedev in the posts of president and Prime Minister, respectively, Lazar spoke at length to foreign audiences about Medvedev's warm attitude toward the Jewish community, even hinting at the latter's Jewish origins.[706] Before the 2012 presidential elections, which were critical for the Kremlin and took place amid mass protests against the authorities, Lazar publicly supported Putin, thanking him for the revival of the Jewish community and declaring that most Russian Jews would vote for Putin.[707] These statements did not reflect the political views of the Jewish population, many of whom took part in anti-Kremlin protests. In communication with the critically minded press, Lazar prefers to resort to more neutral formulations and references to the Judaic traditions: "Our strategy is written in the Talmud... We must pray for the luck and success of the president and the authorities, until, God forbid, they begin to act against the Jews."[708]

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[704] "Berl Lazar praised Putin in Israel", *Detaly*, March 21, 2018, https://detaly.co.il/berl-lazar-v-izraile-rashvalival-putina/

[705] At meeting with Putin in the Kremlin in February 2025, Lazar said: "And I remember the first meeting with you, remember, you were still the prime minister then? Then, when you came to the opening of the community center, it was the moment when everything became different. Unfortunately, in the first years after perestroika, everything was not easy for the Jewish community here. We felt anti-Semitism, there was chaos, there was poverty, poverty not only material, but also spiritual! People were completely lost, confused... And, without a doubt, I think that what you showed, how important eternal values, support for traditional values, gave a new impetus to the community. Today, thank God, the Jewish community in Russia is developing incredibly, a lot is being built, new programs for young people. Russia has united around spirituality, around God! This is a special moment! We see how people are reaching out, how people want! And for us, it is simply a miracle to see it here, where before it the state, unfortunately, did not understand how important it is. And thanks to you, everything just became different!" See in "A thanksgiving: How Berl Lazar Came to Vladimir Putin", *Kommersant*, February 20, 2025, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7517387

[706] "Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar", Oxford Jewish Student Centre, February 27, 2008, https://www.oxfordchabad.org/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/640796/jewish/Chief-Rabbi-of-Russia-Berel-Lazar.htm

[707] "Berl Lazar: Most Russian Jews vote for Putin", Grani.ru, March 2, 2012, https://graniru.org/Society/Religion/m.196104.html

[708] Ilya Azar, Interview with Berl Lazar, *Novaya Gazeta*, May 2, 2017, https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/05/02/72345-gde-by-evrey-ni-zhil-on-dolzhen-molitsya-za-udachu-i-uspeh-prezidenta

FJCR as a tool of Russian foreign policy and soft power

Lazar's political services to the Kremlin are numerous and varied. In the early 2000s, Lazar and his movement were among the founders of the World Congress of Russian-Speaking Jewry (WCRJ). This organization was established as part of the Kremlin's initiative to unify the Russian diaspora, aiming to promote Russia's interests in Western countries.[709] Interestingly, WCRJ operated in parallel with the International Council of Russian Compatriots, which pursued the same goals but sought to unite all people of Russian descent, not just those of Jewish origin. Both organizations enjoyed financial support from the Kremlin and carried out the Kremlin's foreign policy orders under the guise of cultural and social activity. However, after the first years of its activity, WCRJ lost the trust of its foreign partners, and its president, former Russian senator Boris Shpigel, was convicted of corruption.[710] After his initial involvement in WCRJ, Lazar also distanced himself from this organization.

Berl Lazar also promoted the Kremlin's positions in the context of Russian disinformation operations in the West. After the Russian intelligence services interfered with the 2016 US presidential campaign, Lazar denied the meddling.[711] Moreover, Lazar tried to clear Putin of charges of anti-Semitism after the Russian president's statement about the possible interference of "Jews" in the US election campaign. At the same time, Lazar acted as Putin's de facto diplomatic envoy. At a public lecture in Israel, Lazar claimed that Putin takes into account Israel's interests in Russia's policy towards Syria and the Iranian nuclear program.[712] Avoiding an answer to a question about Russia's support for the anti-Israeli terrorist organizations Hamas and Hezbollah, Lazar tried to convince the Israeli audience that Russia's presence in Syria is beneficial for Israel.

Despite Lazar's repeated statements about his non-involvement in politics, his actions suggest otherwise and highlight his commitment to the Kremlin's interests. One of the more

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[709] "World Congress of Russian-Speaking Jewry Established in Moscow", Radio Liberty, July 1, 2002, https://web.archive.org/web/20210812202223/https://www.svoboda.org/a/24191014.html, also "World Congress of Russian-Speaking Jewry to Establish Centers in World Capitals", Jewish.ru, July 2, 2002, https://jewish.ru/ru/news/articles/35754/

[710] "The logical end of Boris Shpigel", *Independent Israeli site*, January 28, 2024, https://belisrael.info/?p=35518

[711] "Berl Lazar praised Putin in Israel", *Detaly*, March 21, 2018, https://detaly.co.il/berl-lazar-v-izraile-rashvalival-putina/

[712] "Berl Lazar praised Putin in Israel", *Detaly*, March 21, 2018, https://detaly.co.il/berl-lazar-v-izraile-rashvalival-putina/

striking examples of his participation in Russia's diplomatic initiatives was his trip to Iran in 2018. The trip took place in the spring of 2018 as part of an official parliamentary delegation at the request of Putin. The speaker of the Russian Duma confirmed Lazar's participation, emphasizing that he had a separate agenda from the delegation. According to publications in Israel and Russia, the Russian side insisted on Lazar's participation despite the Iranian authorities' initial disagreement. The purpose of Lazar's trip, according to commentators, was related to Israel's and Russia's attempts to persuade Iran to leave Syria.[713] The real reasons for the trip remain unknown, described as "mission inexplicable" by the Russian newspaper.[714] However, the visit clearly illustrated the Kremlin's close cooperation with Lazar on foreign policy issues.

Lazar's foreign policy activities extend beyond the Middle East. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Berel Lazar met with Jason Greenblatt, a close adviser to Trump, who later became the administration's special representative for international negotiations. At the meeting, according to Lazar, they discussed issues of anti-Semitism in Russia, Russian-speaking Jews in Israel, and Russian society in general. However, the rabbi stated that he did not discuss the meeting's agenda with the Kremlin representatives.[715] Greenblatt, for his part, emphasized that Russian-American relations were not a topic of discussion.[716] In this context, it should be noted that not only Lazar, but also Chabad structures in the United States facilitated the establishment of contacts between representatives of the Trump team and the Kremlin, who were interested in strengthening relations.[717]

Lazar and his movement provide unwavering support to Putin on the issue that became central in the last 10 years of his rule – the conflict with Ukraine. Lazar was the only Jewish leader who attended Putin's official address to both houses of parliament on the occasion of

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[713] "Russia's Chief Rabbi Arrives on Secret Mission to Iran", *Israel Hayom*, September 3, 2018, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/584093
[714] "Mission inexplicable", *Kommersant*, September 3, 2018, https://kommersant.ru/doc/3731497#comments
[715] Scott Shane and Andrew E. Kramer, "Trump Team's Links to Russia Crisscross in Washington", New York Times, March 3, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/us/politics/trump-russia-links-washington.html
[716] "NYT Caught Trump Aide Talking to Russia's Chief Rabbi", RBC, March 4, 2017, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/04/03/2017/58ba5dd59a794701034f0d7e
[717] *Ben Schreckinger, "The* Happy-Go-Lucky Jewish Group That Connects Trump and Putin", *Politico Magazine*, April 9, 2017, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/the-happy-go-lucky-jewish-group-that-connects-trump-and-putin-215007/

Crimea's "annexation" to the Russian Federation in March 2014.[718] Emphasizing the Jewish aspect of the "annexation," Lazar said that Jews in Crimea would celebrate a double holiday of freedom this year – Passover and the annexation to the Russian Federation, "as the Jews in Crimea have received the freedom they have been waiting for a long time."[719] A few months after the Russian occupation of Crimea, in July 2014, Berel Lazar organized a trip for Jewish leaders to Crimea to draw attention to the anti-Semitic policies of the Ukrainian authorities and Putin's role as a defender of the Jewish minority.[720] Lazar's anti-Ukrainian stance created tensions with representatives of the Jewish community in Ukraine, including Chabad, who rejected accusations of anti-Semitic policies by the local authorities. However, this reaction did not change the rhetoric of Chabad and other leaders FJCR. Moreover, Lazar's son, Yekezkel, became the chief rabbi of Simferopol and moved with his family to Crimea. He explained FJCR's decision to appoint him as having "spiritual" rather than political goals.[721]

Given the close cooperation and coordination between the Kremlin and Lazar, it is interesting to examine Lazar's foreign policy positions, which differed from or contradicted those of the Kremlin, particularly on issues related to anti-Semitism or critical to Israel's security and the Jewish community. In 2017, on the eve of the French presidential election, Lazar sharply criticized anti-Semitism in France and warned that if National Rally leader Marine Le Pen came to power, French Jews would have to leave the country.[722] Three years earlier, Putin had personally met with Le Pen in the Kremlin, and a Russian bank had provided an unprecedented political favor to her party by providing a €9 million loan. However, Lazar's criticism of Le Pen did not mean that he opposed the Kremlin's support for her. On the contrary, by focusing on anti-Semitism in Europe, Lazar promoted Russian propaganda theses about "neo-Nazism" in Europe and at the same time strengthened Putin's image as a defender of the Jews.

There were rare instances of divergence from the official Russian position when Lazar criticized the Russian government's position. In 2016, after the adoption of a UNESCO

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[718] Konstaty Gebert, "Putin's Jews", *Moment,* November-December 2015, https://momentmag.com/putins-jews/?srsltid=AfmBOoo7xFNxw4ibXKEkp-mW45vPRcezd2EORLcmkHDevkTdJBPc3x-S
[719] "Berl Lazar announced that Jews in Crimea have received long-awaited freedom", *Interfax*, April 8, 2014
[720] Andrei Melnikov, "Rabbi Lazar moved to Crimea", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, October 4, 2017, https://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2017-10-04/9_429_lazar.html
[721] Ibid.
[722] "Rabbi Berl Lazar: "If Le Pen is elected - Jews will have to leave France", Kikar Hashabbat, April 22, 1017

resolution denying the connection of the Jewish people with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, Lazar harshly condemned both the resolution itself and the vote of the Russian delegation. According to him, Russia, which is "fighting against any falsification of history, this time supported an "outright fake."[723] In 2018, Lazar called the decision of the Russian leadership to transfer S-300 anti-missile systems to Syria in response to the downing of a Russian transport plane in an incident with the Israeli Air Force a mistake.[724] Following the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, Berel Lazar paid a solidarity visit to Israel and demanded the complete disarmament of Hamas as a condition for ending the war. Lazar thus took a pro-Israel position, contrary to Russia's official policy at the time.[725]

Tensions, divergences, and the balancing act in FJCR-Kremlin relations

These examples illustrate the delicate nature of the relationship between the Kremlin and Lazar, in which the latter can criticize elements of Russian foreign policy related to Israel, thereby maintaining his legitimacy in the eyes of the country's leadership and international Jewish organizations. At the same time, Lazar never criticizes Putin personally, even when he makes anti-Semitic statements, and does not condemn other foreign policy issues. Moreover, Lazar's dependence on the Kremlin compels him to justify Russia's position even when it runs counter to the interests of the Chabad movement, as happened when the Kremlin's refused to return the library of the late Menachem Schneerson to the Chabad center in New York.[726]

This mutual understanding and agreement not only reflect the "symbiotic" nature of the relationship but also emphasize the clear priority of their long-term benefits. Despite Lazar's criticism of the Russian position after October 7, 2023, a year and a half later, Lazar organized a meeting between a freed Israeli hostage who has Russian citizenship and the Russian president. Lazar thanked Putin for helping to free the hostages, despite skeptical comments from Israeli

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[723] "Russia's Chief Rabbi Calls UNESCO Resolution on Jerusalem Offensive to Jews", National accent, October 17, 2016, https://nazaccent.ru/content/22139-glavnyj-ravvin-rossii-nazval-rezolyuciyu-yunesko/
[724] "In rare criticism, Russian chief rabbi blasts supply of S-300 missiles to Syria", The Times of Israel, October 5, 2018, https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-rare-criticism-russian-chief-rabbi-blasts-supply-of-s-300-missiles-to-syria/
[725] "Russia's Chief Rabbi Against Putin's Policy: "Hamas Must Surrender", Kan 11, January 28, 2024, https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/global/693557/
[726] "Russian and American Chabad Arms Split Over Schneerson Library", *Forward,* March 3, 2013, https://forward.com/news/172112/russian-and-american-chabad-arms-split-over-schnee/

officials about Russia's role. Cooperation with FJCR and Chabad continues to yield significant political and reputational benefits for Putin's regime. It is no coincidence that the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, one of the expert communities closest to the Kremlin, wrote back in 2017: "The Russian Chabad community has every chance of becoming one of the key levers for advancing Russia's interests abroad, capable of exerting direct influence on the adoption of fateful decisions in the most influential countries of the world."[727]

3. Consequences of Kremlin interference in Jewish communal affairs

The transformation of Chabad into the primary representative and driving force of Russian Jewry was not the only result of the Kremlin's interference in the community's affairs. In the context of Russia's democratization in the 1990s, the country's Jewish community began to organize itself in the spirit of openness, pluralism, and independence from the government. However, the process of transferring power from Yeltsin to his successor, and even more significantly, the rise to power of Vladimir Putin, became a turning point. From that moment on, the Presidential Administration began an unprecedented and crude interference in the affairs of the Jewish community, which, according to observers and experts, caused irreparable damage to its attempts at independent development.

One of the first consequences was the loss of independence of the RJC, where key posts became the subject of a competition between oligarchs close to the Kremlin. After Gusinsky and then another well-known oligarch, Leonid Nevzlin, were forced to leave Russia due to persecution by the authorities and stepped down from the presidency of the RJC, their successors demonstrated complete loyalty to the regime. The position of the president of the RJC ultimately fell under the control of individuals who were entirely dependent on the Kremlin's political will. As the organization lost its independence and influence, the oligarchs also lost interest in it. The only Jewish organization that could provide access to the Kremlin and enjoyed real influence

[727] “Shalom, Chabad and the Jewish Renaissance”, Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, October 4, 2017, https://svop.ru/projects/dialog-tsivilizatsii/61488/

was the FJCR, controlled by Chabad. Here is how an Israeli newspaper describes this relationship:

> The ties between the Chabad movement, Putin and the leading Jewish oligarchs in Russia resembled a golden triangle, in which each side supported and strengthened the other. Putin allowed the oligarchs to grow rich and prosper as long as they remained loyal to him. The Jewish oligarchs, who became very rich, donated generously to the Chabad movement, which in turn contributed to Putin's international image as the first philosemite king."[728]

The Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia has become the primary partner of the state in the Jewish community, receiving preferential treatment and resources, while also enjoying the support of the wealthiest oligarchs. Thus, Chabad has become a dominant organization, with a network of religious communities and centers throughout Russia. According to the FJCR website, Chabad communities operate in 135 Russian cities.[729] At the 7th Congress of the FJCR, held in 2020, Lazar shared the organization's successes in returning and restoring historical synagogues and building new community centers, which has always been one of the central goals of Chabad. Lazar also emphasized that the main result of the activity is not in the statistical data on the participation of Jews in the activities of Chabad communities, but in the qualitative change of the community, "whose members attach increasing importance to their Jewish identity, seeing Judaism as fundamental to life."[730]

However, not all representatives of Russian Jewry share this opinion. Granting exclusive status to FJCR entailed the monopolization of Jewish life, mainly its religious aspect, in the hands of the Chabad movement. The Kremlin's reliance on FJCR and Lazar changed the religious landscape of the community. According to Zvi Gitelman: "Chabad, with the help of Putin, is now the dominant religious expression of Judaism in a mostly nonreligious population."[731] The overwhelming majority of Russian Jews are secular, assimilated people who

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[728] "Chabad and Putin are no more", Makkor Rishon, July 28, 2022, https://www.makorrishon.co.il/news/510997/
[729] *FJCR website*, https://FJCR.ru.
[730] "VII convention", *FJCR website*, https://FJCR.ru/vii-congress/
[731] Cnaan Liphshiz and Talia Lavim, "Putin's Jewish embrace: Is it love or politics?", JTA, https://www.jta.org/2014/03/11/global/putins-jewish-embrace-is-it-love-or-politics

grew up outside of religious tradition, who are not close to either the liturgical practice of Chabad, or its style, or loyalty to the state. The dominance of Chabad does not meet the needs of the assimilated Jewish population, raised in isolation from the Jewish religious tradition and leading a secular lifestyle. However, the monopolization of Chabad has led to the displacement of rabbis from other movements, particularly those within the modern Orthodox and Conservative streams. Researcher David Shneer from the University of Denver describes the essence of Chabad's religious activity in Russia as follows:

> "Chabad is evangelical Judaism. They bring Judaism to people at whatever level they're at. If they want to light candles, they'll show them how to light candles. If they want to keep kosher, they'll show them how to keep kosher. They know that 95 percent of people who attend Chabad events are not at all religiously observant. But their point is to bring a certain kind of Judaism to as many Jews as possible."[732]

According to Shneer, the dominance of Chabad and the absence of real alternatives, either progressive or reformist, will be "terrible for the future of pluralistic Judaism in Russia."[733] Mikhail Oistrakh, a leader from one of the local Jewish communities, believes that the Putin regime's preferential treatment of Chabad "is creating a monolithic Jewish institutional life and preventing grass-roots development, which is the real key for Jewish rejuvenation."[734]

Chabad's dominance not only undermines religious pluralism within the Jewish community but also distorts the political leanings of the Jewish population, much of which traditionally identifies with the liberal worldview.[735] Russian Jews tend to participate in the pro-democracy opposition, and many of them took part in the 2011–2012 protests. Many of them

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[732] Joshua Keating, "Putin's Chosen People," Slate, November 28, 2014, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2014/11/vladimir-putin-chabad-whats-behind-the-russian-presidents-close-relationship-with-an-orthodox-jewish-sect.html

[733] Joshua Keating, “Putin’s Chosen People”, *Slate*, November 28, 2014, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2014/11/vladimir-putin-chabad-whats-behind-the-russian-presidents-close-relationship-with-an-orthodox-jewish-sect.html

[734] Cnaan Liphshiz and Talia Lavim, “Putin’s Jewish embrace: Is it love or politics?”, JTA, https://www.jta.org/2014/03/11/global/putins-jewish-embrace-is-it-love-or-politics

[735] Lisa Rosovsky, “The quarter-million immigration: Putin arranged a huge immigration of liberals to Israel”, *Haaretz*, July 17, 2024, https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/2024-07-17/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/00000190-c084-d458-a3d7-ebe7597b0000

acquired Israeli citizenship in case the regime "tightened the screws,"[736] and tens of thousands left the country after the Russian aggression in Ukraine began.

Thus, the Kremlin's intervention in the affairs of the Jewish community in Russia from 2000 to 2025 led to a systemic transformation of its entire structure. From the pluralistic, secular, and independent model that emerged in the 1990s, the community has shifted to a vertically integrated, politically loyal model, exemplified by the leaders of FJCR and Chabad.

Although Chabad's activities helped preserve the religious infrastructure in dozens of cities, the price for this was subordination to the political interests of the regime – and, perhaps, the loss of a future in which Jewish life in Russia could again be free, diverse, and democratic.

However, from the regime's perspective, this transformation of the Jewish community was precisely the desired outcome. Since coming to power, Putin has been building a rigid vertical of power, establishing control over society, including its religious life. By doing so, Putin was reestablishing the traditional model of subordination of the Russian Orthodox Church to the country's ruler, as was the case both in Tsarist and Soviet times.[737] With Putin in power, the Russian Orthodox Church again lost its independence. It turned into an organization acting according to the Kremlin's directives and justifying its policies, including the war against Ukraine. The same model was applied to three other "traditional" religions in Russia: Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. In this system, the Chief Rabbi Lazar and FJCR served as the official representatives for the Jewish community. This choice corresponded with the Kremlin's system of control and subordination. Unlike other Jewish movements, Chabad is a centrally organized hierarchical organization. According to Yuri Kanner, president of the RJC, it "replicates in a way the structure of the Orthodox Church. There is a center that sends its ambassadors into the communities."[738] Moreover, Chabad is a "movement that cultivates ties with political leadership as part of a broader strategy to make a home wherever they happen to be."[739]

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[736] Konstaty Gebert, “Putin’s Jews”, *Moment Magazine*, November 5, 2015, https://momentmag.com/putins-jews/?srsltid=AfmBOoo7xFNxw4ibXKEkp-mW45vPRcezd2EORLcmkHDevkTdJBPc3x-S
[737] Richard Pipes, *Russia under the old regime* (London, Penguin Books: 1995), pp. 239-243, and Konstaty Gebert, “Putin’s Jews”, *Moment Magazine.*
[738] Joshua Keating, “Putin’s Chosen People”
[739] Ibid.

This strategy evolved from the historical experience of Chabad in Russia, a small religious sect that had to fight for its survival in a repressive state. Thus, Chabad's interaction with the Russian government in the 21st century is not an accident, but an organic continuation of the movement's historical strategy: to work with those in power for the sake of a minimal but stable space for observing tradition. However, in Putin's Russia, this logic has transformed into political complicity, where Chabad has become not just a tolerant religious force but an active participant in the legitimization of the regime. As the author of the Haaretz article accurately put it: "That has been a spectacular achievement of Russia's Jewish leadership, but a Faustian bargain, as is any such agreement with the devil."[740] As a result, the image of official Jewry has merged with the image of a "loyal servant of the regime," eroding trust in this movement both inside and outside of Russia. In the context of the war in Ukraine, the lack of explicit condemnation of Russian aggression by Berl Lazar and FJCR was perceived as an unforgivable mistake.

It should be emphasized that the mutually, unusual, beneficial relations between Chabad of Russia and the Kremlin have been widely discussed in the Israeli and American press since the 2000s. The newspaper "Haaretz" published an interview with Lazar in 2008, referring to him as "the Chief Rabbi of the Kremlin." In the interview, Lazar justified his actions, stating that "the world does not understand Russia" and that there is "no other way to do this work."[741]

The complete dependence of Jewish organizations on the Kremlin hurt the fight against anti-Semitism. The distortion of the real situation of anti-Semitism in Russia by the leaders of the FJCR as part of the Kremlin propaganda has already been discussed above. However, RJC also forsook its responsibilities. After decades of monitoring anti-Semitism in Russia and publishing annual reports, it did not do so in 2021, limiting itself to a statement by President Kanner that Russia has "one of the lowest levels of anti-Semitism in the post-Soviet space."[742] A year later, the organization not only stopped publishing the report but also ceased monitoring anti-

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[740] "Chabad's Long Faustian Bargain With Russia and Putin", Haaretz, April 25, 2022, https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/2022-04-25/ty-article-opinion/.highlight/chabads-long-faustian-bargain-with-russia-and-putin/00000180-655d-d824-ad9e-e77d0d8b0000

[741] Anshel Pfeffer, "The Chief Rabbi of the Kremlin", Haaretz, February 28, 2008, https://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/2008-02-28/ty-article/0000017f-e71b-df5f-a17f-ffdf68800000

[742] «RJC spoke about the level of anti-Semitism in Russia", *RIA Novosti*, November 22, 2021, https://ria.ru/20211122/antisemitizm-1760137029.html

Semitism. Paradoxically, precisely at that time – the year of Russia's invasion of Ukraine – acts of anti-Semitic vandalism began to increase in Russia, according to independent experts.[743]

Despite these processes, the Kremlin's interference in the community's affairs did not elicit an appropriate reaction from the international Jewish organization nor Israel. Political developments and considerations contributed to this outcome. Since the 2000s, Russian-Israeli relations have been strengthening, which has increased the influence of Chabad as a link between the leaderships of the two countries. As Russia's role in the Middle East has grown stronger, following the unsuccessful and contradictory US policies in the region, the Israeli leadership has increasingly intensified its interaction with Moscow, prioritizing national security interests. As a result, it was ready to accept uncritically the Kremlin's messages, reinforced by Lazar's rhetoric, about the insignificance of anti-Semitism in Russia and the unprecedented flourishing of the Jewish community. It has also been willing to pay no heed to the distortion of Holocaust history carried out by the Putin regime for political purposes.

Thus, the controversial and ambiguous pro-Kremlin positions of Lazar, the "Jewish face of the regime," as we will see in the next section, have not raised objections in the Israeli leadership.

C. "From Russia with Love" – Putin's courting of Israel as part of his foreign policy

Since the beginning of his presidency, Vladimir Putin has sought to reorient Russia's foreign policy, emphasizing pragmatism, transactional approaches, and personalized diplomacy. Relations with Israel occupied a special place in his foreign policy. Initially, he followed in the footsteps of Yevgeny Primakov[744] but achieved much greater effectiveness in forming trusting relations with the Israeli leadership. Russian-Israeli relations during the period 2000-2008 reached a qualitatively new level, at which the national interests, geopolitical calculations, and domestic political goals of both countries became closely intertwined. Signs of the importance of

[743] Vyacheslav Likhachev, "The circuit starts working in reverse - Anti-Semitism in Russia: A Throwback to Soviet Times?", *Kontinent,* March 26, 2025, https://kontinentusa.com/shema-nachinaet-rabotat-v-obratnom-napravlenii/
[744] Yevgeny Primakov was a Russian politician and intelligence officer who served as Prime Minister of Russia from 1998 to 1999 and was influential in shaping Russia's foreign policy.

the Israeli direction in Putin's political thinking appeared even before he came to power: during his tenure as director of the FSB, he held a meeting with former Soviet dissident and prominent Israeli politician Natan Sharansky. This meeting made a deep impression on Sharansky, who saw in Putin a "new type" of Russian official who did not hide his sympathy for Jews and his intention to fight anti-Semitism, which, Putin explained, was in the interests of the country's internal stability.[745] After becoming president, Putin repeated this gesture, inviting Sharansky to the Kremlin during his visit to Moscow, which added even greater symbolic significance to the change of eras in Russia.[746] At the meeting, Putin asked Sharansky to lobby the American administration to repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendments and normalize its trade and economic relations with Russia. Thus, from the beginning of his career in government, Putin's attempts to demonstrate attention to the Jewish issue and the fight against anti-Semitism in Russia were closely linked to Russia's political interests.

Personal contacts between Putin and Israeli leaders have increased significantly. At a certain point, Benjamin Netanyahu's visits to Moscow became more frequent than his trips to Washington, underscoring the growing mutual interest between the leaders. Moscow viewed Israel as an important player not only in the Middle East but also in transatlantic politics; from Jerusalem's perspective, it had to act independently in the face of the weakening of the American position in the region. After Russia's military intervention on the side of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Russia became a "neighboring country" for Israel, which only strengthened Jerusalem's attempts to strengthen ties with the new "sheriff" in the region. Putin's approach, based on elements of "soft power" and personalized dialogue, formed the basis for a new page in Russian-Israeli relations, in which secret agreements played a greater role than open diplomacy, and gestures of friendship alternated with hostile actions, mainly on the Russian side. This approach found understanding in Israel, which grew out of an admiration among some Israeli leaders for Putin's way of thinking and actions, as well as a relatively inflated assessment of Russia's capabilities in the region.

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[745] Interview with Nathan Sharansky by the author.
[746] Dmitry Gordon, “Sharansky: Putin once told me: “I am being frank with you not because you are a minister, but because we read the minutes of your questions.”, Gordon.ua, September 28, 2023, https://gordonua.com/publications/shcharanskij-putin-mne-kak-to-skazal-ja-s-vami-otkrovenen-ne-potomu-chto-vy-ministr-a-potomu-chto-chital-protokoly-vashikh-doprosov-1681750.html

1. Putin’s personal diplomacy

Building relations with Israel’s Prime Ministers

Since coming to power, Vladimir Putin has focused on developing bilateral relations with Israel. Personal diplomacy has become the key instrument of this policy. The high priority given to fostering the president's ties with Israeli leaders has allowed Putin to strengthen Russia's standing in the world, to improve its image in the West, to use bilateral relations to deal with specific problems, such as repealing the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, and to promote Russian interests in Israel and the Middle East.

From the early years of his presidency, Putin actively built relationships with key Israeli political figures, including Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert, Benjamin Netanyahu, Shimon Peres, Natan Sharansky, Avigdor Lieberman, and Naftali Bennett. The format of his meetings with them often deviated from protocol, evolving into a confidential, personal dialogue. As Anna Borshchevskaya notes, "Putin, unlike Soviet leaders, proceeded from a pragmatic assessment of Israel's role in the region and understood the importance of personal ties."[747] Beginning in 2001, visits by Israeli leaders to Moscow became a regular occurrence.

In January 2001, for the first time in the history of bilateral relations, the president of Israel paid an official visit to Russia, which had great symbolic significance. In September that year, Putin received Prime Minister Sharon in the Kremlin. Sharon and his successor Ehud Olmert will visit Moscow at least once a year, in contrast to the sporadic visits of their predecessors in the 1990s. Putin's relations with Israeli leaders were not always very cordial: he showed signs of respect to Ariel Sharon, a former famous Israeli general, but was cold in his communication with Ehud Olmert, whose democratic style was strikingly different from Putin's.[748] However, despite these differences, Putin consistently demonstrated a willingness to communicate with Israeli leaders, which underscored his understanding of the importance of

[747] Anna Borshchevskaya, “The Evolution of Russian Strategy toward Israel: From Non-Recognition to Pragmatic Engagement”, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy: Strategic Assessment*, Volume 25, No. 1, March 2022.
[748] Herb Keinin, “Putin from Mars, Olmert from Venus”, Jerusalem Post, October 19, 2006, https://www.jpost.com/international/putin-from-mars-olmert-from-venus

relations, particularly considering critical events in the region that necessitated interaction – the Second Lebanon War and the expansion of Iranian influence in the region.

Readiness for dialogue did not mean complete agreement between the parties. Ehud Olmert, expressing gratitude to Putin for the opportunity for dialogue, provided evidence of the danger of Iran's nuclear intentions and expected Russia's appropriate response. Despite the stated understanding of Israel's concerns, Russia continued to defend Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy and expressed its disagreement with harsh actions against Tehran. The Israeli press then highlighted the Kremlin's unwavering stance on this issue, despite Putin's openness to dialogue.[749] According to Jerusalem Post analyst Herb Keinon, "Israel's policy toward Russia can be called "containment through engagement." Israeli policy – despite disagreeing with Moscow on many issues – is to keep Moscow in its orbit, based on the conviction that Russia, if pushed out, could cause great harm to Israel's vital interests."[750]

There is no doubt that during Benjamin Netanyahu's tenure in power, cooperation with Russia under Putin reached a new level. Their relations stood out as particularly trusting. The first meeting between the two took place in December 2000 at the Hanukkah celebration at the Chabad center in Moscow, thanks to the coordination of Berl Lazar. Netanyahu was in the capital at that time on a private visit and acted as a private individual, but he had already established personal contact with the Russian president. In the following years, meetings between them became a regular occurrence. Moreover, during specific periods, Netanyahu met with Putin more frequently than with the US president. Between 2015 and 2019, they held at least ten meetings, whereas contacts with Barack Obama were much rarer and less frequent, despite the strategic alliance between Israel and the US. In total, Netanyahu visited Russia 17 times between 2009 and 2020, an unprecedented level of high-level bilateral contacts not only for Netanyahu's predecessors but also for most other foreign leaders. As further proof of the high level of discretion, it is worth noting that in 2009, Netanyahu secretly visited Russia to meet with Putin,

[749] Yossi Melman, “Putin spoke with the Prime Minister about military action and emphasized his opposition”, Haaretz, October 21, 2006, https://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/2006-10-21/ty-article/0000017f-db65-d3a5-af7f-fbefda020000

[750] Quoted from: “On the progress and results of E. Olmert's visit to Moscow”, October 27, 2006, Iran.ru, https://iran.ru/news/analytics/43659/O_hode_i_itogah_vizita_E_Olmerta_v_Moskvu

with both sides keeping the details of the visit confidential.[751] Netanyahu will try to convert his close relations with Putin to strengthen his image among Israeli voters.[752] However, according to some analysts, this demonstration of close relations with Putin alienated Israeli voters, including those of Russian origin.[753]

Putin's first visit to Israel: effective courting of Israel's political elite

Of particular importance in the development of Russian-Israeli relations was Vladimir Putin's visit to Israel in April 2005, the first by a Russian head of state in the history of the two countries. Putin met with President Moshe Katsav, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, and Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, discussing a wide range of issues, from the fight against terrorism to the Iranian nuclear program. He also visited the Yad Vashem memorial and addressed representatives of the Russian-speaking community. These gestures were perceived in Israel as a sign of respect and a genuine desire for dialogue. Within Russia itself, the visit strengthened Putin's status as a global leader and contributed to the improvement of Israel's image. In the international arena, it emphasized Moscow's role as a player capable of influencing regional processes.[754]

In an interview with Israeli television before the visit, Putin emphasized that Israel is "almost a Russian-speaking country," and that personal ties with immigrants from Russia create a special basis for the development of bilateral relations.[755] Israeli leaders, in turn, actively utilized their ties with Putin in their domestic policies: for example, during the political crisis from 2019 to 2021, Putin publicly expressed his support for Netanyahu. It is characteristic that many Israeli leaders have emphasized their connection to Russia or the Russian-speaking world. Ariel Sharon often recalled his parents, who were born in the Russian Empire, and emphasized his knowledge

[751] "Israeli Deputy PM Confirms Netanyahu Was in Russia", *BBC Russian service*, September 12, 2009, https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2009/09/090912_netanyahu_russia_minister_confirm
[752] "Netanyahu touts friendship with Putin in new billboard", *Times of Israel*, July 28, 2019, https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-another-league-netanyahu-touts-friendship-with-putin-in-new-billboard/
[753] Lily Galili, "Netanyahu's Putin campaign alienates Israel's Russian-speaking voters", +972 Magazine, August 9, 2019, https://www.972mag.com/netanyahu-putin-elections-likud-liberman/
[754] "Experts: Putin's visit to Israel will lead to a breakthrough in relations", *RBK*, April 27, 2005, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/04/2005/5703bac89a7947afa08c7e4d
[755] "Interview with Channel One of Israeli television", *Official site of the President of Russia*, April 20, 2005, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22928

of the Russian language.[756] At the same time, Ehud Olmert spoke about his family's origins in Russia.[757] The purpose of those details was to create an atmosphere of cordiality and genuine partnership.

Political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky compared Putin's behavior toward international leaders to the classic KGB methods of recruiting agents of influence. According to Belkovsky, communicating with foreign leaders, Putin employed the same methods: establishing personal contact, expressing respect, and offering mutual benefits.[758] This strategy has proven highly successful in the context of relations with Israeli leaders. Ariel Sharon has consistently called Putin "a true friend of Israel."[759] Even Natan Sharansky, a well-known dissident and former prisoner of a Soviet prison who suffered from KGB repression, was ready to assist the Russian president in the issue of repealing the Jackson-Vanik amendment. It was Sharansky, among others, who helped organize a meeting between Putin and the leaders of major American Jewish organizations, thereby strengthening the Kremlin's international position and facilitating Russia's return to the world stage.[760]

Amid the rapprochement between the two countries, the topic of anti-Semitism has practically disappeared from the agenda of bilateral relations. While anti-Semitism in Russia received broad coverage in the Israeli media in the 1990s, attention to it has noticeably diminished since the 2000s. A decrease in the level of physical violence in Russia and an emphasis on the rise of anti-Semitism in the West contributed to the media's lack of interest. As a result, Russia was considered a relatively safe space for Jewish life. Russia's Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar regularly stated that anti-Semitism in Russia was marginal and did not pose a systemic threat. Israeli politicians readily supported this narrative, and public statements increasingly

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[756] Yuli Edelstein, “Ariel Sharon. Striped Caucasian”, *LeHaim*, January 11, 2017, https://lechaim.ru/events/ariel-sharon-polosatyj-kavkazets/
[757] “Acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert spoke about his Russian roots”, Newsru.com, February 13, 2006, https://www.newsru.com/world/13feb2006/olmert.html
[758] Stanislav Belkovsky, “Putin and Jews”, *EchoFM*, September 16, 2023, https://echofm.online/programs/vremya-belkovskogo/vremya-belkovskogo-putin-i-evrei
[759] “Putin is "Israel's true friend", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, November 4, 2001, https://www.ng.ru/politics/2003-11-04/2_putin.html
[760] “President receives Jewish leaders of the USA in the Kremlin”, *L’Haim*, August 2002, https://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/136/fede.htm

referred to Putin as their friend[761] and a "friend of Israel."[762] The previous concern about the situation of the Jewish community in Russia gave way to the thesis of "a million Russian-speaking Israelis" and a more pragmatic approach based on strategic interests and diplomatic gestures.

At the political level, Israeli leaders have sought to portray relations with Russia in an exclusively positive light, often distorting historical facts. Even such an experienced politician as Shimon Peres, during a visit to Moscow in 2011, stated that "for a thousand years, Jews have received refuge in Russia, despite manifestations of anti-Semitism."[763] This assessment, coming from the lips of a former president and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, cannot help but cause eyebrows to raise, given the long history of persecution and discrimination of the Jewish minority in the Russian Empire and the USSR. Such statements testified to the willingness of the Israeli leadership to sacrifice the historical truth about the life of Jews in Russia for the sake of strengthening political dialogue and strategic interaction with the Kremlin.

Between friendly declarations and traditional interests of Russia in the Middle East

Putin's position won over Israeli leaders due to his openness to dialogue, respect for the Jewish community, and readiness for cooperation. However, behind this facade of sympathy and pragmatism, the continuity of Russian foreign policy, laid down during the period of Yevgeny Primakov, remained.[764] It meant that there was continuity in many aspects of Soviet Middle East policy, for example, a pursuit of good relations even with pro-Western Arab countries, readiness to provide simultaneous support for opposing sides, advocacy of ambitious conflict resolution

[761] "Shimon Peres on Putin", Jewish Community of Lithuania website, February 21, 2022, https://www.lzb.lt/ru/2022/02/21/, "Netanyahu spoke about the importance of friendship with Putin", RBK, October 15, 2017, https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5bc4be3b9a7947a09f7369d4

[762] "Putin is "Israel's true friend", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, also "Bennett called Putin "a true friend of the State of Israel", *RBK*, October 22, 2021, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/22/10/2021/617272d69a79471dba0c3f96, and Aluf Benn, "If Putin is a good friend, where do all these suspicions come from?", *Haaretz*, March 2, 2006. Quoted from: https://www.inopressa.ru/article/02Mar2006/haaretz/secret.html

[763] Lev Kagan, "Israeli President Shimon Peres: Dmitry Medvedev will receive a very warm welcome in Israel!», Kommersant, December 21, 2020, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1552606

[764] Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Evolution of Russian Strategy toward Israel: From Non-Recognition to Pragmatic Engagement", *Washington Institute for Near East Policy: Strategic Assessment*, Volume 25, No. 1, March 2022.

efforts.[765] It also meant maintaining dialogue with organizations considered by the West to be terrorist groups. Moreover, Putin has never revised Russia's strategic priorities in the Middle East: Iran and Syria have remained Moscow's key partners, and the Middle East settlement has remained an important vector of Russian diplomacy.

From Russia's perspective, normalizing relations with Israel was not seen as an end in itself, but as part of a broader strategy to increase Russia's influence in the Middle East. Through its relations with Israel, Russia could position itself as a unique mediator, a country capable of talking to all parties. Moreover, a demonstrative rapprochement with Israel would allow Moscow to have an influence on the United States policy, both in the Middle East context and in its diplomatic efforts to isolate Russia after 2014.[766] However, despite the rhetoric about protecting Russian speakers in Israel and condemning anti-Semitism, Russia was consistently guided by its geopolitical interests. It continued to transfer weapons to Syria and helped Iran develop its nuclear program. Russian weapons eventually ended up in the hands of groups hostile to Israel, including Hezbollah. Following the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Russia maintained and expanded its military support to the Assad regime.[767] This consistent policy undermined Israel's security and demonstrated the limits of Putin's personal diplomacy when it came to the real priorities of Russian foreign policy. In the first years of Putin's presidency, the fight against terrorism became an important aspect of the rapprochement between Russia and Israel. During the Second Chechen War, Moscow sought to gain international legitimacy for its "anti-terrorist operation," and Israel emerged as a natural ally. Israel was one of the few democratic countries in the world that supported Putin during this war. In the meeting with Putin, Knesset member Natan Sharansky stated that Israel supported Russia in the fight against "Chechen terrorism."[768]

However, Russia refused to recognize the analogy between Israel's actions against Hamas and Hezbollah and its war in Chechnya. On the contrary, Moscow emphasized that Chechnya was Russia's internal affair, while Hamas and Hezbollah were the legitimate representatives of

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[765] Mark N. Katz, "The Soviet Roots of Putin's Foreign Policy Toward the Middle East", in *Russia in the Middle East and North Africa: Arms, Power Projection, and Nuclear Diplomacy*, ed. Amr Hamzawy (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024), pp 5-9.
[766] Thomas Graham, "Arguments for a trilateral dialogue between Israel, Russsia and the USA", in *30 years of full format Russia-Israel diplomatic relations: past, present and future* (INSS, 2021), p.306.
[767] "Russia confirms weapons on flights to Syria", *Al Jazeera*, September 11, 2015, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/9/11/russia-confirms-weapons-on-flights-to-syria
[768] Igor Yakovenko, "Putin and Jews", *Detaly*, August 27, 2019, https://detaly.co.il/putin-i-evrei/

the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples. This position caused disappointment in Israel, which had expected more consistent support in the fight against terrorism.

Despite all the outward courtship, Putin's attitude toward Israel has included statements that have caused wariness in Jerusalem. In 2005, commenting on Russia's transfer of Strela-10 anti-aircraft missile systems to Syria, Putin said that they did not threaten Israel, but would not allow "low-level flights over Damascus."[769] This phrase was perceived in Israel as an unambiguous signal: Russia is not prepared to fully take into account Israeli security interests, especially if they conflict with the interests of Moscow's allies in the Middle East. The Israeli government did not hide its concerns but was unable to persuade Russia to cancel the transfer of these and other weapons.[770]

Thus, while strengthening close relations with Israel, Russia did not refuse to support states and actors hostile to Israel if this did not meet its interests. Putin demonstrated that even with his personal sympathy and symbolic gestures towards Israel, his foreign policy priorities – strengthening the multipolar world and containing the West – remain unchanged. Israel, in turn, viewed these relations as a means of strengthening its position in the region in the time of weakening American influence. At the same time, despite friendly rhetoric and active personal diplomacy, Israel was not ready to give Russia a more central role in the Middle East peace process. For example, the Kremlin attempted to position itself as a full-fledged participant in the "Middle East Quartet" (comprising Russia, the US, the EU, and the UN) and hoped to strengthen its influence in the region through this format; however, the Israeli leadership consistently refused Russian mediation services. The reason behind it is Russia's traditionally pro-Palestinian position, which has led to higher demands from Israel as part of the settlement. Russia also considers Palestinian terrorist groups to be legitimate organizations.[771]

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[769] Michail Zygar, "Vladimir Putin made fun of the Israelis", *Kommersant*, April 22, 2005, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/572466

[770] Aluf Ben and Lily Galili, "First visit of a Russian president to Israel – April*", Haaretz*, March 23, 2005, https://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/2005-03-23/ty-article/0000017f-e3bc-d9aa-afff-fbfcc5c20000

[771] Micky Aharonson, "RUSSIA AND THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION: A VIEW FROM JERUSALEM", in *30 YEARS OF FULL-FORMAT RUSSIAN-ISRAELI DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE* (INSS, 2021), pp. 270-271.

Putin's diplomatic courtship may not have led to a change in Israel's foreign policy orientation. However, it did give Russia some advantages in its Middle East policy, most notably increased trust by the Israeli political establishment. Putin's personal diplomacy reflected a broader transformation of Russian foreign policy, in which personal connections between leaders and pragmatism have replaced the ideological guideposts of previous eras.

2. Increased dependence of Israel on the Russian factor in the Middle East

Russian intervention in Syria and the deconfliction mechanism

Since the early 2000s, the relationship between Israel and Russia has been marked by a complex mix of cooperation and tensions. While political dialogue has improved, Moscow's growing military ties with Iran and Syria, as well as its support for Palestinian factions, have increasingly undermined Israeli security interests. Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015 was a major turning point, changing the regional balance and forcing Israel to closely coordinate its actions with Moscow to avoid direct conflict. This new reality has limited Israel's freedom of action against Iran and Hezbollah in Syria, making Russia an essential but delicate arbiter in the Middle East. Gradually, Israeli strategic calculations have become more dependent on maintaining a dialogue with Russia, at the cost of political concessions and cautious neutrality on issues like Ukraine. This chapter explores how this increased dependence is transforming Israeli regional posture and foreign policy.

Already in the early 2000s, relations between Israel and Russia were marked by significant contradictions, despite positive trends in the political dialogue between the two countries. The main points of tension were Moscow's growing cooperation with Iran in the nuclear sphere and Russia's increased military cooperation with the Syrian regime. Israel has repeatedly expressed concern about Russia's transfer of nuclear technology to Iran and the supply of modern weapons to Damascus and Tehran. Despite the Kremlin's assurances that this cooperation does not infringe on Israel's interests, Jerusalem perceived this policy as a direct threat to security. President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly offered his mediation to resolve the

Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Russian Foreign Ministry has maintained close contacts with the Palestinian leadership, including regular meetings with representatives of both Fatah and Hamas, and has also made attempts to promote intra-Palestinian reconciliation. However, these initiatives, as a rule, have encountered open mistrust on the part of Israel, which did not see Moscow as a constructive and neutral mediator.

The civil war in Syria and the indecisiveness of the Obama administration provided Russia with a unique window of opportunity to expand its sway in the region. Moscow's intervention in the Syrian conflict was a turning point not only for the survival of the Assad regime, but also for the entire security architecture in the Middle East, including for Israel. Since 2015, after the entry of Russian troops into Syria, the very balance of power in the region has changed. Israel, which had previously acted relatively freely within the framework of the "war between wars" ("mabam") strategy – limited and targeted operations to contain the Iranian presence in Syria and prevent the transfer of modern weapons to Hezbollah – was forced to coordinate its actions with Moscow. This intervention threatened to limit Israel's freedom of action in its air strikes against Iranian infrastructure in Syria. It led to the establishment of a Russian-Israeli mechanism for coordinating actions ("deconfliction"), which made it possible to avoid direct military clashes.[772]

Israel viewed Russia's presence in Syria as a potential deterrent to Iran and Hezbollah and continued to strike Iranian military infrastructure from Syria. Initially, Moscow did not officially oppose Israeli airstrikes. However, in 2017, the Russian Foreign Ministry summoned the Israeli ambassador for an explanation after one of these attacks, thus emphasizing Israel's dependent position. The crisis culminated in 2018, when Syrian air defenses mistakenly shot down a Russian reconnaissance aircraft in an incident involving Israeli Air Force aircraft. Russia accused Israel of provocation, accusing it of violating Syria's sovereignty. The Russian Defense Ministry took a tough stance, accompanied by an anti-Israeli, and sometimes anti-Semitic, campaign in Russian media and social networks, but Putin's restrained response allowed the incident to fade away.

[772] Zvi Magen and Udi Dekel, "Russia's presence in the Middle East: a view from Israel," in *30 years of full-format Russian-Israeli diplomatic relations: past, present and future* (INSS, 2021), pp. 210-212.

Pragmatic cooperation and increasing dependence

Tensions persisted in the following years. Russia took no real steps to curb Iranian expansion in Syria, while Israel continued to rely on its moderating influence.[773] In 2021, after the change of the Israeli government, Moscow, as well as Tehran and Ankara, amplified their criticisms over Israeli strikes. There were reports of a temporary suspension of the coordination mechanism between Israel and Russia. However, during a meeting between Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Putin in October 2021, the parties confirmed the preservation of the deconfliction mechanism.[774] Russia then began to demand earlier notification from Israel of planned operations to strengthen its control over the situation. Thus, the relationship remained pragmatic, but highly fragile and prone to sudden escalations. The complex balance of interests compelled Israel to maneuver, attempting to maintain its freedom of action while avoiding an open confrontation with Russia.

Russia's goals in the Middle East went beyond the Syrian conflict. Moscow sought to restore its great power status, expand its military and political influence in the region, maintain access to ports and air bases (Tartus and Khmeimim), and establish diplomatic ties with all the major players – Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states. To address the Russian military presence in Syria, Israel developed a two-pronged strategy: on the one hand, continuing military strikes against Iranian infrastructure and Hezbollah in Syria, and on the other, engaging in diplomatic work with Moscow, trying to convince the Russian leadership of the need to contain Iranian influence. Over the next decade following the intervention, the Russian factor was an integral part of Israeli strategic calculations. Moscow became the key arbiter in Syrian airspace, and without its tacit consent, IDF operations would have been impossible or associated with a high degree of risk. Thus, Israel, in its efforts to maintain freedom of action against the Iranian military presence in Syria, found itself in a more dependent position vis-à-vis Russia.

This new situation forced the Israeli military-political leadership to listen more attentively to Moscow's demands in matters that did not directly concern Israeli security. One example is Israel's cautious position regarding Russia's international isolation after the

[773] Ibid.
[774] Bennett-Putin meeting ends: "The two agreed to continue the existing policy in Syria", *Maariv*, October 22, 2021, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/politics/Article-872454

annexation of Crimea and aggression in Donbas. Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, one of the consistent supporters of neutrality on the issue of Ukraine, explained Israel's position as follows:

> "Over the past decades, we have built a special relationship with Russia, which has been very constructive and transparent. We value this relationship with Russia. Even when we were under intense pressure from our closest partners... We maintain normal relations with Russia and take its interests into account. We hope that Russia will also take our interests into account here in the Middle East."[775]

In the same interview, Lieberman said that Israel would destroy Russian S-300 systems in the case of their deployment in Syria. The Israeli minister made it clear that Israel was ready to resist pressure from Western countries for refusing to join the sanctions, but would not tolerate a direct threat from Syria, even if it would harm Russian interests.

It is important to highlight that Israel took a neutral position regarding the Russian annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donbass in 2014 before Russia intervened in Syria. Little wonder that the Russian intervention in Syria further increased Israel's fears and determination not to anger the Russians. According to sources in the Israeli government, the decisive factor in adopting a neutral position on Crimea was fear of Russia: "Russia's ability to cause damage concerning issues that are important to us, such as Iran and Syria, is very significant."[776] According to one Israeli official, "There is an assumption in Jerusalem that it is easier to ask the Americans to swallow the frog than to risk upsetting the Russians. Out of fear, we made our lives harder."[777] Further pressure from the United States has not led to a change in Israel's position on anti-Russian sanctions. Unlike Western countries, Israel not only failed to condemn the Kremlin's actions in Crimea and Donbas but also avoided supporting sanctions initiatives, both in the context of Russian intervention in Ukraine and on other issues. Moreover,

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[775] "We did not join the sanctions against Russia", *Kommersant*, May 2, 2015, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7869820

[776] Barak Ravid, "U.S. Officials Angry: Israel Doesn't Back Stance on Russia", *Haaretz*, April 13, 2014, https://www.haaretz.com/2014-04-13/ty-article/.premium/u-s-angry-at-israel-for-silence-on-ukraine/0000017f-e15c-d9aa-afff-f95c6f4d0000

[777] Ibid.

the ban on food imports from Western countries allowed Israeli firms to increase their food supplies to Russia.[778]

At the same time, it would be wrong to say that dependence on Russia completely deprived Israel of freedom of action and the ability to respond to its unfriendly steps. For example, in 2016, Israel joined, for the first time, the UN resolution condemning the Russian occupation of Crimea. According to some experts, it was Israel's response to a Russian vote in UNESCO on a resolution denying the connection of Judaism with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, considered in Israel as an unacceptable blow to national interests.[779] However, in most cases, in the name of maintaining freedom of action in Syria against the Iranian presence, Israel was ready to "swallow" Russian demarches that infringed on its interests, such as the transfer of S-300 missile systems to Iran, military cooperation with Hezbollah in Syria, and support for numerous anti-Israeli resolutions in the UN. Despite all this, Israel preferred to refrain from publicly criticizing Russia's unfriendly actions:

> "Netanyahu, who likes to berate the French for their support of the Temple Mount resolution at UNESCO or publicly criticize the American administration on the Iranian issue, sounds like a man who has swallowed his tongue when it comes to Russia. He will not dare to give a critical speech in the Duma or send Jewish community leaders in Moscow to place ads in the press against the Kremlin."[780]

The growing asymmetry in Israel-Russia relations

While avoiding confrontation with Russia, the Israeli leadership is less hesitant in taking steps that could irritate its Western allies. One of the most notable examples of this is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's participation in the Victory Parade in Moscow and the Immortal Regiment march on May 9, 2018, which was seen as the "most effective move" for Russia in its

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[778] "After Shunning Europe, Russia Turning to Israel for Fruit Imports", Haaretz, August 13, 2014, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/2014-08-13/ty-article/russia-turning-to-israel-for-fruit-imports/0000017f-e60d-dea7-adff-f7ffcfde0000

[779] "Israel voted at the UN to recognize the "Russian occupation" of Crimea", Makor Rishon, November 21, 2016, https://www.makorrishon.co.il/nrg/online/1/ART2/848/232.html

[780] Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu's visit to Russia: Relations better than ever, but with limited guarantees", *Haaretz,* June 7, 2016, https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2016-06-07/ty-article/.premium/0000017f-e33d-d7b2-a77f-e33f451c0000)

confrontation with the West.[781] By agreeing to participate in events pivotal to Kremlin propaganda, Netanyahu effectively played into Putin's hands. In the context of Western sanctions against Russia, his visit boosted Russia's international legitimacy and its narrative in the "memory wars" with the West. However, from Israel's perspective, Netanyahu's visit held special significance in the context of the dramatic events unfolding in the Middle East. A few days before it, the Israeli Air Force carried out a series of strikes on Iranian bases in Syria. Netanyahu's visit to Moscow, as well as Putin's silence about these attacks, de facto demonstrated that Israel had secured Moscow's neutrality in its continued confrontation with Syria and Iran.[782]

The rapprochement with Russia has been characterized by many experts as a necessary step for Israel, especially in conditions when "Moscow is likely to continue to style itself as the only mediator that has channels of communication to all sides… especially in the absence of sustained and focused US involvement."[783] The well-known Russian expert Igor Yakovenko wrote:

> "Flexibility" and "delicacy" of Israel about Putin's Russia are not only understandable but also justified. For a small country in a hostile environment, it would be the greatest stupidity to openly confront and use harsh rhetoric towards a state that has the world's second most powerful military machine and a fascist-type regime for which there are no norms of international law."[784]

At the same time, these and other experts warned Israel against deepening its strategic dependence on Russia due to the fundamental differences between Israel, as part of the democratic world, and Putin's authoritarian regime. These warnings took on a more alarming

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[781] Alexander Shumilin, "Benjamin Netanyahu's Victory March", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, May 14, 2018, https://www.ng.ru/dipkurer/2018-05-14/9_7223_israel.html
[782] Alexander Shumilin, "Benjamin Netanyahu's Victory March", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, May 14, 2018, https://www.ng.ru/dipkurer/2018-05-14/9_7223_israel.html
[783] Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Evolution of Russian Strategy toward Israel: From Non-Recognition to Pragmatic Engagement", *Washington Institute for Near East Policy: Strategic Assessment*, Volume 25 , No. 1, March 2022.
[784] Igor Yakovenko, "Putin and Jews," Jews of Eurasia, August 27, 2019, http://jewseurasia.org/page18/news64643

tone in a situation where the deepening interaction and understanding between the Israeli government and the Putin regime coincided with a period of political instability in Israel, which exposed the shortcomings of the democratic system in Israel.

Between 2019 and 2022, Israel found itself in a situation of deep political crisis, amid the criminal prosecution of Prime Minister Netanyahu and unresolved issues that polarized Israeli society. Over four years, Israel held five election campaigns, which inevitably influenced all the decisions made by the transitional governments, usually headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, except for the short tenure of the Bennett-Lapid "government of change" (2021-2022). Political and social polarization in the country intensified, as election campaigns became increasingly aggressive and manipulative. Quite unexpectedly, the Likud party campaign also included a Russian element.[785] Five days before the April 2019 elections, Netanyahu made an urgent and unscheduled visit to Moscow, where he received the remains of missing Israeli soldier Zachary Baumel, found by Syrian forces and handed over to Russia. Russia's gesture and personal meeting with President Putin aimed to demonstrate to Israeli voters the respect the prime minister enjoys from the head of one of the world's superpowers. The manipulative use of this humanitarian situation involving the leader of an authoritarian regime provoked a backlash in the Israeli liberal media, which claimed that "Putin controls Netanyahu, and through him, the citizens of Israel."[786] According to Israeli analysts, Netanyahu's election manipulation was an unprecedented international intervention in a national election, uniting "his illiberal brothers - Trump, Putin, Modi, Bolsonaro and Orban."[787]

The intertwining of national interests and the political electoral situation in Israel further increased its dependence on the Russian factor, which in turn led to additional concessions from Israel. The case of Naama Issachar, an Israeli citizen arrested in Moscow on suspicion of drug possession and sentenced to seven years in a Russian prison, became a public demonstration of

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[785] Moran Azoulay, “Behind the scenes: This is how Master Netanyahu decided the elections”, Ynet, April 12, 2019, https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5492269,00.html

[786] Rogel Alpher, “Netanyahu runs for prime minister with space bones from 1982”, *Haaretz*, April 5, 2019, https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/television/tv-review/2019-04-05/ty-article/.premium/0000017f-db36-df62-a9ff-dff76e020000

[787] Nimrod Goren and Gil Marciano, “Israel Now a Key Battleground in the Global Clash of Liberal Democracy and Its Enemies”, Haaretz, August 11, 2019, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2019-08-11/ty-article-opinion/.premium/israel-elections-a-battleground-between-liberal-democracy-and-its-enemies-worldwide/0000017f-f8c4-d044-adff-fbfd3d280000

Putin's willingness to blackmail Israel for political gain. The Russian president took advantage of Netanyahu's precarious position before the elections, as well as the well-known sensitivity of Israeli society to the hostage issue and demanded concessions from Israel in exchange for Issachar's release. Russia's initial demand concerned the extradition of a Russian hacker arrested in Israel, but Israel had to reject it, given the US demand for his extradition. The Russian leadership then demanded a series of concessions in bilateral relations as well as on other issues, turning the Naama Issachar case into a kidnapping for ransom.[788] Having extracted concessions from the Israeli government, Putin was willing to help Netanyahu in his election campaign by agreeing that Issachar's release would take place during Netanyahu's emergency visit to Moscow.

The Israeli leadership insisted that Issachar's release was a gesture of goodwill from Putin and downplayed the significance of Israel's reciprocal gestures.[789] According to media reports, the release deal included the transfer of the Alexander Compound (property of the White Orthodox Church) to Russia, easier entry for Russian tourists to Israel, and unequivocal support for Russia's historical narrative in World War II. The latter condition was critical on the eve of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, a ceremony hosted by Yad Vashem in January 2020 that Putin was to attend. Following Israel's agreement with Russian demands, Polish President Duda refused to participate in the ceremony, and the event itself became a platform for distorting the history of World War II according to Russia's version.[790] Yad Vashem was compelled to issue a public apology to prevent damage to its reputation and loss of public trust. The Israeli press made accusations not only against Putin, but also, and especially, against the Israeli leadership, which traded the memory of the Holocaust with the Putin regime. This event is further discussed in detail in the next chapter.

In conclusion, since the mid-2010s, the Russian military and diplomatic presence in Syria deepened Israel's dependence on Moscow. To maintain its operational freedom in the northern arena, Israel had no choice but to consider Russian interests and, at times, make significant

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[788] "Naama is a hostage of Russia", *Israel Hayom*, October 11, 2019, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/698447
[789] Yossi Verter, “Neither a wonderful friendship nor an election gift: Putin blackmailed Netanyahu”, Haaretz, January 24, 2020, https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/elections/2020-01-24/ty-article/.highlight/0000017f-e1a9-d7b2-a77f-e3af4f160000
[790] “Yad Vashem's reputation under threat after Putin's Holocaust speech. What happened?”, BBC, February 4, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-51369074

political concessions. The result was an asymmetrical model of relations, in which Russia was able to put pressure on a key US ally in the region. At the same time, Israel maneuvered between the interests of its Western partners and the need to maintain working relations with Moscow. The issue of anti-Semitism in Russia, from the point of view of the Israeli leadership, was no longer a subject for discussion. The war of historical narratives between Russia and the West was considered in Israel as part of an intra-European squabble, in which Israel has nothing to do. Partial awareness of the falsity of this perception will come only with the beginning of Russian aggression in Ukraine, and to a greater extent, after the tragedy of October 7 in Southern Israel. The rise of authoritarian tendencies in Russia since the early 2010s had not alarmed the Israeli leadership. On the contrary, Putin's reputation as a strong leader who does not hesitate to use brute force in Ukraine and Syria to achieve his interests has somewhat endeared him to Netanyahu and Israel's rightwing voters. Visible evidence of this deference was a poster of Putin and Netanyahu smiling at each other, inscribed with the words "A League of its own," which the Likud party placed at its headquarters before the September 2019 elections.[791]

D. Tackling anti-Semitism amid Putin's anti-liberal agenda

Since Vladimir Putin’s rise to power, his authoritarian and anti-liberal governance has shaped Russia’s political landscape. While early on he condemned anti-Semitism and sought to suppress it as part of regime stability, recent years have seen a revival of nationalist and imperial ideologies, accompanied by a growing legitimacy of antisemitic rhetoric. This section examines the complex dynamics of anti-Semitism under Putin’s regime, where official condemnation coexists with growing public expressions of intolerance.

[791] ״Elections 2019 - A nod to the Russian audience: Netanyahu's sign with Putin on "Metzudat Ze’ev headquaters”, *N12*, July 28, 2019, "https://www.mako.co.il/news-israel-elections/elections_2019-q3_2019/Article-0cb5a29b1e73c61027.htm

Since he was appointed Prime Minister of the Russian Federation in 1999, Vladimir Putin's style of governance has been openly anti-liberal and authoritarian. The devastating war in Chechnya, the closure of independent television channels, the persecution and reprisals against journalists covering the war in Chechnya, and the creation of the so-called vertical of power were important milestones in the establishment of an authoritarian regime. He justified these steps by the need to restore order in the country after a period of political and economic instability. The rhetoric of Putin and other official representatives differed diametrically from the Kremlin's actions. Speaking in the Bundestag in 2001, Putin argued that "the main goal of Russia's domestic policy is, above all, to ensure democratic rights and freedoms, a decent standard of living, and security for its people."[792] Russia, he said, was "a friendly European country" that "looks with hope to European integration," and in which "a totalitarian ideology of the Stalinist type could no longer resist the ideas of freedom and democracy." While authoritarian in content, Putin's regime merely imitated democracy and the rule of law, which allowed it to expand cooperation with Western countries; as one of the leading experts on Russia, Lilia Shevtsova, aptly put it, the West's eagerness to engage Russia created ideal conditions for "Russia's game of misleading and pretending."[793]

In the first years of his presidency, Vladimir Putin sought to distance himself from nationalist and imperial ideology and demonstrate that Russia was a modern state capable of controlling destructive public sentiment, including anti-Semitism. It was during these years that he laid the foundations of his friendly relations with the leader of the FJCR, Lazar, and with Israel's prime ministers -Netanyahu, Sharon, and Olmert. The Kremlin periodically responded to ferocious anti-Semitic acts, such as the wounding of Tatyana Sapunova in 2002. Putin made his first detailed statement condemning anti-Semitism in Russia in his speech at the ceremony dedicated to the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz:

> "Even in our country – in Russia, which has done the most to fight fascism, to defeat fascism, has done the most to save the Jewish people – even in our country today, unfortunately, we sometimes see manifestations of these diseases. And I am ashamed of

[792] "Speech in the German Bundestag", *Official site of the President of Russia*, September 25, 2001, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21340

f[793] Lilia Shevnsova, "Forward to the Past*", Journal of Democracy*, April 2015, Volume 26, Number 2, p. 23.

this too. However, I must say that Russia will not only condemn any manifestations of this kind but will also fight them with the force of law and public opinion."[794]

The context for Putin's statement was an attempt by a group of Russian parliamentarians to ban the activities of Jewish organizations on trumped-up charges. In an interview with an Israeli TV channel, Putin was asked again about this situation, to which he responded as follows: "One must always respond to manifestations of this kind adequately, very subtly, promptly, but, you know, according to the well-known medical principle of 'not harm."[795] One should note the particular caution in Putin's answer, and the very fact that he spoke publicly on the topic of anti-Semitism to a foreign, not domestic, audience.

Nevertheless, the signal from above reached the destination. Russian justice agencies have tightened the fight against manifestations of anti-Semitism, both vandalism and the dissemination of anti-Semitic publications. It was possible thanks to the tightening of the Russian legislation. Anti-Semitic rhetoric in the media began to decline, and the number of anti-Semitic deputies of the State Duma decreased. Putin himself provided an explanation of his policy in the interview. According to him, protecting the interests of national minorities is important "for the preservation of Russian statehood itself."[796] Therefore, "the fight against anti-Semitism, like the fight against any nationalism and chauvinism, is the basis of our domestic policy." Putin, then the head of the FSB, expressed the same idea at a meeting with Natan Sharansky in 1999.[797] During the transition of power from Putin to Medvedev, the issue of regime stability was critically important for the Kremlin, and the suppression of anti-Semitic manifestations was part of the Kremlin's efforts to stabilize the regime. According to a report by the SOVA Research Center, "if in 2004-2006 anti-Semitic propaganda remained virtually unpunished, then in 2007-2008 anti-Semitism became one of the most persecuted forms of hate propaganda."[798]

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[794] "Speech at the forum "Long Live My People!" dedicated to the memory of the victims of Auschwitz", *Official website of the President of Russia*, January 27, 2005, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22800
[795] "Interview with Channel One of Israeli television", *Official site of the President of Russia*, April 20, 2005, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22928
[796] Ibid.
[797] Interview with Nathan Sharansky by the author.
[798] "Manifestations of anti-Semitism in Russia and counteraction to it by the state. Speech by A. Verkhovsky", *SOVA-Center*, March 17, 2009, https://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/publications/2009/03/d15514/
[798] "Anti-Semitism in Russia is on the decline", *Kommersant*, September 5, 2010, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1766553

This dynamic continued over the next four years, with a power transfer, this time from Medvedev back to Putin. Expert reports on anti-Semitism in Russia reflected the continuing downward trend in the number of registered manifestations of anti-Semitism, an insignificant number of incidents accompanied by violence and vandalism, as well as "the disappearance of anti-Semitism from public political discourse in government bodies."[799] "The authorities' increased activity in suppressing extremist activity" was named as one of the reasons for the decline in the growth of anti-Semitism in Russia.[800] An additional reason for the decline in anti-Semitism was the growth of right-wing conservative sentiments and anti-Muslim xenophobia in Russian society, which contributed to the improvement of the image of Israel and opposed radical Islam.[801] The report also pointed to the insufficient efforts of law enforcement agencies to combat anti-Semitism and the fact that the ideologues of anti-Semitism and publishers of anti-Semitic literature remained untouched. According to an observation by Moscow Rabbi Pinchas Goldshmidt, a general trend of decreasing manifestations of anti-Semitism and improving attitudes towards the Jewish minority has resulted, in part, due to the warming of relations between the Russian Federation and Israel.[802]

The anti-government protests of 2011–2012 in Russia marked a turning point in the Putin regime's survival strategy, which now consisted of legitimizing "a harsher rule at home and a more assertive stance abroad."[803] Russia no longer tried to imitate democracy, frightened by the wave of "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet space and in the Arab world, which, according to the Russian leadership, were provoked by the West. "For us, this is a lesson and a warning, and we are obliged to do everything necessary to ensure that something like this never happens in Russia," Putin said in 2014.[804] The events of the Maidan in Ukraine and the occupation of Crimea and Donbass became the point of no return, after which Russia chose the path of confrontation with the West and tightened the screws at home. A shift from pragmatism to the restoration of archaic models of national self-determination, the rehabilitation of Stalinism, and

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[799] Ibid.
[800] Ibid.
[801] "Anti-Semitism in Russia in 2010", http://www.jewseurasia.org/page468
[802] "Anti-Semitism in Russia has decreased in recent years, says Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt", *Pskov News Feed*, Ocnober 17, 2015, https://m.pln24.ru/society/219697.html?PageSpeed=noscript
[803] Lilia Shevnsova, "Forward to the Past*", Journal of Democracy*, April 2015, Volume 26, Number 2, p. 23.

[804] "Putin Promises to Put a Stop to "Color Revolution" in Russia", Reuters, November 20, 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0J41OM/

the fight against liberalism began. Russia's new transformation into a besieged fortress was "a traditional survival maneuver, but with a new twist for a new century. The Kremlin's style of "hybrid warfare" used military force without admitting it, and "weaponized" other areas of life. Thus, we now have customs wars, natural-gas wars, information wars, culture wars, and history wars."[805]

The turn toward an anti-Western course and authoritarianism within the country went hand in hand with a revival of nationalist and imperial views designed to ensure the military-patriotic mobilization of the population. The eclectic set of ideologies adopted by Putin included "Sovietism, nationalism, imperialism, military patriotism, Russian Orthodox fundamentalism, and economic liberalism."[806] The legitimization of the bearers of these views, among whom were many ideologues of anti-Semitism, led to an increase in anti-Semitic statements in the media and on the Internet.[807] The leaders of the RJC noted with alarm the "gradual legalization of anti-Semitism in the public sphere" due to statements by politicians and public figures. One of the most odious ideologues of anti-Semitism was Alexander Prokhanov, the permanent editor-in-chief of the ultra-nationalist newspaper Zavtra, who became a regular guest on Russian channels. In an interview with one of the central TV channels, Russia-24, Prokhanov accused the Jews of supporting the Maidan, which, according to him, "brings them closer to a second Holocaust". The host of the program responded that the Jews "also brought the first Holocaust".[808]

Despite the growth of anti-Semitism in the press and social networks, the general assessment of the leaders of Jewish organizations and the expert community was that the situation was improving, given a decrease in cases of anti-Semitic violence and vandalism. In this context, they often referred to the situation in Western Europe, where the level of personal security of Jews has been rapidly falling. The Levada Center wrote in 2016 that the "Jewish question" had lost its urgency and relevance, and "mass attitudes toward Jews have become noticeably more favorable." In 2020, their conclusion was the same: "there are no signs of an

[805] Lilia Shevnsova, "Forward to the Past*", Journal of Democracy*, April 2015, Volume 26, Number 2, p. 24.
[806] Ibid.
[807] Ze'ev Khanin, "Anti-Semitism in Russia and Ukraine: Reports and Controversy", *Institute for Euro-Asian Jewish Studies*, February 24, 2019, https://archive.jpr.org.uk/download?id=5565
[808] "In St. Petersburg, they demand that the host of "Russia 24" be fired for anti-Semitism", RBK, March 24, 2015, https://www.rbc.ru/spb_sz/24/03/2014/5592ab539a794719538d211d

increase in aggressive and radical anti-Semitism in Russia; the prognosis in this sense is quite favorable."[809]

However, these positive assessments and forecasts did not consider some results of their own studies. For example, the Levada Center noted in a 2020 study that "the structure of anti-Semitic ideas of the Russian population, the nature of such attitudes, views and prejudices over 25 years" has not changed.[810] The same study indicated that for the majority of the population, "themes of the past, the Stalin period, repressions, persecution of Jews in the Russian Empire, pogroms, collaboration with the Nazis in the occupied territories, the indifference of observers have not entered the culture of the country, the perception of Jews by the Russians." Therefore, they conclude, "for most Russians, the Holocaust is an unimportant, unnoticed topic, despite some vague idea of this tragedy. The catastrophe does not play a special role in the attitude towards Jews - this is one of the conditions for the reproduction of latent anti-Semitism."[811] Based on these observations, experts determined that anti-Semitism in Russia is indeed in a latent, or dormant, form. At the same time, they claimed that "the impression of a low level of anti-Semitism as such in Russia" is incorrect.[812]

Surveys of the Russian Jewish population also gave an ambiguous picture of their perception of anti-Semitism in the country. On the one hand, in 2018, only 16% of Russian Jews called anti-Semitism an acute problem in the country. Most respondents agreed that the influence of anti-Semitic groups in recent years has been insignificant. However, at the same time, more than half (55%) expressed concern about the potential influence of anti-Semites in public life, 42% thought about emigrating (much more than among the non-Jewish population), a third of them because of anti-Semitism. Thus, according to experts, the Jewish population did not feel confident about its future in Russia.[813]

By the end of 2010s there was a broad consensus regarding the absence of state anti-Semitism in Russia, what Khanin described as “secure space” for Jews. For Jewish leaders in

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[809] Lev Gudkov, “Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia in Modern Russia”, *Institute for Euro-Asian Jewish Studies* , 2020, https://institute.eajc.org
[810] Ibid.
[811] Ibid.
[812] Ibid.
[813] Lev Gudkov, Natalia Zorkaya, Ekaterina Kochergina, Evgenia Lyozina, "Anti-Semitism in Russia: Opinions of the Jewish Population", Public Opinion Bulletin No. 3–4 (127) July–December 2018, pp. 104-105.

Russia President Putin served as a guarantee of security for Russian Jewry. They sought to downplay the significance of statements by certain politicians, emphasizing that in Russia, policy is determined at the highest level of government. Many of Putin's critics, who accused him of authoritarianism and imperial ambitions, also shared this view. This logic arose from the supposedly indisputable fact that Putin is not an anti-Semite and does not share anti-Semitic prejudices, which was predetermined by his biography and personal relationships with Jews, as described above. However, this approach overlooked other elements of Putin's biography, such as his service in the KGB, and his manipulative approaches to foreign and domestic policy within the personalistic authoritarian regime that had fully formed by the end of his second decade in power. Russia's use anti-Semitism as a tool for covert "influence operations" abroad was never questioned. The connection between Putin's nationalist and imperial course and gradual legitimization of anti-Semitic discourse also did not evoke any response from Jewish organizations, the Israeli government, or other international actors.

Finally, Jewish organizations and experts did not pay due attention to regional peculiarities in the context of anti-Semitism and its sources. For example, leading Russian researchers claimed that there is no anti-Zionist component in Russian anti-Semitism, unlike in European countries, where waves of anti-Semitism are closely linked to Israel's policy in the Middle East, overlooking the Islamic radicalization among the Muslim population of Russia, primarily in the North Caucasus.

These and other assessments will become a subject of a more critical approach after the dramatic events of 2022–2023 in Russia, Ukraine, and Israel. The imperial and nationalist ideology of the Putin regime will predetermine the revival of state anti-Semitism, including anti-Jewish statements by the head of state and his official representatives. The distortion, trivialization and political manipulation of the Holocaust will be one of the main elements of the new wave of Russian anti-Semitism. The revision of the Holocaust, undertaken personally by Putin, began long before the invasion of Ukraine, but, unfortunately, has not received due attention. The second chapter is devoted to the analysis of the official discourse on the Holocaust as an instrument of Russia's foreign policy in its confrontation with Western countries and Ukraine.

Chapter 2: Holocaust Memory and Anti-Semitism as tools of Russian foreign and domestic policy

Today, there is broad international consensus among UN member states regarding the dangers of Holocaust denial and the societal threats posed by its spread. While debates continue over the adoption of a universally accepted definition of anti-Semitism, such as the IHRA[814] Working Definition of Anti-Semitism, there is significantly less disagreement on the issue of Holocaust denial and distortion. This consensus was clearly demonstrated in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution adopted on January 20, 2022.[815] The definitions of Holocaust denial and distortion in the UN resolution build on the long-standing work of leading Holocaust remembrance organizations, including Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial site, which began operations in 1953. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), founded in 1998 and now comprising 35 countries, has also made significant contributions to the identification and analysis of these phenomena.

Holocaust denial, as defined by Yad Vashem, includes attempts to deny the fact of the Nazi extermination of Jews and the deliberate and systematic policy of extermination, or to downplay the scale of this event. Denial also includes claims that the Holocaust was not unique, that similar crimes occurred earlier, and that its scale has been exaggerated. Less extreme forms of denial attempt to shift the focus, including downplaying the role of the Nazi leadership or presenting the Holocaust as one of many mass killings of the 20th century, comparable, for example, to Stalin's purges in the USSR.[816]

Manfred Gerstenfeld, a leading Holocaust scholar, has proposed a classification of Holocaust distortion that includes 11 subtypes of this phenomenon. In addition to denial and calls for a new Holocaust, Gerstenfeld points to Holocaust deflection – denial of the participation of certain groups of the population in the Holocaust in the presence of evidence; equivalence of the

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[814] The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) adopted the Working Definition of Anti-Semitism on May 26, 2016. Since then, this Working Definition has been endorsed or adopted by many countries, organizations, and institutions worldwide, including over 40 UN member states.

[815] "United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/76/L.30, https://docs.un.org/en/A/76/L.30

[816] "Holocaust Denial", *Yad Vashem official website*, https://wwv.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%201176.pdf

Holocaust with other phenomena of mass murder; Holocaust inversion – comparison of the actions of Jews and Israel with Nazism; forgetting or suppression of the memory of the Holocaust; banalization of the Holocaust by comparing it with various phenomena that have no connection with it. According to the researcher, the main motive of modern Holocaust deniers and manipulators is their political interests.[817]

In post-Soviet Russia, all forms of Holocaust denial and distortion have found expression to varying degrees in anti-Semitic media, literature, and political circles. What is striking, however, is the fact that the Russian head of state, Vladimir Putin, initiated and systematically promoted the distortion and trivialization of the Holocaust for his political ends over many years. The Russian Foreign Ministry also played a central role in the distortion and manipulation of the Holocaust, with state media and the regime's propaganda machine disseminating these views to the greatest possible extent. The scale of these manipulations and their destructive potential became apparent when Putin declared the "denazification" of Ukraine to be one of the goals of his so-called "SVO" - Special Military Operation.

This chapter will analyze the dynamics and reasons for the Russian leadership's use of the Holocaust for political ends, including in the context of the confrontation with Ukraine; factors that contributed to the uncritical attitude towards this policy and its legitimization; and the transition from manipulation to gross distortion of the history of the Holocaust as official policy. This instrumentalization creates a deep paradox: while the Russian leadership formally declares its commitment to combating anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, it simultaneously engages in the distortion and politicization of Holocaust memory, undermining the very foundation of that commitment. Unlike Putin's Russia, where the distorted narrative of the Holocaust is used as an instrument of domestic and foreign propaganda, the leaders of the USSR were interested in keeping silent about the tragedy of the Jewish people. The Soviet policy of silence, which erased

[817] Manfred Gerstenfeld, “The Multiple Distortions of Holocaust Memory”, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, October 28, 2007, https://web.archive.org/web/20240304040718/https://jcpa.org/article/the-multiple-distortions-of-holocaust-memory/

this tragedy from the mass consciousness for decades and thereby prepared the ground for the manipulations of the Putin period, will be examined in the first section of the chapter.

A. Soviet tradition of Holocaust oblivion and its difficult unmaking in Post-Soviet Russia

The Soviet policy of silencing the Holocaust began during World War II. Even though between 2 and 2.5 million Soviet Jews were murdered in the territories occupied by the German Army, precisely because of their ethnic origin, the Soviet leadership avoided recognizing Jews as a separate category of victims. In the first months of the war, references to the mass murder of Jews still appeared in the Soviet press: for example, an article about the Jewish victims of Babi Yar, and a radio broadcast, where Solomon Mikhoels spoke about the deliberate extermination of the Jewish people. Nevertheless, these publications were "signed off by the Secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)," and even then, "the information was dosed according to strict political criteria."[818] Stalin's only public mention of Jewish victims appeared in a speech on the eve of the parade on Red Square in November 1941. He called the Nazi pogroms "the darkness of the Middle Ages," without directly mentioning the Jews. According to Ilya Altman, a renown Holocaust researcher and Director of Russia's Holocaust Center: "Stalin never addressed this issue again, either during the war or after its end, which is also symbolic."[819]

In 1942, Pravda and Izvestia published statements about the extermination of the Jews of Europe and the USSR. However, there were no calls to help the survivors, and in later publications, "the topic of Jewish victims began to be presented in an increasingly veiled and brief manner." Already in 1942, in official documents and publications, Holocaust victims began to be referred to as "peaceful Soviet citizens." Even in those rare cases when the Soviet government allowed the mention of Jewish victims, it did so with reservations or in the context of propaganda purposes. Such measured and selective mention of the Jewish tragedy marked the beginning of the Soviet tradition of forgetting the Holocaust. As Isabella Tabarovsky writes: "By

[818] Ilya Altman, "Holocaust Memorialization in Russia: History, Modernity, Prospects", *Emergency Reserve*, No. 2-3, 2005, https://web.archive.org/web/20110920220335/http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2005/2/alt28.html
[819] Ibid.

the end of 1942, when the full-scale extermination of European Jews began, half of the victims of the Holocaust had already been liquidated on Soviet territory... However, it was this part of history that was so carefully hushed up in the USSR that it was called the "forgotten Holocaust."[820]

The Soviet model of historical memory, formed around the cult of Victory, did not allow for the highlighting of Jewish suffering as unique. Any emphasis on the special fate of the Jews "would have diminished the significance of the sacrifice made by the entire Soviet people."[821] According to Altman, "the principled position of not singling out Jews from among the dead was motivated, first of all, by the fact that this would be advantageous to Nazi propaganda..."[822]

In addition to the general desire to universalize suffering, there were more specific motives in the USSR for concealing the Jewish dimension of Nazi crimes, including the fear of revealing the scale of local collaboration in the occupied Soviet territories, especially in the extermination of Jews. "The problem of collaboration in the extermination of Jews was widespread in all occupied territories... It was considered inappropriate to emphasize that the Jews were the main victims, since this would mean admitting the participation of the local population in the murders."[823] In the Baltics, Western Ukraine, Moldova, and southern Russia, thousands of Soviet citizens became active participants in executions, denunciations, and guarding ghettos. The Soviet authorities were aware of this: the reports of the Extraordinary State Commission, established in 1942, recorded in detail the participation of the local population in the massacres. However, this data was not published in full, since in the post-war period the Soviet government sought to reintegrate the population of the liberated territories and preferred not to focus on acts of betrayal and anti-Semitism. Here is how Kirill Feferman explains the position of the USSR:

> "For the entire Cold War period, the Soviet state downplayed the unique features of the Holocaust by situating it within the tragic experience of the Soviet people. Furthermore, the Holocaust issue turned out to be a minefield with so many potential international

[820] Izabella Tabarovsky,"The Forgotten Holocaust", *Kennan Institute*, August 16, 2017.
[821] Ibid.
[822] Ilya Altman, "Holocaust Memorialization in Russia: History, Modernity, Prospects"
[823] Izabella Tabarovsky,"The Forgotten Holocaust"

implications and repercussions on Soviet internal affairs that the regime increasingly preferred to sideline the Holocaust theme entirely."[824]

As a result, the history of the Holocaust "never became part of the collective memory of Russians about the war.[825]

The Soviet government repressed any attempts to preserve the memory of the Holocaust. The central symbol of this repression was the fate of the Black Book, a collection of testimonies about the mass extermination of Jews in the occupied territories of the USSR, prepared by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee under the editorship of Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman. The authorities banned its publication in 1947, and liquidated the JAC in 1948, charging that the Black Book constituted an expression of "bourgeois nationalism" and "collusion with US Zionists."[826] The closure of Jewish institutions, the campaign against "rootless cosmopolitans," and the "Doctors' Plot" finally marginalized the topic of the Holocaust, making it ideologically unacceptable. Thus, "starting in 1948, a veil of silence shrouded the facts of atrocities against Jews for many decades, and the number of those killed on the territory of the USSR became a state secret."[827]

The most striking manifestation of the Jewish community's resistance to oblivion was the fight for the memory of Babi Yar, the site of the mass execution of more than 33,000 Kyiv Jews in September 1941. Official recognition of the Jewish tragedy of Baby Yar did not occur until 1991. The KGB regularly suppressed informal memory rallies in Babi Yar in the 1960s and 1970s: a poster featuring Hebrew inscriptions, wreaths in the shape of the Star of David, and candles was seen as an act of anti-Soviet propaganda. As one KGB report stated after one of the rallies, "the candles were extinguished, and the six-pointed star was removed from the Babi Yar area." The KGB assessed that the rallies in Babi Yar generated "nationalist sentiments among

[824] Feferman, p. 91.
[825] Izabella Tabarovsky,"The Forgotten Holocaust".
[826] Kostyrchenko, p. 412.
[827] Tabarovsky,"The Forgotten Holocaust".

Jewish youth" and feared the dissemination of information about "the inequality of Jews and the participation of local residents in pogroms."[828]

Despite the official silence, the topic of the Holocaust was still reflected in Soviet literature, although such examples were few and censored. One of the most important works was Vasily Grossman's novel Life and Fate, which describes in detail the extermination of Jews in the death camp. This text became one of the first artistic testimonies of the Holocaust written in Russian. The novel itself was banned from publication in the USSR. The KGB confiscated the book's manuscript, and it was first published in Switzerland in the 1980s. Another important text was Anatoly Kuznetsov's novel Babi Yar, in which the author, based on personal memories, described the mass extermination of Jews in Kyiv. However, this text was also subject to strict censorship. In 1961, Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem "Babi Yar" received the first public recognition of the Jewish tragedy in Soviet poetry, sparking an explosion of public interest.[829] Thus, Soviet literature in the 1950s–70s became almost the only space to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, often as a half-hint, and almost always despite, and not thanks to, state policy.

The suppression of Holocaust memory in the USSR was driven by Soviet ideology that denied Jewish tragedy, antisemitic discrimination after World War II, and an anti-Israeli foreign policy that cast Jews as a “fifth column” and their remembrance efforts as disloyalty. The turning point was the period of perestroika. Since 1987, Jewish organizations have begun holding rallies, publishing memoirs, and erecting monuments featuring Jewish symbols on sites of Jewish mass extermination. In 1988, Claude Lanzmann's film "Shoah" was first shown in Moscow as part of the French film festival.[830] In July 1988, an agreement on access for Western researchers to materials on the Holocaust was signed by a representative of the American Holocaust Council to the Committee on International Relations and the first deputy director of the central archive of the Administration of the Council of Ministers of the USSR.[831] In 1989 a delegation from Yad

[828] Eduard Andryushchenko, "The candles are extinguished, the six-pointed star is taken away" - How the KGB fought against the events in memory of the Jews killed in Babi Yar”, *Current Time*, September 30, 2021, https://www.currenttime.tv/a/pamyat-o-babiem-yare/31484639.html
[829] Pavel Polyan, “Sixth Floor: Shootout with Anti-Semites”, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, September 28, 2021, https://lgz.ru/article/shestoy-etazh-perestrelka-s-antisemitami/
[830] «Soviet Jewish Affairs, Chronicle of Events”, Volume 18, No. 2, 1988, p. 98.
[831] «Soviet Jewish Affairs, Chronicle of Events”, Volume 19, No. 1, 1989, p. 93-94.

Vashem began studying previously inaccessible materials on the Holocaust in Moscow and Ukraine.[832]

In the fall of 1991, senior representatives of the Soviet government attended the anniversary of the tragedy at Babi Yar. During the presidency of President Yeltsin, the memory of the Holocaust received public legitimacy, with the first monuments unveiled, scientific conferences convened, and educational work launched. However, even in post-Soviet Russia, the process of Holocaust memorialization was complex. Despite individual symbolic steps in the 1990s and 2000s – for example, Boris Yeltsin's participation in the opening of the Memorial Synagogue and support for projects related to the study of the Holocaust – Russia has never developed a state policy of remembrance of the Holocaust as an independent historical phenomenon. For the majority of Russian citizens, the history of the mass extermination of Jews constituted, at best, a minor episode in the overall tragedy of the Great Patriotic War. Despite the efforts of Holocaust experts and Jewish organizations, Russian society in the late 1990s had a poor understanding of the Holocaust. As comparative studies have shown, the level of knowledge of Russian citizens about this tragedy was much lower than in other European countries.[833]

It is also no coincidence that the Memorial Synagogue, one of the main projects of the RJC for perpetuating the memory of the Holocaust, was built on Poklonnaya Hill, the location of the Victory Park – a historical complex dedicated to the feat of the Soviet Army in the Great Patriotic War. "This physical proximity between the monuments has presaged, to a large degree, the interdependence of the two narratives that would be fostered a few years later by Yeltsin's successor."[834] The return of the Holocaust to public consciousness, the beginning of work to preserve its memory, and the opportunity to study the extermination of Jews in the occupied Soviet territories were the result of democratic transformations in Russia. The rejection of the democratic path and the choice in favor of an authoritarian one made the Holocaust topic a convenient object for manipulation by Kremlin propaganda.

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[832] «Soviet Jewish Affairs, Chronicle of Events", Volume 20, No. 1, 1990, p. 94.
[833] Stella Rock, "Russian revisionism: Holocaust denial and the new nationalist historiography", in *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2001), p.74.
[834] Yaron Gamburg, "From a state of oblivion to the center stage: Official discourse on Holocaust in the post-Soviet Russia", *Revue Européenne des Études Hébraïques*, No. 21 (2020), p. 63.

B. Subordinate role of the Holocaust in Putin's vision of the Great Patriotic War

1. The Holocaust in Russian official discourse: from Soviet taboo to Putin's public rhetoric

For the leaders of the Soviet Union, the subject of the Holocaust was taboo, and none of them ever spoke publicly about it. Gorbachev and Yeltsin rejected the tradition of forgetting and suppressing the memory of the Holocaust, but neither leader spoke out on the subject. Perhaps, like most of the Russian population, their knowledge of the issue was insufficient. Their silence can be attributed to the political sensitivity surrounding the topic and a deliberate effort to avoid providing conservative forces with grounds to accuse them of a pro-Jewish bias, particularly during the politically volatile and ideologically fragmented first decade following USRR's collapse.

In this context, Putin acted as an innovator, making the topic of the Holocaust part of his rhetoric and actively using it in his foreign policy contacts. Inheriting the positive attitude of his predecessors towards the Jewish community and the return of the Holocaust to public discourse, he personally contributed to the expansion of the public aspect of this policy. In its symbolic significance, this new approach was unprecedented in the history of the USSR and post-Soviet Russia. It was undoubtedly one of the key factors that determined the positive attitude of the Israeli leadership and leaders of Jewish organizations towards the new president. However, the Holocaust narrative promoted by Putin, practically from the moment of its appearance, became an auxiliary element in the Russian interpretation of the Great Patriotic War of the USSR with Germany and the Second World War in general. The emerging Russian official narrative of the Holocaust did not stand on its own, deprived not only of independence but also of numerous aspects and nuances that did not correspond to the official version of history.

In fact, Putin's turn to the topic of the Holocaust did not happen immediately after he took office as a president. It is possible that it was through communication with Israeli leaders that Putin realized the advantages associated with using the Holocaust narrative to strengthen Russia's international standing, as well as forging close ties with Israel and with Jewish organizations. At President Putin's first official meeting with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in September 2001, the Israeli leader mentioned World War II, during which "the Soviet Army heroically proved itself, turning the tide in the war, saving the world and the Jews who survived

the Holocaust."[835] For Sharon and other Israeli politicians, the Soviet Army's contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of the Holocaust was an important message to send to the Russian-speaking audience in Israel. Following the emigration of approximately one million immigrants from the USSR to Israel, their electoral weight, about 15, became a significant political factor. Veterans of World War II represented a significant group among the new immigrants and enjoyed special respect among the Russian-speaking population. Already in 2000, the Knesset approved the law on the "Status of Veterans of World War II" and set the date of Victory Day in Israel to May 9, as is customary in Russia, instead of May 8.[836]

Curiously, Putin did not respond to Sharon's 2001 remarks about Soviet Army heroism in WWII, likely due to limited knowledge of the Holocaust. The subject did not come up at their 2002 meeting either, but by 2003 Putin already had prepared talking points on Holocaust commemoration. He informed Sharon of the opening of a special exhibition dedicated to the Holocaust at the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow, as well as the restoration of the Jewish section of the Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg, which had been closed during the Soviet era.[837] Moreover, a few days later, Putin addressed the issue of the Holocaust at a meeting with Russian veterans of the Great Patriotic War, declaring Russia's determination to stop revisionists from rewriting history and denying the Holocaust. Putin linked the Holocaust denial with attempts to deny "the decisive role of the USSR in the victory over Nazism."[838] That same year, the Russian Ministry of Education included the history of the Holocaust in the draft of the official Russian standard for history education, a decision without a precedent in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.[839] In 2005, FCJR leaders initiated the construction of the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow, which was actively supported by the Moscow mayor's office and personally by President Putin. As a symbolic gesture, Putin donated his monthly salary to the

[835] Alexander Ivanov, "Ariel Sharon Invites Vladimir Putin to His Farm", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 5, 2001, https://www.ng.ru/events/2001-09-05/7_charon.html
[836] "Knesset Lexicon – Victory Day May 9", *Official website of the Knesset*, https://main.knesset.gov.il/ru/about/lexicon/pages/victory.aspx
[837] Natalya Melikova, "Putin is a "true friend of Israel", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, November 4, 2003, https://www.ng.ru/politics/2003-11-04/2_putin.html
[838] "Vladimir Putin met with veterans of Russian Armed Forces"), *Official website of President of Russia*, November 18, 2003, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/29770.
[839] Ilya Altman, "Holocaust Education in Russia Today: Its Challenges and Achievements", in *The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme - Discussion Papers Journal (Volume II)*, United Nation, 2012.

project and instructed FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev to provide the museum with documents shedding light on the fate of Raoul Wallenberg.[840]

Putin's first speech, in which he fully articulated his view of the Holocaust, took place in January 2005, at a ceremony dedicated to the liberation of Auschwitz. In his speech, he honored the memory of the millions of victims of the Holocaust and all other victims of Nazism; paid tribute to the "immortal feat" of the armies of the anti-Hitler coalition; recalled that 600,000 Soviet soldiers gave their lives to liberate Poland; and emphasized that the Soviet Union paid the highest price for Victory – 27 million Soviet citizens who died in the war. The main message of Putin's speech was an appeal to the international community to resolutely condemn any attempts to "rewrite history, equating victims and executioners, liberators and occupiers."[841] During his visit to Israel in April 2005, President Putin repeated these messages in an interview with Israeli television, praising Jewish organizations for their fight against attempts to glorify Nazism in the post-Soviet space.[842] The theme of the Holocaust figured prominently in Putin's program in Israel: he attended the opening of a monument to the victims of the Holocaust, a donation he made to Israel on behalf of the Russian people; visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial; and addressed the Holocaust at almost all of his official meetings and press conferences. In his other two visits to Israel, in 2012 and 2020, the Holocaust also had a central place in his program.

2. Holocaust memory as foreign policy and diplomatic strategy

Messages related to Holocaust have become an integral part of Russia's foreign policy discourse in the context of its confrontation with Western countries. Interestingly, Feferman notes that "The special emphasis on the Holocaust and Holocaust denial in the context of Russian foreign policy indicates that the government considers it largely a foreign policy issue. This may

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[840] "A Museum of Tolerance to Open in Moscow", *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, September 26, 2007, https://www.kp.ru/daily/23975.4/73924/, and "Putin to donate his monthly salary to Jewish Museum of Tolerance construction fund", *Novaya Gazeta*, June 6, 2007, https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2007/06/06/14128-putin-perechislit-v-fond-stroitelstva-evreyskogo-muzeya-tolerantnosti-svoyu-mesyachnuyu-zarplatu

[841] "Speech on state ceremony dedicated to 60th anniversary of Liberation of concentration camp Auschwith-Birkenau by Soviet troops", Official website of President of Russia, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22802.

[842] "Interview to the First channel of Israeli television", *Official website of President of Russia*, January 27, 2005, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22928

have to do with its assessment of worldwide Jewish power, which in a way is a continuation of the Soviet thinking pattern of the 1970s and 1980s."[843] However, the use of the Holocaust theme, as well as the general vector of Putin's pro-Jewish policy, is an indicator not so much of a continuation as of a rethinking of Soviet policy on the Jewish question.

The first practical application of the Holocaust "card" in a diplomatic context occurred in 2004. Shortly before Latvia joined NATO, the Russian Foreign Ministry published a historical background on the participation of the Latvian SS legion in war crimes, linking it to the mass murder of Jews and accusing the country's authorities of rehabilitating members of the Waffen SS and revising the decisions of the Nuremberg Tribunal.[844] In December 2004, Russia achieved the adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution "The Inadmissibility of Certain Practices that Contribute to Fueling Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance". Although the resolution did not mention specific countries, Russian diplomats did not conceal the fact that they were referring to Latvia and Estonia.[845]

In November 2005, Russia co-sponsored a UN resolution declaring January 27 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the day of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp by the Soviet Army. The decision to co-sponsor the resolution followed the principles outlined by President Putin in his speech at Auschwitz and during his visit to Israel in 2005. According to the Russian official position, Holocaust denial is one of the dangerous manifestations of historical revisionism and the belittling of the central role of the Soviet Union in this war. From that moment on, the fight against revisionism and attempts to glorify Nazi collaborators was one of the main directions of Russian diplomacy. The inclusion of the message on the Holocaust in Russia's official position strengthened its moral ground. It also allowed Russian diplomacy to mobilize broader support in its fight against alternative historical narratives that have spread in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics, accusing them of neo-Nazism and anti-Semitism.

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[843] Kiril Feferman, "Russia as a Bulwark against Anti-Semitism and Holocaust Denial: The Second World War according to Moscow", in *The Future of the Soviet Past: The Politics of History in Putin's Russia,* Edited by Anton Weiss-Wendt and Nanci Adler (Indiana University Press, 2021), p. 94.
[844] On the participation of the Latvian SS Legion in was crimes in 1941-1945 and attempts to review the Nuremberg tribunal's verdict in Latvia (background information), *Official Website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, February 12, 2004, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1665200/
[845] Anton Weiss-Wendt, "Holocaust discourse in Putin's Russia as a foreign policy tool", in Hoffmann, David L.. "The Memory of the Second World War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia" (Routledge Histories of Central and Eastern Europe) (p. 282). Kindle Edition.

After the 2008 reshuffle, when Dmitry Medvedev took over the Russian presidency for four years, he continued to advance Putin's Holocaust policy. In August 2009, following a meeting between Medvedev and Israeli President Shimon Peres, the two leaders condemned attempts to downplay the Soviet Union's contribution to the Victory over Nazi Germany and to question the fact of the Holocaust. Their joint statement emphasized that the Jewish people fought alongside Russians and other peoples of the Soviet Union in the Red Army, which played a decisive role in the outcome of the war. They also emphasized the unity of Russians and Jews in the fight against Nazism and racist ideology.[846] The statement was a significant success for Russian diplomacy in the struggle between historical narratives about the war and the Soviet Union's role.

3. Competing historical narratives and the cult of victory in Russia

Historical narratives concerning World War II in the Baltics and Ukraine tend to focus on the struggles of the national movements in these countries that opposed both Nazi and Soviet occupation during and after World War II. As is well known, Stalin agreed with Hitler in 1939 (through the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) to divide Eastern Europe, which allowed him to occupy the Baltic states, Western Ukraine, and Bessarabia, thereby establishing Soviet rule in these regions. The population in the occupied regions did not welcome the Soviet occupation, which harshly suppressed any resistance. As a result, in many of these places, the local population welcomed the German troops as liberators.[847]

The leaders of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army ("UPA") collaborated with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union in the early years of the war. They participated in the systematic extermination of the Jews of Ukraine. After their disappointment with the Nazis, the UPA turned their weapons against Germany. Thus,

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[846] "The presidents of Russia and Israel condemned attempts to distort the history of World War II, deny the key role of the USSR in the victory over Nazi Germany and question the crimes of the Holocaust", Official website of the President of Russia, August 18, 2009, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/45390

[847] "The Eastern Front: The German War against the Soviet Union", US Holocaust Memorial Museum website, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-soviet-union-and-the-eastern-front, also "Some in Estonia greeted Nazis in 1941 as liberators", *New York Times*, April 22, 1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/22/world/some-in-estonia-greeted-nazis-in-41-as-liberators.html

within the framework of this historical narrative, the Red Army is viewed on a par with the Wehrmacht, and Stalin and Hitler are presented as equal war criminals. The inhabitants of these countries, including Jews and representatives of other nations, are depicted by national narratives in Eastern European states primarily as victims of external aggression and occupation.

The Russian interpretation of this period differs radically from this approach. For Vladimir Putin and most Russians, the actions of the Soviet Army are a heroic and sacred mission to destroy Nazism and liberate Europe from the "brown plague." The Russian understanding of the history of the Holocaust emphasizes the role of the Red Army as a liberation army, which saved millions of concentration camp prisoners, including Jews, from total extermination. “The official Russian position on the Second World War takes cues from the old Soviet Russian position. It views itself as the rightful heir to the Soviet Union and claims to still be a superpower that should be reckoned with, especially within the sphere of its vital interests, which covers the entire post-Soviet space.”[848] The memory of the victims and heroism of Soviet soldiers is inviolable, and any attempts to equate the USSR with Nazi Germany are considered a blatant and immoral distortion of historical truth. Such comparisons, according to the Russian side, only confirm an alarming trend - the revival of neo-Nazi and neo-fascist sentiments, as well as the spread of Holocaust denial rhetoric in Ukraine, the Baltics, and Western countries. According to one researcher:

> “The Russian efforts to fashion the (Soviet) Victory over Hitler's Germany as a central event in world history are a carbon copy of the discourse developed by the Soviets right after the end of the Second World War. Only the references changed, while the substance remains the same. Back in 1948, Stalin's government linked genocide to Fascism and "similar racial ideologies," while the Putin regime today has reconciled to using the universally accepted term Nazism. (Anton Weiss-Wendt, "Holocaust discourse in Putin's Russia as a foreign policy tool.”[849]

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[848] Kiril Feferman, “Russia as a Bulwark against Anti-Semitism and Holocaust Denial: The Second World War according to Moscow”, in *The Future of the Soviet Past: The Politics of History in Putin's Russia,* Edited by Anton Weiss-Wendt and Nanci Adler. (p. 92). (Function). Kindle Edition.

[849] The Memory of the Second World War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia, ed. by David Hoffmann (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 290, Kindle Edition

Under Putin, official Russian discourse on the Holocaust has been shaped and understood exclusively within the broader narrative of the Great Patriotic War. The memory of the war has become a crucial element of Russia's foreign policy strategy, while also playing a significant role in domestic consolidation as "the main pillar of the post-Soviet Russian identity."[850] In the words of one scholar, "a sanitized version of 'Russia's World War II has become one heritage that many among both leaders and led could agree on. It developed into a cornerstone of a positive narrative about the nation."[851] After the collapse of the USSR and the rejection of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the Victory in the war remained the only generally recognized historical and ideological bond capable of uniting the country and serving as the basis for building a new identity. Thus, the mobilizing potential of the Victory became a central resource in Putin's strategy of consolidating the legitimacy of his power and his role as the nation's defender. "By making the war a personal event and also a sacred one, Vladimir Putin has created a myth and a ritual that elevates him personally, uniting Russia … and showing him as the natural hero-leader, the warrior who is personally associated with defending the Motherland."[852] It is essential to note that the Kremlin's efforts elicited a response from society, as evident in the creation of the "Immortal Regiment" - a movement aimed at perpetuating the memory of war participants through annual May 9 marches. It is not surprising that this movement enjoys the Kremlin's patronage and serves its propaganda purposes, despite the non-political intentions of its creators. During the Soviet period, the Great Patriotic War became, although not immediately, a subject of national pride, occupying a special place in the people's memory. This tradition continued after the collapse of the USSR. For example, military parades on May 9 in post-Soviet Russia resumed in 1995 and have been held annually since then. However, as part of Yeltsin's efforts to de-Sovietize this tradition, these parades moved away from Soviet symbols during the 1990s. At the same time, among the attempts at rethinking Soviet history, there emerged an idea of double suffering of the Russians and other nations from two forms of totalitarianism - German Nazism and Soviet Communism.[853]

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[850] Olga Manilova, "Political Uses of the Great Patriotic War in Post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin", in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, ed. by J. Fedor et al., 2017, p.46.
[851] Mark Edele, "Fighting Russia's History Wars: Vladimir Putin and the Codification of World War II", in *History and Memory* (Indiana University Press), Vol. 29, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2017), p. 93.
[852] Elisabeth Wood, "Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of WWII in Russia"
[853] Olga Malinova, "Political Uses of the Great Patriotic War in Post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin", p.48-55.

However, under Putin, the grandeur of the Victory in this war not only surpassed all previous eras in its scale but also acquired a new meaning. When most of the war participants were still alive, May 9 was "a holiday with tears in the eyes," as the famous Soviet song put it. Under Putin, Victory Day has been presented in a triumphalist vein, emphasizing the invincibility of the Soviet army and its successor, the Russian army. The argument about the double suffering of the people was rejected in favor of a dichotomous vision in which the forces of absolute good – the Soviet army – triumphed over the absolute evil, Nazi Germany. The gradual rehabilitation of Stalin was an inevitable consequence of this view of the war. As the confrontation with the West intensified, the phrase "We can do it again" became popular in Russia, meaning Russia's readiness for a new war with Nazism. After the Russian occupation of Crimea, stickers with this phrase and a picture of a man with a hammer and sickle instead of a head, raping a man with a swastika instead of a head, enjoyed enormous popularity.[854] The cult of Victory, constantly inflated by the Russian authorities and accompanied by the propaganda of militarism and the threat of external aggression, was called "pobedobesie" - "a victory madness."[855]

To promote its version of World War II, Russian diplomacy has countered alternative narratives of the war in Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and Ukraine, which have constituted an element of its ideological and political confrontation with the West. As part of this strategy, Russia was the author of the UN General Assembly resolution entitled "Global efforts aimed at the total elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance."[856] In 2012, Moscow proposed changing the title of the document, emphasizing its political and historical dimensions: the new wording was: "Glorification of Nazism: inadmissibility of certain practices that contribute to fueling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance." The Russian resolution manipulated history, arguing that those who fought against the anti-Hitler coalition cannot be regarded as a national liberation movement.[857] Under the guise of the need to combat manifestations of Nazism, the Russian

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[854] "Who came up with the slogan "We can do it again" and why?", *Meduza*, May 9, 2022, https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/09/kto-i-zachem-pridumal-lozung-mozhem-povtorit

[855] Maria Snegovaya, "A Backward Looking Nation", *CEPA*, May 11, 2020, https://cepa.org/article/a-backward-looking-nation/

[856] Glorification of Nazism: inadmissibility of certain practices that contribute to fueling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance", Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 20 December 2012, https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/67/154.

[857] Anton Weiss-Wendt, "Holocaust discourse in Putin's Russia as a foreign policy tool"

resolution was, according to the US, "a thinly veiled attempt to legitimize longstanding Russian disinformation narratives denigrating neighboring nations."[858] Despite the manipulative nature of the resolution and the resistance of Western countries that voted against it (the US, Canada) or abstained (the EU countries), the Russian side turned the vote on the resolution into an annual ritual designed to denigrate those who allegedly do not support the fight against Nazism.[859]

The course towards confrontation with the West went through a further hardening of Putin's rhetoric, in which the cult of Victory and the Holocaust were inseparable. In his message for the opening of the Museum of Tolerance in Moscow, Putin stated: "We must clearly understand that any attempts to reconsider our country's contribution to the Great Victory, to deny the Holocaust - a shameful page in world history - are not just cynical and unprincipled lies. This is forgetting the lessons of history, which can lead to a repetition of tragedies."[860] In addition to hidden threats, Putin began to manipulate historical facts and defend Stalin's decisions to justify his own aggressive intentions. In 2014, at a meeting with history teachers, he presented a historically controversial version of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and other facts regarding World War II.[861]

The Russian authorities imposed their narrative of the Holocaust not only by political means, but also by using the cultural medium. The Russian government and President Putin personally promoted the Russian feature film Sobibor, dedicated to the history of the uprising and escape from this concentration camp, led by Soviet officer of Jewish origin Alexander Pechersky. The Minister of Culture wrote the script and supervised the filming, Russian embassies organized screenings of the film in the United States and Europe, and the Russian Oscar Committee nominated it for an Oscar. After the war in Ukraine began, the Russian government supported the creation of the film The Righteous, which tells the story of a Soviet officer who led a group of Jews out of occupied Belarus and saved them from extermination.

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[858] "Explanation of Vote on a Resolution on the Glorification of Nazism", U.S. Mission to the United Nations, November 18, 2020

[859] Andrew Gardner, "EU abstains from UN vote on 'Nazism", *Politico*. November 24, 2014, https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-abstains-from-un-vote-on-nazism/

[860] "The Russian-Jewish Museum of Tolerance has opened in Moscow", *Newsru.com*, November 8, 2012, https://www.newsru.com/religy/08nov2012/museum.html

[861] "Putin's speech to historians has worried Western media", *Vedomosti*, November 7, 2014, https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2014/11/07/vystuplenie-putina-pered-istorikami-napugalo-zapadnye-smi, and "Meeting with young scientists and history teachers", *Official website of the President of Russia*, November 5, 2014, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46951

According to independent critics, these and other films used the Holocaust as a backdrop to emphasize the central narrative of Soviet heroism, casting Soviet soldiers as the principal rescuers of Jews during World War II.[862]

A new phase of confrontation with Ukraine will exacerbate the policy of deliberately distorting the history of World War II and using the Holocaust for political purposes.

C. The role of Holocaust memory and anti-Semitism in Putin's disinformation campaigns against Ukraine and the West

1. Weaponizing memory: Russia's use of the Holocaust and WWII narratives after the annexation of Crimea

The annexation of Crimea and the start of military confrontation in Donbas marked the beginning of a new round of instrumentalization of the memory of World War II and the Holocaust by the Russian Federation for political purposes. While Holocaust-related narratives had already been used over the preceding decade, primarily targeting the Baltic states, it was only after the 2014 escalation that a "concerted propaganda campaign by the Russian government to influence the international discourse on the Holocaust" began.[863] The active and systematic use of historical narratives in Russia's disinformation campaigns during these years has been called the "memory war."[864] Although Ukraine and Western nations were the primary targets of Russia's campaign, other countries, including Israel, were also drawn into it to varying extents.

The success of Ukraine's "Euromaidan," a protest movement demanding the country's European integration and the resignation of pro-Russian President Yanukovych, forced Putin to use military force in February 2014 to maintain Russian influence in Ukraine. Taking advantage

[862] Anton Dolin, *Plohie Russkie* (Bad Russians) (Meduza, 2025), p. 396. Kindle Edition. Also see Gennady Razumov, "Movie Lies About the Holocaust. About the Russian Film "The Righteous One", *Chaika*, April 29, 2023, https://www.chayka.org/node/14118

[863] Anton Weiss-Wendt, "Holocaust discourse in Putin's Russia as a foreign policy tool".

[864] J. Fedor et al. (eds.), *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 14-17, also Alexei Miller, "How Russia and the world approached the next Victory Day anniversary", *Novaya Gazeta*, May 5, 2020, https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/05/05/85240-voyny-pamyati-vmesto-pamyati-o-voyne

of the chaos in the Ukrainian leadership, Russia established complete control over Crimea and then annexed the peninsula based on a hastily organized illegal referendum. Russia launched an intensive disinformation campaign against the participants of "Euromaidan", calling them "neo-Nazis" and "Banderovtsy"[865]; the United States and European countries that supported the protest movement became helpers of "neo-Nazis" and "fascists", as German Nazis are often referred to in Russia.[866]

Amid widespread accusations by Western governments, international organizations and legal experts that Russia violated international law and illegally used military force in Ukraine, the Russian leadership has stepped up its efforts to promote its own interpretation of events, presenting the situation in Ukraine and the West as a resurgence of Nazi ideology, in line with its traditional World War II narrative.

According to this Kremlin view, Soviet Russia was on the right side of history between 1941 and 1945, when it fought Germany and defeated Nazism, while today's Russia would be fighting modern forms of Nazism, nationalism and extremism in Ukraine and its Western backers. In this narrative, Moscow claims that nationalist figures like Stepan Bandera, who collaborated with Nazi Germany during World War II, are today celebrated in parts of Ukraine, particularly in the west of the country, which the Kremlin sees as evidence of ideological continuity.

He also accuses Ukrainian governments after 2014 of having integrated ultra-nationalist groups and of having committed violence against Russian-speaking populations in eastern Ukraine, particularly in Donbass. These accusations are used to justify Russia's military intervention, presented as a moral duty comparable to the liberation of Europe by the Red Army during the Second World War. In March 2014, a few days after the referendum in Crimea, in his speech to the Federal Assembly, Putin condemned the "coup d'état", "organized by the

[865] A pejorative term used in Russian and pro-Russian discourse to label Ukrainian nationalists, particularly those associated with the legacy of Stepan Bandera, a controversial Ukrainian nationalist leader from the World War II era.
[866] "DISINFO: The West supported neo-Nazis in Ukraine, using them to weaken Russia", East Stratcom Task Force, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-west-supported-neo-nazis-in-ukraine-using-them-to-weaken-russia/, Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "Russia's Never-Ending War against "Fascism". Memory Politics in the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict", Institute for Human Sciences, https://www.iwm.at/transit-online/russias-never-ending-war-against-fascism-memory-politics-in-the-russian

ideological followers of Bandera"[867], and promised that Crimea would never belong to them. He claimed that the West had looked the other way and was complicit in supporting a fascist regime.

The Russian leadership actively exploited Holocaust memory and engaged Jewish leaders in Europe and Israel to legitimize its aggression against Ukraine and divert attention from the illegal occupation. In July 2014, Putin met in the Kremlin with a delegation of chief rabbis from Israel, Belgium, the United Kingdom, France, Austria, the Netherlands, and Italy. He particularly noted the danger of the revival of "Nazi ideas," thanked Jewish organizations for their "uncompromising" fight against this ideology, and emphasized: "We consider you to be our closest allies, and I am asking you to view us in the same light."[868] After the meeting with Putin, the delegation, headed by Berl Lazar, came to Crimea to participate in a ceremony dedicated to the anniversary of the mass shooting of Jews by the Nazis in Sevastopol in 1942. An Israeli journalist accompanying the delegation noted an unusually high media presence at the event. According to the journalist's source, "Putin wants to demonstrate his connection with the Jewish community. It is important for him to raise this issue in public discourse in Russia and around the world, so that the Crimean Peninsula is mentioned not only in connection with the conflict with Ukraine."[869]

2. Putin's personal involvement in defining Russia's official Holocaust discourse

Following the events in Ukraine, these ceremonies suddenly began to attract significant support from the Kremlin and the participation of high-ranking officials, which had previously been impossible to achieve.[870] Speaking at the International Holocaust Day ceremony at the Museum of Tolerance in January 2015, Putin not only repeated his regular messages on the Holocaust but also introduced new elements into the Russian discourse on the Holocaust.

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[867] Statement by the president of Russian Federation", *Official website of the President of Russia*, March 18, 2014, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603

[868] "Meeting with representatives of international public and religious organisations", *Official website of the President of Russia*, July 9, 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46180

[869] Ran Boker, "Putin with Crimean Jews: A hug against anti-Semitism", *Ynet*, July 16, 2014, https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4543200,00.html

[870] Week of remembrance on unprecedented scale"), Radio Svoboda, January 20, 2015, https://www.svoboda.org/a/26804133.html.

As one might expect, the victory of the pro-European forces in Ukraine, annexation of Crimea and the confrontation with Western countries have heavily influenced this discourse. Putin focused on the image of Stepan Bandera and other Ukrainian collaborators who were engaged in the extermination of Jews in Lviv, Odessa, Kyiv, and other Ukrainian cities, "while the Nazis were carrying out "ethnic cleansing" in Vilnius, Riga, Tallinn, and Kaunas.[871] Thus, Putin accused the OUN-UPA[872] of exterminating the Jews of Ukraine, instead of the German Nazis. Secondly, accusing Ukraine in "the tragedy of the civilian population of Donbass and Lugansk", Putin compared the contemporary "neo-nationalist" with Nazis since they "do not allow peoples to follow their own path of development".[873] Thirdly, Putin called attention to the fragility of European civilization, which allowed the formation of the ideology of Nazism, and warned that the rejection of so-called "traditional human values" is dangerous for civilization. Borrowing from the Stalin's rhetoric, Putin noted that "the Russian people bore the brunt of the war"; at the same time, breaking the soviet tradition, he confirmed the heroism of Soviet Jewish soldiers. In his speech, Putin did not avoid distorting the Holocaust, placing it on a par with the siege of Leningrad as an example "of the criminal massacre organized by the Nazis." Finally, Putin pointed to manifestations of Rusophobia and equated it with anti-Semitism, emphasizing that the Russian people and Russia are innocent victims of hatred, like the Jews.

Putin has stuck to this line of argument ever since. The Holocaust discourse has become an integral part of the Russian narrative about World War II, which is used as a tool to discredit the Ukrainian government and Western countries that support Ukraine. At the same time, the depiction of Ukraine as a neo-Nazi state controlled by "puppeteers" in the US and EU has been couched in the language of human rights, tolerance, and Holocaust remembrance."[874] Russia accused the Ukrainian leadership of supporting ultra-nationalist, anti-Semitic, neo-Nazi forces and of inciting Russophobia, while the West is held responsible for encouraging WWII revisionism. Foreign Minister Lavrov claimed that "false interpretations of history are being introduced into the Western education system. The younger generation is being convinced that

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[871] "International Holocaust Remembrance Day", Official website of the President of Russia, January 27, 2015, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47529

[872] The OUN was a Ukrainian nationalist political organization founded in the 1920s. The UPA was the military wing associated with the OUN, established in 1942

[873] Ibid.

[874] Julie Fedor, "Introduction: Russian Media and the War in Ukraine", in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, ed. by J. Fedor et al., 2017, p. 2.

the main role in the defeat of Nazism belongs not to the Soviet troops, but to the West, thanks to the Normandy landings, which took place less than a year before the victory."

Putin outlined his vision of the Holocaust in more detail in an interview with one of the most influential propagandists, Vladimir Solovyov:

> "The Jews have not forgotten how they were exterminated in World War II, and they are right. However, similar tragedies have occurred in other nations. And I am not even talking about small nations – the Roma were exterminated en masse. And the Slavs, all this is recorded in the archives… And the Russians were exterminated. They [the Nazis] planned the Russians… some to be destroyed, and others to be used for forced labor. And all those who could not be destroyed or used – to be sent beyond the Urals to die out. This is the same Holocaust but concerning the Russian people. We cannot forget it, not in order to blame someone, but in order to prevent a repetition."[875]

The main messages of the official Russian discourse on the Holocaust, declared by Putin, are as follows:

"1. The Russian people bore the brunt of the fight against Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Army played a decisive role in the liberation of the Nazi death camps.

2. The Holocaust was a tragedy of the Jewish people, one of the victims of Nazi ideology.

3. Other people, such as Russians, Belarusians, and Roma, also experienced a tragedy similar to the Holocaust.

4. Soviet Jews demonstrated a high level of heroism in the ranks of the Red Army and partisan formations.

5. Holocaust denial is an attempt to rewrite the history of World War II. It must be condemned, like other forms of historical revisionism;

6. Modern varieties of nationalism, extremism, and terrorism use the same ideology as Nazism, and their condemnation is as important as the condemnation of Holocaust denial."[876]

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[875] Vladimir Solovyov, "World Order 2018", https://smotrim.ru/brand/62720

[876] Yaron Gamburg, "From a state of oblivion to the center stage: Official discourse on Holocaust in the post-Soviet Russia", *Revue Européenne des Études Hébraïques*, No. 21 (2020), p. 76.

3. Instrumentalization of the Holocaust discourse in Russian diplomacy and propaganda

Since 2014, the Holocaust has received significant attention from state media, the Russian parliament, and government agencies. The Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament, issued a special statement in connection with the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp. It stated that "the total extermination in death camps of civilians and military personnel of various nationalities, and above all Jews, Gypsies, and Slavs, has no precedent in human history." The Federation Council also condemned attempts to "falsify our common history and place equal blame on both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, thereby equating the executioners and their victims," warned of the dangers of racism and intolerance in Europe and Ukraine, and called on the international community to "bring to justice Holocaust deniers and those who deny the genocide of non-Aryan peoples, distort historical facts, insult the memory of the liberating soldiers, and glorify the executioners."[877]

The State Duma, the lower house of parliament, introduced a new bill in February 2014 to criminalize the denial of the facts established by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. According to experts, although Holocaust denial was not explicitly stated, the law was aimed at this phenomenon as well.[878] For example, based on the new legislation, law enforcement agencies began an investigation against Roman Yushkov, an activist from Perm who publicly disputed the actual number of Holocaust victims.[879]

However, the central area of use of the Holocaust was and remains Russia's foreign policy. Six months after the annexation of Crimea, the Russian Foreign Ministry presented a new version of the UN resolution on the glorification of Nazism, which, unlike the drafts of previous years, included an unambiguous condemnation of the Holocaust and a call to take "legislative,

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[877] Statement by Federation council of the Federal Assembly of Russian Federation on 70th anniversary of liberation of prisoners in concentration camp Auschwitz and International Holocaust Remembrance day"), Federation Council of Russia website, january 28, 2015, http://council.gov.ru/activity/documents/50961/.

[878] Alexander Verkhovsky, "Criminal law of OSCE member-states against hate crimes, hate incitement and hate speech"), SOVA Information and analysis center (Moscow, 2015), p. 110-111, https://www.sova-center.ru/files/books/cl15-text.pdf.

[879] However, the court ultimately acquitted Yushkov of the Holocaust denial charge, accepting his contention that the issue should be viewed through the prism of academic debate rather than as a criminal offense. "A case on Holocaust. In Perm' the jury acquitted activist Roman Yushkov", 59.RU, September 6, 2018, https://59.ru/text/criminal/65353521/.

law enforcement and educational measures to suppress all forms of Holocaust denial."[880] This resolution is discussed annually at the UN General Assembly. Russia uses it as further evidence of Ukraine's and the West's refusal to fight neo-Nazism and anti-Semitism.

Russian diplomacy has spared no effort in finding new forms of diplomatic pressure on Ukraine and Western countries, using the theme of World War II and the Holocaust, and the fight against anti-Semitism and Russophobia. In 2015, the Russian Foreign Ministry submitted a report to the UN entitled "Neo-Nazism: A Dangerous Threat to Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law,". The report highlighted the trends in "falsifying and denying history, including by equating Nazism with communism and asserting that Nazi Germany and the USSR were equally responsible for starting World War II." Among the falsification practices, it included "denial of the Holocaust and crimes against humanity".[881] However, the report's methodology reflects a propaganda agenda, rather than an attempt to combat Holocaust denial or other falsifications of history. While the title of the report focuses on neo-Nazism, its content covers a wide range of topics, from genocide and aggressive nationalism to discrimination, xenophobia, and racism. All these phenomena were unsupportedly equated with Nazism and presented as different manifestations of the same phenomenon. Finally, the report highlighted 33 countries with the worst trends of neo-Nazism. Unsurprisingly, the list of countries coincided with the states that imposed sanctions on Russia after the annexation of Crimea.

Interestingly, the structure and content of the MFA report resembled those of the annual US State Department report on the human rights situation, which contains numerous human rights violations in different countries, including Russia. The MFA report constitutes a kind of "mirror" response directed against the United States and its allies. This strategy exemplifies diplomatic "reverse engineering" employed by Russia in its ideological confrontation with the West.[882] The publication of the new reports indicated Russia's intention to use a new tool to strengthen its

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[880] "Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly "Combating glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fueling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance", Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the UN website, November 17, 2014, http://russiaun.ru/en/news/res_cgn

[881] "Report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation "Neo-Nazism - a dangerous threat to human rights, democracy and the rule of law", Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, April 24, 2015, http://www.mid.ru/en/diverse/-/asset_publisher/8bWtTfQKqtaS/content/id/1278647

[882] Ivan Krastev, "Russia Is 'Reverse Engineering' Western Foreign Policy", Graduate Institute Geneva , November 18, 2015, http://graduateinstitute.ch/home/relations-publiques/news-at-the-institute/news-archives.html/_/news/corporate/2015/ivan-krastev-russia-is-reverse-e.

status as a superpower defending a sovereign system of values. The number of countries featured in the report increased from 30 in 2015 to more than 60 in 2018. Moreover, Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism no longer occupied a central place in it.

The 2019 report already included Israel in the list of "problematic" countries.[883] It explained that Ukraine is attempting to "incite anti-Russian sentiments" in Israeli society, and there are organizations and websites in Israel that support Russophobia and racism. Also, the report criticized Israel's policies toward national and religious minorities and pointed to "a wide range of human rights problems resulting from the country's establishment as a Jewish ethno-confessional state and the fact that much of the occupied Palestinian territory remains under Israeli control."[884] This line of argumentation, as well as the very fact of Israel's inclusion in the list of countries that experience "an increase in manifestations of Nazism, neo-Nazism, and xenophobia," echoed Soviet propaganda clichés that presented Israel as a chauvinist state and equated Zionism with racism, which testified to the lingering Soviet legacy in the Russian Foreign Ministry. There is no known reaction from Israel to the report; however, Israel did not appear in the following reports.

It is hard to say whether the inclusion of Israel was a mistake of the report editors; however, it could reflect the dissatisfaction of the Russian Foreign Ministry with the Israeli position in the 2017 international incident related to the Holocaust. In July 2017, the Russian Foreign Ministry accused the countries involved in the Sobibor concentration camp reconstruction project of "historical amnesia" for refusing to allow Russia to participate in the project.[885] The history of Sobibor is of particular importance to Russia, since it is associated with the name of the Soviet officer of Jewish origin, Alexander Pechersky, who organized the uprising and escape from Sobibor. Among the countries condemned by Russia were Poland, the

[883] Regarding the situation with the glorification of Nazism and the spread of Neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fueling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance", Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, May 6, 2019, http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/general_assembly/-/asset_publisher/lrzZMhfoyRUj/content/id/3193903#7.
[884] Ibid.
[885] "Zakharova: Israel's support for the Sobibor decision borders on historical betrayal", *TASS*, August 18, 2017, https://tass.ru/politika/4491902

Netherlands, Slovakia, and Israel, whose position, according to the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, "bordered on historical betrayal."[886]

The new Russian official embrace of the Holocaust, sanctioned by the head of state, is widely covered in state media. The word "Holocaust" has entered the lexicon of influential journalists, TV presenters, experts, and officials participating in television debates and talk shows. Leading Russian propagandists have helped popularize the topic, but only within the parameters set by the Kremlin. Vladimir Solovyov, the host of a popular talk show on a central Russian TV channel, regularly addresses the issue of the Holocaust and the need to combat anti-Semitism and neo-Nazism in Europe and elsewhere, while emphasizing his Jewish origins. As is typical of the genre, Solovyov turns political debates into a scandalous show, including when discussing the Holocaust. On one show, he indignantly kicked one of the participants in the discussion out of the studio for allegedly making insulting statements about Holocaust survivors and their descendants; the removed participant in the show was trying to present the position of Ukraine.[887] Another popular host, Dmitry Kiselyov, devoted one of his programs to the Holocaust, centering on the collaboration of the leading American company, IBM, and Pope Pius XII with Nazi Germany.[888] In this way, Kiselyov emphasized one of the messages of the current discourse that Nazism was an inevitable product of Western civilization, and, at the same time, returned to the Soviet propaganda tropes. Similar discussions and arguments are featured in popular political talk shows, such as "60 Minutes" and "Time Will Tell" on Channel One, on the radio, and social networks.

This was a version of the Russian Holocaust discourse that emerged after the outbreak of the acute crisis between Russia and Ukraine in 2014. It is inextricably linked to the narrative of the Great Patriotic War and plays a central role in Russia's "memory war" with Ukraine and the West. The relentless promotion of the Russian Holocaust narrative allows Russia to secure valuable support for its policies among foreign audiences, primarily from Israel and Jewish organizations. Despite the distortion of the history of the Holocaust and the discrepancy between

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[886] Itamar Eichner, “Israel-Russia relations sour over Sobibór memorial exclusion”, *Ynetnews.com*, August 20, 2017, https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5005138,00.html
[887] Evening with Vladimir Solovyov*, “Rossia” TV channel*, March 20, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loTHZEOnqok
[888] Vesti nedeli, *“Rossia” TV channel*, March 10, 2019, https://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/5206/episode_id/2141133/viewtype/picture/

the rhetoric and actions of the Russian Federation, and at the same time, due to the insufficiently critical perception of this narrative, it enjoyed international legitimation until the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

To fully grasp how Holocaust memory is weaponized in Putin's disinformation campaigns, it is essential to examine how Holocaust remembrance is treated within Russia itself. The state's own remembrance policy reveals both an uncritical embrace of certain narratives and striking contradictions in implementation. These internal dynamics lay the groundwork for Russia's external manipulation of historical memory.

D. Russia's Holocaust remembrance policy: uncritical acceptance and contradictions in implementation

Russian Holocaust narrative did not encounter any significant resistance from Jewish organizations, Holocaust remembrance institutions and other governments along the way. A resistance was, of course, impossible inside Russia, where the Kremlin's propaganda machine, encompassing the media, film industry, education system, and social networks, is the primary of information and interpretation of events for Russian citizens. The Russian authorities also used Russian academic institutions, imposing their Holocaust narrative in the context of anti-Ukrainian propaganda not only inside the country, but also on the foreign expert community, such as in the conference organized by the Moscow Humanitarian University and the Russian Jewish Congress in Russian capital.[889]

However, Russia directed its major efforts at the UN, where it achieved relative success despite the blatant manipulation of its position on the Holocaust. Several factors contributed to this. One of these factors was Russia's traditionally strong influence in the UN. As noted above, Russian diplomacy has systematically used the platform of the United Nations to impose its narrative of the Holocaust on the international community: "The United Nations has proven an important, and malleable, conduit for Russian history policy."[890] The resolution on combating the

[889] See reaction of one of the participants in the conference here: https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1Ch8Jdq1GT/
[890] Anton Weiss-Wendt, "Holocaust discourse in Putin's Russia as a foreign policy tool"

glorification of Nazism, in its various variations, initiated by Russia in 2004, is discussed annually within the framework of the UN Third Committee, which deals with issues of the social and humanitarian agenda, including racial discrimination, xenophobia, and human rights. Using this agenda, the Russian resolution has received an absolute majority of votes for 20 consecutive years. For most countries voting for this resolution, the issue of Nazism and World War II is not an important element of their history and identity, which simplifies Russia's efforts; at the same time, the countries of the European continent that have gone through the experience of Nazism have traditionally abstained, and after 2022, voted against this resolution.

It is important to note that Russia's attempts to promote its narrative of the Holocaust and World War II in other international forums have not been so successful. For example, the member countries of the Council of Europe, the human rights organization of the European continent, rejected the Russian approach. In response, the Russian delegation blocked the approval of the Council's resolution on preserving the memory of the Holocaust for several years. In March 2022, when Russia was expelled from the Council following its invasion of Ukraine, the blocked resolution passed the next day.

Two years after the start of the war in Ukraine, the Russian resolution on the glorification of Nazism was re-approved in December 2024 at the 79th session of the UN General Assembly. While the manipulative character of this resolution is evident even to countries far removed from the topic of World War II, Russia is still able to mobilize massive support in the UN. Among the countries that voted in favor of this resolution again was Israel. This section aims to analyze the factors that led the Israeli government and Jewish organizations to allow Russia's manipulation and distortion of the Holocaust to go unchallenged. The section ends with an examination of the discrepancies between the official Russian position on the Holocaust and its implementation.

1. Manipulating Israel’s support to advance Russia’s historical revisionism of World War II and Holocaust memory

From the introduction of the Russian Holocaust discourse in the mid-2000s until the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the Israeli leadership ignored the manipulations and distortions of the Russian Holocaust narrative. It never attempted to counter or correct the errors

and inaccuracies in the discourse of the Russian President or his official representatives, preferring to accept the Russian interpretation and demonstrate unity of positions between the countries. Stalin's ruthless policy of exterminating Jewish life, the Soviet Union's silence on the Holocaust, the USSR's anti-Zionist policies, and decades of Soviet anti-Semitism have been absent from the discourse of Israeli leaders since the 2000s. Interestingly, there has also been no official reaction to Putin's various anti-Semitic "gaffes," such as his remark about "Jews" interfering in the American elections[891] Notably, Yad Vashem has also refrained from criticizing the Russian President. Even after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when manipulations of the Holocaust were too obvious and frequent to ignore[892] this approach did not change. As mentioned above, Israel annually voted for the Russian resolution condemning the glorification of Nazism, despite the fierce opposition to it of the United States, Israel's main ally.

Several factors influence Israel's position on this issue. The emergence of Russian discourse on the Holocaust was an important indication of the rejection of the Soviet legacy. Moreover, some of its elements aroused enthusiasm in Israel. First and foremost, it was the official recognition of the contributions made by Jewish fighters to the victory over Germany in the ranks of the Soviet Army. Holocaust memory in Israel's tradition emphasizes the heroism of the Jewish resistance to Nazism. It is worth reminding that this recognition began during Yeltsin's reign, but Putin voiced this thesis more than anyone else. Another common element in this discourse is the central role of the Soviet army in the defeat of Nazi Germany and the liberation of concentration camps, which Israeli leaders have constantly emphasized since the resumption of bilateral relations, and which has become one of Putin's main talking points.

As a result, the Kremlin considered the Jewish state as an ally in advancing its narrative of the Holocaust and World War II. During his second visit to Israel in 2012, Putin said, "We value Israel's objective attitude to the events of World War II. The decisive role of the Soviet Union in

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[891] "Путин: Возможно в выборы в США вмешались украинцы, татары или евреи", *Youtube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZNCypN3laY, also "Putin's comments about ethnic minorities have outraged Jewish organizations in the United States", BBC, March 13, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-russian-43383435

[892] Peter Conradi, "Holocaust row: Vladimir Putin seeks to justify Russia's history", *The Times*, January 19, 2020, https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/holocaust-row-vladimir-putin-seeks-to-justify-russias-history-xhwklhh7v, also Weiss-Wendt, *Putin's Russia and the Falsification of History: Reasserting Control over the Past*, pp. 357-364.

defeating Nazism is not questioned here. The people who survived the Holocaust remember well both their executioners and their liberators."[893] Netanyahu's speech mirrored Putin's messages, adding the element of Jewish participation in the Red Army:

> "For us, memory is part of our existence. We fight Holocaust denial and join the fight to deny the Red Army's vital role in defeating the Nazi vermin. This is an integral part of your cultural and historical heritage, and it is an equally important part of our cultural and historical heritage, because more than half a million Jews fought in the ranks of the Soviet Army."[894]

This element also emerged in Putin's discourse: "… we know very well how representatives of the Jewish people fought Nazism in the ranks of the Red Army: they were political workers, and ordinary soldiers, doctors – in general, they made their worthy contribution to the fight against Nazism."[895]

The common position of Russia and Israel on the Holocaust was critical during the period of worsening relations with the West and Ukraine. Israel's vote for the Russian resolution on the glorification of Nazism received systematic coverage in the Russian media, intended to show whose side the Jewish state was on.[896] However, Israel did not limit itself to supporting this non-binding UN resolution. Netanyahu was the only leader of a Western country to participate in the May 9 parade and the Immortal Regiment, one of the Kremlin's flagship projects commemorating the Great Patriotic War. It is worth noting that Netanyahu participated in the Immortal Regiment procession with a photograph of Wolf Vilensky, a Jewish officer in the Soviet Army, highlighting the role of Jewish soldiers.[897] At the same time, the Israeli Knesset and the Russian Federation Council held a teleconference with a joint screening of the Russian film "Sobibor", which emphasized the role of Soviet soldiers in the uprising and escape from this

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[893] "Meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu", *Official website of the President of Russia*, June 25, 2012, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15728
[894] "Meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu", Official website of the President of Russia, June 25, 2012, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15728
[895] "Meeting with representatives of international public and religious organizations", *Official website of the President of Russia,* July 9, 2014, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46180
[896] "Countries that opposed Russia's resolution on combating neo-Nazism have been named", Nezavisimaya Gazeta, December 18, 2024, https://rg.ru/2024/12/18/nazvany-strany-kotorye-vystupili-protiv-rezoliucii-rf-po-borbe-s-neonacizmom.html
[897] Netanyahu walks through Red Square with portrait of war hero Wolf Vilensky, *TASS*, May 9 ,2018, https://tass.ru/obschestvo/5187671

death camp.[898] These gestures by Israel provided significant support for the Russian side during Russia's period of international isolation.

While fully supporting the Russian Holocaust narrative, the Israeli leadership ignored distortions and manipulations. Israel did not react to the Russian propaganda baseless accusations of the Ukrainian Government of neo-Nazism. It ignored the comparisons between the Holocaust and the siege of Leningrad, which Putin openly made in his interviews on central TV channels.[899] Weiss-Wendt points to a combination of Israel's domestic and foreign policy factors as the reason for such an indiscriminate attitude towards the Russian Holocaust manipulations.[900] He emphasizes the influence of the large Russian-speaking community in Israel, when "a limited nostalgia that some of them may feel for their country of origin (the Soviet Union), makes them less critical vis-à-vis Russia's overtures."[901] However, as noted above, among Russian-speaking emigrants in Israel, Israel's pro-Putin gestures did not evoke much support. Moreover, most recent immigrants from Russia do not support the anti-liberal ideology of the Putin regime.[902] The "Russian factor" in Israel is less about a particular sympathy among Russian-speaking citizens towards Russia. It constitutes a helpful strategy of Israel's governement in dealing with Russia, aiming to create a friendly atmosphere and reassure Putin's own belief that Israel is "practically a Russian-speaking country". That is why Netanyahu and Bennett bring Russian-speaking politicians to their meetings with Putin, rather than using professional interpreters.[903]

Another compelling argument, already discussed above, concerns Israeli security interests in its "tough neighborhood": "In the wake of the Syrian crisis, and especially after Putin's decision to support Bashar al-Assad militarily, Israel needs to maintain good working relations with Russia more than ever."[904] However, it is not only about the deconfliction in Syria. In the

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[898] Joint discussion on the eve of Holocaust day between the Israeli Knesset and the Federation Council of Russia", Knesset website, April 11, 2018, https://m.knesset.gov.il/news/pressreleases/pages/press11.04.18x.aspx
[899] Miroporyadok 2018" ("The world order 2018"), film by Vladimir Solovyov, *Rossia TV channel,* https://russia.tv/brand/show/brand_id/62720/
[900] Anton Weiss-Wendt, "Holocaust discourse in Putin's Russia as a foreign policy tool", pp. 290-291.
[901] Ibid.
[902] Lisa Rosovsky, "The quarter-million immigration: Putin arranged a huge immigration of liberals to Israel", *Haaretz*, July 17, 2024, https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/2024-07-17/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/00000190-c084-d458-a3d7-ebe7597b0000
[903] Both Netanyahu and his successor Bennett regularly used MK and minister Ze'ev Elkin as a translator for their talks with Putin.
[904] Anton Weiss-Wendt, "Holocaust discourse in Putin's Russia as a foreign policy tool"

context of Israel's security interests, it is imperative to keep in mind the issue of the Iranian nuclear program, which is viewed in Israeli society, and not only in its political establishment, as an existential question considering the Ayatollah's promise to destroy Jewish statehood. For decades, the Israeli leadership has been trying to influence Russia-Iran cooperation in both the nuclear field and the transfer of missile technology. Russia was a party to the JCPOA agreement concluded in 2015; although the Obama administration played a key role in the negotiations, Russia contributed to the issue of removing enriched uranium.[905] At the same time, Russia transferred S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems to Iran to protect its nuclear facilities, causing deep concern in Israel.[906]

Israel's attempts to influence Russia-Iran cooperation have run into a wall of strategic Russian interests, but this does not mean that they have not been heard in Moscow. Curiously, the issue of Holocaust denial turned into a somewhat controversial topic between Moscow and Tehran during the rule of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, known for his anti-Semitic views. In December 2005, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued an official statement condemning Ahmadinejad for Holocaust denial. The statement emphasized that "attempts to revise the generally known historical facts of World War II, including those related to the Holocaust, are unacceptable."[907] The Russian Foreign Ministry issued similar statements in subsequent years. In December 2006, it condemned Iran's decision to hold an international conference aimed at revising the Holocaust. In September 2009, the Foreign Ministry again condemned Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denial.[908] It is difficult to assess the extent to which Russia's position has influenced Iran's official genocidal rhetoric toward Israel. It is worth noting, though, that

[905] Alexey Arbatov and Vladimir Saghin, "The Nuclear Deal With Iran: The Final Step or a New Stage?", *Carnegie Russia Euraisa Center,* April 20, 2016, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2015/12/the-nuclear-deal-with-iran-the-final-step-or-a-new-stage?lang=en&center=russia-eurasia

[906] "Iran's S-300 missile deliveries seriously worry Israel", *BBC,* April 20, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2015/04/150419_israel_russia_iran_s300

[907] Russian MFA condemns remarks of the president of Iran regarding Holocaust"), *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, December 15, 2005, https://rg.ru/2005/12/15/mid-iran-anons.html

[908] 'Russia rejects distortion of truth on Holocaust", *RIA Novosti*, December 13, 2006, https://ria.ru/20061213/56879115.html, and Russia: Ahmadinejad's Holocaust statement totally unacceptable", Jerusalem Post, September 19, 2009, https://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Russia-Ahmadinejads-Holocaust-statement-totally-unacceptable.

Iranian officials have preferred to remain silent when Russian journalists asked them uncomfortable questions on the subject.[909]

However, there could be another factor. This factor has an existential subtext that profoundly shaped the Israeli mentality. For Israelis, the Holocaust is a constant reminder of the fragility of Jewish existence, and the defeat of the Nazi regime meant a miraculous salvation. To understand the depth of this aspect, it's worth quoting the words of Yitzhak Rabin, the first Israeli Prime Minister to visit post-Soviet Russia:

> "It is well known that there have been difficult times in relations between Israel and the former Soviet Union. There have been dark days. However, even in the most challenging days, in the most bitter moments, we never forgot for a moment that the Soviet Union, the soldiers of the Soviet Army, were, first and foremost, the spearhead of the war against the Nazis... If you allow me, on behalf of the Jewish people, on behalf of the State of Israel, which is a home and a refuge for Holocaust survivors, on behalf of every human being and civilized person, I would like to say to you today: thank you. They say that we have a long memory – and it is true: therefore, even in those difficult days, when here in Moscow we were not very well understood and even treated harshly, we never forgot for a minute that it was the Soviet Union that supported us at the beginning of our state path and was with us in the difficult war for our independence. The State of Israel is stingy with awards. This is not in our customs. But if I could, if I were allowed, I would award every Russian, Jew and non-Jew, in high and low ranks, who came to our aid in those days when our lives depended on us. This memory is not overshadowed by the numerous and complex years that followed. For this old friendship – thank you, Russia."[910]

This speech by Rabin, a former Israeli general born in Mandatory Palestine and a veteran of all of Israel's wars, well acquainted with the anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic policies of the USSR, is the quintessence of the sentiment inherent in Israeli society and its leaders. Said at a time of Russia's political weakness, after the collapse of the USSR, when its influence in the

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[909] "Attempt to establish anti-Iranian coalition are ridiculous"), *Kommersant*, February 20, 2019, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3889343#id971586

[910] Yitzhak Rabin "Speech at a rally for Russian Jews", Moscow, April 26, 1994, https://www.rabincenter.org.il/speeches/

world had sharply declined, these words give an idea of the psychological aspect - "long memory" - in the attitude of the entire Israeli society, and not only its Russian-speaking community, towards Russia, associated with the deliverance from the Holocaust. Such an aspect does not exist in the attitude of Israeli society towards other countries, allies of the anti-Hitler coalition.

However, the sense of historical debt in the context of international relations is a double-edged sword. As already mentioned, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zakharova was quick to accuse Israel of "historical betrayal" for not inviting Russia to participate in the reconstruction of the museum in the Sobibor concentration camp. On the other hand, the full adoption of the Russian narrative of the Holocaust and World War II in Israel, dictated by a sense of historical debt, can lead to excesses. Yakov Kedmi, the former head of the Israeli secret service Nativ and a regular expert on the Soviet propagandist Solovyov's program, provides a clear example of this phenomenon. In keeping with the format of this controversial talk show, where hyperbole and provocative language are the rule, Kedmi has repeatedly drawn literal comparisons between Nazi Germany and "neo-Nazi" Ukraine, the West's capitulation to Hitler in the 1930s, and its support for Ukraine's anti-Semitic and Rusophobic regime. Echoing the common Russian claim that the Ukrainian Government is an American puppet, Kedmi called the US representative in Ukraine, Kurt Volker, a "Gauleiter[911]," equating US influence in Ukraine with the Nazi occupation. Statements by Kedmi, a former high-ranking Israeli intelligence officer, were perceived as Israel legitimizing anti-Ukrainian hysteria in Russia. Kedmi's anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western warmongering resulted in the EU's decision to include him in the sanctions list.[912] According to a 2022 poll by an Israeli Russian-language news site, Kedmi was chosen the "anti-hero" of the year in Israel; the same poll found that Putin was the "anti-hero" of 2022 worldwide.[913]

[911] A Gauleiter was a high-ranking Nazi Party official in charge of a regional branch of the party called a "Gau" in Nazi Germany.
[912] "Israeli Yakov Kedmi Added to EU Sanctions List for Supporting Russian Aggression", *Detaly,* February 26, 2023, https://detaly.co.il/izrailtyanin-yakov-kedmi-popal-v-sanktsionnyj-spisok-es-za-podderzhku-rossijskoj-agressii/
[913] "Heroes, Antiheroes and Events of 2022, According to NEWSru.co.il", *Newsru.co.il*, December 30, 2022, https://www.newsru.co.il/israel/30dec2022/geroi2022_itog.html

The uncritical attitude towards the Russian narrative of the Holocaust and World War II causes damage to Israel's reputation and undermines its status as a guardian of Holocaust memory. Russia's participation in the International Holocaust Forum organized by Yad Vashem[914], in Jerusalem, in January 2020 ended in scandal. First, the format of Putin's participation led to the Polish President's refusal to attend the event.[915] In his speech at the event, Putin laid out his version of the Holocaust to an international audience of heads of state, presidents, and royal dignitaries from around the world, using the forum as an instrument of Russia's "Holocaust geopolitics." The event sparked a public outcry, particularly from Poland and other Eastern European countries, who criticized the forum's video materials for presenting a distorted, Russia-centric account of World War II.[916] The materials were provided by one of the main sponsors of the event, Moshe Kantor, the president of the European Jewish Congress, and one of Putin's close associates.[917] Media and historians accused Yad Vashem of undermining its proper mission and historical truth, which led to the institution's publication of an official apology - a rare and exceptional event in itself.[918] It is important to note that Yad Vashem apologized for the videos, and not for Putin's words that equated the Holocaust with the tragedies of other peoples.[919] There was no reaction from the Israeli Government either. Despite strong protests in Israel, Putin scored another diplomatic victory in the "memory war", using Israel and Yad Vashem in his fight against the West.[920]

Despite the diplomatic "blunder", Israel did not change its approach to the issue of the Russian narrative of the Holocaust. After two years of the war in Ukraine, the Israeli delegation supported the Russian resolution on the glorification of Nazism. According to Anton Weiss-

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[914] Yad Vashem is Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, located in Jerusalem.
[915] Anshel Pfeffer, "In New Battle Over Auschwitz Legacy, Poland Falls Victim to Holocaust Geopolitics", Haaretz, January 22, 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-auschwitz-75-years-israel-yad-vashem-poland-victim-holocaust-geopolitics-putin-1.8432285
[916] "Israel's Holocaust museum apologizes for inaccurate videos", APNews, February 3, 2020, https://apnews.com/general-news-85f8ea4f53b3b49052fc07dc70140e3d
[917] Rimma Polyak, "The President's Personal Jew: How Moshe Kantor is Laundering Vladimir Putin's Reputation", *Republic*, February 10, 2020, https://republic.ru/posts/95870
[918] Ofer Aderet, "Yad Vashem apologized for presenting pro-Russian distorted materials at the International Holocaust Forum", Haaretz, February 3, 2020, https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/.premium-1.8480705
[919] "Forum "Preserving the Memory of the Holocaust, Fighting Anti-Semitism", *Official website of the President of Russia*, January 23, 2020, http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62646
[920] Ksenia Svetlova, Israel at the service of Putin, Russian World War II narrative, Al-Monitor, January 28, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/israel-russia-benjamin-netanyahu-vladimir-putin-holocaust.html

Wendt, "although playing along with the official Russian discourse on the Second World War and the Holocaust may seem like a small price to pay, in the long term it may draw Israel even closer into Russia's orbit. Unless, of course, Israeli historians and politicians alike start taking history politics as advanced by the Russian Government more seriously."[921] In November 2024, Israel supported an American amendment to the "glorification" resolution that accused Russia of justifying its aggression against Ukraine by fighting neo-Nazism.[922] Still, it remains unclear whether this vote signals a more critical Israel's view of Russia's distortions of the Holocaust.

Russia's efforts to secure Israeli support are a crucial element in its broader strategy of historical revisionism regarding World War II and Holocaust memory. From the Kremlin's perspective, an equally important factor was the support for its Holocaust narrative from Jewish organizations, both in Russia and abroad. The Kremlin was able to achieve, if not the acceptance of its discourse, at least the neutralization of criticism directed at it. At the same time, the condemnation of Ukraine's position on the Holocaust by Jewish organizations was an important asset in the Kremlin's anti-Ukrainian propaganda.

2. The position of Jewish organizations

The position of Jewish leaders and organizations regarding the Russian narrative of the Holocaust and World War II generally followed the official Israeli line. Jewish organizations in Russia contributed to the commemoration of the Holocaust, but within the limits set by the state. There was no criticism of the manipulations and distortions of the history of the Holocaust and World War II. Moreover, some Jewish public figures acted as propagandists for the regime. American Jewish organizations occasionally criticized Russia for its insufficient efforts to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, but over the years, this criticism diminished. At the same time, Jewish organizations were important allies of Russia in the fight against manifestations of

[921] Anton Weiss-Wendt, "Holocaust discourse in Putin's Russia as a foreign policy tool"
[922] "Combating glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance", UN GA, November 8, 2024, https://docs.un.org/en/A/C.3/79/L.51

Holocaust denial and distortion in the Baltic states and Ukraine. Russia also used Jewish organizations to influence the expert community.

Russian Jewish organizations, mainly FJCR and RJC, devoted a significant part of their activities to the Holocaust commemoration and education. FJCR gained significant institutional support for its Holocaust-related initiatives. With the personal approval of President Putin, a state-run Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center was established with the full support of the Kremlin. Putin personally participated in the discussions of this project, seeking to create a Russian equivalent of Yad Vashem, with one crucial difference: the Center was to serve as a memorial for both Russian Jews and people of other nationalities.[923] After opening, the museum served as a convenient platform for Putin's speeches on the issue of the Holocaust and World War II, especially after he was no longer welcome to international ceremonies.

None of the FJCR or RJC leaders ever tried to challenge Putin's Holocaust narrative. At the same time, overt manifestations of Holocaust denial or distortion at a lower level of government met with criticism and condemnation by Jewish organizations. For example, RJC President Yuri Kanner and Rabbi Lazar sharply condemned Professor Vladimir Matveyev's remarks denying the Holocaust and publicly demanded his punishment.[924] In some cases, Jewish organizations were ready to challenge the actions of local authorities who resisted their efforts to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust. One of the most famous incidents occurred in Rostov-on-Don, where city authorities changed a memorial plaque at the site of the mass shooting in Zmievskaya Balka, where, according to various estimates, about 25,000 Jews died. Instead of indicating the Jewish victims of the tragedy, the new plaque spoke only of the extermination of "peaceful civilians", following the Soviet language of Holocaust obliteration. The actions of the authorities outraged members of the Rostov-on-Don Jewish community, who filed a lawsuit against the city administration. RJC President Kanner compared the event to manifestations of Holocaust denial in the Baltic states.[925] However, more than a decade later, the

[923] Anton Weiss-Wendt, “Holocaust discourse in Putin’s Russia as a foreign policy tool”, (p. 280) Kindle Edition.
[924] “A professor from St. Petersburg suggested telling schoolchildren that “the Holocaust is a positive phenomenon,” and responded to critics by saying that they are “dark-minded people”, Meduza, January 28, 2021, https://meduza.io/feature/2021/01/28/professor-iz-peterburga-predlozhil-rasskazyvat-shkolnikam-chto-holokost-pozitivnoe-yavlenie-a-kritikam-otvetil-chto-oni-dremuchie-lyudi
[925] “Defending the Right to Memory”, Russian Jewish Congress website, August 10, 2012, https://rjc.ru/ru/news/zashhishhaya-pravo-na-pamyat/

situation with Jewish commemoration remains unresolved, and RJC has called for a solution at the federal level.[926]

Among the prominent members of Russia's Jewish community were those who joined the chorus of propagandists on Russian state-run TV and social media to promote a distorted narrative of the Holocaust and World War II. Yevgeny Satanovsky, former president of the Russian Jewish Congress (2001–2004) and a renowned expert on Middle East politics, became a regular speaker on talk shows aimed at brainwashing the Russian public about Ukraine and the West. Satanovsky compared the Holocaust to the anti-Russian policies of the "masters of the world," whose goal is to destroy "Russia, Russians, and the Russian language." Calling the Ukrainian president a "traitor to the Jewish people," he called for the elimination of Zelensky and Biden.[927] Promoting Russia's narrative of World War II, he compared Russia's invasion of Ukraine to the Battle of Stalingrad. As in the case of Kedmi, Satanovsky's status as a prominent Jewish figure gave greater legitimacy to Russia's Holocaust narrative.

As noted earlier, from the Russian authorities' perspective, the primary target audience of the Holocaust and World War II narratives was external. For this purpose, the Russian government collaborated with the World Congress of the Russian-speaking Jews (WCRJ) that served as a foreign policy "proxy". For example, in January 2009, in collaboration with the Russian Foreign Ministry, the WCRJ organized a conference in New York on the topic "Lessons of the Holocaust and Modernity."[928] Notably, in the first few years of its establishment, well-known Israeli Russian-speaking politicians participated in the WCRJ's activities.[929] However, the WCRJ's subordination to the Russian authorities discouraged many from participating in its activities. On the instructions of the Foreign Ministry, in February 2011, the WCRJ, together with another "non-governmental" organization, "World Without Nazism", held a round table at the UN headquarters on the topic of "A World Without Nazism: A Global Challenge to Humanity and the 65th Anniversary of the Nuremberg Trials".[930] The head of both organizations was Boris

[926] "The RJC called for resolving the issue of perpetuating the memory of Holocaust victims in Zmievskaya Balka
[927] "Satanovsky: Judgment Day for the Masters of the World", Vesti.ru, October 5, 2022, https://www.vesti.ru/article/2974595
[928] Mikhail Margolin, "PUTIN'S AGENCY OF INFLUENCE", *Journal Masteraskaya*, September 21, 2022, https://club.berkovich-zametki.com/?p=73493
[929] "Russian Jews Will Defend the IDF", *Jewish.ru*, October 9, 2009, https://jewish.ru/ru/events/world/7816/
[930] Anton Weiss-Wendt, "Holocaust discourse in Putin's Russia as a foreign policy tool", (p. 283) Kindle Edition.

Shpigel, a Russian businessman and member of the Federation Council. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried to involve the Russian Holocaust Foundation in its work, but the professional ethics of this organization could not fit into propaganda campaigns, as did the WCRJ and "World Without Nazism".

American Jewish organizations, which, unlike their Russian counterparts, enjoy freedom of action, responded to Russian manipulations and distortions of the Holocaust sporadically. In fact, by the end of the 2010s, they had lost interest in Russia. Several factors contributed to this outcome. First, there was a decrease in manifestations of antisemitic vandalism and violence in Russia, accompanied by declarations of the FJCR about free Jewish life and the marginalization of anti-Semitism. Reports on anti-Semitism in Russia were gradually losing their dramatic effect. The dubious palm of primacy in anti-Semitic violence had moved to Western European countries, where radical Islamists attacked synagogues, Jewish schools, and grocery stores. Anti-Semitism was also on the rise in the United States, becoming the most common type of hate crime.[931] The Russian-Israeli common position on the Holocaust, supported by Israeli President Peres and Prime Minister Netanyahu, both emphasizing Russia's strategic importance to Israeli security interests, further reduced the incentive to monitor anti-Semitism in Russia and follow its Holocaust commemoration efforts.

The Russian authorities actively used Jewish organizations to legitimize their narrative about the fight against neo-Nazism in Ukraine and the Baltics. The World Jewish Congress, the Wiesenthal Center, and other organizations did criticize the glorification of Nazi collaborators in these countries.[932] From Moscow's perspective, this position reinforced the impression of support

[931] "New FBI data shows rise in anti-Semitic crimes hate", *CBS News*, November 13, 2018, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fbi-hate-crimes-up-new-data-shows-rise-in-anti-semitic-hate-crimes/
[932] For example, see "WJC concerned by Ukraine's decision to rename Kyiv boulevard after ultra-nationalist complicit in murdering Jews during Holocaus", WJC, July 8 , 2016, https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/wjc-concerned-by-ukraines-decision-to-rename-kyiv-boulevard-after-ultra-nationalist-complicit-in-murdering-jews-during-holocaust-7-1-2016, and Efraim Zuroff, Estonia's severe case of Holocaust amnesia", The Times of Israel, December 18, 2012, https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/estonias-severe-case-of-holocaust-amnesia/

for the Russian position. When Putin was saying that Russia sees Jewish organizations as its ally in the fight against neo-Nazism, Jewish representatives agreed.[933]

One influential American organization, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, condemned the actions of local authorities in Rostov-on-Don in 2012 for their actions Holocaust in the Zmievskaya Balka incident. Shimon Samuels, the Wiesenthal Center's director of international relations, visited Rostov-on-Don, where he demanded the return of the old memorial plaque at Zmievskaya Balka. He was quoted as saying that the Jews executed there "were killed twice – the first time in 1942, the second time in 2011, desecrating their memory."[934] In 2014, the Wiesenthal Center published its annual report on the status of investigations into Nazi war criminals, according to which Russia was at the very bottom of the list of countries in which "no practical steps have been taken to uncover new cases."[935]

The Wiesenthal Center continued to demand a response from the Russian government to manifestations of neo-Nazism, but, like other organizations, did not criticize Russia's manipulation of Holocaust history. In 2018, Wiesenthal Center representative Efraim Zuroff received an award from the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia for combating Holocaust denial. Speaking at the awards ceremony in a hall of the Kremlin, Zuroff spoke of the "miraculous" transformation of Jewish life in Russia. A few months later, after the Ukrainian government decided to honor the memory of Stepan Bandera, Zuroff declared that "Ukraine has been one of the major propagators of a distorted version of Holocaust history which seeks to hide or minimize crimes committed by Ukrainian nationalists."[936] While demonstrating a principled approach in the case of Ukraine, the Wiesenthal Center overlooked the Kremlin's policy of distorting and manipulating the Holocaust.

By making constant efforts to strengthen ties with Jewish organizations, Putin was able to use his Holocaust narrative as a tool for building an "alliance" with them in the fight against anti-

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[933] "We see Putin as an ally", *Military Review*, July 12, 2014, https://topwar.ru/54064-my-vidim-v-putine-soyuznika.html
[934] «Lessons of the Holocaust and Modern Russia", *Kanal 7*, August 8, 2014, https://www.7kanal.co.il/news/154003
[935] "Nazi hunter lauds Germany, US in annual report", *The Times of Israel*, April 27, 2014, https://www.timesofisrael.com/nazi-hunter-lauds-germany-us-in-annual-report/
[936] "Wiesenthal Center Harshly Criticizes Decision By Ukranian Parliament To Designate Birthday Of Nazi Collaborator Bandera As National Holiday", *Simon Wiesental Center*, December 27, 2018, https://www.wiesenthal.com/about/news/wiesenthal-center-harshly-4.html

Semitism. From the Kremlin's perspective, the country's new image as a "bulwark against Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism" brought important foreign policy dividends.[937] In the context of Western sanctions and ideological confrontation with the US and the EU, establishing an ally in the form of Jewish organizations, with which Russia had built "stable, workable relations," was a significant achievement.[938] It was equally important for Jewish organizations to have an influential ally like Russia when dealing with rising anti-Semitism in Western countries. None of them raised uncomfortable questions or expressed their disagreement with the distortions of the Holocaust in the discourse of the Russian president and his government. This is even more surprising given that the Russian narrative on the Holocaust was full of contradictions and manifested a growing gap between declarations and reality.

3. Contradictions in Russian Holocaust remembrance policy

Neither Israel nor Jewish organizations have paid attention to the contradictory nature of Russia's policy on Holocaust remembrance. However, these contradictions began to emerge from the very beginning of the official Holocaust narrative. The first contradiction concerned the UN's decision to establish International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Russia was one of the co-sponsors of the resolution, initially prepared and submitted by the Israeli delegation. The choice of the date for Holocaust remembrance - January 27, the day of the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet troops - was intended to ensure Russia's co-sponsorship. The resolution was adopted in late 2005, and since then, it has been included in the national calendars of approximately 40 countries - except in Russia. Despite co-sponsoring the UN resolution, Russia does not officially observe International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, instead prioritizing Victory Day on May 9 to emphasize the Soviet Union’s broader role in World War II. This reflects a reluctance to fully integrate Holocaust-specific commemoration into its national narrative, highlighting a key contradiction in Russia’s policy. Representatives of Russian Jewish organizations have repeatedly appealed to the Russian authorities to recognize International Holocaust Remembrance Day in its national calendar, but their requests have remained

[937] Kiril Feferman, “Russia as a Bulwark against Anti-Semitism and Holocaust Denial: The Second World War according to Moscow” (p. 100). Kindle Edition.
[938] Ibid.

unanswered. In 2009, the European Jewish Congress (EJC) asked President Medvedev to officially establish International Holocaust Remembrance Day in Russia. The EJC President even suggested renaming the day as "Soviet Army and Auschwitz Liberation Day" to highlight the most important element of the event for Russia, but this did not help either.[939]

Ten years after the UN resolution was adopted, the President of the Russian Jewish Congress complained that "this day is still not considered a memorial date in Russia. He announced his intention to "inform the leadership of the parliament about this" in the hope that "someone will put forward this initiative to make January 27 World Holocaust Remembrance Day in Russia."[940] The RJC was able to persuade the Russian Ministry of Education to include International Holocaust Remembrance Day in the "Calendar of Educational Events and National Holidays of the Russian Federation, Memorable Dates and Events in Russian History and Culture." But in 2019-2021, the Ministry of Education excluded this date from the Calendar for "technical reasons" and returned it after public pressure from the RJC.[941] It is possible that, in this case too, the reasons behind this confusion are the authorities' calculations related to the political circumstances, specifically the beginning of the war in Ukraine. One way or another, the International Holocaust Remembrance Day is still not officially commemorated in the country that promoted the corresponding resolution in the UN, and whose troops liberated Auschwitz.

Another indication of the opportunistic nature of the Holocaust commemoration by the authorities is the fluctuating level of its participation in the Holocaust ceremonies. Until 2015, Russian Jewish organizations were the sole initiators and organizers of these events, which took place in the absence of government representatives. As the President of the RJC said, "For six years I have been trying to reach out to the government with the idea that the memory of the victims of the Holocaust should be commemorated as an event of national importance. And not just lie on the shoulders of the Jewish community, the Holocaust Center, and public figures."[942] This situation changed dramatically after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of

[939] "European Jews Ask Russia to Mark Holocaust Memorial Day", Haaretz, November 26, 2009, https://www.haaretz.com/2009-11-26/ty-article/european-jews-ask-russia-to-mark-holocaust-memorial-day/0000017f-dc4f-d3ff-a7ff-fdefbc940000
[940] "People say, Andropov was a Jew", *Radio Svoboda*, January 27, 2016, https://www.svoboda.org/a/27510599.html
[941] "Yuri Kanner: How the Holocaust Was Expelled from School", Institute of Religion and Policy, December 9, 2021, https://irp.news/jurij-kanner-kak-holokost-iz-shkoly-iskljuchili-tendencii/
[942] "Remembrance week on an unprecedented scale", Radio Liberty, January 20, 2015.

international isolation, when Russia needed to prove in practice, and not just in words, its reputation as a fighter against Nazism that cares about Holocaust commemoration.

Another important contradiction of the Holocaust policy concerned the sphere of education. On the one hand, thanks to the initiatives and long-term efforts of the RJC, the Holocaust Foundation, and other Jewish organizations, the topic of the Holocaust was included in the Federal State Standard of General Education in 2004 and history textbooks in 2012. However, the school curriculum allowed for minimal exposure to the Holocaust, and the instruction on it remained superficial.[943] In general, the knowledge of the Holocaust among the population was scarce, and among young people entirely absent.[944]

RJC President Kanner explained the difficulties of teaching the Holocaust in Russia due to the resistance of society, which found it difficult to pay special attention to Jewish victims, given the enormous losses of the non-Jewish population in World War II. At the same time, Kanner tried to present the ambiguous attitude towards the Holocaust in Russia as an expression of a global trend, including Israel.[945] However, Russia's Holocaust experts do not ignore the growing gap between official declarations and reality. According to Alla Gerber, the founder of the Holocaust Foundation, "the authorities do not understand, as the whole world does, how important this is. We only pretend: yes, of course, it is worth it, so that we do not forget... But there is no point in even discussing convening the Duma on this occasion, so that the Duma would simply rise and hold a minute of silence in memory."[946] Discussing the memory of the Holocaust in the context of state anti-Ukrainian propaganda, two years after the annexation of Crimea, Gerber asserted: "Now this topic (the Holocaust - Y.G.) has entered into circulation, which has not happened for many, many years. However, this is a purely political move. Formally, everything is fine... But today, more than ever, it is difficult to call for tolerance, for

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[943] Ildar Zinnatov, “LEARNING FROM THE PAST: GERMAN AND RUSSIAN VIEWS ON HOLOCAUST STUDY”, Kazan Bulletin of Young Scientists, 2017, no. 3, https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/izvlekat-uroki-iz-proshlogo-germanskiy-i-rossiyskiy-vzglyady-na-izuchenie-temy-holokosta/viewer

[944] “People say, Andropov was a Jew”, *Radio Svoboda*, January 27, 2016, https://www.svoboda.org/a/27510599.html, and “"Holocaust - Wallpaper Paste?", Radio Liberty, June 30, 2013, https://www.svoboda.org/a/25028419.html

[945] “People say, Andropov was a Jew”, *Radio Svoboda*

[946] “The authorities are not at all interested in this terrible human anti-experience”, Radio Liberty, January 27, 2008, https://www.svoboda.org/a/432159.html

good-neighborhood relations with people, when they have been instilled with a dose of aggression in connection with the eternal search for enemies."[947]

Contradictions between discourse and actions also characterized the foreign policy agenda of the Holocaust. Russia's diplomatic signals have made clear its reluctance to adhere to international standards on Holocaust remembrance and the fight against anti-Semitism. Moscow has consistently refused to join the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and blocked the adoption of the Council of Europe's Holocaust Remembrance Guidelines.

Moreover, the search for international legitimacy in the face of Western sanctions has pushed Russia to seek allies not only on the Holocaust and combatting Neo-Nazism, but also in the opposite direction. In parallel with strengthening ties with Jewish organizations, Putin has personally cultivated relations with far-right political parties in the West known for their controversial attitudes toward the Jewish question, the Holocaust, and World War II. These parties include Italy's Lega Nord, Germany's AfD, France's Rassemblement National, Hungary's Jobbik, Austria's FPÖ, and Britain's UKIP; some of these, such as the AfD, are suspected of having ties to Nazi groups.[948]

Russia's ultra-nationalist and imperialist movements have long maintained close relations with the far right and neo-Nazi movements in Europe. Kremlin's close ideologist Alexander Dugin invited the anti-Semitic Alain Soral to a conference organized by the Kremlin propaganda mouthpiece Rossiya Segodnya; Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev maintained contacts with Marine Le Pen; and LDPR leader Zhirinovsky organized a conference in the Duma attended by representatives of Russian and Scandinavian neo-Nazis.[949] Those events received little coverage and remained under the radar until the Kremlin endorsed these contacts. However, once Putin began to befriend the leaders of the European far right, he did not shy away from demonstrating his relations with them, precisely as he did with the Jewish leaders. This ambivalent policy by the Kremlin did not provoke any reaction. Perhaps the efforts of some far-right parties to change their anti-Semitic image and improve relations with Israel and the Jewish

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[947] «People are wildly susceptible to propaganda», *Gazeta.ru*, January 27, 2016, https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2016/01/26/8042231.shtml?updated
[948] Isabelle Mandraud, Poutine parrain de l'extrême droite européenne", *Le Monde*, Avril 3, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/04/03/vladimir-poutine-parrain-de-l-extreme-droite-europeenne_5444940_3210.html
[949] Ibid.

communities may, to some extent, explain this lack of reaction. However, Putin's shift to far-right ideology, for example, his fascination with the pro-Nazi Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin, or his rapprochement with one of the most notorious Holocaust deniers, Alexander Prokhanov, caused little public reflection.[950]

Finally, one of the most serious failures in Putin's understanding of the issue of the Holocaust and genocide in general is his deliberate denial of the Ukrainian people's right to exist. Vladimir Putin outlined his vision of Ukraine and its future in an article published several months before the invasion. In this article, he claimed that Ukrainians are not a separate nation but constitute one people with Russians and Belarusians; that Ukraine is a "brainchild of the Soviet era," created "at the expense of historical Russia"; and that Ukrainian national identity is forced."[951] At the time of publication, the article provoked an adverse reaction from historians, who accused Putin of falsifications and "alternative history."[952] After February 24, the genocidal aspect of the article, as well as Putin's entire policy of destroying the Ukrainian nation, became clear.[953]

None of the above contradictions, including their combination, led to a rethinking of Putin's narrative of the Holocaust and World War II. Only after the war began did the true purpose of this narrative become evident, namely, a justification for his plan to eliminate Ukraine as an independent nation. As the anti-Western course and confrontation with Ukraine intensified, the Holocaust and World War II turned into a key propaganda tool for the Kremlin. The Kremlin was able to involve the Israeli government in the orbit of its propaganda, which ignored the

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[950] Timothy Snyder, “Ivan Ilyin, Putin’s Philosopher of Russian Fascism”, *The Nw York Review*, March 16, 2018, https://www.nybooks.com/online/2018/03/16/ivan-ilyin-putins-philosopher-of-russian-fascism/, and “Vladimir Putin pulled the country out of the "black hole" of the 90s”, *Official website of the political party Rodina*, https://rodina.ru/novosti/slovo-i-delo/Vladimir-Putin-vytashhil-stranu-iz-chernoj-dyry-90-x-godov, “Putin congratulated writer Alexander Prokhanov on his anniversary”, RIA, February 27, 2023, https://ria.ru/20230227/prokhanov-1854582203.html

[951] Vladimir Putin's article "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians", *Official website of the President of Russia*, July 12, 2021, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181

[951] Joshua Kroeker, “Vladimir the historian: Putin’s political revision of Ukrainian history”, *New Eastern Europe*, December 2, 2021, https://neweasterneurope.eu/2021/12/02/vladimir-the-historian-putins-political-revision-of-ukrainian-history/

[952] Joshua Kroeker, “Vladimir the historian: Putin’s political revision of Ukrainian history”, *New Eastern Europe*, December 2, 2021, https://neweasterneurope.eu/2021/12/02/vladimir-the-historian-putins-political-revision-of-ukrainian-history/

[953] Tymothy Snyder, “Putin has long fantasized about a world without Ukrainians. Now we see what that means”, *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/23/putin-genocide-language-ukraine-wipe-out-state-identity/

Russia's manipulation and distortion of the history of the Holocaust and World War II. The Kremlin used the fight of Jewish organizations against the denial and distortion of the Holocaust in Ukraine and the Baltic states for its political purposes. The Russian government demonstrated concern for the memory of the Holocaust outside the country, while commemoration and education efforts at home were scarce and inconsistent. Putin's regime was able to lull the academic community, using professional conferences on the Holocaust to promote anti-Ukrainian propaganda.

As a result, Kremlin could proceed with impunity, doubling down its efforts on brainwashing and fostering an image of Ukraine as a neo-Nazi regime that suppresses the Russian minority and glorifies Nazi collaborators such as Bandera and Shukhevych. The goal of this disinformation campaign was to delegitimize Ukraine as an independent state and Ukrainians as a separate nation. The introduction of these ideologies and narratives marked a preparatory phase for another Russia's special operation – the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Chapter 3: Russia's Return to Anti-Semitism in the Age of Wars

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a moment of truth. The imperial vector of Russian foreign policy, aiming to regain control of the territories it lost after the Soviet collapse, was now on full display. In the context of war, the authoritarian nature of Putin's regime quickly began to take on the features of totalitarianism, with the closure of independent media and repression of the opposition, including the imprisonment of its prominent leader, Alexei Navalny. The purpose of the Kremlin's long-standing campaign to discredit Ukraine as a neo-Nazi regime and a failed state became obvious, embarrassing Russia's supporters and partners. Western political leaders and academics condemned the Russian authorities' baseless accusations of Ukraine as Neo-Nazi, characterizing its reasons for the war as "outlandish historical claims" and "twisted

mythology."[954] Israel's foreign minister also condemned Russian aggression.[955] Yad Vashem condemned "the banalization of the Holocaust and the distortion of historical facts it reflects."[956] These condemnations were belated and ineffective. They could not stop the Russian escalation in any way, either on the battlefield or in the ideological confrontation.

While the Russian army continued its offensive in Ukraine, the Kremlin tightened its control at home through increased repression. It exacerbated its rhetoric, which included overt anti-Semitism and gross distortions of the memory of the Holocaust. The Russian government took unfriendly steps against Israeli interests inside Russia and entered a diplomatic duel with the Israeli Foreign Ministry on the topic of the Holocaust. Accusations of the West in Russophobia, equated by the Russian authorities with anti-Semitism, turned into one of the main elements of propaganda. At the same time, Russia actively used anti-Semitism as a tool of its influence operations in Western countries with the aim of internal stabilization due to their support for Ukraine. The methods of the Russian special services were no different from those used by the KGB of the USSR against Israel and Western countries during the Cold War.

The October 7 tragedy in southern Israel exposed the deep anti-Semitism of the pro-Kremlin media and patriotic circles of Russian society, which, together with the Kremlin's official propaganda, led to a surge in anti-Semitic actions in the North Caucasus. At the same time, Russia demonstrated its foreign policy priorities by supporting Hamas and other Iranian proxies in their war with Israel. The Russian military's need for weapons has increased its dependence on Iran and made it more open to military and strategic cooperation with this country, at the expense of relations with Israel. Israel's military achievements and the resulting weakening of Russia's position in the Middle East forced the Russian leadership to abandon the course of escalation with Israel. At the same time, the surge in anti-Semitism in the North

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[954] "AHA Statement Condemning Russian Invasion of Ukraine", *American Historical Association*, https://www.historians.org/news/aha-statement-condemning-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/, also 'Dark day for Europe': World leaders condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine", CNBC, February 24, 2022, https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/24/leaders-of-us-uk-eu-and-canada-condemn-russian-invasion-on-ukraine.html, and "Statement on the War in Ukraine by Scholars of Genocide, Nazism and World War II", *Jewish Journal*, February 27, 2022, https://jewishjournal.com/news/worldwide/345515/statement-on-the-war-in-ukraine-by-scholars-of-genocide-nazism-and-world-war-ii/

[955] Twitter account of Foreign Ministry of Israel Yair Lapid, https://x.com/yairlapid/status/1496792821457637378, also see "Lapid strongly condemns: "The invasion has no justification, we call on Russia to stop the attacks", *Ynet*, March 13, 2022, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hjz4oejz5

[956] "Yad Vashem's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine", *Yad Vashem website*, February 27, https://www.yadvashem.org/he/press-release/27-february-2022-14-45.html

Caucasus, which caught the Russian authorities by surprise, clearly highlighted the domestic aspect of anti-Semitism. The process of Islamic radicalization in Chechnya, Dagestan, and other republics of the North Caucasus, the complex past and present of interethnic relations in the region, and the authorities' strict control over information necessitate a deeper analysis of the demographic and social trends in Russia and its impact on anti-Semitism.

A. War in Ukraine, resurgence of official anti-Semitism in Russia and the notion of Rusophobia

This section explores how the war in Ukraine has coincided with a resurgence of official anti-Semitism in Russia and the instrumentalization of the concept of Rusophobia as a propaganda tool. It examines the Kremlin's use of antisemitic rhetoric, its confrontations with Israel, and the complex positioning of the Jewish community within this discourse. It then considers how Russia's military setbacks have fueled increasingly hostile narratives, often targeting Jews as scapegoats. It will also discuss Israel's early attempts to mediate the conflict and how bilateral relations deteriorated over time. Attention is given to the responses of the Russian Jewish community, caught between loyalty, fear, and dissent. Finally, the section analyzes how Russian propaganda recasts Russians as the "new Jews," framing global criticism of Russia as a form of Rusophobia to deflect from its own aggression and internal repression.

1. Russia's antisemitic rhetoric and the closing of the Jewish Agency

Military Failures and the Kremlin's Anti-Semitic Frenzy

On the first day of the war, February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin named three goals of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: "protecting residents of eastern Ukraine from genocide by the Kyiv regime" and "demilitarization and denazification" of Ukraine. Explaining what the Russian president means by the term "denazification", his press secretary Peskov said that "ideally, we

need to liberate Ukraine, cleanse it of Nazis. Of pro-Nazi people and ideology."[957] At the same time, the Russian authorities have never given precise explanations of who they consider Nazis in the Ukrainian leadership, and why, and have repeatedly changed their rhetoric about the ultimate goals of the war.[958] The Kremlin's use of the term "denazification", borrowed from the history of post-war Germany and the Nuremberg Trials, meant to emphasize the essence of the "Kyiv regime" and justify Russia's actions. Political leadership in Western countries rejected the Kremlin's goals as a gross distortion of history.[959] However, for Putin's regime, as subsequent events showed, this no longer mattered.

Furthermore, here is how the process of denazification was clearly explained in a soldier's manual, officially recommended by the Russian Ministry of Defense:

> "Until recently, 96.7% of Ukrainians were Russian. But for 30 years of independence, they were deprived of a normal education, culture, native language and turned into "wild" Russophobes. They still have something left of the Russians. Someday, after denazification, they will become Russian again, but for now, they are enemies. Cruel and insidious. And that means we must beat them until they raise their hands, without relaxing, until our victory." The same manual clearly explained that "Ukraine as a state does not exist, there is the territory of the former Ukrainian SSR, temporarily occupied by a terrorist gang. All power there is concentrated in the hands of citizens of Israel, the United States, and Great Britain, who organized the genocide of the indigenous population, "reducing" 20 million people during the years of "independence."[960]

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[957] "The Kremlin: it is necessary to clean Ukraine from "pro-Nazi-minded people", BBC, February 24, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-60509463

[958] "The Goals of the SVO": How Did the Kremlin Change Them Over the Three Years of War?", *Verstka*, May 24, 2025, https://verstka.media/czeli-svo-kak-kreml-menyal-ih-na-protyazhenii-tryoh-let-vojny

[959] Putin's claim of fighting against Ukraine 'neo-Nazis' distorts history, scholars say", NPR, Rachel Treisman, March 1, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/03/01/1083677765/putin-denazify-ukraine-russia-history

[960] «I live, I fight, I win! Rules of life in war», Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan and Special Military Operations, Moscow, 2022.

Thus, while accusing Ukraine of genocide without evidence, Russian authorities appeared to pursue actions that raised serious concerns about potential Russoa's war crimes against the Ukrainian population.

After the Russian plan to seize Ukraine in a "blitzkrieg" fashion failed, the Russian authorities switched to the "war of attrition" scenario. To ensure obedience among Russian citizens and nationalistic mobilization, the authorities had to intensify imperial and nationalist propaganda. The language of the highest-ranking officials became indistinguishable from that of far-right ideologists and politicians. Since February 2022, anti-Semitism and distortion of the Holocaust have become a permanent element of the rhetoric of government officials. The first major scandal erupted two months after the start of the war, when Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov compared Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to Adolf Hitler. Justifying the need for denazification in a country where the president is of Jewish descent, Lavrov said that Hitler, like Zelensky, had "Jewish roots." He also noted that "the most ardent anti-Semites are usually Jews."[961]

Lavrov's statements caused a wave of indignation in Western countries, including Israel. Instead of an apology, the Russian Foreign Ministry published an article on its official Telegram channel entitled "On Anti-Semitism." Justifying their minister's statements, Russian diplomats used new manipulations of the history of the Holocaust, talking about examples of Jewish collaboration with the Nazis, "remembered for absolutely monstrous acts." By deliberately muddling the history about the "collaboration" of Jews with the Nazis, the Foreign Ministry's article justifies the need for the "denazification" of Ukraine: first, because Zelensky, unlike the Judenrat, acts consciously and voluntarily when he "covers up for natural neo-Nazis"; second, the situation in Ukraine repeats the scenario of Nazi Germany, when after the communists and socialists, they came for the Jews - only in the Foreign Ministry's version, in "Ukraine they are coming for the Russians."[962] Thus, the Russian authorities equated and replaced anti-Semitism with Russophobia (See the discussion of the term in the next section).

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[961] "Interview of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S.V.Lavrov to the Italian television company "Mediaset", Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 1, 2022, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1811569/

[962] "About Anti-Semitism", Official Telegram channel of the Russian Foreign Ministry, May 3, 2022, https://telegra.ph/Ob-antisemitizme-05-03

The next scandal involving anti-Semitism in the highest echelons of Russian power arose from an opinion piece by Alexey Pavlov, an adviser to the Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, published in a popular Russian newspaper.[963] Pavlov described Ukraine as a country governed by supporters of religious sects interested in "reformatting the minds of Ukrainian citizens, forcing them to abandon centuries-old traditions."[964] One of such sects in his view is the Chabad movement in Ukraine, the leading life principle of which "is the superiority of the sect's supporters over all other nations."[965] These statements caused an immediate reaction from both the Israeli authorities and international Jewish organizations, and, naturally, Chabad in Russia. Curiously, in both cases, the Kremlin responded with an apology. Putin held a telephone conversation with Israeli Prime Minister Bennett and distanced himself from Lavrov's words, while Security Council Chairman Patrushev publicly condemned his adviser's publication.

However, a year into the war, official apologies for antisemitic remarks stopped. The worsening situation at the front, accompanied by internal tensions and Prigozhin's mutiny in the summer of 2023, strengthened the dictatorial features of the Russian regime. Social discontent grew, especially among the families of mobilized soldiers, the economic situation worsened, independent media were closed, and the persecution of dissidents intensified. Ultra-nationalist and anti-liberal attitudes, including narratives borrowed from Russian Holocaust deniers, became stronger in the official rhetoric. Without a doubt, the Russian Foreign Ministry has been the leader of these anti-Semitic provocations, each time worsening the distortion of the Holocaust and deliberately escalating tensions with the United States and Israel. The Russian Foreign Minister, Lavrov, stated that the actions of the United States are comparable to those of Adolf Hitler, as Washington, in alliance with Europe, intends to carry out a "final solution to the Russian question." In July 2023, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova published an article in a government newspaper[966] in which she denied that the Holocaust was a unique

[963] "Russia's Security Council claims there are "hundreds of sects" in Ukraine and demands "desatanization", RISU (Religious Information Service of Ukraine), 26 October 2022, https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/10/25/7373464/
[964] Ibid.
[965] "What's Cooking in the "Witch's Cauldron"? Neo-Pagan Cults Have Gained Strength in Ukraine", *Argumenty I Facty*, October 25, 2022,
[966] "In memory of all victims of the Holocaust", *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, July 19, 2023, https://rg.ru/2023/07/19/pamiati-vseh-zhertv-holokosta.html

tragedy for the Jews and defined it as "the persecution and mass extermination of representatives of various ethnic and social groups by the Nazis."

Closing of the Jewish Agency and the question of Jewish emigration

The anti-Semitic rhetoric preceded unfriendly actions against one of the most prominent Israel-affiliated organizations.[967] In the summer of 2022, the Russian Ministry of Justice initiated a lawsuit to close the Russian branch of the Jewish Agency[968], the organization responsible for the repatriation of Jews to Israel. It was a very sensitive issue for Israel and the Jewish organizations, given the long history of restrictions on Jewish emigration, which ended only with the collapse of the USSR. As mentioned earlier, the Jewish Agency's activities in Russia encountered difficulties as early as the late 1990s but continued their work until the summer of 2022. The timing of this decision gave rise to various speculations about the reasons for the closure. This step may have been a retaliation for Israel's position on the Ukrainian conflict. Also, by freezing the work of the Jewish Agency, which was responsible for providing emigration services for Russian Jews, the authorities attempted to slow down the pace of emigration, one of Russia's concern due to the adverse effects of the brain drain on the Russian economy.[969]

However, to date, the court has not made a final decision regarding the Jewish Agency, meaning that from the authorities' perspective, the ban remains a temporary measure. Moreover, the data on Jewish emigration from 2022 to 2024 indicate that the cessation of the Jewish Agency's activities did not halt the massive emigration. Jewish emigration from Russia in 2022 assumed a large-scale character, with more than 43,000 people moving to Israel, six times the number from the previous year. In 2023, this number decreased to 33,000, and in 2024, it was

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[967] Louis Imbert, « Les provocations antisémites de la Russie obligent Israel à sortir de sa réserve », *Le Monde*, May 4 , 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/05/04/guerre-en-ukraine-les-provocations-antisemites-de-moscou-contraignent-israel-a-sortir-de-sa-reserve_6124693_3210.html; also , « Les Russes doivent cesser d'utiliser l'Holocauste pour servir leurs intérêts politiques », *Courrière International*, May 2, 2022, https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/vu-d-israel-les-russes-doivent-cesser-d-utiliser-l-holocauste-pour-servir-leurs-interets-politiques; « Anti-Semitism », Russian Foreign Ministry Telegram chanel, May 3, 2022, https://telegra.ph/Ob-antisemitizme-05-03; and « MFA heil! », Novaya Gazeta, May 6, 2022, https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/05/06/mid-khail

[968] The Jewish Agency for Israel is a non-governmental organization that has played a central role in the development of the State of Israel and in connecting Jews worldwide to Israel.

[969] "Goebbels, Stalin, Solovyov, war: we talk about anti-Semitism in the Russian Federation with Alla Gerber", *Kanal Dim*, August 30, 2022, https://kanaldim.tv/ru/gebbels-stalin-solovev-vojna-ob-antisemitizme-v-rossii-govorim-s-alloj-gerber/

almost 20,000 people.[970] For the first time since the 1990s, Jewish annual emigration was measured in the tens of thousands of people again. The Jewish Agency authorized a private company ("Marom") to act on its behalf in Russia and provide emigration services.

For Russian authorities, the Jewish Agency's affiliation with a foreign government rendered its status and activities incompatible with wartime realities of international isolation. For Russian security agencies, whose mandate included monitoring foreign funding and preventing the leakage of personal data on Russian citizens, the closure of institutions such as the Jewish Agency was considered a matter of national security. One of the undesirable consequences of the closure of the Jewish Agency was the complete cessation of monitoring anti-Semitism, one of the organization's important functions.[971] However, Jewish emigration did not stop. Russia's doors remained open for entry and exit, not only for Jews, but for all citizens of the country.

Post-Soviet Russia's policy of free movement in and out of the country was a deliberate choice of the authorities and radically distinguished it from the Soviet Union's Iron Curtain. Since 2022, approximately one million Russian citizens have left the country; three years into the war, Russia has allowed its citizens to leave and enter freely. As Maxim Trudolyubov explains, freedom of movement ensures the stability of the regime. The possibility of leaving is an "excellent safety valve", which allows the authorities to get rid of dissatisfied and opposition-minded members of the elite: "Regimes similar to the Russian perfectly combine openness and isolation, freedom of movement and tight control over the political system."[972]

Among the main reasons for both Jewish and non-Jewish emigration were the fears of a new round of repression, additional economic hardships, and the closing of the borders. Moreover, the threat of forced military mobilization loomed over the country's male population.

[970] Statistics on the arrival of the Russian Jews to Israel appear in the annual reports of Israel's Ministry of Immigration and integration: "Misrad ha-Aliya ve ha-Klita," https://www.gov.il/he/collectors/publications
[971] Vyacheslav Likhachev, "The circuit starts working in reverse - Anti-Semitism in Russia: A Throwback to Soviet Times?", *Kontinent,* March 26, 2025, https://kontinentusa.com/shema-nachinaet-rabotat-v-obratnom-napravlenii/
[972] Maksim Trudolubov, "Can the Russian government completely ban travel abroad?", *Meduza*, July 24, 2020, https://meduza.io/feature/2020/07/24/mozhet-li-rossiyskaya-vlast-sovsem-zapretit-vyezd-za-granitsu

Among those who left the country, there were mainly representatives of the liberal professions, IT specialists, scientists, and cultural figures. These groups of the population, as a rule, held liberal views and opposed the war.[973]

A similar wave of emigration had already been observed in Russia in previous years, for example, after the suppression of opposition protests and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The growth of anti-Semitism did not play a decisive role in the emigration of the 2010s. However, after 2022, Russian Jews could no longer ignore this factor. Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, who had to leave Russia due to his disagreement with the war, stated:

> "When we look back over Russian history, whenever the political system was in danger, you saw the government trying to redirect the anger and discontent of the masses towards the Jewish community. We saw this in tsarist times and at the end of the Stalinist regime. We're seeing rising anti-Semitism while Russia is going back to a new kind of Soviet Union, and step by step the iron curtain is coming down again. This is why I believe the best option for Russian Jews is to leave."[974]

Antisemitic rhetoric of President Putin

The setbacks on the battlefield and the prolongation of the war hardened Putin's rhetoric, leading to greater distortion of the Holocaust and openly anti-Semitic statements from the Russian president. In the summer of 2023, at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, he declared that "Zelensky is a disgrace to the Jewish people" and questioned his Jewish origins. In his speech, he distorted the facts of the Holocaust, claiming that Banderites primarily exterminated 1.5 million Jews in Ukraine.[975] Putin repeated similar statements in September 2023 at a meeting of the "Victory Committee" devoted to patriotic education, claiming that it was Ukrainian nationalists, not German troops, who initiated the mass murder of Jews.[976] Before the war with

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[973] "New Russian emigrants. Who are they, how many are there and where did they go?", BBC,
[974] "Exiled chief rabbi says Jews should leave Russia while they can", The Guardian, December 30, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/30/exiled-chief-rabbi-jews-should-leave-russia-while-they-can-pinchas-goldschmidt-war-ukraine
[975] "Putin called Zelensky a "disgrace to the Jewish people" and showed a film about the Holocaust, hinting that it is allegedly denied in Kyiv", *Meduza*, June 16, 2023, https://meduza.io/feature/2023/06/16/putin-nazval-zelenskogo-pozorom-evreyskogo-naroda-i-pokazal-kino-pro-holokost-nameknuv-chto-ego-yakoby-otritsayut-v-kieve
[976] 'Even the SS troops didn't consider it possible' Putin says 'local nationalists and anti-Semites' killed 1.5 million Jews in Ukraine during WWII," *Meduza*, (September 5, 2023), https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/09/05/even-the-ss-troops-didn-t-consider-it-possible

Ukraine, Putin avoided such direct distortion of the history of the Holocaust and antisemitic accusations; the central element of distortion was in equating the Holocaust with the suffering of other peoples. Now he referred to Ukrainian President Zelensky as an "ethnic Jew" who covers up Nazism in Ukraine and blamed the Banderits, not the Nazis, for the murder of all Ukrainian Jews.

Putin did not limit his anti-Semitic remarks to Zelensky. In 2023, he moved on to accusing prominent Russians of Jewish descent who opposed his war and emigrated to Israel. At an economic forum in September 2023, he mocked the Jewish origins of former Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais, referring to him as "Moshe Izrailevich." He also accused Arkady Volozh, the founder of Yandex, of adopting an anti-Russian stance to please the Israeli authorities.[977] By doing so, Putin openly singled out the Jews as opponents of war, even though this position united people of many ethnic origins. Encouraged by the propaganda, Kremlin supporters sought to highlight the connection between the anti-war position and Jewish descent. The criminal prosecution of poetess Yevgenia Berkovich, who published anti-war poems, has sparked anti-Semitic comments about her Jewish origin.[978]A famous actress, Tatyana Talyzina, accused Russian artists who left the country of a lack of patriotism and spoke in detail about their Jewish roots.[979]

Putin's antisemitic frenzy reached a new high, quite symbolically, in the context of the Russian Orthodox Church. Commenting on the new Ukrainian law banning the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine (for its role in the spread of Russian propaganda), Putin called this decision "a flagrant violation of human rights and the rights of believers" and blamed it on "ethnic Jews", whom he described as follows:

> "...these are people without any faith, atheists. They are ethnic Jews, but who has seen them in a synagogue? In my opinion, no one has seen them in a synagogue. They are not

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[977] . “Antisemitic Undertones: Putin Mocks Former Senior Russians Who Moved to Israel,” *Haaretz,* September 12, 2023, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-09-12/ty-article/.premium/antisemitic-undertones-putin-mocks-former-senior-russians-who-moved-to-israel/0000018a-8a9d-dd09-a3ba-ffbded3e0000

[978] “Jewish Congress files complaint with Investigative Committee against Berkovich case expert for anti-Semitism”, *RBC*, May 17, 2023, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/17/05/2023/64648f459a79471bc32ca2c8,

[979] "Anti-Semitic Nonsense." Bloggers on Valentina Talyzina's Interview”, *Radio Liberty*, August 16, 2023, https://www.svoboda.org/a/antisemitskaya-ahineya-blogery-ob-intervjyu-valentiny-talyzinoy/32550374.html

Orthodox, as they do not attend churches either. They are certainly not followers of Islam, as they are unlikely to be found in mosques. These are people without a family, without a tribe. They do not value anything dear to us and most of the Ukrainian people. They will run away at some point and will go not to church, but to the beach."[980]

Putin's statements reproduce not only the anti-Semitic rhetoric of Stalin's USSR, where Jews were called "rootless cosmopolitans", but also that of Tsarist Russia, where the Orthodox Church was an active disseminator of Judeophobia.[981] After three years of war with Ukraine, the Kremlin has effectively adopted the anti-Semitic discourse of radical nationalist movements in Russia. It was a clear signal given to propagandists and officials, which they spread throughout the system of power: "The very logic of the regime and the forces that it released from hiding and legitimized within the country and abroad made the return of anti-Semitism to political rhetoric practically inevitable." [982]This situation required a rethinking and a corresponding response from the international community, primarily the Jewish state.

2. Israel's early mediation attempts and subsequent deterioration of relations

Israel's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been cautious from the start, trying to maintain a balance between international commitments, strategic interests in the region, and relations with the Kremlin. The "Government of change" which replaced Benjamin Netanyahu in 2021, was a broad and ideologically diverse coalition formed to end Netanyahu's long tenure. This new government relied on the tandem of Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, which allowed for a certain measure of duality in their policies. Position on Russia's war with Ukraine was one of them. Yair Lapid, who was the Foreign Minister at the time, took a tougher stance on Russia. He condemned the invasion of Ukraine, calling it a gross violation of the world order, and promised humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

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[980] "They are ethnic Jews, but who has seen them in the synagogue?", Meduza, December 19, 2024, https://meduza.io/news/2024/12/19/oni-etnicheskie-evrei-no-kto-ih-videl-v-sinagoge-putin-nazval-bezbozhnikami-teh-kto-prichasten-k-zapretu-deyatelnosti-rpts-v-ukraine

[981] Joshua Steim, "Putin faces anti-Semitism accusations following attack on 'ethnic Jews', *Atlantic Council* December 24, 2024, Putin faces anti-Semitism accusations following attack on 'ethnic Jews'

[982] Ksenia Poluektova-Krimer, "Russian Anti-Semitism: Long Time No See", *Riddle,* January 12, 2024, https://ridl.io/ru/rossijskij-antisemitizm-davno-ne-videlis/

In contrast, Naftali Bennett did not condemn Russia and limited himself to expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian population.[983] The Israeli government's statement was couched in measured tones, supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity, but without mentioning Russia by name.[984] The primary consideration from Israel's perspective was maintaining cooperation with Russia on deconfliction in Syria. Lapid also emphasized the safety of the Russian Jewish population and ensuring their right to free emigration. Israel's official statement was "below the threshold of harshness" aiming not to "anger Putin or damage Israel's military maneuver space in Syria."[985] According to government sources, the US administration was sympathetic to the Israeli position. It is important to emphasize that neither Lapid, nor Bennett, nor the Israeli government condemned Russia for distorting the Holocaust to justify the war.

Curiously, in the first weeks of the war, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was among the international mediators who attempted to initiate negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow. From Bennett's perspective, this mission served as a justification for Israel's neutral stance on the war refusal to join the sanctions, thus safeguarding the cooperation with Russia in Syria. But this position did not satisfy the United States, which demanded that Israel provide more serious support for Ukraine.[986] Bennett's initiative was short-lived and yielded no results; as Putin later explained, Zelensky suspected Bennett of having pro-Russian sympathies and did not trust him as a mediator.[987]Despite the lack of success, the mediator role strengthened Bennett's position in the Kremlin's eyes for some time. According to Bennett, after the statements of the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Hitler's Jewish origins, Putin disavowed his minister's words in a phone conversation with him. However, as the conflict deepened and Moscow's international isolation grew, Israel found itself in a new reality, where balancing between interests became increasingly complex.

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[983] "Israeli foreign minister condemns Russia", *Politico*, March 13, 2022, https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/13/israeli-foreign-minister-condemns-russia-00016833
[984] Jonathan Liss and Sam Sokol, "Foreign Ministry: Israel supports Ukraine's territorial integrity, calls for diplomatic solution", *Haaretz*, February 23, 2022, https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2022-02-23/ty-article/0000017f-f446-d044-adff-f7ffee700000
[985] Ibid.
[986] "Ukraine and the US are signaling to Bennett that they will not be satisfied with "mediation efforts", Haaretz, March 13, 2022, https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2022-03-13/ty-article/.premium/0000017f-e92b-df5f-a17f-fbffd4d00000
[987] "Putin reveals new details about Bennett's mediation: "In Ukraine, they suspected he was pro-Russian", *N12*, June 14, 2024, https://www.mako.co.il/news-world/2024_q2/Article-8ff035f2e571091026.htm

The crisis surrounding the closure of the Jewish Agency in Russia complicated relations between the countries. The decision of the Russian authorities was perceived not just as a blow to a respected Jewish organization, but as a threat of a new "iron curtain".[988] The Israeli government publicly condemned Moscow's unfriendly move and announced possible retaliatory steps, but it ultimately became the target of criticism.[989] First, then-opposition leader Netanyahu criticized the Israeli government's reaction, urging against "destroying what has been built over the years" in relations with Russia and calling for a balanced and confidential dialogue.[990] FJCR representative argued that "the current situation cannot be compared with the problems of Jews in the USSR" and expressed doubt that "concern for the diaspora is a determining factor in international policy for the Israeli government."[991] The continued emigration of Russian Jews to Israel, despite the closure of the Jewish Agency, eventually removed this issue from the agenda between the countries.

Another irritant from the point of view of the Israeli Foreign Ministry was the escalation of distortions of the Holocaust by high-ranking Russian representatives. Foreign Minister Lapid sharply condemned Lavrov's words about Hitler and Zelensky. The Russian Ambassador was summoned to the Israeli Foreign Ministry for clarification. Lapid instructed the ministry to convey to the Ambassador that "the mistake must be corrected, let them open the history books."[992] The Russian Foreign Ministry responded with new distortions of the Holocaust, and only Putin's conversation with Bennett reduced the tension. However, the Russian minister continued to stir up the Holocaust topic, making his "final solution"[993] remark. The press secretary of the Israeli Foreign Ministry sharply condemned "any comparison of current events with Hitler's plan for the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question."

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[988] Anna Barsky, "We will know how to bring the immigrants": The Israeli message to Russia against the backdrop of the Agency crisis", *Maariv*, July 25, 2022, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/politics/article-934033
[989] Gennady Petrov, "Israel is ready to respond with sanctions to the closure of the Jewish Agency", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, July 25, 2022, https://www.ng.ru/world/2022-07-25/6_8495_world3.html
[990] Itamar Eichner, Moran Azoulay, "Netanyahu: "The crisis with Russia is dangerous", *Ynet*, July 26, 2022, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hjc4c9p39
[991] Gennady Petrov, "Israel is ready to respond with sanctions to the closure of the Jewish Agency", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*
[992] Lapid against Lavrov: "Unforgivable, scandalous statement. The Russian ambassador will be summoned for talks", *Ynet*, May 5, 2022, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/sklzjxtsq
[993] Israel against the Russian Foreign Minister: "Any comparison to the final solution distorts history", *Ynet*, January 18, 2023, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/rjcrwjrjs

The Holocaust was again at the center of a new heated controversy in the summer of 2023. The Israeli Foreign Ministry had to respond to the Russian allegations of the Israeli Ambassador to Kyiv in "encouraging Russophobe sentiments." Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zakharova accused the Israeli Ambassador of blasphemy, to which the Israeli Foreign Ministry press secretary responded that "no country should lecture Israel, its Foreign Ministry and its diplomats on how to preserve the memory of the Holocaust."[994] The subsequent scandal arose after the publication of an article by Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, in which she argued that the Holocaust describes the elimination of many peoples, not just Jews. The Israeli Foreign Ministry issued the following statement: "We oppose any attempts to distort and belittle the Holocaust, especially those that use the greatest catastrophe of the Jewish people for political purposes... The horrors of the Holocaust and its uniqueness as an industrial and systematic murder that led to the destruction of six million Jews cannot be hidden."[995]

The decision of Israel's diplomacy not to leave unanswered the distortions of the Holocaust by the Russian Foreign Ministry indicates a change of approach to this issue. However, the approach has clear limits: Israel reacts only to statements by representatives of the Russian Foreign Ministry; it never condemned President Putin's distortion of the Holocaust or his anti-Semitic statements. This limited approach remained in effect after the change of government in Israel and Netanyahu's return to power in December 2022. The new Israeli Ambassador to Moscow emphasized in her first interview with the Russian press that she will "tirelessly repeat the unique nature of the Holocaust." However, neither the president, the prime minister, nor other ministers in the Israeli government raised the issue of the Holocaust distortion and antisemitic rhetoric in Russia. Avoiding personal confrontation with Russian leaders, the Israeli government prioritizes close relations with Moscow to ensure its security interests on Israel's northern border and in the context of the Iranian threat.[996]

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[994] Russian Foreign Ministry summons Israeli diplomat over ambassador's remarks in Kyiv", *Radio Liberty*, June 27, 2023, https://www.svoboda.org/a/mid-rossii-vyzval-izrailjskogo-diplomata-iz-za-slov-posla-v-kieve/32478472.html
[995] "Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson: The Holocaust Does Not Belong Only to the Jewish People", *Kan*, July 20, 2023, https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/global/451334/
[996] Joseph Roche, "Iranian and Syrian factors shape Israeli response to Russia's Ukraine invasion", *Atlantic Council*, April 27, 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/iranian-and-syrian-factors-shape-israeli-response-to-russias-ukraine-invasion/

The Biden administration's position contrasted with Israel's limited response to Russia's manipulation of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. Since the Russian invasion began, administration officials have condemned antisemitic statements by Russian officials, including Putin.[997] US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, wrote on his twitter account on the occasion of 82nd anniversary of Babiy Yar massacre:

> "Eighty-two years ago, Nazis murdered 34,000 Jews at Babyn Yar. Soviets buried this history, which today Putin's government manipulates to provide cover for Russia's abuses in Ukraine. The U.S. is committed to justice for Holocaust survivors and accountability for atrocities."[998]

The State Department's Global Engagement Center has regularly published information refuting Russian manipulation and disinformation efforts about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. In early 2024, the Global Engagement Center published a report, "More than a Century of Anti-Semitism: How Successful Occupants of the Kremlin Have Used Anti-Semitism to Spread Disinformation and Propaganda," which described the origins, motivations, and methods of the Russian government's use of anti-Semitism and the false narrative of the Holocaust.[999] The US Holocaust Memorial in Washington has regularly criticized statements by Putin and other officials, in contrast to Yad Vashem's single statement early in the war.[1000]

Israel's response to the war in Ukraine and the Russian leadership's anti-Semitic rhetoric and Holocaust distortions illustrate a complex and multi-layered diplomatic strategy in which humanitarian and moral considerations give way to realpolitik and security considerations. These new realities have also presented Jewish organizations in Russia with difficult choices.

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[997] "US Slams Putin's Claim That Zelensky Is 'Not a Jew', *The Algemeiner*, June 19, 2023, https://www.algemeiner.com/2023/06/19/us-slams-putins-claim-that-zelensky-is-not-a-jew/
[998] *US Secretary of State twitter account*, September 29, 2023, https://x.com/SecBlinken/status/1707826104759705760
[999] "More Than a Century of Anti-Semitism: How Successful Occupants of the Kremlin Have Used Anti-Semitism to Spread Disinformation and Propaganda," *US State Department, Global Engagement Center*, January 2024.
[1000] "Anti-Semitism charges swirl after Putin denigrates Zelensky's Jewish roots", *The Washington Post*, September 25, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/25/putin-anti-Semitism-zelensky-russia-ukraine/

3. Reaction of the Russian Jewish community on the war in Ukraine

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Jewish organizations in Russia have found themselves in a problematic and contradictory position. Between the need to preserve community infrastructure and the danger of openly confronting the authorities, they adopted a cautious approach and refrained from voicing their position. In this context, the primary focus was on the Chabad movement and the FJCR organization, whose leaders, Rabbi Berel Lazar and FJCR President Alexander Boroda, enjoyed the Kremlin's favor.

In the early days of the war, Lazar and his FJCR associates attempted to express their disagreement with the war while avoiding explicit words of condemnation. Stood out the emotional reaction of Borukh Gorin, a representative of the FJCR, who, on the third day after the invasion, published a short post on his Facebook page: "Stop the war!" This phrase sounded like a challenge to authorities in conditions when the very word "war" was effectively banned from use.[1001] Gorin noted that his position reflected the opinion of Rabbi Lazar and FJCR, but Lazar's reaction was more restrained. Like Israel, Lazar also offered his mediation services to end the war, which remained unanswered. Gorin's post was the first and last attempt by the FJCR to declare its disagreement with the war, showing how dangerous it had become to express an anti-war position in Russia.

Israeli newspaper reported on the Kremlin's pressure on Jewish organizations to support the war.[1002] According to Alexander Boroda, president of the Federation of Jewish Communities, Chabad did not face direct threats from the authorities but found itself under pressure from other religious denominations who wanted to sign a joint statement in support of the "special military operation" in Ukraine. Chabad refused, arousing suspicion and irritation among Russian nationalists, who accused the movement of insufficient loyalty. On the other hand, the excessive caution of the FJCR leaders angered some Jewish circles outside Russia, mainly in Ukraine. Rabbis and representatives of Jewish organizations demanded that Lazar and the Russian Jewish community raise their voice against the government and demand an end to the war. In the Israeli

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[1001] Cnaan Liphshiz, 'Ukraine invasion puts Chabad of Russia 'between a rock and a hard place', Jewish Telegraphic Agency, March 31, 2022, https://www.jta.org/2022/03/31/global/ukraine-invasion-puts-chabad-of-russia-between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place

[1002] Sam Sokol, "Russia Pressures Jewish Leaders to Support Putin's Ukraine War", *Haaretz*, March 24, 2022. https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/2022-03-24/ty-article/.highlight/russia-pressures-jewish-leaders-to-support-putins-ukraine-war/00000180-5ba0-dc66-a392-7ffbfcf30000

press, the position of Lazar and FJCR was described as "the moral catastrophe of this cosy symbiosis between Putin and his Kremlin Hasidim".[1003]

It is important to note that, unlike the official representatives of the Orthodox Church and the Spiritual Administrations of Muslims of Russia, the leaders of FJCR did not express direct support for Russian aggression and did not call for participation in the war.[1004] The Jewish community in Ukraine and media in Israel criticized FJCR's position, but the organization's relative restraint, especially compared to the anti-Ukrainian rhetoric of Russian propaganda, shows the delicate relationship it maintains with the Kremlin. A possible explanation is that the Kremlin likely recognizes Berel Lazar's "red lines," which he must uphold to maintain his legitimacy in the eyes of world Jewry and Israel, and therefore limits its pressure on the FJCR.

In addition to its controversial stance on the war, the FJCR position has drawn criticism for its support for Russian discourse on neo-Nazism in Ukraine. In an interview with The Jerusalem Post, a month after Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, FJCR President Alexander Boroda condemned the glorification of Nazi collaborators in Ukraine, emphasizing that this is in line with the position of Israel and the World Jewish Congress. In response to the interview, Ukraine's Chief Rabbi Moshe Azman stated that Russia is "killing women and children. No one asked them to 'De-Nazify' us as a country," and accused the FJCR president of actually supporting the murder of Ukrainian civilians, including Jews.[1005]Boroda asserted that his words were taken out of context and unrelated to justifying the invasion, adding that the Chabad movement in Russia is actively engaged in providing humanitarian aid to Ukrainian Jews.[1006]

While refusing to take a clear position against the Russian aggression, FJCR leaders do not ignore the rise in anti-Semitic rhetoric from government officials. After Lavrov's statement about Zelensky and Hitler, Berl Lazar suggested that the Russian minister apologize in order to

[1003] Lev Stesin, "Chabad's Long Faustian Bargain with Russia and Putin", *Haaretz*, April 25, 2022, https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/2022-04-25/ty-article-opinion/.highlight/chabads-long-faustian-bargain-with-russia-and-putin/00000180-655d-d824-ad9e-e77d0d8b0000
[1004] "Halal or Haram? War with Ukraine, Split between 'Official' and 'Unofficial' Islam in North Caucasus", Re:Russia, July 27, 2023, https://re-russia.net/review/346/
[1005] Zvika Klein, "Russian rabbi: Hard to understand why neo-Nazism asserting itself in Ukraine", *The Jerusalem Post*, March 22, 2022, https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/article-702045
[1006] Cnaan Lipshiz, "Chabad refuses to condemn Putin in order to preserve its achievements in the country", *Zman,* April 11, 2022, https://www.zman.co.il/303134/popup/

"consider the incident closed."[1007] Berl Lazar and FJCR also reacted sharply to the article by the assistant secretary of the Security Council, who called Chabad a religious sect.[1008] However, in most cases of distortion and trivialization of the Holocaust, the FJCR leaders remained silent.

Lazar not only did not condemn Putin's anti-Semitic attacks, but also participated in the Kremlin's propaganda events, at which Putin distorted the history of the Holocaust. At a meeting of the "Victory" organizing committee in the Kremlin with the participation of Lazar and other Jewish historians, Putin spoke at length about the Holocaust, accusing Bandera supporters of killing all the Jews in Ukraine and removing responsibility from the SS units. None of the meeting participants objected to Putin or tried to correct him.[1009]

Both internal and external factors compound the complexity of Chabad's position. On the one hand, many Russian Jews, including Chabad rabbis themselves, have their family roots in Ukraine, making the war emotionally painful. On the other hand, international sanctions have cut off access to funds from major Russian donors who previously supported Chabad. In these circumstances, FJCR is attempting to strike a balance between the community's interests and the moral and value-based expectations of Judaism. Rabbi Misha Kapustin, who left Crimea after the 2014 annexation, believes that Chabad rabbis face a tragic choice: either leave the communities or remain silent. In an authoritarian regime, dissenting from the regime puts at risk the future of Jewish communities that took decades to build.[1010]

According to Israeli expert and former Knesset member Roman Bronfman, "Chabad rabbis in Russia find themselves between a rock and a hard place…What is happening now in Russia means the collapse of the model by which Chabad has operated for the past two decades, staying outside of politics, in exchange for state support. This model has lost its sustainability: neutrality no longer guarantees security. The war has destroyed the room for maneuver."[1011] This precise description requires only one clarification: as shown in the previous chapter, FJCR did

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[1007] "Russia's Chief Rabbi Asks Lavrov to Apologize for Hitler Comments", *RBK*, May 4, 2022, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/04/05/2022/627217ef9a7947ec64585045
[1008] "Russia's Chief Rabbi Calls Patrushev's Assistant's Article Offensive", *RBK*, October 27, 2022, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/10/2022/6359b6bb9a79475fa69207fe
[1009] "Meeting of the Organizing Committee "Victory", Official website of the President of Russia, September 5, 2022, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72197
[1010] Cnaan Liphshiz, 'Ukraine invasion puts Chabad of Russia 'between a rock and a hard place'
[1011] Ibid.

not stay out of politics. It always acted within the framework of the Kremlin's policies, performing a propaganda function aimed at foreign Jewish audiences, including Israel. In the situation of war, justified by Putin's regime through Holocaust distortion and false accusations of Ukraine in neo-Nazism, FJCR leaders could not openly support Kremlin's propaganda which was unanimously condemned by the international Jewish organizations and Israel. Thus, the only way out for FJCR was to temporarily step aside from its public role and minimize reputational damage.

However, the FJCR's gradual return to promoting Russian interests began a few months after the outbreak of the war. In January 2023, Berl Lazar called Russia's failure to be invited to the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz "humiliating."[1012] A year later, Lazar publicly accused Ukraine's chief rabbi of paying tribute to fighters from Ukraine's controversial Azov Battalion.[1013] In early 2025, Chabad leaders began to promote once again pro-Kremlin narratives that Russia has a better anti-Semitism record than Europe and the United States, praising the government's efforts while downplaying the rise of anti-Semitism in the North Caucasus (discussed in Section D below).[1014] Lazar is back to his messaging about the normalization of Jewish life in Russia, and claims, without providing verified data, that all Jews who left for Israel after 2022 have returned to Russia.[1015] According to Boroda, even more people returned to Russia than had left at the beginning of the war.[1016] Thus, after three years of war, FJCR resumed its usual functions within the regime.

Of all the Jewish organizations, only the "Community of Mountain Jews in Russia" publicly supported the Russian war in Ukraine. The head of the community, German Zakharyaev, is one of the vice presidents of the RJC and has previously participated in pro-Kremlin

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[1012] "Russia was not invited to the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Zakharova went berserk", *Channel 9*, January 28, 2023, https://www.9tv.co.il/Item/53964

[1013] "Against the backdrop of war: Russia's Chief Rabbi against his Ukrainian counterpart", *KAN*, May 8, 2024, https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/global/746846/

[1014] Anna Gromova, "There are losers in the world": Russia's chief rabbi on anti-Semites, "global conspiracy" and Elon Musk's gesture", *Gazeta.ru*, June 18, 2025, https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2025/06/18/21222212.shtml?updated

[1015] "Rabbi tells what happened to Jews who left Russia at the beginning of the Second World War", *Ria Novosti*, January 23, 2025, https://ria.ru/20250123/ravvin-1995151158.html

[1016] "The rabbi spoke about the fate of Jews who left for Israel at the beginning of the special operation", *RBK*, January 23, 2025, https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/679256099a7947252d88ef0d

projects.[1017] Some tried to justify Lavrov's words about Hitler and Zelensky.[1018] The RJC itself did not make any statements about the war, while its president, Yuri Kanner, according to media reports, left Russia. Many of the Jewish oligarchs who financed Jewish organizations also left the country. Leonid Nevzlin, a former president of the RJC, called the silence of the leaders of the Jewish community regarding the war and the distortion of the Holocaust "betrayal", which, in his opinion, was inevitable in a system where "Jews were required to serve the authorities."[1019]

Moscow's Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt was one of the Jewish leaders who condemned the aggression and continued to criticize the Russian leadership for distorting the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. However, he did so from abroad, as he was forced to leave Russia because of his position. In Russia itself, only a few people dared to protest the official rhetoric of anti-Semitism. According to Alla Gerber, the founder of the Russian Holocaust Foundation, "Lavrov's statement that Hitler was also a Jew is not even anti-Semitism. It is blatant stupidity; it is downright idiotic. It is hard to imagine that the Minister of Foreign Affairs can be so stupid."[1020] Even more striking is the example of the current director of the Holocaust Foundation, Ilya Altman, who publicly criticized Maria Zakharova's article on the Holocaust, calling it an attempt at revisionism.[1021] Given the instrumental role of the Holocaust narrative in Russian state propaganda and the broader climate of repression in today's Russia, challenging those distortions entails a considerable risk and demands substantial civic courage.

4. "Russians as the new Jews": Russophobia as a tool of Russian propaganda

Since the mid-2010s, *Russophobia* has become a key concept in Russian state propaganda, used to dismiss foreign criticism and portray Russia as a victim of Western hostility. Initially a term used by Russian diplomats, it has evolved into a broad ideological tool. This

[1017] "Jewish veterans of the Red Army gathered in Times Square in New York", Voice of Russian-speaking America", May 15, 2015, https://www.forumdaily.com/en/evrejskie-veterany-krasnoj-armii-sobralis-segodnya-na-ploshhadi-tajms-skver-v-nyu-jorke/
[1018] "Moscow Synagogue Reacts to Lavrov's Words About Hitler's Jewish Roots", *Lenta.ru,* May 3, 2022, https://lenta.ru/news/2022/05/03/korniotvet/
[1019] "Leaders of Russia's Jewish Community Betray Their People in the Face of Danger", *Detaly,* May 3, 2022, https://detaly.co.il/lidery-evrejskoj-obshhiny-rossii-predayut-svoj-narod-pered-litsom-opasnosti/
[1020] "Goebbels, Stalin, Solovyov, war...: we talk about anti-Semitism in Russia with Alla Gerber", Dim.
[1021] "Once again about the term "Holocaust". And not only", Holocaust Center, July 26, 2023, https://holocf.ru/

chapter examines how the Kremlin has weaponized *Russophobia* to justify its foreign policy, suppress dissent, and recast Russians as a persecuted people, drawing on historical analogies and emotionally charged narratives to mobilize domestic support.

The gradual introduction of this term of into public and diplomatic discourse began in the 2000s, when the Russian Foreign Ministry began using the term to discredit post-Soviet republics that had chosen the Euro-Atlantic path and to legitimize its interference in the internal affairs of these countries. Over time, the term has expanded in meaning, becoming a universal label that the Kremlin uses to denote any form of criticism or rejection of Russian foreign or domestic policy abroad. Russian officials and propagandists have increasingly claimed that criticism of Russia is a form of ethnic hatred, similar to anti-Semitism. By comparing contemporary criticism of Russia to genocidal anti-Semitism, Russian propaganda trivializes the Holocaust and distorts its historical meaning. In doing so, Russia reframes itself as the "new Jews", a persecuted people facing existential threat, thereby co-opting Jewish suffering for political gain.

This analogy frames Russians as a historically persecuted group, much like Jews in 20th-century Europe. As early as 2000, an article appeared on the Russian Foreign Ministry's website in which Estonia's policy towards the Russian-speaking population was described as "an instance of institutional Russophobia."[1022] As relations between Russia and its neighbors, primarily the Baltic states and Ukraine, have worsened, the use of this term has increased accordingly. Its use increased exponentially after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbass in 2014.

Russian officials and propagandists began using the term "Russophobia" as part of their accusatory rhetoric, blaming the West for double standards, discrimination against Russians, and hostility toward the "Russian world." Official statements by Russian diplomats, analysts, and state media suggested that, in their view, criticism of the Kremlin was not a political position but simply a manifestation of hatred towards Russians as a whole. Unsurprisingly, Russophobia became a subject of research and analysis, both in Russia and abroad.

Chronologically, the term was first used in the book Russophobia by the Soviet dissident mathematician Igor Shafarevich, which was published in samizdat in 1981 and received wide

[1022] "Estonian Republic", Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 31, 2000, https://mid.ru/ru/maps/ee/1653729/

publicity after the collapse of the USSR. Oddly enough, this samizdat manifesto about "Russophobia" turned out to be yet another expression of anti-Semitism. Shafarevich claimed that there was a certain "Small People" hostile to Russians and striving to destroy Russian identity, traditions, and culture. He identified this "Small People" with representatives of the Jewish intelligentsia, which immediately earned him a reputation as an anti-Semite, "the ideologist of anti-Semitism in Russia. As a result, the American Academy of Sciences expelled Shafarevich from its ranks.[1023] Although he denied his anti-Semitic intentions, his public actions and speeches, already in post-Soviet Russia, invariably confirmed his reputation as an anti-Semite.[1024]

Russian researchers argued that Russophobia in Europe originated in the period of Ivan the Terrible, when the Muscovite kingdom became a force to be reckoned with by its Western neighbors. Swiss journalist Guy Mettan, known for his ties to the Kremlin, went even further back in history and wrote a book about the thousand-year history of Russophobia.[1025] American professor Andrei Tsygankov wrote about the Russophobic lobby in American politics.[1026]

Paradoxically, this concept has undergone another odd metamorphosis in the Kremlin's rhetoric - it has become equated with anti-Semitism. In this context, Russian commentators and propagandists began portraying Russians as the "new Jews" – a people facing persecution and discrimination. Gradually, the term has entered the discourse of Putin and his associates. This comparison reached its extreme form in the statement of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who declared that "the West wants to achieve a final solution to the Russian question through a war with Russia," comparing it to the Nazi "final solution to the Jewish question" – a euphemism for the Holocaust.[1027] By using the label of "Russophobia," Russian propaganda has deliberately equated it to the most horrible examples of discrimination in history for purposes of patriotic mobilization and justification of its aggressive foreign policy. Accusations of Russophobia have

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[1023] "Academician Igor Shafarevich, ideologist of anti-Semitism in Russia, has died", *Newsru.com*, February 20, 2017, https://www.newsru.co.il/world/20feb2017/met_201.html

[1024] "Anti-Semitism in the 1990s–2000s", Digital Jewish Encyclopedia, https://eleven.co.il/diaspora/judeophobia-anti-semitism/15533/

[1025] Guy Mettan, *Russie-Occident Une Guerre de Mille Ans. La Russophobie de Charlemagne a la Crise Ukrainienne* (Paulsen 2017).

[1026] Andrei Tsygankov*, Russophobia: Anti-Russian Lobby and American Foreign Policy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

[1027] "Lavrov compares West's approach to Russia with Hitler's 'Final Solution' (video), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opO2x_G6ZTA&ab_channel=AlArabiyaEnglish, also see "Russia's Lavrov compares West's approach to Russia with Hitler's 'Final Solution', Reuters, January 18, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-likens-us-actions-those-hitler-napoleon-2023-01-18/

become part of the Kremlin's ideological struggle, in which old, proven methods were used, from appealing to historical traumas to using popular culture.

One of the most odious examples in this context is Sergei Shnurov's song "No Entry", which became popular after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022: "A Russian like a Jew is now in Berlin in 1940... / However, the doctor has a sign in his office: 'No entry for Russians and dogs!" / I scream in horror: "Scoundrels! They are introducing genocide little by little" / ... European, tell it like it is Don't be silent! / For you, a Russian is a new Jew / you wish we all were burned in an oven!"[1028] The Kremlin encourages the publication of articles equating Russophobia with anti-Semitism, giving preference to Jewish authors, such as Alexander Brod, a former member of the Russian Communist Party. In an article titled "The Spiral of History," published in a central newspaper and on the official website of the Council under the President of the Russian Federation, Brod claimed that Russians had become victims of the same "historical injustice" as the Jews in the 20th century.[1029]

In 2023, the State Duma adopted a law to counter Russophobia, asserting that the state would protect not only Russian citizens but also all Russians whose rights were allegedly being violated abroad.[1030] The law not only gave the term legal status but also attempted to legitimize Russia's interference in the internal affairs of other countries under the pretext of protecting "Russian interests." The law criminalized "calls to Russophobia," raising concerns about an attempt to criminalize political speech and restrict freedom of expression.[1031] Thus, "Russophobia" has become not just a propaganda cliché, but the Kremlin's political sledgehammer in its confrontation with the West, its domestic mobilization efforts, and brutal suppression of any dissent.

[1028] "Leningrad - No Entry",(video) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeIjDxbAZeM&ab_channel=%D0%9B%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B4

[1029] Alexander Brod, "The Spiral of History," Council under the President of the Russian Federation for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights, http://www.president-sovet.ru/members/blogs/post/spiral_istorii/

[1030] "Irina Yarovaya: Russophobia as a dangerous crime should be included in legislation", State Duma website, March 18, 2023, http://duma.gov.ru/news/56625/,
"Russian govt supports bill criminalizing Russophobia among foreigners", Interfax, 23 September 2024, https://www.interfax-russia.ru/military/news_eng/413303

[1031] "Ideological clause - For manifestation of "Russophobia" will be threatened up to five years in prison", Verstka, My 18, 2023, https://verstka.media/do-5-let-za-rusofobiyu?tg

The war in Ukraine served as a catalyst for the reactivation of deeply rooted anti-Semitic tropes in Russian political and media discourse. Faced with mounting military failures and international isolation, the Kremlin has resorted to scapegoating, rewriting history, and manipulative narratives that simultaneously revive and distort Jewish memory. This has manifested itself in the growing tensions with Israel, the ambiguous position of the Russian Jewish community, and the cynical exploitation of the memory of the Shoah and anti-Semitism through the concept of Russophobia. By presenting Russians as victims of global persecution, or even of an international conspiracy, comparable to that suffered by Jews in the 20th century, Russian propaganda not only falsifies historical memory, it also weakens the fight against anti-Semitism.

However, these developments are not solely the product of political circumstances. They are part of the heritage of the Soviet intelligence services and their ideological roots. The next chapter looks at how anti-Semitic narratives, cultivated and used by the KGB, continue to influence the Putin regime's disinformation strategies today by drawing a direct link between Cold War-era "influence operations" and the Kremlin's current propaganda campaigns on a global scale.

B. KGB legacy of anti-Semitism and "operations of influence" in the service of Putin's Russia

The ideological struggle in the Soviet Union against the West has always relied not only on official diplomatic and propaganda activities, but to a much greater extent on the covert work of the secret services. The KGB played a special role in this system through its so-called "active measures," using provocations, falsifications, and other manipulations - methods it inherited from the practices of the tsarist secret police.

For centuries, Russian security agencies have fought against "foreign subversive activity" – an irreplaceable phantom of power striving for total control over society. In this context, anti-Semitism, whether in the form of conspiracy theories, discreditation campaigns, or manipulation

of historical memory, was used as a tool of destabilization. With the rise to power of Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer, this tradition has received new life.

As noted above, although Putin showed goodwill toward the Jewish community, the environment that shaped his political style treated the national question – and especially the Jewish one - as both a potential vulnerability and a tool for political influence operations. The approach to Jews and the Holocaust in Putin's Russia is determined not so much by personal views as by the professional legacy of the Soviet special services, for which anti-Semitism was part of the toolkit of confrontation with the West. The Russian special services have adapted the mechanisms developed by the KGB to new conditions and now utilize them to conduct their "operations of influence", the modern version of the KGB's "active measures".

1. The origins and main characteristics of KGB anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism in the KGB's activities was not an accidental or marginal phenomenon, but a systemic instrument of ideological and operational work, rooted in the broader attitudes of the Soviet state. One should trace its origins to the Soviet government's shift in policy toward Jews and to its escalating campaign against "external and internal enemies," especially after the Second World War. In the first years of Soviet power, a significant number of Jews occupied positions in the state security agencies - the Cheka, the OGPU, and the successor agencies.

However, by the end of the 1930s, Stalin's purges had virtually eliminated the Jewish presence in these agencies. In the post-war years, Soviet authorities intensified suspicion and repression, increasingly viewing Jews as potential agents of Western influence and Zionism.[1032]

After the defeat of the Arab armies in the Six-Day War of 1967, the Soviet anti-Zionism campaign turned Israel into a fierce ideological and strategic enemy of the USSR, the embodiment of the worst features of imperialism, the center of world evil, along with the United States. From this point on, the KGB increasingly used anti-Semitism as part of its struggle against the United States, Western democracy, and "world Zionism". Anti-Zionism became an official form of anti-Semitism, giving ideological legitimacy to the actions of Soviet intelligence.

[1032] Vadim Abramov, *Jews in the KGB* (Bystrov Publisher, 2006).

One of the most well-known examples of Soviet covert warfare against Israel was the KGB's active role in creating Palestinian terrorist organizations. Although Yasser Arafat was not Palestinian, the KGB selected and installed him as the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The USSR not only provided ideological backing to radical Palestinian groups but, through the KGB, also trained their members, supplied logistical support, and orchestrated their terrorist operations against Israel and the United States.[1033]

Under the leadership of Yuri Andropov, who chaired the KGB from 1967 to 1982, the agency played a key role in organizing disinformation operations. For him, as for his predecessors, anti-Semitism was an important tool at the service of the Soviet foreign policy. One example of such activity was an Operation Zionist States (SIG), whose goal was the distribution of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion and other anti-Semitic literature in Arab countries. The purpose of the operation was to incite hatred in the spirit of Nazi propaganda among the populations of the modern enemies of the USSR – Israel and the USA.[1034]

Similar actions were also carried out in Europe. Operation Zarathustra aimed at discrediting the Federal Republic of Germany, which they tried to present as a state where Nazism and anti-Semitism were reviving. The operation to discredit Pope Pius XII sought to link the Catholic Church with the Nazis. As part of Operation Pandora, the KGB spread anti-Semitic disinformation aimed at inciting racial conflicts in the USA.[1035] In 1971, in order to provoke mass riots in New York, KGB chief Yuri Andropov approved the distribution of fake brochures to black activists, allegedly from extremists from the Jewish Defense League, accusing them of attacking Jews.[1036]

The ideological basis of the KGB's anti-Semitic policy was a mixture of Marxist ideology and traditional Russian conspiracy theories. The internal attitudes of the Soviet elite, despite their formal anti-fascist orientation, largely reproduced the Manichaean notion of the "Jewish threat."

[1033] Ion Mihai Pacepa, "The KGB's Man", *Wall Street Journal*, September 22, 2003, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10641929613226300?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=ASWzDAjMx0yWNfxO_oXU2MeGu_2e1RNxBD5JE2j5dGCYVsxydO6II45KM99p_HW1cLM%3D&gaa_ts=68793910&gaa_sig=Br7FkgR11Bm5Za1-RAJIpkcEx0IXN-pJhq0uO7LKY0fess1JZpRuChR-e3VuvrDDswpT_BNxWJ4bfFarE78SCQ%3D%3D

[1034] Ion Mihai Pacepa, *Disinformation* (Ronald J. Rychlak, 2013), pp. 262-263.

[1035] Ibid, p. 97.

[1036] Jean Chichizola, "Désinformation, manipulation, sabotages…Le grand retour des vieilles méthodes du KGB", *Le Figaro*, June 19, 2024

Recognition of the influence of the Jewish world, especially in the United States, served not only to justify repressive policies but also to justify the need for ideological confrontation and "active measures". Former Romanian intelligence chief Ion Mihai Pacepa, who defected to the United States, described Andropov's approach to the Muslim world as follows:

> "According to Andropov, the Islamic world was a waiting petri dish in which we could nurture a virulent strain of America-hatred, grown from the bacterium of Marxist-Leninist thought. Islamic anti-Semitism ran deep. The Muslims had a taste for nationalism, jingoism, and victimology. Their illiterate, oppressed mobs could be whipped up to a fever pitch. Terrorism and violence against Israel and its master, American Zionism, would flow naturally from the Muslims' religious fervor. We had only to keep repeating our themes - that the United States and Israel were 'fascist, imperial-Zionist countries' bankrolled by rich Jews." [1037]

Thus, the KGB's anti-Semitism was a deliberately chosen tool of manipulation, both within the country and abroad.

It is worth reminding that before taking office as Russian president, Putin ordered the installation of a memorial plaque to KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov, a mastermind of instrumentalizing anti-Semitism and a symbol of the brutal persecution of the dissident movement, including Jewish dissidents.[1038] This rehabilitation reflects not just nostalgia for the Soviet past, but also recognition of the effectiveness of old KGB methods in the new circumstances.

KGB anti-Semitism was an institutionalized practice of the secret services aimed at achieving the USSR's geopolitical goals. It was part of a systematic effort to discredit the West, manipulate public opinion, and create alliances based on hostility to Israel and the United States.

[1037] Ion Mihai Pacepa, "What does Moscow have to do with the recent war in Lebanon?," National Review (August 24, 2006), https://www.nationalreview.com/2006/08/russian-footprints-ion-mihai-pacepa/
[1038] Andrei Soldatov, “How the cult of Andropov was revived”, Agentura.ru, August 15, 2022, https://agentura.ru/investigations/kak-vozrozhdali-kult-andropova/

The legacy of the KGB and its experience of using anti-Semitism have proven to be in demand in modern Russia.

2. The use of anti-Semitism in "operations of influence" and disinformation campaigns by the Putin regime

Since 2014, anti-Semitism has become part of Russia's global strategy of "influence operations" to destabilize democratic states, increase internal polarization in adversary countries, and discredit Western political institutions. This tactic, which has its roots in the Soviet tradition of "active measures," is now being actively used by Russian intelligence agencies in the United States, France, and other Western countries. As during the Cold War, the goals of Russian intelligence agencies are no different from those of their Soviet predecessors: weakening NATO, supporting anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism, polarizing Western societies, and undermining trust in liberal democracy.[1039]

Russian intelligence agencies adapt their methods to the socio-political realities of their target countries. For example, in France, where the Jewish community faces threats from the rise of Islamism, the Kremlin is playing the anti-Semitic card, increasing tensions and provoking public outcry.[1040] Following the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, several provocations occurred in Paris. Vandals spray-painted Stars of David on buildings and marked the Holocaust Memorial with red handprints - an apparent attempt to evoke memories of the lynching of Israeli soldiers during the 2000 Intifada. The influence operations aimed to increase mistrust in the government and destabilize the political situation ahead of the 2024 snap elections. President Macron's pro-Ukrainian stance and his proposal to send NATO troops to Ukraine likely prompted Russia to target France in its operations.[1041]

[1039] Jean Chichizola, "Désinformation, manipulation, sabotages…Le grand retour des vieilles méthodes du KGB", *Le Figaro*, June 19, 2024

[1040] "La Russie derrière des tags antisémites en France ? Pourquoi Moscou veut "amplifier les divisions au sein de la société française", La Depeche, June 4, 2025, https://www.ladepeche.fr/2025/06/04/entretien-la-russie-derriere-des-tags-antisemites-en-france-pourquoi-moscou-veut-amplifier-les-divisions-au-sein-de-la-societe-francaise-12738234.php

[1041] "Dégradations antisémites : pourquoi soupçonne-t-on une ingérence de la Russie ?", RTL, June 6, 2025, https://www.rtl.fr/actu/international/degradations-antisemites-pourquoi-soupconne-t-on-une-ingerence-de-la-russie-7900513021

In May 2025, vandals targeted Jewish sites in Paris, attacking the Holocaust Memorial, two synagogues, and a Jewish community restaurant. Following the investigation, three Serbian citizens were arrested, suspected of committing these acts "in the interests of a foreign power."[1042] The suspects coordinated their actions via Telegram and acted for monetary gain, without realizing the potential political consequences; they were detained while attempting to leave France. The French authorities consider these attacks to be operations of Russian special services.

Russia's influence operations are not limited to antisemitic provocations. Saboteurs have targeted the infrastructure of several European countries, setting fire to private companies and shopping centers in Lithuania, Poland, and the UK, and preparing similar arson attacks in Germany and the Netherlands. In France, the police arrested on June 2024, a citizen of Russia and Ukraine on suspicion of preparing acts of sabotage using explosive devices found in a hotel near Paris[1043]. A month later, in Germany, authorities foiled an assassination attempt by Russian special services targeting the head of the Rheinmetall defense company.[1044] Experts note that due to a shortage of professional agents, Russian intelligence is increasingly recruiting foreign nationals through social media, although this approach significantly lowers the likelihood of success.[1045]

Jean Chichizola addressed in his article the continuity between the Soviet KGB and the Russian SVR, FSB, and GRU. The KGB successor agencies apply traditional "active measures", such as disinformation, subversion, and sabotage, using new technologies: "The digital revolution is thus accompanied by a transformation with the involvement of private digital marketing and public relations firms in Doppelgänger-type operations … The methods can be crude or more sophisticated. All of this is relayed both by the Russian diplomatic network and by official media and social networks committed to the cause."[1046]

[1042] Ibid.
[1043] Man arrested with explosives near Paris airport was part of vast Russian sabotage campaign, Le Monde, 27 June 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2024/06/27/man-arrested-with-explosives-near-paris-airport-was-part-of-vast-russian-sabotage-campaign_6675959_7.html
[1044] US and Germany foiled Russian plot to assassinate CEO of arms manufacturer sending weapons to Ukraine, CNN, 11 July 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/11/politics/us-germany-foiled-russian-assassination-plot
[1045] "Russia's Shadow War Against the West", *CSIS*, March 18, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-shadow-war-against-west
[1046] Jean Chichizola, "Désinformation, manipulation, sabotages…Le grand retour des vieilles méthodes du KGB", *Le Figaro*

Among the various types of Russian cyber operations, experts particularly distinguish Doppelgänger, which involves the use of mirror sites to spread disinformation. The main contractor for the Russian intelligence services in implementing this project is the so-called Social Design Agency, although other organizations are also active in this field. According to a recent report entirely devoted to the study of this type of operation and the work of the Social Design Agency, "Doppelgänger is Russia's greatest propaganda triumph since 2016 because SDA was able to spin the words of misled politicians, Western media discourse, and the work of the counter-FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference, Y.G.) community into evidence of market penetration."[1047] Closely interacting with the Kremlin and possessing significant human and financial resources, SDA is one of the key tools for implementing "Putin's vision of a Russian population, and a global population, divided, fearful, and malleable to cognitive and informational manipulation."[1048]

Russian intelligence services used the Doppelgänger botnet during a wave of anti-Israel and anti-Semitic protests at American universities. This campaign aimed to discredit the American administration, which allegedly ignores public opinion by supporting Israel, and to accuse law enforcement agencies of excessive brutality towards pro-Palestinian protesters.[1049] Provocative videos distributed through pro-Kremlin Telegram channels used the war in Gaza to undermine public consensus and increase polarization, both in the United States and in European countries.

Israel is also one of the targets of Russian disinformation campaigns and influence operations. According to internal SDA documents obtained by German newspapers, the organization's campaign in Israel sought to deepen public polarization, damage Israel's relations with countries like Turkey, reduce support for Ukraine, and boost support for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu due to his position on the war in Ukraine. In addition to spreading disinformation online, the campaign included the establishment of a new political party in Israel targeting the Russian-speaking Israeli community, cooperation with Russian-speaking politicians, distribution of anti-Ukrainian leaflets in synagogues, and the spraying of provocative

[1047] James Pamment and Darejan Tsurtsumia, "Beyond Operation Doppelgänger: A Capability Assessment of the Social Design Agency", Psychological Defense Agency, Lund University, May 12, 2025.
[1048] Ibid.
[1049] Steven Lee Myers, Tiffany Hsu, "Campus Protests Give Russia, China and Iran Fuel to Exploit U.S. Divide", *New York Times*, May 2, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/02/business/media/campus-protests-russia-china-iran-us.html

graffiti in Arab-populated areas.[1050] Israel thus plays a central role in the Russian campaign, both as a target in itself and as a country integral to campaigns against other countries. The SDA also used events in Israel to promote the Russian domestic agenda, such as supporting the Netanyahu government's discussions on changing Israeli immigration laws, a sensitive issue for Russia, which was concerned about the mass exodus of Jews to Israel.[1051]
Israel's intelligence services grew increasingly concerned about Russian influence operations in Israel during the anti-government protests of 2023.

In a highly unusual move, Israeli intelligence sent a strong warning to Russian intelligence officials, demanding an end to their online influence operations targeting Israeli citizens. This marked the second such instance, one year earlier, Israeli intelligence had asked Russia not to interfere in the 2023 election campaign.[1052] The Institute for National Security Studies in Israel (INSS) reported that Russia's influence and disinformation campaign targeting Israeli audiences is ongoing and has been resilient to warnings[1053]. Meanwhile, Israel's political leadership chose to remain silent on the issue.

The use of anti-Semitism by state security services to manipulate public opinion has deep historical roots in Russia. The US State Department recalled this in a report it published in January 2024, under the title "More than a Century of Anti-Semitism: How Successive Kremlin Occupiers Used Anti-Semitism to Spread Disinformation and Propaganda." The report emphasizes the continuity of approaches, from the Tsarist secret police to the KGB and FSB, towards Jews, who invariably became a convenient target for accusations and manipulation in the fight against external and internal "enemies." The report says in particular:

> "The leaders of Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and now the Russian Federation, along with their state-run or state-controlled media and security services, have successfully exploited anti-Semitism for more than a century… Mimicking the disinformation tactics

[1050] Uri Blau and Milan Czerny, "Russia's Shadow War Against Israel Revealed: Fueling Arab Discontent, Straining Foreign Relations", *Haaretz.com*, September 20, 2024, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-09-20/ty-article-magazine/.premium/russias-shadow-war-against-israel-fueling-arab-discontent-straining-foreign-relations/00000191-fffe-d98e-ad99-ffffd7600000
[1051] Ibid.
[1052] Nadav Eyal, "Israeli intelligence officials demanded that the Russians stop their online influence operations", *Ynet,* July 21, 2023, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hks3ymd9h
[1053] Russian Influence Campaign Against Israel: Strategic and Cognitive Implications, INSS, 1 May 2024, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/russia-disinformation/

> of the past, Putin's Kremlin repeats cynical lies by manipulating the history of the Holocaust and World War II, obscenely exploiting the suffering and sacrifice of all those who survived the Shoah and World War II, and falsely accusing Jews and supporters of Ukraine more generally of neo-Nazism."[1054]

Anti-Semitism in the Putin regime's influence operations is not an accidental occurrence, but a deliberate tool of hybrid warfare designed to sow chaos within Western societies. Anti-Semitism, in this context, is just one of the means to incite hatred, discredit liberal values, and mobilize allies in the information space. When integrated into the overall strategy of disinformation, anti-Semitism allows the Putin regime to act as a destructive force within the democratic world itself.

The instrumentalization of anti-Semitism by the Soviet and post-Soviet security apparatus did not vanish with the end of the Cold War, it just evolved. As explored in this section, the KGB's legacy of conspiratorial thinking and “operations of influence” continues to shape the Kremlin’s approach to domestic control and foreign manipulation, including the use of antisemitic narratives. This legacy took on new importance after the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, which marked a turning point not only in the geopolitics of the Middle East but also in Russia's position towards Israel, its adversaries and world Jewish communities. The next section examines how the Hamas-Israel war has highlighted tensions and contradictions in Russia's regional strategy, particularly the balance between its long-standing ties to anti-Israel actors and its relations with Israel and shed light on the internal dynamics of anti-Semitism in Russian society.

[1054] "More Than a Century of Anti-Semitism: How Successful Occupants of the Kremlin Have Used Anti-Semitism to Spread Disinformation and Propaganda," US State Department, Global Engagement Center, January 2024

C. Hamas-Israel war and its impact on Russia's relations with Israel and level of anti-Semitism in Russia

The war between Israel and Hamas, which began in the fall of 2023, was one of the few positive geopolitical moments from Russia's perspective after the failure of its blitzkrieg in Ukraine and transition to a protracted war of attrition. For Moscow, it opened an opportunity to distract the attention of the United States and its allies from the Ukrainian front, focus on the West's "double standards," and weaken international support for Ukraine amid Israel's growing need for assistance. At the same time, the war in the Middle East turned out to be a severe test for Russian-Israeli relations, exacerbating existing contradictions. Russia effectively took the side of Hamas and its allies, placing the primary responsibility for the escalation on the US and Israel and intensifying anti-Israeli rhetoric, often reproducing Soviet anti-Zionist clichés. Officials and public figures in Russia reflected this position in both their official statements and public discourse.

Since the October 7 attack, Hamas representatives have maintained active contacts with the Russian leadership, visited Moscow, and received its diplomatic support at the UN and other international venues. At the same time, Russia has deepened its strategic ties with Iran and its regional allies, including Hezbollah and the Houthi movement in Yemen.
However, despite the growing tension, the cooling of Russian-Israeli relations have not escalated into a rupture. Both sides have maintained pragmatic approaches dictated by security, diplomacy, and geopolitical calculations.

1. The History of Russia–Hamas relations

Russia's approach towards the radical Islamist organization Hamas, recognized as a terrorist organization by the United States, the EU, and Israel, has undergone a significant evolution, from condemnation and distancing to regular political contacts. This transformation reflects both a shift in Russia's foreign policy strategy and Moscow's desire to establish a unique position in the Middle East as a counterbalance to Western powers.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia consistently condemned Hamas for terrorist attacks against Israeli citizens. For example, in a statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on

October 15, 1994, it said: "We are outraged by the inhuman crime of Islamic fanatics who killed a young Israeli soldier who was taken hostage by the Palestinian organization Hamas. Those guilty of this atrocity must be punished most severely." Following the terrorist attacks in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in March 1996, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman called the actions of Hamas "criminal and reckless" and stressed that they were "contrary to the fundamental interests of the Palestinian and Israeli peoples."[1055] The Russian Foreign Ministry responded similarly to the terrorist attack in Beersheba on August 31, 2004: "Moscow resolutely condemns the new barbaric attack by extremists. We are convinced that no political or other goals can be achieved through violence and terror."[1056]

An additional factor of tensions during this period was the mutual support between Hamas and the Chechen separatists. The leader of the movement, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, openly supported the Chechen struggle in October 2000. In an interview with the Russian newspaper Vremya Novostei, he said: "Muslims are needed on their own battlefield. We have our own occupier, and they have theirs. Let them stay and fight against Russia. We support the Chechen people's fight for freedom. If someone occupies your land, you must fight for it to the end"[1057]

The apparent ideological affinity between Hamas terrorists and Chechen fighters gave the Israeli government grounds to view Russia as a partner in the fight against international terrorism. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon put forward the idea of a joint effort by the free world against the "forces of darkness" of international terrorism.[1058] This approach appealed to Russia, which sought to legitimize its war in Chechnya. However, it resisted any comparison of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the situation in Chechnya, considering it to be an exclusively internal affair. Moreover, unlike most Western countries, Russia has never included Hamas in the list of terrorist organizations.

President Vladimir Putin officially articulated this position in 2006. Answering a question from the Al Jazeera TV channel, he noted: "We have never considered Hamas a terrorist

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[1055] "Evolution of Russian views on Hamas", *Kommersant*, March 4, 2006, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/655030
[1056] "We talk about the history of Russia's relations with Hamas - Israel's main enemy these days", *Meduza*, May 21, 2021, https://meduza.io/feature/2021/05/21/rasskazyvaem-ob-istorii-otnosheniy-rossii-s-hamas-glavnym-vragom-izrailya-v-poslednie-nedeli
[1057] "Hamas leader asks Chechen militants to fight at home", *Lenta.ru*, October 16, 2000, https://lenta.ru/news/2000/10/16/hamas/
[1058] "Sharon: 'We can defeat forces of evil', *CNN*, September 12, 2001, https://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/east/09/11/terror.reax/index.html

organization."[1059] Later, while on a visit to Madrid, Putin added: "Today we must recognize that Hamas came to power in the Palestinian Authority as a result of democratic, legitimate elections, and we must respect the choice of the Palestinian people." At the same time, he clarified that this does not mean automatic support for all of the movement's actions.[1060]

After Hamas's victory in the elections in the Palestinian Authority, Russia began to build working relations with the organization. Already in March 2006, the head of the Hamas Politburo, Khaled Mashal, visited Moscow. In an interview with Rossiyskaya Gazeta, he said: "We were always convinced that the day would come when we would be able to come to the capitals of the world calmly… But none of us knew that this would happen so quickly." Russian politicians and experts openly supported this new approach. Yevgeny Primakov, the former head of foreign intelligence and ex-foreign minister, stated in 2006 that he considered Hamas "not a terrorist but a charitable organization," adding: "Hamas has a militant wing involved in terrorism, but the people elected it and should be recognized as a political entity."[1061]

However, relations deteriorated already in the early 2010s. The reason was Hamas's participation in the Syrian revolution against Bashar al-Assad's regime. This was in sharp contrast to Moscow's position, which in 2015 launched a military operation in Syria on Assad's side. Despite the cooling in relations, Russia did not change its official position. In 2015, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov confirmed: "We do not consider Hamas terrorists. They are an integral part of Palestinian society with representatives in legislative structures." [1062]

Since the beginning of the 2020s, relations have begun to recover. In May 2022, a Hamas delegation visited Moscow and met with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. Russia continued to offer itself as a mediator in Palestinian reconciliation and a platform for dialogue. However, as columnist Marianna Belenkaya noted, "key agreements, such as the 2017 Fatah-Hamas deal, were reached without Russia's participation," and therefore "Moscow is more likely to save face in the region than to exert real influence." Israel has refrained from interfering with these contacts for pragmatic reasons. According to Israeli political scientist Nadav Eyal, Israel understands that Russia lacks real influence over Hamas, so

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[1059] "We talk about the history of Russia's relations with Hamas - Israel's main enemy these days", *Meduza*
[1060] Ibid.
[1061] "Primakov does not consider the Hamas movement a terrorist organization", *Vedomosti*, August 31, 2006, https://www.vedomosti.ru/library/news/2006/08/31/primakov-ne-schitaet-dvizhenie-hamas-terroristicheskoj-organizaciej
[1062] "We talk about the history of Russia's relations with Hamas - Israel's main enemy these days", *Meduza*

Israeli officials prefer to avoid raising the issue publicly and instead focus their dialogue with Russia on Syria and Iran's regional presence.[1063]

Russia's ties with Hamas have historical roots shaped by broader regional and strategic considerations. The following section examines how Russia positioned itself in the aftermath of Hamas attack against Israel on October 7th, 2023, navigating between diplomatic caution, strategic ambiguity, and its evolving stance toward Israel's adversaries.

2. The scope and limits of Russia's support for Israel's adversaries in the aftermath of October 7

The events of October 7, 2023, became a pivotal moment for Israel-Russia relations. On the day of the Hamas attack on Israel, Russia took an ambivalent position, refusing to condemn the terrorists directly. Subsequently, this approach of the Russian authorities turned into solid political and military support for Israel's enemies. Russia has placed its bets on supporting Hamas and its pro-Iranian allies, even at the cost of worsening relations with Israel. The Kremlin voted for anti-Israel resolutions at the UN, denied Israel the right to self-defense, and Vladimir Putin, using Soviet cliches, compared the actions of the Israeli army in Gaza to those of the Wehrmacht in the Soviet Union. In his rhetoric, he resorted to hints at traditional anti-Semitic imagery, accusing the United States of escalating the conflict.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas carried out a large-scale attack on southern Israel, resulting in the deaths of more than 1,200 people, including women and children. From Israel's perspective, Moscow's reaction to this tragedy was antagonistic. Since October 7, the Russian leadership has not uttered a single word of condemnation of the Hamas massacre and has focused on emphasizing the legitimate rights of the Palestinians, which, in its view, have not been realized. Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov said: "Russia expresses extreme concern about the escalation and calls for an immediate end to the violence." Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stressed that "the problem of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict cannot be resolved without taking into account the interests of the Palestinian people."[1064] As part of an escalation of anti-Western rhetoric since the start of the war in Ukraine, Putin has blamed the United States for the crisis,

[1063] Ibid.
[1064] "Serious Escalation", "Inhuman Aggression" and What Does Ukraine Have to Do With It? How the World Reacted to the War in Israel", *Fontanka.ru*, October 10, 2023, https://www.fontanka.ru/2023/10/10/72792773/

using imagery from the Soviet anti-Zionist campaign. He called the United States "the root of evil" and "a spider that is trying to entangle the entire planet, the entire world, in its web and wants to achieve our strategic defeat on the battlefield."[1065] The image of a Zionist spider entangling the entire world in its web was widespread in Soviet and, before that, Nazi propaganda. Putin warned Israel not to carry out a siege of Leningrad against Gaza, which is considered in Russia to be one of the most brutal war crimes of Nazi Germany.[1066] In the most tragic period for Israel since its establishment, Putin manipulatively used the memory of World War II, personally reviving tropes of Soviet anti-Zionist campaign.

One week after the tragedy, Putin finally called Netanyahu to express condolences. However, Russian officials established contact with Hamas immediately after the attack. In an interview with the pro-Kremlin channel RT, Hamas spokesman Ali Baraka expressed gratitude to Russia for its support.[1067] On October 26, 2023, an official Hamas delegation arrived in Moscow, including Politburo member Musa Abu Marzouk. Officials held the meeting at the Foreign Ministry, where he declared support for the "right to resist the Zionist occupation by all available means."[1068] The Israeli Foreign Ministry summoned the Russian ambassador to protest the visit of the Hamas delegation to Moscow.[1069] True to its pragmatic approach, Moscow sought to maintain channels with both sides of the conflict and use its ties with Hamas as an instrument of its diplomatic presence, demonstrating an alternative to US Middle East policy.

However, after October 7, this strategy failed; Russia abandoned its neutrality, openly siding with one party in the conflict and adopting a position increasingly seen as hostile to Israel. Russia's actions and declarations have outraged Israelis. Two months after October 7, Netanyahu held a "difficult" conversation, as the Israeli press described it, with Putin, expressing

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[1065] "Putin Rails Against US in Dagestan Meeting: 'Scum,' 'Root of Evil', *Newsweek*, October 30, 2023, https://www.newsweek.com/putin-rails-against-us-dagestan-meeting-1839353

[1066] Putin called the call to block the Gaza Strip unacceptable", *AIF*, October 13, 2023, https://aif.ru/politics/putin_nazval_nepriemlemym_prizyv_osushchestvit_blokadu_sektora_gaza

[1067] "Senior Hamas Official Ali Baraka: We Have Been Secretly Planning The Invasion For Two Years," Memri-TV (October 8, 2023), https://www.memri.org/tv/senior-hamas-official-ali-baraka-prisoner-swap-america-planning-invasion-two-years-russia-support

[1068] "Hamas is in Moscow. Why did the Palestinian delegation come to Russia?", *BBC*, Octobr 25, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c06rmz0dj1po

[1069] "Israeli Foreign Ministry summons Russian ambassador over Hamas delegation visit to Moscow", *RBC*, October 30, 2023, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/30/10/2023/653ecdd99a7947fb67f330cf

dissatisfaction with Russia's position.[1070] However, Israel chose not to escalate the situation. Despite disappointment and irritation, official Jerusalem sought to maintain a channel for deconfliction in Syria and avoid further deterioration. An exception was the speech of the new Israeli ambassador to Russia, Simona Galperin, who in early 2024 directly stated that Russia had not realized the new reality that arose after October 7 and had effectively taken the side of Iran and its proxies. She condemned meetings with Hamas representatives in Moscow, pointed out the lack of Russia's pressure on the group on the issue of hostages, and called Russia's policy unacceptable. In an interview with Kommersant, she noted: "We cannot understand why Hamas members are being accepted, embraced, and given a red carpet"; "Russia, which itself suffered from terrorist attacks, does not support Israel's fight against terrorism"; "Any country that supports Iran is fueling chaos in the Middle East." The Israeli ambassador also raised the issue of distorting the Holocaust, without blaming the Russian leadership for it.[1071]

Trying to demonstrate its constructive approach, the Russian leadership constantly emphasized its efforts to free the hostages. The results of these efforts were questionable, as the Israeli ambassador in Moscow said to reporters.[1072] Despite this, the Russian side attributed to itself the release of one of the hostages, who had Russian citizenship.

The war in Ukraine has exacerbated Russia's military needs and affected its foreign relations. Thus, Iran has become one of Russia's leading arms suppliers. Russia's dependence on Iranian weapons, fueled by the war in Ukraine, has brought Moscow closer to Tehran. According to media reports, in 2024, Russia began delivering Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 air defense systems to Iran.[1073] Russia has also stepped up contacts with other Iranian proxies, including the Houthis, to whom Putin has openly threatened to start supplying missiles, in response to US support for Ukraine.[1074] The military aspect of Russia's support for Israel's enemies was particularly evident during the fighting against Hezbollah in 2024. The Israeli army captured a

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[1070] "Tough conversation between Netanyahu and Putin: "The Prime Minister was angry about Russia's positions at the UN and criticized cooperation with Iran", Ynet, December 10, 2023, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/bydjzxqut

[1071] «I really believe in open and direct dialogue», *Kommersant*, February 4, 2024, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6492853

[1072] «I really believe in open and direct dialogue», *Kommersant*, February 4, 2024, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6492853

[1073] Arkady Mil-Man and Yaron Gamburg, "Russia Seeks Closer Cooperation with Iran", INSS, November 11, 2024, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/iran-russia-2024/

[1074] "Report: Moscow may arm Yemen's Houthis over US support for Ukraine", The Times of Israel, July 20, 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-moscow-may-arm-yemens-houthis-over-us-support-for-ukraine/

significant amount of Russian weapons, including advanced air defense systems. According to Israeli sources, they came directly from Russian military bases in Syria.[1075]

The Iranian attack on Israel in April 2024 drew official condemnation from many countries around the world, but not from Russia, which called on all sides to exercise restraint. The Russian Foreign Ministry's statement outlined Iran's position that the attack was a legitimate response under the UN Charter and the right to self-defense in response to the attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus.[1076] The Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman gave an even harsher response to the Israeli ambassador to Moscow, who wrote that Israel expected Moscow to condemn the Iranian attack. Zakharova responded: "Remind me when Israel at least once condemned the Kyiv regime's attacks on Russian territory? Don't you remember? Neither do I. But I remember well the regular statements by officials about their support for Zelensky."[1077] The Russian ambassador to the UN also justified the Iranian attack on Israel.[1078]

Russia's anti-Israeli position is not unexpected and fits in perfectly with the logic of the strengthening ties between Russia and Iran in the context of the war in Ukraine. However, as the 12-day Iran-Israel war showed, Russia cannot intervene militarily to help Iran. The logic of Russian foreign policy has remained unchanged, with its focus on confrontation with the West, to which Israel belongs. However, Israel's neutral position on the war in Ukraine is beneficial to Russia. Considering Israel's successes in confronting Iran and its proxies, the Kremlin is aware of Russia's limited capabilities in the Middle East and prefers to relieve tensions with Israel.

This new shift in Russia's approach, less hostile towards Israel, began as early as 2024. After a series of defeats for Russia's allies - the weakening of Hamas, the defeat of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, and the joint Israeli-American strike on Iran's nuclear facilities - Moscow's influence in the Middle East has declined. However, the Israeli leadership demonstrates its readiness to continue the dialogue with Russia, including on security issues. For example, Israel remained interested in the Russian presence in Syria in the

[1075] Arkady Mil-Man and Yaron Gamburg, "Russia Seeks Closer Cooperation with Iran"
[1076] Bat Chen Druyan Feldman, Arkady Mil-Man, "Russia stands by Iran after attacking Israel", INSS, April 15, 2024, https://www.inss.org.il/social_media/russia-stands-by-iran-after-attacking-israel/
[1077] "Zakharova asked the Israeli ambassador to remind her when Israel condemned the Kyiv regime's strikes on Russia", *Ukraina.ru*, April 14, 2024, https://ukraina.ru/20240414/1054504062.html
[1078] Bat Chen Druyan Feldman, Arkady Mil-Man, "Russia stands by Iran after attacking Israel"

situation of uncertainty arising from the nature of the new Syrian regime and the strengthening of Turkey's influence in Syria.[1079]

The telephone conversation between Putin and Netanyahu in May 2025 indeed shows that the Israeli government is ready to forget the Russian hostility after the October 7 tragedy. Commenting on the meeting, the Israeli Prime Minister's Office reported: "Both leaders warmly congratulated each other on the 80th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. The Prime Minister emphasized the decisive contribution of the Red Army to the victory over the Nazis and noted the significant role of many Jewish commanders and fighters in this war." According to the Kremlin, both leaders reaffirmed Russia's and Israel's commitment to protecting the historical truth about the events of World War II.[1080] Thus, Putin's distortions of the Holocaust and his anti-Semitic rhetoric, before and after October 7, remained without any reaction from Israel, meaning that a unified position on this issue was maintained.

It appears that the two leaders have reverted to the "status quo ante" also on the issue of Hamas. In his meeting with a hostage released from Gaza, Putin said: "... the fact that you were freed is the result of Russia's stable and long-term relations with the Palestinian people, with its representatives, with various organizations. And I think that we should express gratitude to the political leadership of Hamas for reaching an agreement with us and carrying out this humanitarian act."[1081] This affable attitude to Hamas terrorists did not cause any reaction from the Israeli side. It only reinforces the impression that countries are back to square one: Russia will maintain relations with Hamas, providing it with diplomatic support, while having no real influence on Hamas; Israel will ignore Russia's dialogue with Hamas, while maintaining close relations with the Kremlin to discuss other, more important aspects of security.

It remains unclear why Netanyahu insists on returning to a friendly tone in relations with Putin at a time when Russia's role and capabilities have suffered a significant blow, in the Middle East and beyond. In the context of this dynamic, the question arises about the personal aspect of the relationship between the leaders of the two countries, who are also long-serving politicians

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[1079] "Exclusive: Israel lobbies US to keep Russian bases in a 'weak' Syria, sources say", Reuters, February 28, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/israel-lobbies-us-keep-russian-bases-weak-syria-sources-say-2025-02-28/
[1080] "Russian report: Russian President Putin spoke by phone with Prime Minister Netanyahu", *Kan*, May 6, 2025.
[1081] 'Putin meets with Russians freed by Hamas, expresses gratitude for 'humanitarian act', *Meduza*, April 16, 2025, https://meduza.io/en/news/2025/04/17/putin-meets-with-russians-freed-by-hamas-expresses-gratitude-for-humanitarian-act

(since 1999, Putin has been in power for 26 years, and Netanyahu - 15). During the presidencies of Obama and Biden, who repeatedly criticized him, Prime Minister Netanyahu sought to diversify Israel's foreign policy contacts as a strategic response. However, even after the arrival of the Trump administration, Israel continues to seek confidential and direct dialogue with the Kremlin. Vladimir Putin takes a similar approach. Unlike Netanyahu, he has much greater freedom of action concerning Israel. However, understanding the importance of Israel as an ally of the United States, its military-technological superiority in the Middle East, and its weight in the Jewish world, the Russian president is interested in maintaining relations with Israel and with Netanyahu personally.

In the wake of the October 7 attacks and the Israeli military response, Russian state media and government-affiliated social networks have intensified their dissemination of anti-Israeli messages, often blurring the line between criticism of Israeli policy and anti-Semitic tropes. These campaigns draw on long-standing conspiratorial themes, generating hatred and hostility towards Israel and Jews.

3. The antisemitic and anti-Israel campaign in Russian media and social networks

Anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic statements by Putin, Lavrov, and the Kremlin propaganda mouthpieces have helped legitimize anti-Semitism in the public sphere since the start of the war in Ukraine. As noted above, there has also been an increase in vandalism against Jewish institutions during this period. However, the wave of anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli hatred that has spilled into the Russian information space after October 7, 2023, has become the most extensive anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli campaign since the 1990s. The level of hatred matched that of Stalin's anti-Semitic campaigns and the Tsarist press's calls for pogroms following the assassination of Alexander II or during the 1905 revolution. How these messages fit into Russia’s broader information warfare and national propaganda strategy?

Under the pretext of the war between Israel and Hamas, pro-Kremlin media outlets, Telegram channels, as well as neo-Nazi resources and Z-bloggers (the name given in Russia to

the segment of the Internet dedicated to covering the Russian-Ukrainian war from an ultra-patriotic position) began to spread a stream of demonizing narratives, often directly appealing to classic anti-Semitic cliches.[1082] However, none of it was officially condemned. On the contrary, the state rhetoric only fueled the situation, since from the point of view of the Russian authorities, the war in Gaza provided a convenient tool for distracting attention from the protracted war in Ukraine. For the Kremlin, the war between Israel and Hamas became a way to accuse the West of "double standards" given their support for Israel's operation despite the suffering of the civilian population of Gaza. A similar sharp increase in anti-Israeli propaganda occurred in 2018 when Syrian air defense systems shot down by mistake Russian reconnaissance aircraft in an incident that involved Israeli jets.[1083] The campaign then quickly acquired an anti-Semitic tint but was stopped personally by Putin, who was not interested in escalation with Israel at that time. However, in 2023, the Kremlin took no steps to contain anti-Semitic hatred. The consequences of this propaganda policy proved detrimental to the authorities themselves, as it led to spontaneous mass unrest in the North Caucasus, discussed in the next section.

In the absence of monitoring of anti-Semitic acts in Russia, the study of this wave of anti-Semitism and its impact on the Jewish population is limited. Nevertheless, the existing information gives an idea of the deep anti-Semitic hatred among supporters of the war with Ukraine, as well as the expansion of manifestations of anti-Semitism in Russian society and on social networks. The research of independent journalist Maria Borzunova is one of the first detailed descriptions of the anti-Israeli bacchanalia in Russian social networks after October 7.[1084] The general attitude of the propaganda resources associated with the Kremlin or other government structures regarding the massacre carried out by Hamas can be best characterized as delight and admiration for the actions of Hamas. The patriotic pro-Kremlin forces of the Russian information space did not simply justify the actions of Hamas. They actively projected them as a model for their actions in the war against Ukraine, providing a vivid indication of the

[1082] Arkady Mil-Man, "From Russia – with Hate?", *INSS,* October 16, 2023, https://www.inss.org.il/social_media/from-russia-with-hate/

[1083] "Putin seeks to defuse downing of Russian plane off Syria", *PBS News*, September 18, 2018, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/putin-seeks-to-defuse-downing-of-russian-plane-off-syria

[1084] "Z-channels rejoice at the attack on Israel, envy Hamas and send Makarevich to the front" (video), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8SlC71C_BQ&ab_channel=%D0%9C%D0%B0%D1%88%D0%B0%D0%91%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B7%D1%83%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0

militarization and dehumanization of public consciousness. Borzunova speaks about the "cannibalistic nature" of the reactions to the October 7 massacre; below are a few examples:

- Neo-Nazi association "Rusich": "It's a pity there is no opportunity to take part"

- Channel "Govorit TonaZ": "I give the Arabs advice: grab more prisoners and tie them to poles around the city, so that you are not bombed so hard in response."

- Channel "OSSinoe Gnezdo": "The ideal scenario now is - Kebabs (referring to the Palestinians) cut the Jews, the Jews turn Palestine into dust, and in return the Arabs and Iran turn Israel into dust..."

- Dmitry Steshin, a journalist with ties to Russian Neo-nazi groups: "not a drop of pity or sympathy, we will leave the crap "about "a quarter of our former people" in the past, to the first wave of relocators, fighters against OVIR" (referring to the Russian-speaking population of Israel).

- Grey Zone, a telegram channel associated with the Wagner PMC, regretted that few Israelis died.[1085]

Russian media covered Putin's numerous statements about Israel's actions in Gaza, about the US's responsibility for this crisis, and about his solidarity with the Palestinians, but not the Israelis: "When you look at the bloodied children, the dead children, at how women and old people suffer, how doctors die, of course, your fists clench and tears come to your eyes. There is no other way to say it."[1086] In unison with the Kremlin's talking points, Margarita Simonyan, the head of the pro-Kremlin RT, accused Israel of fascism.[1087] Russian TV channels and the print media did not hide their gloating over the failure of the Israeli secret services and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). At the same time, propagandists spoke of a "brilliant" Hamas operation.[1088] Israel's war with Hamas was widely used by propaganda in the context of the war with Ukraine, from asserting the humanity of the Russian army compared to the IDF, accusing

[1085] Ibid.
[1086] "Fists clench when you look at dead children in Gaza, Putin says", *RIA Novosti*, October 30, 2023, https://ria.ru/20231030/putin-1906291801.html
[1087] «Russia Calls Israel's Response in Gaza 'Fascism", *Detaly*, October 19, 2023, https://detaly.co.il/v-rossii-nazyvayut-otvetnye-mery-izrailya-v-gaze-fashizmom/
[1088] "Hamas did everything brilliantly": Kremlin propagandists admire terrorists' actions in Israel", *Nastoyashee Vremya*, October 14, 2023, https://www.currenttime.tv/a/32636452.html

Ukraine of selling weapons to Hamas to Putin's thesis that "the future of Russia and Palestine is being decided on the battlefield in Ukraine."[1089]

It is not surprising that, according to a Levada Center poll from October 2023, a significant part of the Russian population viewed Israel as an aggressor in the conflict with Palestine. In the context of virtually complete state control over the population's opinions, state control over the media and the Internet, and the exclusion of alternative opinions from the information space, the audience is accustomed to the rules of censorship, making the influence of propaganda decisive.[1090] The anti-Israeli campaign launched in the Russian information space has led to an increase in hatred, domestic violence, and anti-Semitic incidents. In the absence of monitoring anti-Semitism in Russia, testimonies collected by independent media outlets convey the feelings of Russian Jews in an atmosphere of intolerance and hatred:

- Vladimir from Astrakhan, says that for the first time, he felt stereotypes had become a real threat. On a bus, he heard an elderly man talking about Israelis who allegedly "cut off children's heads and blew up a mosque." Later, at the market, people wiped their feet on printed Israeli flags laid out in the aisles.

- Irina from Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky encountered anti-Semitism in a parent WhatsApp chat. One of the participants posted a picture calling for people not to rent out housing to Jews. Irina's attempt to express outrage provoked an aggressive exchange.

- Golda, originally from the Urals, who left for Israel, notes that her grandmother in Russia was insulted by a bus driver after he found out that her granddaughter lived in Israel. Golda herself was bombarded on Instagram with messages like: "die, Jewish pig" and Palestinian flags.

- Maria from the Moscow region, who left for Kazakhstan, was removed from her neighbors' chat after she expressed outrage at a nationalist article. In response, they wrote to her: "Kike" and accused her of undermining the patriotic spirit.

[1089] "The future of Palestine is being decided in Ukraine", RIA Novosti, October 30, 2023, https://ria.ru/20231030/palestina-1906305434.html

[1090] Vyacheslav Likhachev, "The circuit starts working in reverse - Anti-Semitism in Russia: A Throwback to Soviet Times?"

- Andrey from Moscow, remembers how he heard about "Kids" and a "Jewish conspiracy" since childhood. After 2023, such statements began to appear more frequently and became increasingly aggressive.[1091]

A wave of hatred against Israel and Jews characterized not only Russia but also most Western countries. Vyacheslav Likhachev, the well-known expert on anti-Semitism in Russia contends that global trends do not directly drive the dynamics of contemporary Russian anti-Semitism, and the fact that these patterns align suggests deep, homegrown transformations within Russian society. In his opinion, "the war in Gaza served only as a trigger that allowed the previously accumulated aggression to break out but was not the cause of its emergence."[1092] It is important to recognize that anti-Semitism frequently functions as an ideological common denominator between ultra-nationalist factions in Russia and certain radical progressive movements. In both contexts, there is a resurgence of Soviet-era anti-Zionist discourse, which historically operated as a veil for the USSR's underlying antisemitic policies.[1093]

The argument about the detachment of Russian society from the global context also warrants further consideration. The anti-Semitic unrest in the Caucasus may have been connected not only with domestic Russian anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic propaganda, but also with the influence of the protest of the Muslim population in European, North American, and Middle Eastern countries on the events of October 7. The Muslim population of this region is in the process of re-Islamization, which has increased its connection with the Islamic world and its responsiveness to external events and trends.

[1091] "Threats on Instagram and anti-Semitism posts in a parent chat: Current Time readers talk about their experience of facing anti-Semitism in Russia", *Nastoyashchee Vremya*, November 3, 2023, https://www.currenttime.tv/a/ugrozy-v-instagrame-i-yudofobnye-posty/32669957.html

[1092] Vyacheslav Likhachev, "The circuit starts working in reverse - Anti-Semitism in Russia: A Throwback to Soviet Times?"

[1093] Izabella Tabarovsky, "Understanding the Real Origin of that New York Times Cartoon - How antisemitic Soviet propaganda informs contemporary left anti-Zionism", *Tablet,* June 5, 2019, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/soviet-anti-semitic-cartoons

D. Antisemitic riots in North Caucasus and Geography of Contemporary Russian Anti-Semitism

In recent decades, the nature of anti-Semitism in Russia has changed noticeably. If in the 1990s and 2000s it manifested itself primarily in the form of physical violence, acts of vandalism, and threats against Jewish communities, then in the 2010s and 2020s its forms have become more indirect. Anti-Semitic rhetoric has moved to the digital sphere, to social networks, anonymous forums, Telegram channels, and marginal segments of the media. These trends, coupled with a decrease in the number of anti-Semitic incidents, have allowed to consider modern Russian anti-Semitism as a marginal phenomenon that does not require close attention to its regional characteristics.

Most sociological studies, including reports by the independent Levada Center, have focused exclusively on the level of anti-Semitism as public sentiment, highlighting persistent antisemitic stereotypes and ambivalent attitudes toward Jews among various social groups. According to their 2016 study, "anti-Semitism is highly marginalized and concentrated on the periphery of civil and social life."[1094] Public opinion institutes have neglected the geographic dimension of anti-Semitism. The regional specifics of anti-Semitic manifestations remained outside the scope of most studies until 2023. However, this does not mean that researchers have completely ignored this topic. Analytical materials have pointed to higher tensions in the issue of anti-Semitism "in the poor strata of the population of the autonomous republics", specifying that, as a rule, this characterizes the peripheries, and not the capital cities in these regions.[1095] But full-fledged studies on this topic have not been conducted.

The reduction in the Jewish population also affected the level of everyday and institutional anti-Semitism: "the reduction in the Jewish population and the loss of its former economic, political and cultural influence led to the fact that Jews are no longer perceived as a significant threat."[1096] Nevertheless, Lev Gudkov, one of the senior independent sociologists, emphasizes that, under certain circumstances, short-term surges of anti-Semitism are possible: "The most

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[1094] "Anti-Semitism is out of fashion", Levada-Center, November 7, 2016, https://www.levada.ru/2016/11/07/antisemitizm-ne-v-mode/

[1095] Lev Gudkov, 'Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia in Modern Russia', *Institute for Euro-Asian Jewish Studies*, 2020, https://institute.eajc.org/

[1096] Emil Pain, "Historical Weakening of Anti-Semitism in Russia and its Short-Term Actualization in the Discourse of Contemporary Russian Nationalists", *Bulletin of Liberal Arts University*, 2024. Vol. 12, no. 2. P. 131–147.

likely short-term surges of anti-Semitism are related to the actions of Jews or Israel, which will be interpreted negatively... The main bearers of anti-Semitic sentiments remain ideological groups of "imperial nationalists", "ethnic nationalists", and, to a lesser extent, Islamists."[1097]

The anti-Semitic unrest in October 2023 in the North Caucasus demonstrated the need to rethink previous assumptions about anti-Semitism in Russia. These events revealed not only the strength of anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic mobilization in the Northern Caucasus but also their difference from manifestations of xenophobia in other parts of the country. One of the key factors in this context is the processes of Islamist radicalization, which primarily affect these regions. At the same time, migration waves within Russia, both from the North Caucasus republics and Central Asian republics, can influence the situation in other regions of Russia, including its major cities. These events call for special attention to the geographical dimension of anti-Semitism, which has so far remained underestimated in the study of Russian anti-Semitism.

1. History of the Jewish community and anti-Semitism in the North Caucasus

The Jewish presence in the North Caucasus has deep historical roots. The basis of Jewish life in this region was the so-called Mountain Jews - descendants of Persian and Babylonian Jews who settled in the territory of modern Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria in the early Middle Ages. Despite centuries of Muslim encirclement, they managed to preserve their religious, cultural, and linguistic identity. Mass emigration to Israel since the 1970s has led to a sharp reduction in the Jewish population of the North Caucasus.

Today, fewer than a few thousand Mountain Jews reside in the seven autonomous republics of the North Caucasus, which have predominantly Muslim populations: Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia-Alania, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan. Most of the Mountain Jews who stayed in Russia moved to the adjacent Krasnodar and Stavropol regions or other central cities. Of the seven autonomous republics, the most significant Jewish communities lived in what is now Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Chechnya. Derbent, the southern capital of Dagestan, is considered the site of the oldest Jewish community in the North Caucasus and served as the cultural center of the Mountain Jews before

[1097]Ibid.

the 1917 Revolution. In the late 1990s, no more than 5,000 Jews remained in the city. The Jewish community of Makhachkala experienced significant growth during the Soviet era; in 1959, approximately 1,900 Mountain Jews resided there, but the community has since declined substantially. Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, has long retained its status as the largest Mountain Jewish community in the North Caucasus. In the late 1980s, approximately 10,000 Jews lived there; however, by 2021, the number had decreased to fewer than 400 people. Before the Chechen War, Grozny was home to about 6,000 Jews, but at the height of the Second Chechen War, only 12 Jews remained there. Small communities of Mountain Jews continue to exist in Mozdok, Vladikavkaz, Pyatigorsk, and Stavropol.[1098]

Most of the population of all seven autonomous republics professes the Sunni version of Islam. The traditional attitude of the Muslim majority towards the Jewish community during the pre-revolutionary period was characterized by a hierarchical structure and relative tolerance. Under the rule of Muslim feudal lords, Mountain Jews were recognized as a subordinate minority, paid special taxes, and suffered restrictions. In addition to taxes, they were subjected to humiliating and hard labor. Despite this, Mountain Jews retained their Caucasian identity, including wearing a dagger as a symbol of inclusion in the traditional system of adat - blood feud, brotherhood, and inter-clan relations. Ethnographers note that there were good relations between the Jews and the Muslim mountaineers, including the conclusion of fraternities.[1099]

However, differences in faith, lack of land and water, and social conflicts gradually gave rise to tension. Muslim neighbors often desecrated Jewish cemeteries, cut off water, and accused Jews of being "foreigners." Periods of political instability, mainly uprisings and wars against the Russian Empire, were often accompanied by violence against the Jewish population. The troops of Imam Shamil, the leader of the struggle of the North Caucasian peoples against Tsarist Russia, attacked Jewish settlements, robbing them, killing or taking the inhabitants captive, sometimes returning them to relatives for ransom.[1100] Even before the annexation of the Caucasus to Russia, there were cases of unfounded accusations against Jews in the region. In the second half of the 19th century, their number increased. In addition to slander, pogroms became more frequent, and with the arrival of Russian settlers, traditional anti-Semitic hostility intensified.

[1098] "Mountain Jews: History, Ethnography, Culture", ed. У. Dymshits (Jerusalem-Moscow, Daat:1999), pp. 147-186
[1099] Ibid, pp. 29-69
[1100] "Jewish communities of the North Caucasus", Caucasian Knot, October 31, 2023, https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/393949

Pogroms and blood libels occurred in the North Caucasus during both the Tsarist and Soviet periods. For example, in 1911, a blood libel occurred in the village of Tarki in Dagestan, which almost led to a large-scale pogrom. During the Civil War, libels were also used as a pretext for violence against Jews. With the establishment of the Soviet regime, pogroms ceased, but everyday anti-Semitism remained. In 1926, a rumor of a ritual murder spread in Dagestan, which provoked pogroms in several cities, including Derbent and Makhachkala, which local authorities initially did not want to stop.[1101] In 1928, police in Derbent searched the Jewish quarter on suspicion of ritual murder, initiated by investigator Aliyev. In 1931, authorities in Derbent searched 500 Jewish homes, accusing Jews of storing kerosene. The Central Committee of the Republican Communist Party initiated an investigation, the perpetrators were convicted, but the case became an important milestone in the history of anti-Semitism in the Caucasus.[1102]

If in the 1920s and 1930s there were efforts to suppress anti-Semitism, the situation changed for the worse in the post-war decades. In 1960, a local newspaper in Buinaksk published an article falsely accusing Jews of trading in Muslim blood. This caused panic among the local Jews who feared pogroms. Only the intervention of party organs and an official denial prevented violence, although tensions remained. After the Six-Day War in 1967, official anti-Israeli propaganda again intensified antisemitic sentiments. Protesters in Derbent held mass rallies, calling to "strike a blow at the aggressor." Authorities managed to stabilize the situation, asking a respected mullah from Makhachkala to intervene with calming exhortations.[1103]

During the Soviet period, Mountain Jews showed a higher interest in immigrating to Israel than other Jewish groups - their share among those who left in the 1970s reached 7%, while they constituted only about 2% of the USSR's Jewish population. Following the perestroika and the collapse of the USSR, repatriation intensified, coinciding with the revival of Jewish community life. However, the outflow of the Jewish population from the republics of the North Caucasus in the 1990s turned out to be irreversible. Among the main reasons for the exodus were a deep economic crisis and high unemployment (especially in Dagestan), high crime rate, political instability, and, of course, the Chechen wars.[1104]

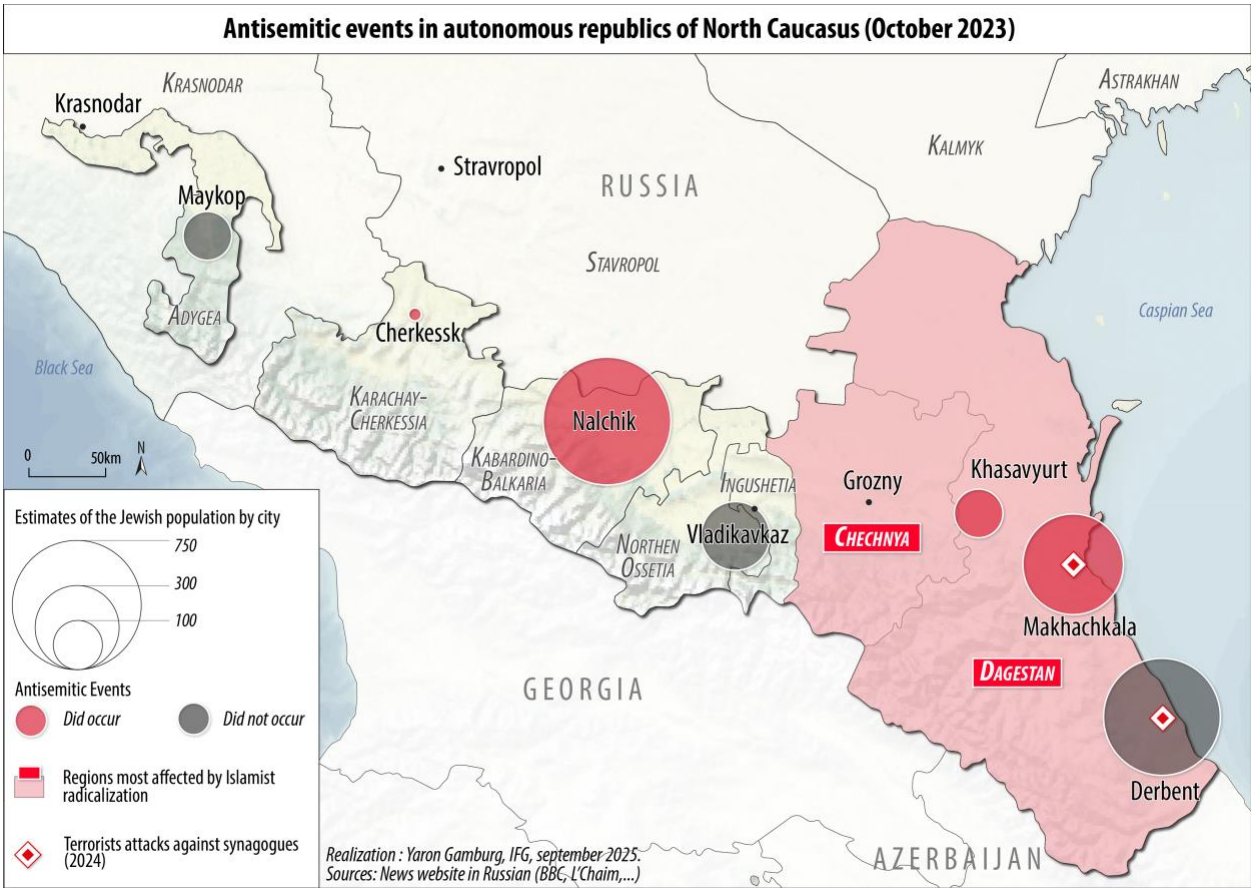
[1101] Solomon Schwarz, *The Jews in the Soviet Union*, (Syracuse University Press, 1951), pp. 254–256.
[1102] “Mountain Jews: History, Ethnography, Culture”, ed. У. Dymshits, pp. 69-99
[1103] “Mountain Jews: History, Ethnography, Culture”, ed. У. Dymshits, pp. 69-99
[1104] Ibid.

With the collapse of the USSR and the beginning of the first Chechen war, anti-Semitism in the North Caucasus acquired new forms, mainly because of the aggravation of the crime situation and the growth of Islamism. Criminal groups from the North Caucasus organized the kidnapping of Jews for ransom, including in Moscow. One of the most famous episodes is the kidnapping of the son of an Israeli businessman, Adi Sharon, in 1999 by Chechen militants, which became a symbol of the legal and political vacuum of those years. Despite the pacification of Chechnya after the Second Chechen War, the North Caucasus remains one of the most unstable regions of Russia. This is due to interethnic conflicts, weak legitimacy of power, as well as a low standard of living, corruption, and lack of prospects, which contribute to Islamic radicalization.[1105] In these circumstances, maintaining Jewish life in the North Caucasus is becoming increasingly complex, and the Jewish exodus from the republics continues. By 2016, there were only about 10,000-11,000 Mountain Jews in the North Caucasus, that is, 0.1% of the region's total population.[1106] In Chechnya and Ingushetia, there is no Jewish population; in others, the number of Jews ranges from several dozen to hundreds of people, and only in Dagestan does the Jewish community number several thousand people. Thus, the anti-Semitic events of 2023 took place in a region that has no significant Jewish presence compared to what it used to be in previous years

2. Analysis of anti-Semitic unrest in the North Caucasus

On October 29, 2023, the North Caucasus found itself at the epicenter of anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic unrest, culminating in a crowd taking over the airport in Makhachkala when a crowd stormed Makhachkala airport, searching for passengers from a flight arriving from Tel Aviv.[1107] These events shocked both Russia and the rest of the world, catching the Russian authorities by surprise.

[1105] Sergei Markedonov, “North Caucasus: "Achilles' heel" or political resource?”, PONARS Eurasia, September 5, 2017, https://www.ponarseurasia.org/9372/
[1106] “Jewish communities of the North Caucasus”, Caucasian Knot, October 31, 2023, https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/393949
[1107] “Why did the Jewish pogrom in Makhachkala occur? Experts and local residents answer”, BBC, October 31, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cxw9wm38kw7o



Map 3: Antisemitic events in autonomous republics of North Caucasus (October 2023)

While the Kremlin tried to shift responsibility for the events to external interference, independent experts estimate that the surge in anti-Semitic violence in the North Caucasus was the result of a combination of three factors: state propaganda, Islamic radicalization of the region, and socio-economic instability. The formal pretext for the outbreak of violence was the events of October 7, 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel, and a large-scale Israeli operation that began in the Gaza Strip three weeks later. These events sparked a wave of indignation among Islamic communities in the North Caucasus, which quickly crossed the line, turning into outright acts of anti-Semitic violence.

Immediately after the invasion of southern Israel by Hamas militants on October 7, messages in support of Palestine and condemnation of Israel began to appear on North Caucasian Telegram channels. At the same time, fake information about the arrival of refugees from Israel in this region's cities began to spread on social networks. The messages included calls urging people to confront Jews and "put them in their place," as well as inciting violence with slogans

like "smash Jews all over the world." Telegram channels called for not renting apartments to Jews "who arrive from Israel".[1108] On October 28, in Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, city residents threw Molotov cocktails and set fire to a Jewish community building under construction. In Cherkessk, the capital of Karachay-Cherkessia, demonstrators gathered in front of the local government building and demanded the expulsion of all Jews from the area. In the Dagestani city of Khasavyurt, an angry mob broke into two hotels in the city to check if there were any Jews or Israelis there. That same day, local Telegram channels began spreading an appeal to residents to come to the Makhachkala airport to prevent the entry of "refugees from Israel."[1109] According to various estimates, more than 1,000 people responded to this call, breaking into the airport, disrupting its work while searching for passengers from Israel. Police forces offered no resistance to the crowd, which rampaged for several hours at the federal airport. It is important to note that for more than 20 days preceding the riots, local law enforcement had taken no steps against the flood of calls for violence and anti-Semitic hatred on social media.[1110]

One of the reasons for the anti-Semitic unrest in the North Caucasus is the rise of anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic rhetoric by President Putin and other officials since the start of the war with Ukraine. "If the top brass can allow themselves dubious jokes, it means that a few floors below, they can already allow themselves more. Accordingly, many people perceive this not as 'anything is possible', but rather that they can clearly do more than before,"[1111] Alexander Verkhovsky, head of the Sova research center, explained to the BBC. Following the events of October 7, 2023, Putin, along with state media and pro-Kremlin Telegram channels, reiterated messages of support for the Palestinians and harshly condemned Israel. In late October, a Hamas delegation visited Moscow and held talks with the Foreign Ministry leadership, a move widely perceived as further evidence of Russia's support for Hamas. Observers perceived this as the authorities giving tacit permission to act: "All this gave people the feeling that this was an open topic, permitted… This is such a rare situation when the position of Muslims with an Islamist

[1108] Ibid.
[1109] "Who and how provoked the storming of the airport in Dagestan", *Holod*, October 30, 2023, https://holod.media/2023/10/30/shturm-v-dagestane/
[1110] "Why Did the Jewish Pogrom Happen in Makhachkala? Experts and Locals Answer".
[1111] Ibid.

agenda and of the Kremlin coincided. And this gave people the feeling that the topic was somehow safe."[1112]

The Kremlin's propaganda efforts extend throughout the various regions of the Russian Federation, but only in the North Caucasus did it have such drastic consequences. There is another, deeper reason for the unrest, namely the process of re-Islamization in the region, especially Dagestan and Chechnya, that has continued over the past three decades. Islamic envoys from Egypt, Turkey, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Morocco filled the religious vacuum in the North Caucasus after the collapse of the USSR, guiding this religious transformation, including training of militants.[1113] During this period, more radical variations of Islam penetrated the region, confronting the official Islamic clergy and introducing a political dimension with anti-Western, anti-Semitic, and anti-Russian overtones. At the time of the separatist government in Chechnya (1996-1999), where jihadists enjoyed significant influence, anti-Semitism was one of the main components of their ideology.[1114] The re-Islamization of parts of the Russian population, particularly in the North Caucasus, reshaped the country's image, positioning Russia not only as part of the Slavic and Christian world but also as a component of Islamic civilization.[1115] Many residents of the North Caucasus, especially religious ones, consider themselves part of the global Islamic world: "The unrest in Makhachkala is an opportunity for at least some of its participants to feel a connection with this global Islamic world."[1116]

High socio-economic tension was another important factor. Dagestan remains one of the poorest regions in Russia, characterized by high unemployment and frequent protest activity. In recent years, the region has seen protests against the excessive mobilization of the local population for the war in Ukraine, as well as demonstrations over COVID-19 restrictions and other instances of social injustice. "The pogrom in Makhachkala became a way for residents to vent their pent-up anger" due to the lack of other opportunities for protest.[1117] Experts also note that the local population's higher susceptibility to conspiracy theories is another factor. One of

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[1112] Ibid.
[1113] Konstantin Polyakov, Arab Countries and Islam in Russia in 1990s (Moscow, 2001), p. 73.
[1114] "Descendants of Hitler in the North Caucasus", *Jewish.ru*, April 2, 2001, https://jewish.ru/ru/events/world/5290/
[1115] "The problem is broader than one republic or the entire Caucasus region" - political scientist Markedonov on the events in Dagestan", *Fontanka.ru*, November 1, 2023, https://www.fontanka.ru/2023/11/01/72870683/
[1116] "Why Did the Jewish Pogrom Happen in Makhachkala? Experts and Locals Answer".
[1117] Ibid.

the rumors that circulated in the North Caucasus before the unrest was about the intention of the Israelis to seize lands. During the COVID period, Dagestan saw mass rallies against the installation of 5G cell towers. These theories often intersect with others, including the "Jewish conspiracy" theory, which spreads actively amid widespread public frustration.[1118]

The Russian authorities initially responded with caution, primarily because the events had taken them by surprise and created a sense of confusion. This hesitation stemmed from the fact that the anti-Israel and antisemitic nature of the unrest in the North Caucasus closely mirrored the messages the Russian leadership and state media had been promoting about Israel and Jews. "The violent events … far from contradicting these signals, were an exaggerated result of the Kremlin propaganda machine."[1119] Official propaganda immediately accused the American and Ukrainian special services of allegedly "provoking ethnic strife in the country." Putin acknowledged the "anger" of Caucasus residents over the situation in Gaza and avoided directly condemning those who took part in the pogroms.[1120] However, once authorities restored order and media attention faded, the Kremlin began imposing stricter punishments on the participants.[1121]

One reason for the government's lack of resolve in combating anti-Semitic unrest in the North Caucasus is Putin's consistently strong support in the region: in presidential elections, he regularly receives the highest vote counts in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia. In return for the loyalty of the region's ruling elites, who deliver this high level of "popular" support, the Kremlin turns a blind eye to certain excesses of Islamist radicalism in the area.[1122] In this context, the status of Chechnya as an autonomous region governed by a leader who has a special preferential arrangement vis-a-vis the federal institutions deserves special consideration. Ramzan Kadyrov has been granted a unique status by the Kremlin, enabling him to conduct an independent foreign policy towards Muslim countries and govern the republic according to his

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[1118] Ibid.
[1119] Yaron Gamburg, “The Antisemitic Discourse of a “Friend of the Jewish People” - Why Putin’s Russia Slides Again into the Trap of Anti-Semitism”, Institute of the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism, Indiana University, December 2024
[1120] “Putin blames the West, Ukraine after mob storms Russian airport to 'catch' Jews”, *Reuters*, Ocnober 30, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/airport-closed-southern-russia-after-people-pour-onto-runway-russian-aviation-2023-10-29/
[1121] Vyacheslav Likhachev, “The circuit starts working in reverse - Anti-Semitism in Russia: A Throwback to Soviet Times?”
[1122] “Putin and the North Caucasus: a marriage of convenience or genuine sympathy?”, *Voice of America*, February 20, 2012, https://www.golosameriki.com/a/zj-elections-north-caucasus-2012-02-20-139728843/250956.html

principles. In return, he demonstrates absolute loyalty to Putin personally and provides him with the highest electoral support.[1123]

Kadyrov uses his privileged position in Putin's regime to express odious opinions, including flagrant anti-Semitism, with impunity. In 2019, Kadyrov publicly called Jews "enemies of Islam," without any criticism from the Kremlin. [1124]At a meeting in Jordan, Kadyrov claimed that "the prophet killed Jews most of all," and in a speech to Chechen soldiers, he called Israel a "terrorist organization."[1125] After Israel launched its operation in the Gaza Strip following the October 7 massacre, Kadyrov accused Israel of committing genocide and of exhibiting "fascism more cruel than Hitler's."[1126] However, just one day later, he condemned the rioters in Makhachkala for "destabilizing the situation."[1127]

The events of October 2023 revealed deep problems in Russia's interethnic policy, including the inability to control religious radicalization, the vagueness and inconsistency of state policy, and the vulnerability of Jewish and other minorities during periods of international crisis. Moreover, the Kremlin's complex relationship with the North Caucasus republics poses a risk not only of ongoing instability within the region but also of its spillover into other parts of the country, including Moscow and other major cities. Thus, in June 2024, a group of local Islamic militants organized a series of terrorist attacks on churches and synagogues in Makhachkala and Derbent.[1128] In September of the same year, residents from Chechnya and Ingushetia started a shootout in the center of Moscow due to disagreements on the redistribution of property.[1129] Chechen security forces kidnap for trial in Chechnya Kadyrov's opponents or Russian citizens who speak disrespectfully about Islam. It happens with the tacit consent of the

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[1123] Ibid.
[1124] "Putin and the North Caucasus: a marriage of convenience or genuine sympathy?", *Voice of America*, February 20, 2012, https://www.golosameriki.com/a/zj-elections-north-caucasus-2012-02-20-139728843/250956.html
[1125]
[1126] "Kadyrov called Israel's actions towards Palestine fascism", RBC, October 29, 2023, https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/653d9df39a794747c28ed126
[1127] "Kadyrov condemns participants of anti-Semitic riots at Makhachkala airport", RBC, October 30, 2023, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/30/10/2023/654004aa9a794764a16d9a0a
[1128] "Brothers for Terror - How Attacks on Churches and Synagogues Were Prepared in Dagestan", *Kommersant*, December 1, 2024, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7344013?tg
[1129] "Business conflict at Wildberries office: shooting between Ingush and Kadyrovites", Fortang.org, September 18, 2024, https://fortanga.org/2024/09/biznes-konflikt-u-ofisa-wildberries-strelba-mezhdu-ingushami-i-kadyrovczami/

federal authorities, who are interested in Kadyrov's control over Chechnya and therefore help him maintain his reputation as a strong leader.[1130]

The anti-Semitic unrest in the North Caucasus in the fall of 2023 was the result of a combination of a foreign policy crisis, domestic Islamic radicalization, and long-term social degradation of the region. By refusing to confront religious extremism before it evolves into a political threat, and by covertly exploiting Kadyrov's "Islamic agenda," the Kremlin is unintentionally setting the stage for a potential loss of control, the very scenario the Putin regime is desperate to avoid.

The spread of anti-Semitic violence across Russia may be linked not only to developments in the North Caucasus but also to an external factor - labor migration from the Muslim-majority republics of Central Asia. In recent years, individuals from these countries have been involved in terrorist activities in Russia, including attacks presumably targeting the Jewish community.

In 2017, the head of the FSB described labor migrants from CIS countries as "the backbone of terrorist groups." He stated that in 2016, authorities had foiled 16 attempted terrorist attacks in cities including Moscow, St. Petersburg, Krasnoyarsk, Yekaterinburg, Tula, Ufa, Sochi, Novosibirsk, and Nizhny Novgorod, all involving individuals from CIS member states.[1131] In 2017, a suicide bomber from Kyrgyzstan blew himself up in the St. Petersburg metro.[1132] The most serious terrorist attack in recent years was the mass murder in the Crocus City shopping center near Moscow, where 149 people died, carried out by people from Tajikistan; the Islamic State-Khorasan claimed responsibility for the attack.[1133]

Following such a tragedy, Russia's security services were under pressure to demonstrate their effectiveness. In March 2024, Russian authorities announced they had foiled an armed attack planned by an Islamic State cell in the Kaluga region, which had been targeting

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[1130] "Part of a Systemic Practice." Blogger Kidnapped in Central Moscow", *Radio Liberty*, June 4, 2025, https://www.svoboda.org/a/chastj-sistemnoy-praktiki-pohischenie-blogera-v-tsentre-moskvy/33433707.html

[1131] FSB Chief Calls CIS Labor Migrant Workers the Backbone of Terrorist Groups, *RBC*, April 11, 2017, http://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/04/2017/58ec92ea9a79477def3267f1?from=main_right

[1132] "Terrorist attack in the metro in St. Petersburg (2017)", *RIA Novosti*, April 3, 2022, Terrorist attack in the metro in St. Petersburg (2017)

[1133] "They were shooting from all sides, just from all sides." Chronology of the terrorist attack in "Crocus", RBC, March 22, 2025, "They were shooting from all sides, just from all sides." Chronology of the terrorist attack in "Crocus"

worshippers at a Moscow synagogue.[1134] In April 2024, the FSB reported that it had killed a terrorist during an attempted attack on a synagogue in Moscow.[1135] In March 2025, security forces again neutralized a terrorist who had planned to bomb a Jewish religious institution in the Moscow region and a metro station.[1136] In all of these cases, the perpetrators were individuals from Central Asia. However, some researchers have expressed doubts about the veracity of this information from the FSB, which wants to "demonstrate zeal in the context of the catastrophic failure of the Crocus City attack."[1137]

The following figures illustrate the magnitude of Russia's challenge in addressing labor immigration. In 2025, approximately 4.5 million migrants from Central Asia were residing in Russia, half a million more than in 2024.[1138] Most were concentrated in major cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg, where they have formed active and growing diasporas. In 2024, Russia hosted 1.8 million labor migrants from Uzbekistan and 1.2 million from Tajikistan. In Moscow alone, their combined communities numbered over 60,000 people, which is three times larger than the combined communities of Dagestanis and Chechens.[1139] The spread of Islamic radicalization in these and other Central Asian countries has contributed to numerous terrorist attacks within their borders. It has driven hundreds, possibly thousands, of their citizens to join the most extreme Islamist groups in the Middle East.[1140] Russia's reliance on migrant labor necessitates the authorities maintaining a large influx of workers from Central Asia. The risks associated with the infiltration of members of terrorist groups may influence the expansion of the geography of terrorism, including anti-Jewish terrorism. However, the government can mitigate the risks by tightening border control and reducing immigration from these countries, even if temporarily.[1141]

[1134] "FSB prevents terrorist attack on Moscow synagogue", *TVC*, March 7, 2024, https://www.tvc.ru/news/285777
[1135] "FSB prevents armed attack by ISIS members on synagogue in Moscow", Meduza, April 11, 2025, https://meduza.io/news/2024/04/11/fsb-soobschila-chto-predotvratila-terakt-v-moskovskoy-sinagoge
[1136] "FSB: Terrorist planning synagogue and Moscow metro bombings neutralized", Vedomosti, March 3, 2025, https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2025/03/03/1095531-fsb-neitralizovan
[1137] Vyacheslav Likhachev, "The circuit starts working in reverse - Anti-Semitism in Russia: A Throwback to Soviet Times?"
[1138] "About 4.5 million migrants from Central Asia live in Russia", *Avesta Information Agency*, June 2, 2025, https://avesta.tj/2025/06/02/okolo-4-5-milliona-migrantov-iz-tsentralnoj-azii-prozhivaet-v-rossii/
[1139] All-Russian Population Census 2010
[1140] Edward Lemon, "Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia", Wilson Center, December 2018.
[1141] "Uzbekistan to Strengthen Measures to Legalize Citizens in Russia", *RIA Novosti*, June 11, 2025, https://ria.ru/20250611/uzbekistan-2022249128.html, and "The phone decides whether you will be allowed into Russia: what they are now looking for at the border", *Newsinfo*, July 23, 2025, https://www.newsinfo.ru/news/inostrancy-proverka-telefona-tamozhnja/902748/

Such measures fall short of adequately addressing the challenges posed by the North Caucasus, which constitutes an integral part of the Russian Federation. To prevent such situations, Russian authorities will have to consider the unintended consequences of their anti-Semitic propaganda and the limits of manipulating public opinion. The continued transformation of Russia into a part of the Islamic world, driven by the growing Islamization, will make this task increasingly difficult. In the context of behind-the-scenes agreements with the leaders of the North Caucasus, as well as the Kremlin's changing policies in the Middle East, the likelihood of new outbreaks of anti-Semitism is growing, even in the absence of a Jewish population.

Conclusion

This dissertation attempted to analyze the evolution of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust narrative in Russia over a nearly forty-year period, from the late 1980s to 2025. This evolution has had a complex, often unpredictable trajectory, in which, after an initial attempt to break with the past, elements characteristic of previous periods of Russian history gradually began to emerge. Having begun with an attempt to normalize the "Jewish question," which included the abolition of the Soviet policy of anti-Semitism and the rejection of the ideology of anti-Zionism, it was reformatted into an instrument of manipulation and control in order to implement the political goals of the central government.

We have witnessed two transformations of anti-Semitism. The first was associated with the authorities' decision to abandon the Soviet legacy of state anti-Semitism in favor of a democratic model based on equality of ethnic and religious minorities. This transformation resolved the problem of discrimination against Jews by the Soviet regime, enabled free Jewish emigration, and created conditions for the revival of Jewish cultural and religious life. However, it did not prevent a sharp rise in anti-Semitism in politics and the media. The second transformation consisted of establishing control over the Jewish community, the manipulative use of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism in the Russian foreign policy, and the temporary suppression of anti-Semitism as part of strengthening authoritarian rule. In exchange for loyalty, Jewish organizations received government support and freedom of action to restore Jewish life, while their ability to combat anti-Semitism and distortions of the Holocaust was curtailed. The growth of neo-imperial policies, confrontation with the West, and the war with Ukraine further fueled anti-Semitic rhetoric on the part of the authorities and acts of anti-Semitism on the part of radical segments of society.

This study sought to answer the question of why, how, and with what consequences post-Soviet Russia moved from rejecting Soviet state anti-Semitism to using anti-Semitism and distortion of the Holocaust as political tools. It examined in detail the contradictory tendencies and paradoxes of Russian politics that accompanied, contributed to, and testified to the transformation of post-Soviet anti-Semitism. For example, during the first transformation, the rejection of state anti-Semitism coincided with a sharp rise in political and organized anti-Semitism, which fostered an atmosphere of intolerance and violence. Another paradox was that even as the Jewish emigration reached an unprecedented scale, Jewish cultural and religious life revived, and Jewish participation in Russia's economic and political reforms increased. A third

paradox emerged in the late 1990s when a severe economic crisis led to renewed political anti-Semitism but did not culminate in the worst-case scenario of Russian history - Jewish pogroms. Finally, during the second transformation of anti-Semitism, while the Putin administration maintained a favorable attitude toward the Jewish community and engaged in pragmatic dialogue with Israel, anti-Semitism nonetheless reemerged as a result of Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy. In a similar vein, while Russia has sought to present itself as a bulwark against anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, its leaders have simultaneously distorted the Holocaust and exploited anti-Semitism for political purposes.

Paradoxes of Post-Soviet Anti-Semitism: main findings and contributions

This study traced the main directions and milestones in the evolution and paradoxes of post-Soviet anti-Semitism. The rejection of the policy of discrimination against Soviet Jews occurred in the final years of the USSR as part of Mikhail Gorbachev's ambition to reform the Soviet regime. This shift was not initially planned by Gorbachev and his team, but resulted from a combination of internal and external factors. On the one hand, it required abandoning the ideological dogmatism of the USSR regarding the Jewish population and the Jewish state. This dogmatism, rooted in the geopolitical thinking of Stalin and his successors, held that Soviet Jews had no connection with Israel, but were merely an ethnic group destined for assimilation. On the other hand, the urgent need to address economic stagnation and technical backwardness prompted the USSR to normalize relations with the West, one of the conditions of which was resolving the question of Soviet Jewry, first and foremost by granting them the right to emigrate freely.

The combination of these pressures convinced the Soviet leader to permit Jewish emigration, which was the first important step toward abolishing state anti-Semitism. This decision also represented the victory of a competing geopolitical idea: that the Jewish minority in the USSR was part of the Jewish people, whose national center was the Jewish state, Israel. Yet Gorbachev's hesitation and inconsistency undermined his own policies, including on anti-Semitism. Only two months before his resignation, after effectively losing power, did he finally abandon two elements of Soviet anti-Semitism, officially recognizing the Holocaust and restoring relations with Israel.

Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, largely continued Gorbachev's approach toward Jews and the Jewish community. The abolition of state anti-Semitism and discrimination opened up opportunities for the rapid integration of Jews into the political and economic life of the country. However, like Gorbachev, Yeltsin paid little attention to the problem of political anti-Semitism, which became a weapon of the anti-democratic opposition and generated the escalation of anti-Semitic acts in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At the same time, the gradual turn to authoritarian methods of governance and manipulation of public opinion undermined democratic achievements, with negative consequences for the Jewish population.

For Soviet Jews, the abolition of the state anti-Semitism policy and the right to emigrate were the most important events since the founding of Israel. The long-awaited permission for emigration, granted amid a severe economic crisis, triggered a mass exodus from the USSR, with most of the emigrants settling in Israel. Unlike in Tsarist Russia, however, emigration was a personal choice, rather than the result of a government's policy of expulsion. Jewish emigration from post-Soviet Russia has continued without any restrictions ever since, sometimes declining, sometimes spiking, leading to a historically low Jewish population by 2025. The FJCR leadership, loyal to the Kremlin, has sought to downplay this fact, just underscoring the symbolic importance attached to community size, even when these claims no longer match the reality. In parallel, the first post-Soviet decade became a formative period for the Jewish community. For the first time in Russian history, Jews were no longer geographically confined (as under the imperial Pale of Settlement) or ideologically restricted (as under the Soviet system since the 1940s). The Russian Jewish Congress, established in 1996, was created as an independent organization that represented the interests of Russian Jewry. Modeled on the North American Jewish community, it constituted a milestone in the process of normalizing relations between the Jews and the Russian state.

This period also saw the normalization of Russian-Israeli relations. Diplomatic ties with Israel, delayed for years by intra-party resistance and pressure from the USSR's Arab partners, were reestablished only in the USSR's final months. Rapprochement with the Soviet Union produced mixed reactions in Israel, primarily because of Moscow's pro-Arab stance. During the short-lived "honeymoon" between Moscow and Jerusalem (1992–93), both the Russian government and the leaders of the parliamentary opposition endorsed normalization of relations. It was in this period that the idea of a "human bridge" between the countries emerged, embodied

in the large Russian-speaking population in Israel, created as a result of emigration. The subsequent cooling of the relations under Yevgeny Primakov reflected Moscow's geopolitical pivot away from the West and renewed ties with Arab partners. Yet, even this deterioration was itself an indicator of normalization: unlike in Soviet times, it did not entail a complete rupture of or affect the Jewish population, as was the case in the Soviet Union. Pragmatic considerations and Primakov's multipolar worldview, aimed against American hegemony, replaced Soviet anti-Zionist ideology.[1142]

The abolition of state anti-Semitism did not mean its disappearance. First, the intra-party opposition in the CPSU, and later the parliamentary opposition to Yeltsin, joined forces with nationalist movements to turn anti-Semitism into a weapon in the fight against perestroika, democratization, and economic liberalization. Anti-Semitism became the shared ideological platform for far-right and communist parties alike. Through their representatives in parliament and the media, it gained broad exposure. From an ideological point of view, it represented a combination of the pre-revolutionary tradition of the Black Hundreds and the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," the Soviet ideology of anti-Zionism, and Holocaust denial. Yet despite the prominence in politics, media, and radical Orthodox and Islamic movements, sociological surveys showed that this rhetoric did not enjoy broad support among the majority of the country's population. Between 1999 and 2006, the rise in anti-semitism showed no correlation between community size and anti-Semitic incidents, except in Moscow. The North Caucasus region stood out for a distinctive form of anti-Semitism – kidnapping for ransom. In all other regions, the most common incidents were vandalism or attacks on synagogues.

With Vladimir Putin's rise to power, the "Jewish question" immediately became a tool of political manipulation aimed at consolidating his regime. By enlisting the support of a Jewish organization loyal to the Kremlin, Putin was able to get rid of the Jewish oligarchs who opposed him without being accused of anti-Semitism. A product of the KGB's worldview and methods, Putin attached great importance to the geopolitical influence of the Jews, who KGB officers believed helped discredit the USSR during the Cold War. Moreover, Putin refrained from artificially separating the Jews of Russia from their co-religionists in Israel and the United States,

[1142] Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Evolution of Russian Strategy toward Israel: From Non-Recognition to Pragmatic Engagement", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Strategic Assessment, Volume 25, No. 1 | March 2022.

making it a priority to win over all three constituencies. In Russia, he supported the FJCR in its efforts to revive the Jewish community in exchange for loyalty. In Israel and the US, he cultivated relationships with Jewish leaders through personal diplomacy and a willingness to engage in dialogue. The loss of independence of the Russian Jewish organizations and the transformation of the FJCR into an instrument of the Kremlin's foreign propaganda weakened the Jewish community and limited its ability to combat anti-Semitism. Taking advantage of favorable circumstances in the Middle East (the US disengagement from the region), Russia strengthened its military and political presence, which increased Israel's dependence on Moscow's actions.

Despite the importance of the Middle East in demonstrating Russian influence, the Kremlin's primary focus has been on reasserting control over Russia's "near abroad", primarily in Ukraine. Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic orientation contradicted Russia's vision of its "sphere of influence" and constituted the primary driver of confrontation with both Ukraine and the West. To mobilize domestic support and define Russia's enemies and friends, the Kremlin created a new geopolitical vision based on the history of World War II and the USSR's fight against Nazism, placing the Holocaust at the center of its anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western discourse. In this new narrative, Ukraine was branded a neo-Nazi state, the Western countries its accomplices, while Russia was the heir to the anti-fascist struggle of 80 years ago. Within this construct, Jews and Israel were cast as natural allies, sharing with Russia a commitment to historical truth and the fight against neo-Nazism and Holocaust denial. The criticisms of the Baltic states and Ukraine by international Jewish organizations for rehabilitating Nazi collaborators who fought against the USSR served Russia's goals of discrediting these countries. The government of Israel, mindful of Russia's growing presence in the Middle East, accepted the Russian interpretation of World War II, despite its apparent contradictions and distortions of the Holocaust. Despite the manipulative nature of the Kremlin's Holocaust narrative, the FJCR actively promoted it, even when it was used to justify the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014. At the same time, neo-imperial and revanchist official propaganda fueled the growth of anti-Semitic discourse within Russia.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has exposed the manipulative nature of the Kremlin's narrative. International Jewish organizations and Holocaust remembrance institutions, including Yad Vashem, condemned the exploitation of the Holocaust for political purposes. Government of

Israel and the FJCR, however, faced a dilemma: how to reconsider their role in the geopolitical framework that was imposed on them by Putin. This situation further deteriorated with the rise of anti-Semitic rhetoric by Russian officials, including Putin himself, who targeted the Jewish origins of the Ukrainian president and war opponents. Another escalation followed the war between Israel and Hamas, when Russian officials, including Putin, reverted to Soviet-style anti-Zionist rhetoric. This discourse inflamed anti-Semitic sentiments, leading to acts of vandalism and an attempted pogrom in the North Caucasus. The Russian Foreign Ministry officials openly quarreled with Israeli diplomats and sought to revise the definition of the Holocaust. At the same time, President Putin has blamed "ethnic Jews" for anti-Russian actions in Ukraine.

In Europe, Russian intelligence services have launched a series of sabotage and destabilization operations, including anti-Semitic provocations in France. The dramatic events in the Middle East in 2024-2025, which weakened Russian influence in the region, and an attempt to renew direct dialogue with Israel in May 2025, may lead to possbile reduction of tensions between the two countries. While refusing to condemn Israel for its war with Iran (June 13-24, 2025), Putin has again referred to the Jewish state as "almost a Russian-speaking country."[1143] Thus, for now, his geopolitical conception of Israel remains intact.

Meanwhile, the rise of terrorist activity by adherents of radical Islamic groups in Russia, including against Jewish institutions, highlights complex regional (North Caucasus) and demographic (labor immigrants from Central Asia) dynamics. In this context, the Kremlin will have to adapt its geopolitical narratives to new realities in order to preserve authoritarian control at home, which has been and remains the overriding goal of Vladimir Putin's regime.

I would emphasis three main conclusions. First, the transformation of anti-Semitism in Russia, and the paradoxes surrounding it, were shaped by the external and internal political agendas of the central authorities. The second conclusion indicates that the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust theme has been a deliberate policy of the current Russian leadership, and an integral part of its foreign policy strategy and internal control mechanisms. And finally, the third conclusion is that the Kremlin's aggressive policy towards Ukraine and

[1143] "Putin responded to the Arabs: "Israel is actually a Russian-speaking country", *Channel 9*, June 20, 2025, https://www.9tv.co.il/item/93534?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=ts&utm_content=rss&fbclid=IwY2xjawMz2KxleHRuA2FlbQIxMQBicmlkETE2ZzZRZ3lRNFQ4RGZNeFF2AR5fEeqKU47BsWHfkBWKOJSjY8cBBMg1d2ZSNW8t1J32bwjbtsDNEuP812LrPQ_aem_wgxvViu1sgkEGSkDwwfn0w

Western countries, combined with intensifying repression and authoritarianism at home, has produced a new surge in anti-Semitism, a renewed wave of Jewish emigration, and a systematic distortion of the history of the Holocaust. Thus, Russia's current policies stand in direct contradiction with one of the main achievements of early post-Soviet Russia: the abolition of state anti-Semitism in the USSR. The paradox of Putin's Jewish policy is that under a leader who cultivated the image of a "friend of the Jewish people," anti-Semitism has once again become embedded in the official discourse. Ultimately, these were the consequences of the Putin administration's instrumental and manipulative approach to the Jewish question in Russia, anti-Semitism, and Holocaust memory.

The findings of the study demonstrate a direct connection between the Kremlin's early efforts to consolidate power after 1999, where interference in the affairs of the Jewish community was a central element, and the manipulation of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in its confrontation with Ukraine and the West. It was regime interests that shaped his image as a friend of the Jewish people, and Russia as a bulwark in the fight against anti-Semitism, not Putin's "personal predisposition toward the Jews," as Feferman argues.[1144] On Putin's personal geopolitical map, both the Jewish people and the state of Israel were necessary allies, and during his first tenure as president, he succeeded in securing their support. In this sense, "the cultivation of Jewish support by the Putin regime is purely instrumental".[1145]

The instrumental nature of Putin's policy helps explain its sensitivity to foreign policy fluctuations. On the one hand, Putin continues to see strategic value in cultivating close ties with Israel and the Jewish people as it strengthens Russia's position in its confrontation with the West. But on the other hand, this position frequently clashes with the changing realities of the Middle East and Russia's regional interests, generating tensions in the relationship. That explains why periods of close cooperation alternate with outbursts of anti-Israeli rhetoric, embraced by the authorities and official propaganda. At the same time, the manipulative nature of this policy also carries the risk of losing control, as seen in the North Caucasus in October 2023.

This study also provides an alternative explanation for Israel's position on the Kremlin's Holocaust narrative. Israel's willingness to cooperate with Russia on this issue is not, as suggests Weiss-Wendt, the result of nostalgia among the Russian-speaking population for their country of

[1144] Feferman, p. 100.
[1145] Weiss-Wendt, Anton, Putin's Russia and the Falsification of History: Reasserting Control over the Past", p. 367.

origin. Public opinion polls show that Israeli society views Russian aggression largely negatively. Instead, Israel's position reflects the government's determination to protect national security, even at the cost of tolerating distortions of Holocaust memory. The controversial character of this approach has created an adverse reaction within Israeli society.

In modern Russia, as in the USSR and the Tsarist Empire, the state acts as the "regulator" of anti-Semitism. It can raise or lower its "dosage" at will, depending on political calculations. In the late 2000s, the number of antisemitic incidents declined as the state chose to confront them as part of its authoritarian consolidation of power. However, antisemitic manifestations never disappeared entirely and regained visibility after 2014, when Russia opted for confrontation with Ukraine and the West. The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East further entrenched anti-Semitism and Holocaust distortions in official Russian discourse, thereby legitimizing antisemitic sentiments in society. As Lev Gudkov argues, "without special propaganda, anti-Semitism in Russia does not pose a threat."[1146] In a similar vein, Brim noted in 1999 that anti-Semitism in Russia depends not on popular sentiment but on "who controls the presidential office and the State Duma."[1147] By 2025, it depends exclusively on the presidential office. As with other sensitive issues, the Kremlin seeks to maintain complete control over anti-Semitism, which is why it was caught off guard by the events of 2023 in the North Caucasus. The attacks on synagogues in Dagestan and other regions in 2024–2025 suggest that the genie of anti-Semitism may have been unleashed by Kremlin propaganda.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the understanding of possible scenarios for the future evolution of anti-Semitism in Russia. The most likely outcome in the near future seems to be the continuation of current trends. As Russia continues its war with Ukraine and confrontation with the West, anti-Semitism will remain a tool in the fight against its external enemies. The Holocaust, as part of the Russian narrative of World War II, will remain central to official propaganda, and the Kremlin will maintain the same geopolitical logic. The Jewish community in Russia will continue to decline demographically, while its leaders remain dependent on the Kremlin.

[1146] Gudkov, "Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia in Modern Russia".
[1147] Brim.

A more dangerous prospect for the Jewish population, especially in the event of economic collapse or political instability, is that it may again be scapegoated. In times of systemic crisis, such as military failure or sudden political change, the Kremlin could revive Stalin's tactic of assigning blame for Russia's failures by labeling Jews as "enemies of the people." Casting Jews as a "fifth column" working against Russia would allow popular discontent to be redirected against a vulnerable minority, as has occurred repeatedly in Russian and Soviet history. This scenario, however, would require abandoning the Kremlin's current philo-Semitic image cultivated for foreign policy purposes.

A more optimistic though less likely scenario would be a post-Putin reorientation towards genuine democratization. Under these conditions, the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism could be rejected, and the Holocaust memory could return to its universal and educational functions. Such an outcome, however, presupposes a radical change in the political system. Given the deep entrenchment of neo-imperial ideology and the regime's transition to totalitarian methods, this scenario looks very unlikely in the short or medium term. Yet it is worth recalling that post-Soviet Russia itself began with precisely such a transformation that seemed impossible at the time.

A hybrid scenario is also possible, combining elements of the first two scenarios. While the central authorities may continue to exploit anti-Semitism for domestic and political purposes, regional dynamics could produce surges in anti-Semitic violence, much as occurred in the North Caucasus in 2023-2024. The combination of socio-economic conditions and religious radicalization, particularly Islamist, could have explosive potential in the peripheral regions of Russia. This makes the likelihood of anti-Semitic violence especially high in the North Caucasus region. Moreover, the concentration of ethnic communities from these regions in Moscow and St. Petersburg further raises the likelihood of such incidents spreading to these cities.

Topics Remaining Outside the Research

Several important topics that could expand our understanding of the transformation of contemporary anti-Semitism in Russia were left beyond the scope of this study. One such subject is the examination of attitudes towards the Jewish community and the level of anti-Semitism among immigrant communities, given the magnitude of the migrant population. Most

immigrants to Russia come from the former Soviet republics, primarily from Central Asian countries, and settle in large cities, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg. Russian authorities are concerned about the level of crime rates among immigrants, which in turn leads to an escalation of interethnic relations.[1148] In 2024, immigrants from Tajikistan carried out the deadliest terrorist attack in Russia in the last twenty years. Official reports on thwarted synagogue attacks by immigrants highlight the need for a deeper analysis of this phenomenon in the broader context of anti-Semitism.

Field research in the North Caucasus republics could provide deeper insight into anti-Israeli and antisemitic sentiments in the region. However, the current risks of working in North Caucasus, and in Russia more generally, particularly amid the growing military confrontation between Russia and Western countries, make such research unfeasible for the foreseeable future.

Another underexplored area concerns the influence of the digital environment and social networks, which in the last two decades have become the most important channels for the dissemination of anti-Semitic narratives and distortions of Holocaust memory. Understanding these mechanisms is especially interesting given the central role of the Russian authorities, interested in creating a "sovereign Internet," in shaping and controlling the digital environment.

Finally, this research focused exclusively on the Russian context and did not include a comparative study with other post-Soviet states, particularly the Baltic countries, Ukraine, and Belarus. Such a comparison would have allowed for a more precise identification of the specifics of anti-Semitism's evolution in Russia.

Perspectives

The evolution of anti-Semitism in Russia over the past 25 years, especially its foreign policy or geopolitical aspect, is part of a larger trend that extends beyond Russia itself, opening ample opportunities for further research. The rise of anti-Semitism in countries with large Jewish communities, and more so amid the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict, places them at the

[1148] Irina Ivakhnyuk, “Labor Migration to Russia: A Look Through the Prism of Political, Economic and Demographic Trends”, Russian International Affairs Council, 17 November 2023, https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/trudovaya-migratsiya-v-rossiyu-vzglyad-cherez-prizmu-politicheskikh-ekonomicheskikh-i-demograficheskikh/

heart of global politics. Countries with significant Jewish communities find themselves in a situation where they must respond to international pressures and also manage internal dynamics that may threaten the security of their citizens. At the same time, these states must also address the link between local Jewish communities and the Jewish state.

From a methodological perspective, the relationship between the Jewish diasporas and Israel corresponds to Gamlen's "emigration state" model, which explains new geopolitical concepts. According to this model, states seek to maintain ties with their diaspora through specific mechanisms. Israel maintains particularly close ties with Jewish communities, treating them as its diaspora, since, under the Israeli Law of Return, they are entitled to citizenship. Other countries also recognize the special relationship between the Jewish diaspora and Israel, albeit not in a formal manner, but rather as a geopolitical concept.

The case of France clearly illustrates this logic. President Macron's decision to recognize a Palestinian state coincided with a surge in anti-Semitism within the country, creating double pressure. Domestically, the Jewish community became the target of violence linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; externally, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the US Ambassador to France accused the French government of failing to protect its Jewish population. This left France in a difficult position: its foreign policy initiative faced the risk of intensifying internal divisions, while drawing international criticism over the unresolved issue of the security of the Jewish community. In his response letter to Netanyahu, President Macron rejected the accusations as "instrumentalization of anti-Semitism" but did not deny the legitimacy of the Israel Prime Minister's concern for Jewish communities abroad.[1149] The US ambassador's intervention, by contrast, provoked a diplomatic protest from the French government. These events demonstrate the existence in France of a geopolitical conception of the French Jewry as a diaspora of Israel, although the majority of French Jews are not Israeli citizens.

The 2023–24 protests on American campuses, in which anti-Israel rhetoric was frequently mixed with overtly anti-Semitic expressions, further highlight how anti-Semitism has become a flashpoint between domestic and foreign policy. For the Joe Biden administration, mass demonstrations initiated by pro-Palestinian organizations linked to Hamas posed a dual

[1149] "Emmanuel Macron répond à Benyamin Nétanyahou : le texte de la lettre envoyée par le président de la République", Le Monde, August 26, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/08/26/emmanuel-macron-repond-a-benyamin-netanyahou-le-texte-de-la-lettre-envoyee-par-le-president-francais_6635773_3210.html

challenge: responding decisively to rising anti-Semitism in the United States, while also managing public pressure over the war between Israel and Hamas. Hamas and its supporters on American campuses deliberately blurred the line between the anti-Zionist agenda and hostilities toward Jews, to discredit the Jewish community, thus inciting to anti-Semitic violence and discrimination. This forced the US government to balance two competing imperatives: ensuring the security of the American Jews and simultaneously promoting its policy in the Middle East amid disagreements with the Israeli government.[1150]

The examples of Russia, France, the United States, and other countries show that anti-Semitism and the security of Jewish communities can no longer be seen as internal social issues. They have become a geopolitical factor. On the one hand, Israel's connection with the Jewish diasporas and its concern for their security are widely acknowledged by other states as legitimate. On the other hand, Israel's opponents exploit this very connection to justify anti-Semitic actions. Thus, in 2025, anti-Semitism has become a geopolitical factor that, much like ninety years ago, directly links the physical security of Jewish communities with the international agenda.

Returning to the topic of anti-Semitism in modern Russia, I will cite the words of a contemporary researcher of the Russian Jewry:

> "The return of anti-Semitism to the public sphere is an important symptom of the ongoing decay of both the political system and the norms that held society together, which, after February 24, 2022, are increasingly 'falling out of their grooves'... The current revival of anti-Semitism is also a miasma signaling the moral decay of Russian social and political institutions and the pervasiveness of conspiracy thinking."[1151]

This observation strikingly echoes the words of the Russian philosopher Dmitry Merezhkovsky, who noted at the beginning of the 20th century, that "the Jewish question is the Russian question."

[1150] Aurelia End, "After breaking silence, Biden faces balancing act on Gaza demos", Al-Monitor, May 2 ,2024, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/05/after-breaking-silence-biden-faces-balancing-act-gaza-demos

[1151] Poluektova-Krimer, "Russian Anti-Semitism: Long Time No See".

Future scenarios of Jewish life in Russia remain uncertain, but one conclusion is clear. As long as anti-Semitism continues to serve as an instrument of power, its eradication will be impossible. The central lesson of the past four decades of post-Soviet history is that without a genuine democratic transformation and complete rejection of the anti-Semitic legacy – imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet – anti-Semitism will persist both as an instrument of power and a symptom of its abuse.

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Résumé :

Dans le cadre de la crise identitaire qui a traversé la Russie après l'effondrement de l'URSS, l'antisémitisme et la mémoire de la Shoah occupent une place paradoxale : après avoir connu une phase de normalisation dans les années 1990, ils ont été progressivement réinvestis et instrumentalisés par le pouvoir.

Comment expliquer cette transformation des narratifs liés à l'antisémitisme et à la Shoah dans la Russie post-soviétique ? Dans quelle mesure ces narratifs servent-ils à renforcer une identité nationale en quête de légitimité, à délégitimer l'Occident, ou à justifier des choix géopolitiques ? Enfin, quelles continuités et ruptures observe-t-on entre la mémoire soviétique et la mémoire russe contemporaine, et que révèlent-elles des rapports entre mémoire collective, pouvoir politique et stratégie internationale ?

En tentant de répondre à ces questions, ma recherche analyse l'évolution de l'antisémitisme en Russie post-soviétique et a pour objectif de mettre en lumière les liens complexes entre mémoire, idéologie et géopolitique. Elle tente de montrer que la mémoire de la Shoah, loin d'être un simple héritage du passé, est devenu un champ de bataille symbolique et politique, et s'attache à mettre en évidence les mécanismes par lesquels une mémoire universelle peut être remodelée, détournée et utilisée comme ressource stratégique.

La première partie traite du recul des politiques antisémites sous Gorbatchev et Eltsine, et de la normalisation avec Israël. La seconde montre comment, sous Poutine, la question juive et la mémoire de la Shoah sont instrumentalisées à des fins politiques, alimentant les tensions antisémites, la distorsion de l'Holocauste et la confrontation avec l'Ukraine et l'Occident.

MOTS-CLES : Russie, Antisémitisme, Holocauste, Propagande, Géopolitique, Israël

Abstract :

In the context of the identity crisis that swept through Russia after the collapse of the USSR, antisemitism and the memory of the Holocaust occupy a paradoxical position. After undergoing a phase of normalization in the 1990s, they have been gradually reinvested and instrumentalized by the authorities.

How can we explain this transformation of narratives related to antisemitism and the Holocaust in post-Soviet Russia? To what extent do these narratives serve to reinforce a national identity in search of legitimacy, to delegitimize the West, or to justify geopolitical choices?
Finally, what continuities and ruptures do we observe between Soviet and contemporary Russian memory, and what do they reveal about the relationships between collective memory, political power, and international strategy?

In attempting to answer these questions, my research examines the evolution of antisemitism in post-Soviet Russia, aiming to shed light on the complex relationships between memory,

ideology, and geopolitics. It attempts to show that antisemitism and the memory of the Holocaust, far from being a simple legacy of the past, have become a symbolic and political battlefield, and seeks to highlight the mechanisms by which universal memory can be reshaped, diverted, and used as a strategic resource.

The first part deals with the decline of anti-Semitic policies under Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and normalization with Israel. The second shows how, under Putin, the Jewish question and the memory of the Holocaust are being exploited for political ends, fueling the anti-Semitic tensions, Holocaust distortions, and confrontation with Ukraine and the West.

KEYWORDS: Russia, Anti-Semitism, Holocaust, Propaganda, Geopolitics, Israel