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Russian-speaking Jewish Immigration to The United States and Miami: Historical Overview and Analysis of the Ongoing Situation

Communication given by Daniel Etienne ALTMAN¹

Abstract

Immigration of Russian-speaking Jews (RSJs) to Israel and the West has captured the attention of many researchers. Soviet Jews underwent many challenges in practicing Judaism and, upon immigration to Israel and the US, their acculturation process has overwhelmingly evolved. Russian-speaking Jews comprise about 10% of American Jewry. Most of them arrived during the 1970s and the 1990s, after the collapse of the Former Soviet Union (FSU).

The Russian-speaking Jewish community of Miami demonstrates that what we may think about immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) is inaccurate. This community has been thriving in the past twenty years, thanks, in part, to the influence of the Chabad Russian Center in Sunny Isles Beach. Russian-speaking Jews play an important role in the dynamic character of the social and cultural diversity of the Jewish community of Miami.

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¹ Ph.D. candidate at CY Cergy Paris University and Fulbright grantee during the academic year 2021-2022. The communication was presented during the cultural event “The Russian-Speaking Jewish Community of Miami: Immigration, Integration, and Influence of the Current War in Ukraine. The event was co-organized with Professor Ira M. Sheskin (Department of Geography and Sustainable Development; Director of Jewish Demography Project at the Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies, University of Miami, co-editor of the *American Jewish Yearbook*) and included the participation of Rabbi Alexander Kaller, founder of the Chabad Russian Center in Sunny Isles (Miami Dade County). The event took place on March 29, 2022, at the Sue and Leonard Miller Center, University of Miami.

My ongoing research focuses on the immigration of Russian-speaking Jews (RSJs) to Miami. The study on RSJs in America requires further analysis, and the academic literature on RSJs in South Florida is relatively scant.

Before further developing the topic, it is essential to briefly recall the history of Jews in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Jews underwent numerous changes and upheavals during that period. Before 1917, most Jews of the Russian Empire lived in a zone known as the Pale of Settlement. They experienced social and political discrimination and suffered from antisemitic assaults known as the pogroms, especially at the turn of the 20th century.

After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the establishment of the Soviet Union, antisemitism became officially prohibited. The Jewish population became a recognized ethnicity, and the new government outlawed their social and political discrimination. At the same time, the Soviet government, first under Vladimir Lenin (1917-1924) and then under Josef Stalin (1924-1953), began to coerce Jews and other ethnic minorities into abandoning any religious practices. From the 1920s until the eve of the Second World War, Jews assimilated into the new Soviet society, leaving behind the Jewish religious tradition. They were able to go to universities and to choose their professions. The percentage of Jews with academic education was the highest among the ethnic groups in the Soviet Union by the end of the 1930s, and it was possible to find many of them working in different fields of research, science, art, and literature.

However, a radical change came about after the Second World War and the establishment of the State of Israel, with anti-Semitic propaganda and discrimination towards Jews reappearing. Jewish authors and writers were persecuted, and the presence of Jews at universities and prominent positions in the sciences, education, technology, and culture was significantly hindered.

Since the 1930s and during the Soviet period, the ethnic origin was marked in the internal passport, known as the fifth paragraph. Larissa Remmenick, a prominent specialist of RSJ immigration, describes the infamous fifth paragraph as a synonym for Jewish social disability among other “normal citizens” (*Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 2007, 19-20) ...

Jews suffered from various forms of social discrimination until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

Immigration of Jews from the FSU to America and the demographic situation today

There were two significant periods of Jewish immigration from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) to America during the 1970s and the 1990s.

From 1970 to 1988, around 126,000 Jews arrived in America, with some non-Jewish relatives. Most came during the 1970s when the Soviet government permitted emigration before closing the gate in the early 1980s.

From 1989 to 2009, around 326,000 FSU Jews immigrated to America. Most of them arrived during the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In addition, Israel and Germany were other focal destinations of FSU Jewish immigration in the 1990s.

According to a recent PEW study (2020), the estimated number of RSJs in America is 750,000 immigrants and their children, comprising about 10 % of the American Jewish community.

FSU Jews, Russian Jews, or RSJs?

When looking into studies on Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, we encounter different terms to refer to this social group. Some researchers use the terminology FSU or Russian Jews. The terminology “Russian-speaking Jews” (or Russian-speaking immigrants who are not necessarily Jews) highlights the fact that the social and cultural background of Jews from the FSU is rather diverse; in some cases, the Russian language is the only element that binds them. The cultural, social, and political differences related to immigrants from the FSU and its successor countries are well illustrated in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Acculturation and RSJs

In reference to the Canadian social psychologist John W. Berry, acculturation is the dual process of cultural and psychological change that occurs due to contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members. Berry refers to four categories of acculturation, also known as acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization.

During the Soviet period, it is possible to talk about assimilation in Soviet society, at least until the Second World War. The marginalization or exclusion process occurred in the late 1940s and early 1950s. After immigrating and settling in America, we can talk about integration. However, according to some researchers, RSJs seem like a separate group from the American Jewish mainstream.

RSJs- the conclusions of numerous specialists

When examining the conclusions of many specialists, the overall conclusions suggest the following:

- “Misalignment” between the Jewish mainstream and RSJs in the United States. The RSJs have not met the expectations of American Jews because of their social and cultural differences, whereas RSJs have not found themselves among the main denominations of American Judaism: Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox.
- The contribution of Chabad is taken into account, but it is said that Chabad is incapable of meeting all the spiritual and intellectual needs of RSJs.
- Post-Soviet Jewish identity is considered “thin,” a sort of “diluted” culture that is deprived of a solid connection to Jewish customs, traditions, religion, and language.

My assumptions about RSJs in Miami and in America

The situation in Miami may be different thanks to its Jewish community's social and cultural diversity. RSJs comprise about 3% of the Jewish population of Miami Dade County, according to the 2014 study of the Greater Miami Jewish Federation Population Study conducted by Professor

Ira M. Sheskin. The identity of RSJs has been very dynamic, and it may evolve in recent years. Moreover, the influence of the Chabad movement should be more considered. Finally, much of the academic literature on RSJs provides general insights and requires further investigation.

Methodology and observations

Since October 2021, I have carried out on-site work consisting of visiting Sunny Isles, known for its Russian-speaking population, attending the Chabad Russian Center in Sunny Isles, participating in the events and activities that the center organizes, meeting with different members of the RS Jewish community and conducting in-depth interviews with members of the community as a part of my qualitative approach.

According to my observations, the RS Jewish community in Sunny Isles is thriving. Its success is mainly thanks to the great endeavors of the Chabad Russian Center under the direction of Rabbi Alexander Kaller. The synagogue has a remarkable social diversity, and prayers and ceremonies are held in English and Russian. The activity of the Chabad Russian Center consists of religious and cultural events that take place regularly, in-person, and via Zoom, like the weekly Torah Class.

Conclusion

In this ongoing research (2022), any conclusions are yet to be made. However, it is probable that my initial premise that the acculturation process of RSJs in Miami differs would be accurate. Moreover, it may illustrate that the religious and Jewish identity of RSJs in America has changed in recent years.

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