Benjamin Nathans

Refuseniks and Rights Defenders: Jews and the Soviet Dissident Movement

In October 1970, on the eve of Simchat Torah, an enormous crowd gathered in front of the Moscow Choral Synagogue on Arkhipova Street. In his report on the event to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Philipp Bobkov, the head of the KGB’s division for combatting domestic dissent, estimated that roughly twelve thousand individuals had taken part, singing and dancing to “nationalist songs.” The celebratory mood also included the circulation of a samizdat copy of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, distributed - according to Bobkov - by Zionist students from local institutions of higher education aiming to foster “the emigration mood.”

The Universal Declaration’s appearance as ersatz Torah, at the dawn of a decade characterized by leading human rights historians as “the breakthrough,” invites us to revisit the relationship between Soviet Jewish activists and the broader dissident movement. The presence of such a large crowd at an unsanctioned gathering in the capital of the Soviet empire serves as a reminder that in its heyday, the Jewish national movement outsized the older and more diverse group known as “rights-defenders” (pravozashchitniki), at least if measured by numbers of participants at demonstrations and signers of collective petitions. Indeed, among the various ethnic and national activists striving for greater autonomy and/or geographic relocation, Soviet Jews were second in number only to Crimean Tatars.

Like many episodes of social protest, dissent in the late Soviet era consisted of a congeries of loosely allied groups, with overlapping but distinct grievances vis-à-vis the Soviet system. Russian and other

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1 B. Morozov, ed., Evreiskaia emigratsiia v svete novykh dokumentov (Tel Aviv, 1998), doc. 27, p. 107.
nationalists sought cultural and political autonomy; religious believers sought greater freedom to worship and to transmit their faith to their children. “Punished peoples” such as the exiled Chechens and Crimean Tatars campaigned to return to ancestral homelands, while neo-Leninists and monarchists sought to return to their imagined pasts. Activists for civil and human rights, bearers of the dissident movement’s lingua franca who occupied the nerve center of its communication network within and beyond the USSR’s borders, strove to uphold civil liberties enshrined in the Soviet Constitution and in international rights covenants such as the Universal Declaration and, after 1975, the Helsinki Accords. Over the course of the 1970s and up to the eve of the USSR’s dissolution, only a single one of these dozen or more groups could claim visible success in achieving its self-declared goals: the movement for Jewish emigration. Between the 1970 Simchat Torah gathering in Moscow and Leonid Brezhnev’s death in 1982, the Kremlin permitted over a quarter-million Jews to exit the USSR.\(^3\) Such an achievement was not only without parallel in the annals of dissent in the Soviet Union; one recent study called it “the preeminent case of Jewish human rights activism.”\(^4\)

As with the unravelling of the Soviet Union, many parties have been eager to claim credit for this remarkable fact. The determination and fortitude of Soviet Jewish activists and the larger community of refuseniks have been celebrated in dozens of first-person accounts. In much of the secondary literature on what is commonly called the “Jewish national awakening,” the former Jews of Silence (the title of Elie Wiesel’s 1966 report on his visit to the Soviet Union the preceding year) become the Jews of Hope (the title of the historian Martin Gilbert’s study of the same subject two decades later) as they prepare their

\(^3\) Yaacov Roi, The Jewish Movement in the Soviet Union (Baltimore, 2012), p. 107 [this pagination reflects the ms. version and will be updated].
\(^4\) Michael Galchinsky, Jews and Human Rights: Dancing at Three Weddings (Lanham [Maryland], 2008), p. 51. Galchinsky’s book, it must be noted, is riddled with errors of fact and interpretation.
exodus from the Soviet behemoth. The emigration movement’s genesis is commonly ascribed to factors both within and beyond the Soviet Union. Rising discrimination in education and employment threatened to reverse the meteoric rise of Jews in the Soviet system, while Israel’s transformative victory in the Six-Day War gave many Soviet Jews, no less than their counterparts elsewhere in the world, a visceral sense of identification with the Jewish state. As Dimitry Shumsky recently noted, the historiography of Soviet Jewry still tends to present its subject in terms of a contest between assimilation and nationalism, even as scholarship on modern European Jewry as a whole (to which Soviet Jews ought to belong) has recognized the centrality of the process of acculturation as well as the extent to which Jewish nationalism, including Zionism, represents a form of assimilation to European nationalisms. In other respects, historians of the Jewish national movement in the late Soviet era have been methodologically precocious: for decades they have explored its transnational dimensions, highlighting the flow of people, texts, and goods across continents and stressing the historical work that got done outside the realm of formal state-to-state relations (without, however, neglecting the latter). In fact the lion’s share of academic scholarship (especially in English) on the mass emigration of Soviet Jews has focused on the relationship of the Jewish national movement to actors on the other side of the Iron Curtain: citizens’ initiatives in the United States, Canada, and Britain to free Soviet Jewry; the U.S. Congress and its passage of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment in 1974, linking U.S. trade to Soviet policies on emigration; and, despite restricted access to relevant sources, the clandestine work of Israel’s Lishkat ha-Kesher.

In this chapter, I explore the relationship of the Jewish national movement to actors closer to home, namely to the rights-defenders who championed Soviet civil rights and international human rights,

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including the right to leave one’s country. The burgeoning field of human rights history has drawn attention to the variety of ways by which local movements have deployed what was rapidly becoming the dominant moral vocabulary of late twentieth-century global society.\footnote{In addition to Eckel and Moyn’s \textit{The Breakthrough} (footnote 2 above), see Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I Hitchcock, eds., \textit{The Human Rights Revolution: An International History} (New York, 2012).} This process is of particular salience to the Jewish national struggle in the USSR insofar as that struggle constituted, by the mid-1970s, one of the most prominent human rights arenas of the Cold War, repeatedly insinuating its way into superpower summits and front-page headlines. During and after the Cold War, moreover, Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union transformed the Jewish landscape in North America, Germany, and above all Israel, where Jews from former Soviet territories now constitute roughly twenty percent of the country’s population.

For Soviet Jewish activists, international prominence was a double-edged sword, ensuring high visibility but also entangling the hoped-for Jewish exodus in a host of geopolitical issues, from Soviet relations with the Arab world to the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states. Such entanglements mirrored the tensions that typically arise when universal human rights norms are applied to an emphatically national, particularist movement such as Jewish emigration. Those tensions in turn found their sharpest expression in the fraught relations between individual refuseniks and rights-defenders - or within individuals who at various times belonged to both communities.

As with the late imperial Russian revolutionary movement, a remarkable proportion of late Soviet-era dissidents were of Jewish background - far higher than the proportion of Jews in the Soviet population at large. It was by no means obvious that this should be so. In the aggregate, after all, Soviet Jews were extraordinarily successful, outperforming all of the USSR’s many ethnic groups, including Russians,
whether the benchmark was higher education, residence in desirable urban centers like Moscow and Leningrad, entrance into prestigious occupations or prominence in high-status pursuits from filmmaking to physics. Yet behind hundreds of thousands of individual Jewish success stories loomed a collective loss of Jewish languages and culture, a complex outcome of both self-Russification and suppression of the Jewish inheritance by the Soviet regime. By the middle of the twentieth century, moreover, what had been the world’s first anti-anti-Semitic state, the country most responsible for crushing the Nazis, was engaged in its own state-sponsored persecution of those it branded "cosmopolitans" and "Zionists." By the time of Brezhnev’s rise to power in the late 1960s, the USSR’s affirmative action policies had caught up with the Jews, effectively putting a halt to, and in some cases reversing, their meteoric rise. Like its tsarist predecessor, the Soviet government decided to limit Jewish access to institutions of higher education and white-collar professions—the major difference being that Soviet quotas were kept secret, thereby fueling rumors and uncertainty among a generation of Jews whose hopes of matching their parents’ achievements were quickly fading.

When the dissident Russian nationalist writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn came to the conclusion in the 1960s that the USSR was doomed, he did so – or so he claimed after the regime’s collapse – based in part on what he observed to be the rising disaffection of Jews with the Soviet system.\(^8\) However dubious Solzhenitsyn’s assumption that the Soviet project relied on Jewish support to keep it going, there is no denying that in the Soviet dissident movement, as in the late imperial Russian revolutionary movement, Jews constituted a strikingly higher proportion than they did in the Soviet population at large. To be sure, neither of the two most famous Soviet dissidents - Solzhenitsyn himself and the physicist Andrei Sakharov – were Jewish, although their enemies tellingly accused them of having changed their original names from Solzhenitsker and Tsukerman (the latter a Yiddish variant on sakhar, the Russian word for

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sugar). But a striking range of cardinal figures in the dissident movement, starting with Alexander
Esenin-Volpin, the progenitor of the rights-based “legal” strategy of dissent, were indeed partly or wholly
of Jewish origin. Other prominent Jewish dissidents included Larisa Bogoraz-Brakhman, one of the
organizers, along with Pavel Litvinov (grandson of Stalin’s foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov [Meir
Wallach-Finkelstein]), of the August 1968 demonstration on Red Square against the Soviet invasion of
Czechoslovakia, and Natalia Gorbanevskaia, a participant in that demonstration and one of the founders,
earlier that year, of the Chronicle of Current Events, the most important dissident periodical
(Gorbanevskaia’s father was Jewish). To this list could be added Raisa Berg, Elena Bonner, Ilya Gabai,
Yuri Glazov, Semon Gluzman, Lev Kopelev, Dina Kaminskaia, Viktor Krasin, Grigorii Pomerants, Boris
Shragin, Boris Tsukerman, Petr Vail, Vladimir Voinovich, Petr Yakir, and many others. Even among
Russian Orthodox dissidents, three of the most significant were of partly Jewish origin: Alexander Men,
Anatolii Levitin-Krasnov, and Mikhail Meerson-Aksenov. “I’m outraged that 85 percent of Democratic
Movement members are Jews!,” the poet Naum Korzhavin (Mandel) once quipped. “The percentage
ought to be fair: fifty-fifty!”

It was not only the dissident movement that was ethnically mixed. Thanks to high rates of inter-
marrige among the first generation of the Soviet intelligentsia, so were many of their offspring who
composed it and who had all, without exception, grown up in the intensely multi-ethnic Soviet milieu.
Even in cases of individuals with comparatively unalloyed ancestry, ethnic identities were commonly
subject to criss-crossing attractions and repulsions. Thus Larisa Bogoraz-Brakhman described herself as
having “an unquestionable genetic tie with Jewry” even as her entire sensory apparatus - “what the eye

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9 Quoted in Nina Voronel’, Mark Azbel, Aleksandr Voronel’, “Dvadtsat’ let spustia (vospominaniia o
protsesse Siniavskogo-Danielia),” Dvadtsat’ dva no.46 (January-March 1986), p. 175. See also
Ulanovskiaia’s quip about a meeting between Zionists and Democrats – all of them Jews. Istoriiia odnoi
semi, p. 273.
sees, the ear hears, the skin feels’’ - led her to self-identify as Russian.10 When Andrei Sakharov became acquainted with Yasha Tseitlin, a fellow physicist, he was reminded of his childhood friend Grisha Umansky: both displayed a “contemplative nature, a melancholy empathy that seems to be an innate Jewish characteristic,” and that not coincidentally echoed many descriptions of Sakharov’s own temperament.11

Equally striking, among leading activists in the Jewish national movement were more than a few individuals who began as rights-defenders advocating the general rule of law, only to shift their activities, typically beginning in the late 1960s, to the world of refuseniks. Mikhail Agursky, Mark Azbel, Eduard Kuznetsov, Vitalii Rubin, Anatolii (Natan) Sharansky, Vladimir Slepak, Julius Telesin, Maia Ulanovskaia, and Alexander and Nina Voronel belong to this category - some as defectors, others as bridge-builders between the two milieux. To the best of my knowledge, there was not a single example of a shift in the opposite direction, from the refusenik to the rights-defending cause.

For different reasons, both the US and Soviet governments tended to view refuseniks and rights-defenders as part of a single phenomenon. Of all the varieties of national and religious ferment in late Soviet society, the Jewish case was most closely connected to the dissidents at large, on the level of personnel and contacts abroad. In the binary thinking characteristic of (but by no means limited to) the Cold War, Washington and Moscow were both primed to lump together all those identified as “anti-Soviet.”12 Communist officials, mindful perhaps of their own party’s earlier stigmatization as a largely

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10 Larisa Bogoraz, “Kto ia?,” Evrei v SSSR no. 1 (1972) [samizdat].
11 Andrei Sakharov, Memoirs (New York, 1990), p. 47. On his childhood friendship with Grisha Umansky, Sakharov writes (p.19): “It seems to me that back then I was already attracted to something I can’t quite describe, something I think of as Jewish intelligence. Or perhaps ‘rich inner life’ might be a better way of putting that quality found among even the poorest Jewish families.”
12 In one of Ronald Reagan’s favorite jokes (or fantasies), Brezhnev allows an opposition party to form but the Soviet Union remains a one-party state - because everyone joins the opposition party. Quoted in Jussi M. Hanhimaki and Odd Arne Westad, The Cold War: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts (New York, 2004), p. 574.
Jewish affair, were not above applying the same stigma to the dissident movement, condemning the latter as a Zionist plot and issuing Israeli visas to non-Jewish dissidents whom they coerced into leaving the Soviet Union.

While Sakharov and other rights-defenders privately expressed regret that so many members of the Jewish intelligentsia - and thus, from their point of view, actual or potential supporters of the dissident movement - were seeking to exit the USSR, they consistently spoke out in support of Soviet Jews whose applications for visas had been refused. Within two years of its founding, the *Chronicle of Current Events* instituted a regular section (run by Rubin and Sharansky) called “News from the Jewish Community,” reporting on instances of rejected visa applications, arrests and trials of Jewish activists, and the fate of those who had been sent to the camps. Sakharov and other members of the Moscow Committee for Human Rights, founded in 1970, added their signatures to some of the earliest petitions by refuseniks and attended numerous public demonstrations by and trials of refuseniks. In one of his most controversial acts - because it violated the dissident movement’s categorical rejection of violence - Sakharov petitioned the Soviet government for clemency for Mark Dymshits and Eduard Kuznetsov, leaders of a group of refuseniks in the attempted hijacking of a plane in Leningrad in June 1970, who had been sentenced to death for treason.13

In his memoirs, Sakharov acknowledged that “there was some question whether [the Leningrad hijacking affair] was properly a human rights matter.”14 Human rights were indeed the lens through which dissidents judged the issue of Jewish emigration. And precisely because they framed the exit from one’s country as a human right, as a necessary component of freedom of movement and thus of human

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13 Sakharov sought to balance his appeal on behalf of the Leningrad hijackers by pairing it with an appeal to the U.S. government for clemency for the American Communist Angela Davis, following her arrest for assisting an armed attempt by Black Panthers to free several prisoners during a trial.
dignity, rights-defenders side-stepped the specifically *Jewish* rationale for emigration, grounded in the Zionist idea of return to the Jewish homeland. In a letter of September 21, 1971 addressed to the presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Sakharov wrote that “Soviet citizens of Jewish as well as many other nationalities - Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Armenians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Turko-Meskhetians and others - who are striving to leave for personal, national, or other reasons, are being denied permission for years without cause, and these denials reduce their lives to a constant torment of waiting.” Rights-defenders also avoided the analogous *Soviet* rationale of “repatriation,” grounded in Moscow’s longstanding policy of territorializing certain Soviet ethnic and national groups in their putative republican or regional homelands. Consistent with Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, moreover, Sakharov, Esenin-Volpin, Vladimir Bukovsky, and other leading rights-defenders insisted that the right to leave one’s country of birth should be paired with the right to return to it.

Informed by the moral absolutism of human rights discourse, rights-defenders’ support for the refusenik cause was thus driven by an overlapping but distinct logic vis-à-vis that of the refuseniks themselves. Not only Jews but *all* Soviet citizens should have the right to leave the country if they wished, whether for repatriation or any other purpose or indeed for no particular purpose at all. The Soviet state should acknowledge the right not only to leave but to *return*, in contrast to its practice of automatically stripping Soviet citizenship from those who emigrated and de facto barring their return - unless the latter was carried out in full penitential mode.

How did Soviet Jewish activists view rights-defenders and their principled maximalism on the subject of emigration? As the historian Juliane Fürst has noted, for all the talk of specifically Jewish factors

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16 Article 13 of the UDHR reads: “Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.”
behind the Jewish national movement in the USSR - Soviet anti-semitism, the wildly popular samizdat edition of Leon Uris’s novel *Exodus*, Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War - refuseniks and rights-defenders were largely formed by the same Soviet institutions and overwhelmingly belonged to the same historical generation (the “people of the sixties” [*shestidesiatniki*]), as well as to the same privileged social class (the intelligentsia).\(^{17}\) Whether or not they had first taken part in the broader dissident movement, Jewish activists began by adopting many of that movement’s techniques, couching their demands in terms of law and rights, staging public demonstrations, and above all, creating an alternative sphere of communication via samizdat, including a remarkable range of underground periodicals beginning in 1970, including *Iton*, *Evrei v SSSR*, *Tarbut/Kul’tura*, and many others (all of them, incidentally, in Russian).\(^{18}\)

Remarkably, the editor of one of the first Jewish samizdat periodicals, *Iskhod* (*Exodus*), Viktor Fedoseyev, was an ethnic Russian whose wife was Jewish. On the cover of each edition of *Iskhod* were two epigraphs, one consisting of Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on the right to leave and return to one’s country, the other excerpted from Psalm 137 (“If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, Let my right hand forget her cunning...”). Since the mid-1960s, the samizdat *Bulletin of the Council of Relatives of Imprisoned Evangelical Christian Baptists in the USSR* had featured a quotation from the New Testament on its cover (verse 13:3 from the Epistle to the Hebrews: “Remember the prisoners, as though you were in prison with them...”). Since its inception in 1968, the *Chronicle of Current Events* had featured UDHR Article 19 (on the free flow of information) on its cover. *Iskhod* adopted both approaches in an attempt to marry universal and particularist agendas. The marriage did not last long.


\(^{18}\) For a comprehensive list of Jewish samizdat periodicals, see Ann Komaromi, “Jewish Samizdat - Dissident Texts and the Dynamics of the Jewish Revival in the Soviet Union,” in Ro’i, op. cit., Chapter Thirteen.
By the early 1970s, the Jewish national movement was divided between so-called kulturniki, who sought to strengthen Jewish life in the USSR by reviving Jewish culture and the Hebrew language, and politiki, who considered emigration to Israel the only solution to the Soviet Jewish predicament. It was a split eerily reminiscent of that between Jewish da-istn and dort-istn (the “here-ists” and “there-ists”) in the late tsarist era, except that the proportions were reversed: with Israel no longer a fantasy but a sovereign state, reachable from Moscow within hours by airplane via Rome or Vienna, politiki easily outnumbered kulturniki. No less divisive was the split among Jewish activists between those who favored and those who rejected cooperation with the broader dissident movement. Advocates pointed to the many forms of support provided by members of the Moscow Human Rights Committee and other rights-defenders; to the likelihood that a general liberalization of the Soviet regime would foster a more open attitude toward Jewish emigration; and to the bedrock motive for coalition-building - strength in numbers. Opponents of cooperation with rights-defenders offered tactical, moral, and ideological counter-arguments. Association with the broader dissident movement would only heighten the impression that Jewish activists were anti-Soviet, thereby leading to greater repression by the KGB. Those who sought to leave the USSR, it was further argued, “do not have the moral right to interfere” in the affairs of the country they aimed to abandon. This view - antithetical to even a minimal concept of universal human rights - was expressed by many would-be emigrants, including Evgenii Yakir, cousin of Petr Yakir, a leading rights-defender until his arrest in 1972. 19 Finally, participation in the general dissident movement was taken as a symptom of precisely the kind of assimilation that was anathema to Soviet Zionists - a repetition of the fatal Jewish attraction to the Russian revolutionary movement a century earlier.

Collaboration with the general dissident movement, according to one activist, would “deprive the Jewish national movement of its spiritual authenticity, its precise goals, and its maneuverability, and without

19 Morozova, Anatomiiia otkaza, p. 232.
these aspects it would become simply a part of the dissident phenomenon.”

Shortly before his emigration to Israel in 1975, Alexander Voronel, who had taken part in the birth of legal dissent at the trial of the writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel, went further: “We must now remain aloof, while it is not yet too late to separate our problems from their [the Russian people’s] problems. Otherwise they will solve our fate together with their problems, and this solution will be radical.”

While the Soviet regime still existed, mutual criticisms among the various currents within the dissident movement were understandably muted, given the shared risk of persecution. Memoirs published prior to the 1990s display a distinct reticence in this regard. With the passing of the USSR, as well as of many leading dissident figures, formerly silent grievances have begun to emerge.

In a 2007 interview, Voronel faulted Sakharov for having “always fought for other people” and thus lacking a healthy sense of self-interest. This was a variation on an old theme, voiced by Russian nationalist critics of dissidents in the 1970s: by supporting greater autonomy for Jews, Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Baptists and other minority groups, rights-defenders had undermined whatever appeal they might have gained vis-à-vis ethnic Russians, an indispensable constituency for any movement claiming to be democratic. For Voronel, rights-defenders practiced the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice - all the more reason, therefore, for Jews to keep their distance.

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21 *Evrei v SSSR* no. 7 (1974) [samizdat].
23 Komaromi interview with Voronel, described in Ro’i, p. 298. On dissidents’ reputation among Soviet Russians, see Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, 2009), especially p. 304. Other critics of the rights-defenders charged them with the opposite of naive selflessness: by emphasizing rights of free speech and assembly and focusing their activities on trials of their peers who had publicly criticized Soviet policies, they were allegedly defending the narrow interests of their own relatively small class, the intelligentsia.
In their choice of tactics, Jewish nationalist activists increasingly moved beyond rights-defenders’ strategy of promoting the rule of law, which required remaining strictly within its bounds and therefore excluded acts of civil disobedience. More media-savvy than most dissidents, refuseniks staged sit-ins at the presidium of the Supreme Soviet wearing yellow stars on their coats - and made sure that western journalists were present to photograph them.24

One of the most extraordinary records of the transformation of a Soviet-Jewish rights-defender into an (anti-)Soviet Zionist, as my student Alexander Hazanov has shown, can be found in the diaries of Vitalii Rubin.25 A highly regarded sinologist, Rubin kept a diary from 1956 until his death in 1981, five years after emigrating to Israel. In the early 1960s, the Sino-Soviet split provided an early opportunity to voice his criticism of the Soviet system, if only obliquely, via attacks on Maoist China as a “totalitarian” state that denied its citizens elementary individual rights. Like many rights-defenders, Rubin was devastated by Moscow’s crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 - the event that, more than any other, planted seeds of pessimism regarding the dissident movement and triggered Rubin’s decision to apply for a visa to Israel. Just as Cold War concepts of freedom vs. totalitarianism had shaped his views on China and the USSR, they increasingly informed his identification with Jews as a “free” people, in contrast to the “slave mentality” he found in the Soviet, which is to say Russian, population. To be sure, the antinomies of freedom and slavery had a long history in Zionist thought, going back to Ahad Ha’am’s 1891 essay “Slavery in Freedom” and the later idea of “negation of the diaspora.” But these were critiques of Jewish assimilation, or “spiritual slavery,” as Ahad Ha’am called it. For Rubin, and for Cold War Zionism, the freedom of Soviet Jews was now defined as liberation from Russian totalitarian slavery. As his wife Ina Aksel’rod-Rubina wrote, “The feeling that we were ‘free people’ came [...] when we

submitted our documents to emigrate to Israel.” Sharansky similarly describes how widespread approval of the invasion of Prague shaped his view of the mentality of the typical Soviet person: “His self-respect derived from being part of the Soviet system, and the more powerful the system, the stronger he felt [...]. This mentality constituted the real power of the regime [...] - the consciousness of the slave who looks for guidance to the good tsar, the leader, the teacher.” Sharansky therefore dated his liberation not to his arrival in Israel in 1986, but thirteen years earlier, when he applied to leave the Soviet Union: “At the age of twenty-five [i.e., in 1973] I finally learned what a joy it was to be free.”

I noted earlier that the Jewish national movement was split between those who sought to rebuild Jewish life in the Soviet Union and those who regarded emigration to Israel as the only viable solution to the Jewish predicament, with the latter outnumbering the former within the movement. It is worth recalling, however, that both kulturniki and politiki were outnumbered by those Soviet Jews who belonged to neither group and, when given the choice, emigrated according to the criteria set forth by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, acting as individuals unmotivated by Zionism, repatriation, or any other collective purpose. By 1977, half of all Soviet Jewish emigrants, having crossed the Soviet border with Israeli visas in hand, instead resettled in North America and other regions in the West. A decade later the proportion of so-called “dropouts” had risen to 88 percent, before being drastically reduced in 1990 by mutual agreement of the US and Israeli governments. The reality of tens of thousands of Soviet Jews deciding for themselves between the logic of repatriation and the logic of the Universal Declaration cast the tension between Soviet Zionists and Soviet rights-defenders into

28 Ro’i, The Jewish Movement in the Soviet Union, p. 107. By 1990, roughly 180,000 Soviet Jews had emigrated to Israel and 185,000 to other countries.
exceptionally sharp relief. “We were not only disillusioned,” wrote Mark Azbel, the rights-defender turned refusenik, near the height of the “drop-out” phenomenon, “we were humiliated”:

The very possibility of anyone leaving the Soviet Union was due to the heroic efforts of Jews who dreamed of Israel, who sacrificed their liberty, and in some cases their lives, to build the road to freedom. In our opinion, those who rejected Israel cast shame and mockery upon the memory of these people [...] To abandon our country [i.e., Israel] in favor of another that offered more goods, more choices - I couldn’t stop feeling ashamed of the people who made this choice. These same people would run to Israel if the need arose, and if Israel should ever be annihilated again, the rest of the world would despise the Jews who let it happen. And they would be right.29

Azbel went on to note that the ruse of applying for a visa to Israel while intending a different destination threatened to undermine the Kremlin’s willingness to allow any emigration at all. It remains indeed a mystery why Soviet leaders tolerated this legal fiction on a mass scale, which allowed tens of thousands of Soviet citizens to defect to the rival superpower, making a mockery of the “repatriation” argument in the eyes of both the Soviet population and the rest of the world.30

At various moments in this chapter I have alluded to similarities between arguments about Jewish emigration in the late Soviet and late imperial eras. I would like to close with a brief attempt to push the historical comparison further in order to illuminate some parallels as well as particularities of the Soviet case.

29 Azbel, Refusenik, pp. 420-1.
30 One can speculate that the Soviet government’s motive for permitting (selective) Jewish emigration had to do with getting rid of troublemakers and avoiding potentially worse publicity than was created by the departure of tens of thousands of Soviet Jews for the capitalist West. It is also possible that concerns about Soviet-Jewish immigration to Israel voiced by the USSR’s clients in the Arab world led Moscow to turn a blind eye when Soviet Jews chose to settle in other countries. See for example the correspondence between the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Communist Party of Jordan, in Morozov, Evreiskaia emigratsiia, Doc. 48, pp. 171-4.
One ought to begin, perhaps, by noting that the shared designation “late” is anachronistic in both instances; contemporaries, especially in Brezhnev’s USSR, had no inkling that time was running out on the political order in which they found themselves. The two political systems themselves - tsarist and Soviet - were strikingly different when it came to the issue of emigration, Jewish or otherwise. While neither recognized a legal right to leave the country, only the USSR had the actual governing capacity to prevent it. The tsarist state perpetually struggled to regulate the movement of its population both within and beyond the empire’s borders. Much of the Jewish emigration that occurred prior to the 1890s took place illegally via the lucrative trade in human smuggling, without the invocation of rights of any kind. The tsarist state eventually permitted transnational entities - above all the Jewish Colonization Association, directed by Baron Maurice de Hirsch - to help organize Russian-Jewish emigration at its point of origin, without formally recognizing a legal right on the part of Russian subjects to leave the empire. By 1913, the JCA had over five hundred bureaus in European Russia, offering information, advice, and financial assistance to would-be emigrants.31 The American Joint Distribution Committee, as Chizuko Takao demonstrates in her chapter in the present volume, managed to secure similar arrangements for a brief time in Soviet Crimea in the 1920s. Such arrangements, needless to say, were unthinkable during the Cold War.

The forms of collective Jewish organization and advocacy were also dramatically different in the late Imperial and late Soviet eras. Late imperial Russian Jewry was a hot-house of political parties, each with its own executive committee, ideological program, dues-paying members, publications, and congresses. Jewish advocacy under the tsars also made unfettered and abundant use of Jewish languages, especially Yiddish. The Communist Party’s monopoly on public life under late Soviet socialism meant that Jewish activists were connected at best by loose networks formed largely through personal and professional ties, as well as through

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the circulation of samizdat. The steep decline in knowledge of Jewish languages across the Soviet era meant that Jewish samizdat was produced and consumed in the same discursive space as other Russian-language samizdat.

These contrasting structures, however, had one important quality in common: both closely mirrored the general forms of oppositional activity of their time. In both historical scenarios, the “general” movement (revolutionary in late imperial Russia, dissident in the late Soviet Union) included a disproportionate number of Jews and was stigmatized as a “Jewish” (or “Zionist”) plot. In both eras, key figures in the Jewish nationalist camp had passed through a phase of activism in the “general” movement, only to despair of that movement’s capacity to achieve its goals. Moshe Leib Lilienblum, Leon Pinsker, Vladimir Medem, and Shlomo Rapaport (An-ski) found their distant reflections in Vitalii Rubin, Natan Sharansky, Mark Azbel and Alexander Voronel. In the friction between refuseniks and rights-defenders we can hear echoes of the arguments that once divided - and connected - Bundists and Bolsheviks.