



Mobility and the geographical factor as reasons for the Jewish assimilation in the Soviet Union

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Abstract

The article concerns the matter of assimilation of the Jewish groups in the USSR. It is assumed that the level of assimilation in the Soviet Union depended not only on a geographical factor, but also on mobility. We can distinguish such Jewish groups like: Ashkenazi, Bukharan, Mountain Jews and Georgian Jews. Among all of these Jewish groups, Ashkenazi Jews were subjected to assimilation the most, mostly because of the historical and political reasons that influenced geographical regions where they lived. Mobility was a special element of everyday life in this country due to its dependence on a political regime. In the 1930s, forced mobility was a method to fight politically undesirable elements, which were people who were considered as a part of the former bourgeois system (peasants and entrepreneurs who owned property). As a result, hundreds of thousands were deprived of their property and deported or arrested and had to start a new life in completely different regions (or were sent to prison). Jews also became the victims of this process. Forced mobility was put an end to only with the liberalization of the political system. Since the 1960s, people had chances to change their place of living voluntarily due to work. Sometimes the place they chose was located in other republics. Usually, the new place of living is a challenge to adopt to local conditions and customs. In the case of the

Soviet Union this adaptation was a lot easier because of the unified educational, social and political systems. Russian language became the lingua franca and the mother tongue of dozens of nationalities, when Russian culture dominated the other cultures. These factors helped Soviet citizens to integrate into new working collectives easily, but did not help many Jews to keep their identity.

Keywords: mobility, USSR, assimilation, Jews

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1. Assimilation processes in the USSR

In 1970, Leonid Brezhnev declared that the idea of the “Soviet people” was fulfilled. He found confirmation in mixed marriages, the multiethnic army, that overall the same living conditions within the Soviet Union prevailed and the common usage of the Russian language as a mother tongue (Fawkes 1997:267). Certainly, all these elements had played an important role. In a country where more than a half of the citizens belong to different nationalities, it was necessary to find a common identity for all of them. The Soviet Union faced such a challenge throughout its existence.

The Soviet state was a huge territorial unit, which consisted of 15 national republics. Despite this national diversity, as well as the difference in the development of large regions of the country, similarities in the lifestyle of Soviets citizens can be assumed. This similarity consisted in belonging to the civil society organizations (Oktyabryata, Pioneers, Komsomol, and communistic party), a unified school system, the general media, as well as the general system of bureaucracy and administration. That means that in any point of the country the citizens of the Soviet Union took the same path of education and received the same cultural knowledge. From Tallinn to Dushanbe children sang the Pioneers’ song “Soar bonfires” (Vzveytes’ kostrami), the youth joined Komsomol, all went together on May 1st parades, celebrated Victory Day, and stood in line for food. Another common feature of everydayness in the

USSR was mobility, which is here understood as a process of movement within the country and the change of a place of residence.

Today the Soviet national policy is considered to be a failure, although its beginning seemed to be promising (Fawkes 1997). In addition to the centralization of the system, collectivization and electrification, the Bolsheviks also introduced a policy of indigenization (korenisatsya). Civil War demanded new allies and the native populations of Turkestan, Caucasus and other lands were considered as potential ones. Most nations got their territorial units - republics, where they had the right to use their language and customs together with the communist ideology. The authorities introduced the concept of ethno-nationalism - 100 ethnic groups shared one country, the economic system, language and the collective principle. The identity of the people was based on the administrative units, as well as Russian realism mixed with a local folklore. Soon, this policy reincarnated in a kind of colonial system. "Moscow Center" imposed to the dependent territories an accumulation and redistribution of power and attachment to the dominant Russian culture (Chari, Verdery 2001:6-34). This stage can be called a progressive assimilation. Despite the presence of the local culture, radio and television broadcast a general central transmission and the new generation was brought up under the one ideological system. People were accustomed to atheism.

Undoubtedly religion can be considered as a special category of identity. In the case of, for instance, Central Asian and Siberian peoples, the struggle with the religious customs has become a significant method of introducing the Soviet elements into everyday life. Youth was lured by the possibility of free education, social upgrade through the party structures, and as a result many broke with their ethnic ties. The Soviet people were brought up in the spirit of the friendship of peoples and built their Soviet identity through collective social life. The working class identified itself not only with the place of residence, local and general culture, but also with a place of work, where there was an access to public life, various hobby groups, clubs, or summer holidays vouchers (Ashwin 1999).

Another element which helped to increase Soviet identity was mobility. Times can be seen in the history of the USSR when large numbers of people were included in the process of mobility – forced and voluntarily.

The Stalinist period is an example of forced mobility, which has been linked to evictions, deportations, exiles, arrests and departures to the Gulag camps. All these categories, in addition to the camps, were usually associated with dekulakization which is the process when the state nationalized the property of peasants and small entrepreneurs. Those who were not shot at once were sent to special settlements (trudposelenya) in Kazakhstan, Siberia and the Far East. Exile was not an equivalent for deportation as from exile one could return. The category of forced settlements

means that people could not change their destination. If a person tried to escape from a forced settlement, he was punished with up to 20 years of hard labor. During more than ten years, hundred thousands of families were sent from Ukrainian SSR, the Lower Volga region, Caucasus, from the Crimea and from other regions to trudposelenya. Special settlers worked primarily on collective farms (kolkhoz), but also in industry - the coal, metallurgy, and so on. Sometimes deportations were subjected to whole nationalities (mostly Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, and Germans). During the war in the special settlements also Kalmyks, Chechens, Crimean Tatars, Greeks and many other nationalities were deported (Земсков 1990).

During the Second World War, millions of soldiers and hundreds of thousands of civilians were mobilized and evacuated from the front line. After the war, many soldiers who had survived fights and prison camps were sent to prison by the state in order to avoid potential rebellion tendencies after visiting the West.

To the above list should be added another form, the phenomenon of a “labor mobility”. In the USSR, work mobility was represented by social phenomena such as a construction works done by Komsomol, or mandatory state distribution of young professionals after graduation into different regions of the country. The change of a place of residence or workplace was not a particular problem, as the realities of life were almost identical. Moreover, an important binding element of the vast country was the Russian lan-

guage, which became native to many nationalities, as well as the Russian culture, which was the very basis of school education.

It is sometimes believed that the authorities failed to implement one unified identity among the people. A peaceful multicultural life ended with the fall of the USSR. Many nationalist conflicts ensued. Furthermore, also political reasons can be found. Years of repression formed a mass of subordinate people who knew the party slogans and laws by heart, but did not believe in them. Still, they accepted the communist party because they knew that there was no alternative (Yurchak 2006). Lack of recognition of power can be considered as an example for the failure of the “Soviet man”. Despite the active participation in the system, no all people took it seriously. Most of the youth joined Komsomol just to go to college, which was a necessary precondition. Membership in the party opened the way to a career. Elections, May Day parades, voluntary work were required, and it was not desirable to miss it. Double thinking became a standard in the Soviet reality and can suggest some artificiality in the concept of the Soviet identity. This problem was discussed by many dissidents from the socialist countries, including Vaclav Havel, who wrote open letters to the Czechoslovakian communistic leaders (Havel 1986). Nevertheless, the Soviet lifestyle propagated by the system became a characteristic element of the Soviet assimilation for the people.

It is necessary to remember that Soviet reality concerns also Jews. This brief background is important to show differences in the assimilation processes of the Jewish groups in the USSR. Like all other nations they too were influenced by these processes.

When we think about the Jewish groups which inhabited the USSR, we should look at two factors that influenced the level of their assimilation. Jewish diaspora includes a large variety of groups with respect to the geographical location. This factor influenced the customs, costumes and language which the particular group used (or still uses). Despite big differences between, for instance, Kaifeng and Ashkenazi Jews, Judaism was still the factor which united them. In the case of the USSR we can distinguish several groups that inhabited this territory: Ashkenazi (European Jews who lived all around the country during the Soviet period, but historically lived in the Western part of Russia), Bukharan Jews (from Central Asia, mostly Tajikistan and Turkmenistan), Mountain (Caucasus) and Georgian (Georgia). Even if it is still the Caucasus region, the group is distinguished because it uses a different language – Georgian, other than Mountain Jews - Juhuri).

2. Ashkenazi, Mountain, Bukharan and Georgian Jews in the USSR

After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem the exile of the Jewish people began. According to historians,

Jewish groups appeared in the Caucasus and Central Asia a long time ago. In the Caucasus, Jews probably came from Persia before the 10th century, and in Asia in a similar period of time. Jews settled in Georgia even earlier (Ниязов 2006:13; Бегун 1999:25).

Ashkenazy Jews established their communities in the Central and Eastern Europe. A significant majority lived in Poland. They became citizens of Russia together with the annexation of Polish territory in the 18th century.

Depending on their geographical location, the fate of the groups evolved differently. Central Asian Jews soon got the name Bukharan due to the Bukhara Khanate, although Jews lived also in other places. According to a legend, the Asian conqueror Tamerlane named Jews living in the cities Kokand, Bukhara and Khiva this way. Bukharan Jews had an opportunity to develop themselves through the Silk Road. They were mainly engaged in trade, agriculture, jewelry and other crafts activities. Some of them achieved a big financial success thanks to cotton and astrakhan fur trade between Russia and Europe.

Mountain Jews, isolated by the mountains of the Caucasus, evolved differently. Most of them were employed in agriculture or in small trade, which did not bring as much profit, as in the example of Bukharan Jews. The main Jewish settlements were in Baku, Quba, Nalchik, Derbent and Mahachkala (Бегун 1999). Georgian Jews can be described

in the same manner according to the same geographical area.

Soviet policy introduced major changes into Jewish life. A special Jewish classification was introduced depending on the regions, as well as on the languages: Yiddish, Judeo-Tat (also called by Mountain Jews Juhuri), Jewish-Tajik (Bukharan), Hebrew-Aramaic (Kurdish), Crimean Tatar and Karaite (the language of Karaites living in Lithuania and Western Ukraine, they do not regard themselves as Jews) (Tchlenov 1995). Among all the Jewish groups, the Ashkenazi were most strongly exposed to assimilation.

For centuries, Bukharan, Mountain Jews and Georgian Jews were not very influenced by assimilation with other nations, as they lived in peripheral regions. Asian and Caucasian Khanates could complicate life politically, but the cases of Islamization of Jews were rare. After the conquest of the southern lands by the Russian Empire, converts could return back to Judaism (Gubaeva 1995). Intermarriages almost did not occur. In the Caucasus, they appear only in the cases of the theft of Jewish women (a custom popular in this region), and later under the Soviet regime. Marriages within the family between relatives were very popular. This practice existed till the late Soviet times (Vyshenskaya 1995).

Ashkenazi Jews gradually left their Jewish heritage as a result of years of pogroms and anti-Semitism. The Soviet government gave all the people equal rights. However, these rights were associated with the assimilation to the

Soviet system and then the Russian culture. Not only the new generations of European Jews left the faith and customs of their ancestors, but also the Bukharan and Mountain Jews, especially in the late 1930s. Until 1938, it was possible to study in one's native language. Until that time, there was no special conflict with religion. In the 1920s, there were three religious schools in Nalchik (Бергун 1999:215). Soon, the authorities began to suppress the culture of the local populations. In the schools Russian became the language of instruction, not Bukharan and Juhuri. Gradually, synagogues were closed and rabbis were arrested. Some became victims of property dispossession. However, the Sovietization process did not affect the traditional rituals of Jews.

Despite the active atheist propaganda, the USSR failed in the destruction of religion. For example, in the Uzbek republic in 1945 the majority of synagogues were closed, but people still gathered in private houses to continue their rituals. In some cities, in Dushanbe, Tashkent and Kokand all synagogues functioned until the end of the Soviet Union. In Shahrisabz in the 1960s people continued to pray in their homes, as all the houses of worship were closed (Baldauf, Gammer, Loy 2008). In the Jewish settlement Quba in Azerbaijan, from 11 synagogues that were active in 1917, 7 worked until the end of the USSR (Бергун 1999:157). Authorities could not destroy the tradition of circumcision and ritual slaughter. Despite the fact that Stalin had banned the circumcision of boys under the threat of execution of their fathers, Bukharan, Georgian Jews and Mountain

Jews continued the tradition. Usually, both functions - the slaughter of animals and mohel – were performed by the same person in the whole region. In the Caucasus the ritual functions were executed by several people at the same time. Officially, their activities were considered illegal, but most of them successfully served their society mostly because the authorities ignored their activism. Of course it was not possible to avoid all reprisals. Many of those who actively demanded the development of the Jewish religious life were arrested. An opportunity of development happened in the 1980s, when synagogues could open religious schools for children and permitted activities of foreign religious Jewish groups, which was usually Chabad-Lubawicz (Vyhenskaya 1995). During Stalin period, studying the Torah was banned. Under Khrushchev things improved for the Jews. In 1957 an official yeshiva was opened in Moscow, where many regional leaders were educated to lead a ritual service (Baldauf, Gammer, Loy 2008).

It is worth mentioning that the lack of assimilation of Mountain, Georgian Jews and Bukharan Jews was a result of the fact that they lived in separate villages or neighborhoods and communicated mostly with their own environment. In Central Asia, Jews lived in quarters called mahalla, where the traditional principles of community administration were preserved in the Soviet times. Jews who lived in the Caucasus were also settled in the separate quarters, such as the Jewish settlement in Quba.

In Europe this practice was not possible since Jewish shtetls did not exist in Russia anymore, and Ashkenazy Jews were usually fully integrated into the society in which they lived. Although Bukharan, Georgian Jews and Mountain Jews also adopted the culture of the peoples among whom they lived, it was limited to clothes, family names, architecture and cuisine. The main distinctive features were religion and language. Thanks to Judaism, Caucasian and Central Asian Jews kept their identity. Ashkenazi submitted to atheism and; therefore, they lost the tradition of their ancestors. For many of them the only one element which emphasized their Jewish identity was only the fifth column in their passport which declared their nationality as being Jewish (which included the nationality of a person). On the other hand, Mountain Jews, Georgian Jews and Bukharan Jews continued to follow the rituals associated with the holidays, birth, death and marriage. Some authors give Komsomol weddings as an example (what means “secular”) celebrated under the chuppah (Бегун 1999:168).

Ashkenazi Jews failed to preserve Yiddish, while Central Asian and Caucasian Jews continuously used the Juhuri and Bukharan languages. The survey from 1979 showed that in Samarkand (also inhabited by Ashkenazi Jews who settled there under the tsarist regime), only 19% of Bukharan Jews recognized Russian as their mother tongue, while the number among Ashkenazy was 57%. Juhuri was named as a mother tongue by 73% of Mountain Jews (Tchlenov 1995).

This fact shows how strong the tradition was even in the late phase of the Soviet Union.

3. Mobility as a sign of assimilation

Differences on forced and voluntarily mobility in the USSR have already been mentioned. While Caucasus and Central Asian Jews mostly did not change the place of their residence for centuries, for Ashkenazy Jews mobility was an important element of their everyday life.

At the end of the 19th century, Russia was inhabited by over 50% of the Jewish world population, over 5 million of people (Вишневский 2000:117). They did not have equal social and economic rights. As a result, the level of poverty among them was very high, especially in the villages (shtetl). Such conditions caused two tendencies among the Ashkenazy – either they moved to the cities (the category of “useful Jews” which was introduced by the tsarist authorities and which described educated people, who could work in particular professions), or they migrated (usually to the USA or Palestine). It is estimated that before the First World War around 2 million Jews left Russia (Вишневский 2000:117). The Countries they reached allowed them to keep their Jewish identity, while their ex compatriots fought with the assimilation dilemma. Many of them who stayed left their religion and language in the past and began a new life as a “Soviet person”. That does not mean that the other Jewish groups did not become a part of this project. Still, as the

previous description showed, some Central Asian and Caucasus Jews also became victims of the system, but because of the peripheral location they could keep the tradition. On the other hand, if we think about the percentage of victims in each group, we should remember that Ashkenazi group constitutes a majority in the world Jewish population, so its number will naturally stay bigger in the future.

Deportations concerned the Jewish nation, too. For instance, according to official statistics, in 1941 there were registered 59 031 Jews who were deported to special settlements in Kazakhstan (Земсков 1990). Not all the categories of special settlers included nationality, so the number could be bigger.

How did the forced deportation influence the lives of its victims? People were transported in cattle wagons to the destination. There, depending on the region, the settlers built dugouts by themselves and were regularly supervised by a commanding officer. The high mortality rate of the immigrants should also be added, as the conditions of transport and the life conditions were extremely difficult (Земсков 1991). In the new settlements, people didn't only have to settle down in a new place, but also had to learn how to live in a new multicultural society. Additionally, special settlers were constantly suffering from hunger and the harsh climate. None of them had passports, so they had no freedom of movement.

Hard political conditions continued until the time of Khrushchev. Most families that belonged to the category of special settlers remained in the settlements, but their children began education according to the general Soviet lifestyle. They used the possibility of changing the place of residence to work elsewhere. Often, the first place of work was allocated just after the graduation and young people from the cities went to the village, and vice versa.

Of course the number of places of residences depended on the profession. Many were living in the place where they had been sent to by the state distribution (the state – employer – decided or asked a person where he or she wanted to work, or was directed to work in a certain region. It depended on the availability of work in a particular place). The first period of work usually lasted 3 years.

It should be noted that the bureaucratic, ideological and school systems and, above all, the Russian language as the state one, allowed people without any problems to change the place of residence in such cases. Moving from Chemkent in Kazakhstan to Vladivostok did not bring any special adaptation problems, apart from the climate. The school curriculum was the same everywhere, the houses looked similar and people were standing in line for food and goods in the same way.

With regard to the voluntary mobility, tactics in movement had different goals. Many people were looking

for better earnings. Work in the north or the Far East made such opportunities possible, but the harsh climate was a large drawback. Furthermore, changes of residence for the family or the work were absolutely normal in Soviet everyday life. People from other regions and republics integrated into a new life including a new location and a new job. One language, one culture and life experience in the USSR was a common denominator for dialogue and friendship.

This explains how Ashkenazi Jews assimilated to the Soviet system. Many of them came to work also to Central Asia and the Caucasus. They were never accepted by the “local Jews”, hence they did not use the same language (apart from Russian), were not religious and generally had a different background. Sometimes they were not even considered to be “real Jews” due to the fact that they had lost their traditions and were much more different in manners, customs and names.

That does not mean that all these groups did not have anything in common. They all struggled with anti-Semitism. The republics promoted their own titular nations, so very often high working positions were reserved only for them and Jews had no access. Many Jews who were high class specialists could not achieve a full professional success. It is also important to note that there was a national percentage limit at the universities. There was a particular number for each nationality that could be accepted for certain faculties. Jews were in a minority. Thus many talented young people could not apply to study despite

their excellent or sufficient grades. Such a discrimination forced many Jews to think about exile.

A free migration from the USSR did not exist. There were some exceptions when Jewish people were allowed to leave the country. Especially from the late 1970s to the 1980s, more than 300 000 left the Soviet Union forever (Вишневский 2000:117). The process was not easy. Some people waged a real struggle with the system like Natan Sharansky, who became one of the first famous political leaders of assimilated Jews who wanted to move to Israel, and who spent many years in prison before he was allowed to leave. This fight was also a stimulus to rethink one's own identity. It was the moment when many Ashkenazi Jews realized that being a Jew is not only the issue of the name of one's nationality. They started to recreate rituals and to learn Hebrew.

It would be unfair to claim that all Ashkenazi Jews assimilated by mobility or any other form of the Soviet system. Some families succeeded in using Yiddish. Religious life existed through all periods of the USSR. Many religious communities existed illegally, so the practice usually took place in private houses. Some official institutions were already mentioned, like the yeshiva in Moscow. The main synagogues in Moscow, Leningrad and other cities continued to function. The variety of Jewish religious groups also survived. Liberal, orthodox and chassidic communities were continued on. The choral synagogue in Leningrad was ruled by Chabad Chassids.

On the other hand, in comparison with Central Asian Jews and Caucasus Jews who lived in the traditional communities, the level of atheism among the Ashekanzi was very high.

4. The Soviet legacy today

The collapse of the Soviet Union has not only caused a crisis, but also promoted the development of the identity of all the peoples whose identity during the Soviet Union was repressed (Humphrey 2002:270). Unfortunately, this movement was sometimes connected with the ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus and Central Asia. A desire to explore one's own culture and past, as well as a reappearance of ethnic hate, showed that the policy of the Soviet Union to detach people from their own history did not bring many positive results. In many cases, authorities succeeded in destroying the traditions of indigenous peoples (as it happened with the Siberian tribes, who were forced to leave the traditional way of life), but also with many of the repressed peoples, who were forcibly exiled to Siberia and Kazakhstan. The collapse of the Soviet Union provided an opportunity for many people to emigrate in the 1990s to their fatherlands and to rediscover their identity. Those who did not dare to leave the post-Soviet space, began to develop their national communities in their place of residence.

In the case of all Jewish groups, migration was caused by economic and anti-Semitic reasons. People began to leave the country in great numbers in the early 1990s and migrated to Austria, Germany, Israel and the United States. Bukharan, Mountain and Georgian Jews succeeded in recreating their own communities and Ashkenazi Jews joined the local communities.

It is important to emphasize that Central Asian Jews and Caucasus Jews did not join the local Jewish communities. It is considered that the traditions are very different, including some ritual aspects, language and community customs. Besides, the moment when “local Jews” did not accept Ashkenazi who settled among them, still existed after moving to a new place. Of course it is unfair to claim that communities are completely separated today. Communication and cooperation do exist, but all of the groups emphasize their distinctiveness. In the Moscow Choral synagogue, all these groups are present in one building, but in separate rooms.

Central Asian Jews and Caucasus groups are very proud of the fact that, for centuries in comparison with European Jews, they were able to keep the ancient Jewish tradition alive. Since Ashkenazi Jews moved to different countries, some customs also changed. Mountain and Bukharan Jews have lived for centuries in the same area, and they settled there when the tradition of the ancient Jewish state was still somehow fresh. This is confirmed by the languages that are a mixture of ancient Hebrew

and local dialects. These groups still use their languages actively. The current attachment to Juhuri seems to be even stronger as the young generation uses it as a mother tongue often which is not the case with the Bukharan language. Nevertheless, there is a risk that both languages will be lost in the future. Among the young generations an assimilation to new cultures is growing. Therefore, there is a struggle for the preservation of identity. In the United States the World Congress of Bukharan Jews was established. Such initiatives also present Mountain Jews by organizing the Congress for young people in Germany, as well as the World Congress of Mountain Jews in the United States.

Today, among the former Soviet Jews the same nostalgia exists for the USSR as among other Soviet citizens. On the question about the Soviet past people react positively on the subject of education. Until the Soviet period in the Caucasus and Central Asia education was limited only to religious knowledge. In the Caucasus, in the 1930s, 75% of the Jews was illiterate (Бегун 1999:68). Professions were passed on mostly by the fathers. Educated Jews appeared in the guise of Ashkenazi, who came to work during the tsarist and later Soviet period. Soviet power has brought education and the emancipation of women (however many women traditionally remained housewives). This led to the mass intellectualization of indigenous Jews and their introduction into the sphere of specialists. A large number of doctors is still impressive among Bukharan Jews.

Education was achieved as a result of the Soviet assimilation. The Russian language has become the common form for communication of people who were actively involved in social organizations. Some Mountain Jews recalling the desire of their parents to attend synagogue seemed to them to be ridiculous and boring. Young girls willingly joined Komsomol to see a different life than at home. A new generation was brought up in a limitless ideology. On the other hand, they still could not completely move away from their roots because of the ongoing active Jewish religious life. Of course, for Caucasian and Central Asian Jews reality was not only a feast of freedom of Jewish identity. Cases of change of the fifth column in the passport (concerning nationality) happened often. There were also intermarriages. It was the effect of anti-Semitism, as well as the policy promoting titular nations of the republic, which has already been mentioned. Nevertheless, many Jews managed to reach the highest political and professional positions.

Apart from education, the Soviet past is nowadays considered in a various ways. Former Jewish residents of the Dagestan republic find the concept of friendship of the peoples positive. Many of them are proud that in the times of repression and also later they managed to keep the Jewish traditions alive. Many people express nostalgia for the Soviet life stability. It is interesting to see that in comparison to the Ashkenazi, the other groups present a weak attachment to the Russian and Soviet cultures. The young generation

knows little, or does not use the Russian language at all and is not interested in the contemporary Russian culture. Bukharan and Mountain Jews who live, for example, in Austria are partly assimilated into the local culture, but are still strongly influenced by their first one. Georgian Jews are settled mostly in Israel nowadays. The fact that they lived in the USSR is considered as a significant experience, but is not a part of their self-identification. The older generation still practices some Soviet aspects of everyday life, like the celebration of the Victory Day, New Year's, or watching Russian media, but it is not so important for the youth. The main factor of their identity can be regarded as the factor of regional and ethnic belonging. Ashkenazi Jews have lost this sense of place belonging because of mobility.

The Ashkenazi group cannot be criticized for its assimilation. The Western regions of tsarist Russia and later the USSR were always jeopardized on military conflicts, which were usually accompanied by pogroms. The Civil War in the years 1917-1922 was the moment when many Jews left their heritage after the wave of pogroms. Caucasus and Central Asian Jews did not stand in front of the dilemma of how to survive. Of course the Civil War also took place in the peripheral regions, but the fact that local Jews preserved Jewish customs and rituals for such a long time means that the political conditions present in the region allowed them to do that.

The example of the Bukharan, Mountain and Georgian Jews shows that the Soviet regime was unable to implement

the idea of the “Soviet people” in a complete way. It is impossible to detach a man from his own roots, especially if it takes place under a repressive regime. Although the Soviet Union introduced the universal rules of life that simplify everydayness in a multiethnic country, they were still limited to daily practices, which were not confirmed by human beliefs. Indigenous identity was always much closer to people than an artificial and forced political one. Many Ashkenazi Jews after the collapse of the USSR found that they had to start to rediscover their lost identity from the beginning. The International Jewish community as well as religious leaders takes credit for helping them do this.

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