



Identity Issues of a Minority Ethno-Religion in a Multi-National State Versus a Nation-State: Early Post-Soviet Russian-Jewish Identity in the Former USSR and in Germany and Its Fictional Representation

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Abstract

The present essay considers the unique identity and socio-cultural dynamics of post-Soviet Jewish populations in Russia, Ukraine and Germany in the 1990s, supported by analysis of its treatment in contemporary Russian literature, namely in the short fiction of the Ukrainian-Russian Jewish writer Aleksandr Khurgin. In a darkly humorous way, Khurgin's works treat the theme of belonging to a Jewish minority during the final years of the Soviet Union and the subsequent Jewish emigration to Germany. Certain of his works seem to imply that post-Soviet Jewish identity was a cultural and to a lesser degree national identity, rather than a religious one. His fiction, which is shown to essentially reflect socio-cultural reality, thereby engages with the dynamics of an ethno-religious minority in an officially supranational atheistic state. Likewise, it reflects a sense of having become a minority group of another kind in the country of emigration, and of alienation in a more traditional nation-state, effecting multi-layered challenges to identity.

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A leading postmodern theoretician who has offered considerable reflections on his own hybrid identity was the French Jewish thinker Jacques Derrida. His approach to Jewish identity will be briefly introduced here for later development as it will help to illuminate our subsequent discussion of Russian Jewish identity in the former Soviet Union and in Germany. Derrida wrote that “the moment the identity of the Jew, or of Judaism, consists of not being identical with myself, of being alien, noncongruent with myself, etc., the more Jewish one is!”¹ Derrida’s understanding of Jewishness incorporates a sense of fragmentation and of duality expressed in the extremes of remoteness and proximity, which, as we will see in due course, also seems to have been the condition of many post-Soviet Jews. Derrida argued that

those who proclaim an actual circumcision, a Jewish name, Jewish descent, Jewish soil, Jewish sun etc., are not by definition better placed than others to speak on behalf of Judaism... There is “Of course I am a Jew” and “Of course, I am not a Jew”... both together, that is the condition of the Jew.²

Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian Jewish Identity in Russia and Ukraine

Let us begin this discussion of post-Soviet Jewish identity proper with an excerpt from a narrative written by Aleksandr Khurgin (1952–), a Ukrainian-Russian Jewish writer to whom we will return again later. The main character in one of his stories, “From the Life of a Cyclist” (“Iz zhizni velosipedista”),³ Zhora, lives in Vinnitsa, a town in west-central Ukraine with a historically large Jewish population. He is a somewhat clownish figure and works as a journalist, editing a monthly periodical for Jewish children. While he is not Jewish himself, Zhora has work relations with members of the local Jewish community, such as contributing to the community’s children magazine. However, having been exposed to Christian beliefs, he cannot help but include sermons of Jesus Christ into an article for the Jewish kids’ magazine. Although the rabbi does not notice this and really likes the article, the Jewish editor does and is not amused. When threatened with getting fired for antisemitic propaganda, Zhora defends himself in the following section:

“Givi, I didn’t do this on purpose. You’re my fellow countryman, Givi. Remember Vinnitsa and Vinnitsa region at sunset.”

At first, Givi didn’t want to listen and promised to report Zhora’s extraordinary provocation to all levels of Jewish authority, but then gave heed to his petitions, supplications and admonitions.

“Swear,” he said, “that you didn’t intend to harm us.”

“Here you have the cross as an oath,” said Zhora and made the sign of the cross three times on a Star of David. As always, the conversation took place in the synagogue.

¹Jacques Derrida, *Questions au judaïsme*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1996), p. 76, cited by Gideon Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, trans. by Peretz Kidron, The Library of Jewish Philosophy (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 33.

²Weber, *Questions au judaïsme*, p. 77, cited by Ofrat, p. 33.

³Aleksandr Khurgin, *Nochnoi kovboi. Povesti i rasskazy* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2001), pp. 287–293.

Givi said, “To hell with you.” He believed Zhora and didn’t report him to anyone, but he didn’t pay him his monthly salary as a punishment and compensation for the moral damage inflicted on the whole Jewish people of Ukraine.⁴

This short excerpt perfectly illustrates that the Jews in Russia and Ukraine were used to a very weak religious identity but a strong ethnic or national identity as Jews or rather Hebrews (*evrei* in Russian). They felt that they firmly belonged to the secular intellectual Russian and Russian-speaking culture. Accordingly, they viewed themselves to varying degrees as Russians or Ukrainians in the civic sense, while often more strongly identifying with their local or regional geographical home.

From a communist point of view, the international proletariat embodied in the Soviet Union was expected to become the new defining paradigm in world politics, replacing the traditionally ethnicity-based nation-states as the central political unit. Both Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin claimed that every nation, including the nationalities or ethnicities of the former multi-ethnic Russian Empire should be free to exercise the right of self-determination. However, they understood this idea of national self-determination and autonomy as being culturally and territorially defined, rather than nationally and politically. The idea behind this territorial definition of nationalities, though being informed by an idealistic notion of the equality of nations and the dispensation with conflict, was to lead attention away from centralisation and to buffer the political significance of the national question by reducing it to language, culture and folklore.⁵

An official Soviet patriotism and imperial rhetoric often accompanied this development, along with Russification and the repression of local nationalism. It functioned as some kind of imperial ideology and was intended to absorb the ethnic identities and political loyalties of the over 130 nationalities in the Soviet Union and to facilitate the consolidation of Soviet power. Furthermore, systematic persecution of faith and religion was intended to re-direct loyalties of the less developed parts of the country to the Party. Soviet patriotism, therefore, was a very polyvalent phenomenon: for the different nationalities it served as a substitute for nationalism; for communists within and without the USSR it represented an ideological homeland and moral model to emulate; and for the less educated and rural parts of society, it constituted a quasi-religion.⁶

In order to control population and manipulate migration, a decree of December 1932 introduced an internal passport regime. Passport entries included information on social status and background, military service and family relations. Since 1938, further information was required for an entry regarding the holder’s nationality, since by then certain minorities and nationalities, especially in Soviet border regions, such as Koreans, Finns, Germans, and Poles had turned into potentially suspicious groups.⁷ This green, internal passport registered the holder’s ethnic affiliation in

⁴Khurgin, p. 291. This and all subsequent translations from the Russian and German are mine.

⁵Dietrich Beyrau, *Petrograd, 25. Oktober 1917: Die russische Revolution and der Aufstieg des Kommunismus* (Munich: dtv, 2001), pp. 197–225. More recently, Stephan Rindlisbacher discusses the political and territorial division of the early Soviet Union in *Borders in Red: Managing Diversity in the Early Soviet Union*, Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Series (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2025), pp. 13–62.

⁶Beyrau, pp. 225–230.

⁷Beyrau, pp. 150–153.

the fifth entry level, be it “Russian,” “Ukrainian,” “German,” an indigenous Siberian nationality or, for example, “Jew.”

Since the internal passport had to be presented on many every-day occasions, this system aided in the discrimination of a number of nationalities, but especially of Jews, though the immediacy of this discrimination varied during different periods in Soviet history. As the affiliation with a minority ethnicity often had severe disadvantages, such as concerning access to higher education and professional training, some tried to get this passport entry changed. There are numerous jokes about this system and the “fifth record” (*piataia grafa*) or “fifth point” (*piatyi punkt*), such as one which reflects on the fact of being often disadvantaged and repressed with such a “Jewish” entry, and referring to holders of such passports as “disabled persons of the fifth group” (*invalidy piatoi gruppy*) — in the Soviet Union, disability was normally categorised into three medical groups.

Soviet ideology demanded assimilation, and many Jews desired to completely assimilate to the mainstream Soviet culture. At the same time, religion generally and therefore also Judaism and its practice were repressed. The USSR’s nationalities and passport policies created the very opposite effect by identifying and setting apart Jews in everyday life through discrimination, particularly since the 1930s. The passport regime was a key instrument in this. Jews, irrespective of how secular or religious they were initially, actually became more aware of their Jewish nationality. This even went so far as to cause some formerly secular Jews to turn to practising Judaism, although this was really a minority. Jewish identity was strengthened, although only in a uni-dimensional way, that is at the level of ethnicity, descent and kinship.

The religious dimension of Jewishness was mostly lost because religious practice and education was very limited and difficult to participate in, however. The Soviet case proves the rule that “Jewish identities in general are to be understood as constructs in response to circumstances.”⁸ The historian Zvi Gitelman states that: “In the USSR, state-imposed identity and governmental anti-Semitism combined with grassroots anti-Semitism to maintain boundaries between Jews and others long after Jewish content had largely disappeared from Jewish ethnicity.”⁹

In Russia, that is the late former Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic (RSFSR) and its successor state, the Russian Federation in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Jewish population of the post-Soviet period (e.g. 229,900 in 2002) constituted roughly one third of the Jewish population of 1959 and one half of 1989. In the 1990s, about 800,000 Jews emigrated from the former Soviet Union. 97.8 per cent of the Russian Jewish population then lived in cities, with a high proportion belonging to the intelligentsia or exercising entrepreneurial professions in the banking and commercial sectors, or working in politics. St Petersburg was estimated to be the home of 36,600 Jews, and Moscow of 79,400 at the time.¹⁰

⁸Jonathan Webber, “Modern Jewish Identities,” in: *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. by Jonathan Webber (London: Littman Library, 1994), p. 82 (pp. 74–85), cited in: Zvi Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 270.

⁹Gitelman, p. 270.

¹⁰Ibid.; cf. Willi Jasper and Bernhard Vogt, “Integration und Selbstbehauptung: Russische Juden in Deutschland,” in *Juden in Deutschland nach 1945: Bürger oder «Mit»-Bürger?*, ed. by Otto Romberg and Susanne Urban-Fahr, 2nd ed. (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2000), p. 214 (pp. 209–220).

Considering levels of religiosity, St Petersburg counted approximately 200–300 active worshippers; an estimated 2,000–4,000 attendants at high holidays and feasts; and 15,000 community members bought *Matza* for Passover from the community.¹¹ This translated into roughly one per cent active and regular worshippers, about ten per cent of high holiday worshippers, and about forty per cent who celebrated the main holidays at home. This pattern shows that even in Russia’s urban centres, where the Jewish population traditionally concentrated, everyday Jewish life in Russia was for the overwhelming majority very secular indeed. It was only on high holidays and even more so at the quintessential Passover, that a higher portion of Jews was interested in observing a minimum of religious tradition.

However, this minimal observance of religious tradition was often understood to be Jewish ethnically and culturally, rather than representing a religious tradition. Indeed, the majority of Russian and Ukrainian Jews, even a proportion of Jews occasionally attending synagogues, were “confessing” atheists or agnostics.¹² This explains why Jewish culture in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine could best be described by the concept of “thin culture.” The notion implies a very precarious and rather symbolic cultural identity — defined by Stephen Cornell as a “common and distinct system of understandings and interpretations that constitute normative order and world view and provide strategic and stylistic guides to action.”¹³ Faith, religious practice, observance of tradition, language — be it Hebrew or Yiddish — all seem to have been rather irrelevant factors in post-Soviet Jewish identity. Even so, the feeling of belonging to the Jewish people and of pride in this ethnic inheritance is regarded as the single defining factor of Jewishness; it is “a subjective feeling of belonging, of kinship.”¹⁴

Jewish-gentile intermarriage rates confirm the fact that the vast majority of Russian and Ukrainian Jews lived a secular life not much different from ethnic Russians or Ukrainians and identified with Russian (and to a lesser extent with Ukrainian) culture. In most cases, this culture relegated Jewish tradition to a form of folklore. High intermarriage levels confirmed a low significance attributed to religious tradition as well as an absence of communal coherence. This was the case because tradition and its observance can to some degree only be effectively transmitted and enforced by a functioning community. The figures for the whole USSR in 1989 were: 57.5 per cent were ethnically mixed marriages for men, and 46.6 per cent for women. In Russia itself, these numbers were even higher: 73.2 per cent for men and 62.8 per cent for women (in 1988). Whereas the ratio of non-Jews to Jews in the households in the 1980s was 60:100, in the 1990s this increased to 80:100. Generally, the demographic decline consisted of mass emigration since 1989 as well as of high

¹¹Personal conversation with the St Petersburg Jewish Religious Community (May 2008).

¹²Cf. Elena Solominski, “Akzeptanz oder Emanzipation?,” in: Romberg and Urban-Fahr, *Juden in Deutschland nach 1945: Bürger oder «Mit»-Bürger?*, p. 226 (pp. 221–231). According to Jaspers and Vogt, “Integration und Selbstbehauptung,” seven per cent of Soviet Jews in the 1980s considered themselves as “religious,” and 17 per cent expressed atheistic convictions. Most disregarded religious stipulations and only one fifth attended a synagogue occasionally (p. 215).

¹³Stephen Cornell, “The Variable Ties That Bind: Content and Circumstance in Ethnic Processes,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19, no. 2, 1996, pp. 265–289 (p. 271), cited in Gitelman, p. 266.

¹⁴Stephen H. Miller, “Religious Practice and Jewish Identity in a Sample of London Jews,” in: *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. by Webber, p. 198 (pp. 193–204), cited in Gitelman, p. 268.

inter-marriage and low fertility rates.¹⁵

How then did the Jews in Russia and Ukraine relate to their states and countries of residence? There is an important difference to be underlined between Russian and Ukrainian Jews. Whereas Russian Jews took an interest in the political life of their country and were politically engaged, Ukrainian Jews were far more apathetic about politics in their country. Russian Jews were far more likely to vote, and to vote for the democratic and liberal end of the political spectrum than the average Russian citizen. Ukrainian Jews, in contrast, were decidedly more insecure about whom to vote for, with a significantly lower voting participation than the general electorate.¹⁶

A reason for this might be found in Jewish skepticism towards an independent Ukraine, as it used to be affected by Ukrainian nationalism. Moreover, Ukraine was perceived at times as lacking the ability to deliver economic and political stability. Furthermore, historically, an independent Ukraine seems to have been somewhat absent from the Jewish geographical imagination. In addition, in 1989, 98 per cent of Ukrainian Jews called the Russian language their mother tongue, something which did not facilitate their identification with Ukraine at a time of Ukrainisation policy. While three-quarters of the Jews in Russia regarded Russia as their homeland, only slightly more than half of the Jews in Ukraine thought of Ukraine that way, preferring Israel or even the Soviet Union as their true homeland.¹⁷

The main difference between Russian and Ukrainian Jews was that even though both population groups were an ethnic minority, Russian Jews lived in the Russian cultural mainstream. Ukrainian Jews were partially also a cultural minority, however, due to their attachment to Russian culture in a Ukrainised environment.¹⁸ What seemed to be the key criteria for both Russian and Ukrainian Jews for identification with their country was the level of social, economic and legal stability which they experienced.¹⁹ In the words of Gitelman, “Jews can adopt a conditional and exchange relationship with their native countries.”²⁰

It is proposed that this consciously ethnic Jewish identity was to a certain degree the unintended product of the Soviet Union’s nationalities policy and official or semi-official discrimination. Although the Soviet state tried to do away with religion, in effect it practised, brought to the fore and fortified the earliest biblical notion of Jewishness which came into existence in the time of the Jewish patriarchs. This identity of the Jews representing a nation or ethnicity, that is a people “set apart,” is a feeling which was less urgent in other parts of the Jewish diaspora at the turn of the twenty-first century.

¹⁵Iu. A. Evstigneev, *Rossiiia: korennyye narody i zarubezhnye diaspory (kratkii etno-istoricheskii spravochnik)*, (St Petersburg: Asterion Filfak, 2008), pp. 201–206; Gitelman, pp. 253–254.

¹⁶Gitelman, pp. 254–260.

¹⁷Gitelman, pp. 254–266. For a more recent discussion of language and identity among Ukrainian Jews, see Abel Polese, “The Ukrainization of Odes(s)a? On the Languages of Odesa and Their Use,” in: *Cosmopolitan Spaces in Odesa: A Case Study of an Urban Context*, ed. by Mirja Lecke and Efraim Sicher, Ukrainian Studies (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023), pp. 252–272. For a study of the development of Jewish identity in Ukraine in the wake of Russia’s war against Ukraine since 2022, consult Marina Sapritsky-Nahum, “Identity transformations of Ukrainian Jewry during the Russian-Ukrainian war: Odesa’s communities and religious leaders at home and in exile,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, vol. LXVII, nos. 1–2 (2025), pp. 214–235.

¹⁸Gitelman, pp. 260–265.

¹⁹Gitelman, pp. 260, 265–266.

²⁰Gitelman, p. 265.

Post-Soviet Jewish Identity in Germany

Let us now compare post-Soviet Jewish identity in Russia and Ukraine with that of post-Soviet Jews in Germany. For many post-Soviet Jewish immigrants to Germany, especially for the older generation which grew up in the Soviet Union, life in Germany adds another layer to their already highly complex assemblage of cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic identities. Whereas in the Soviet Union they were identified by society at large as Jews and, therefore, as non-Russians, in Germany, the German majority often viewed them simply as Russians, owing to their allegiance to Russian culture and language. This was the case irrespective of the fact that they may not have come from Russia itself, but rather from other regions of the former Soviet Union, too, such as Ukraine or Moldova, for example.²¹ Generally, to German eyes and ears, the difference between ethnic Germans who repatriated from the Soviet Union after its break-up, on the one hand, and ethnic Russians and ex-Soviet Jews, on the other, was often not even noticeable. It was their country of origin, the former Soviet Union, which defined their perception by many Germans.²²

The fact that they were officially viewed as refugees (*Kontingentsflüchtlinge*) rather than as immigrants or migrants added a further layer of complexity to their identity and representation in terms of their integration into the receiving society. In the wake of the break-up of the Soviet Union, in light of Germany's historical responsibility vis-à-vis the Jewish people, Germany decided to offer post-Soviet Jews the possibility to migrate there, offered them residence, social benefits and the guarantee of not being removed. It treated them as refugees in accordance with the Geneva Convention on Refugees.²³ By the same token, this very legal status as refugees significantly compounded their social inclusion. It represented a real obstacle for the recognition of professional qualifications gained in their countries of origin, and thereby also a hurdle to finding qualified employment (71.2 per cent had received higher education),²⁴ as well as to gaining economic independence from state support. Likewise, owing to the absence of definite legal regulations, they were not easily granted citizenship. Consequently, they lacked key means of participating in the democratic process of political representation.

However, social and religious pressure groups, and consequently also political and state institutions paid attention to their situation in terms of working towards improving the legal status of post-Soviet Jewish immigrants.²⁵ This issue was further aggravated and affected by another fact, namely that Germany still preferred to not define itself as an immigration country but as a nation-state of ethnic Germans, even though it has long recognised that many residents and citizens of Germany have a migrant background.²⁶ An interviewee gave the following recommendation:

²¹Judith Kessler, "Zuwanderer aus den ehemaligen GUS-Staaten: Erwartungen und Realitäten in der jüdischen Gemeinde," <http://www.juden-in-berlin.de/gemeinde/sozialarbeit.htm> (para. 4–5 of 75) [accessed 21 September 2025].

²²Cf. Jasper and Vogt, "Integration und Selbstbehauptung," p. 218.

²³Jasper and Vogt, "Integration und Selbstbehauptung," p. 211; Arno Herzig, "Neubeginn", *Informationen zur politischen Bildung*, no. 307 (2/2020), "Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland" (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2010), p. 68.

²⁴Jasper and Vogt, p. 217.

²⁵See, for example, Jasper and Vogt, pp. 219–220; cf. Solominski, p. 225.

²⁶Cf. Joachim Gauck and Helga Hirsch, *Erschütterungen: Was unsere Demokratie von außen und innen bedroht* (Munich: Siedler Verlag, 2023), pp. 185–188.

“If you want to emigrate, don’t go to Germany, not to a nation-state. At worst go to America. . . .”²⁷

Above and beyond the fact that Jewish people in the Soviet Union had not only belonged to an ethnic minority but also to the intellectual elite, their immigration to Germany ascribed them to yet another ethnic minority, one from which they had previously been excluded. Suddenly, they were regarded as Russians, which in the context of the Soviet Union represented the majority ethnicity. At the same time, the highly qualified immigrants experienced an enormous social devaluation — as refugees without proper political representation or possibilities to participate in mainstream society and culture.²⁸ While they surely gained something which they had lacked in their home country, namely economic security and political stability, they often lost their sense of home and belonging, their self-esteem, their cultured life-style and many possibilities of self-actualisation, to draw on Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs. In effect, they often ultimately exchanged the satisfaction of “higher” for that of “lower” human needs. To cite an immigrant:

Our situation is ambivalent. I am not a refugee. I have not fled. Well, in my situation I was forced to stay. More than anything, I would like to go back. However, I have become lazy, have settled in, I have been bought. Bought with an income in German currency. Yes, I have sold myself! But my situation is not to be envied, I do not feel like a fully-fledged human being.²⁹

A third dimension of additional identity and representation difficulties was the relationship between the receiving established Jewish communities and the newcomers. For specific reasons to be discussed below, the established communities often hesitated to view the post-Soviet Jewish immigrants as *halakhic* Jews, which, as a consequence, excluded many of them from the official Jewish community. They had experienced state-sanctioned rejection for being Jews in the Soviet Union. In Germany, they were treated as refugees rather than as fully-fledged members of society. At times, many also felt ostracised by the German Jewish communities, which sometimes viewed the newcomers as “Russians” rather than as “real Jews.”

As suggested above, Soviet Judaism had largely lost its religious content and was marked by high intermarriage rates. The “unitary” German Jewish communities (*Einheitsgemeinden*) had been dominated by Orthodox and Conservative Judaism. They had difficulties accepting many immigrants into their ranks, since they only recognised as Jewish someone born to a Jewish mother. Consequently, about half of the newcomers could not be accepted into the communities.³⁰ Also, they were occasionally resentful of the lack of religious interest and dedication amongst the post-Soviet immigrants.³¹

In addition, the number of Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants was at least three times as large as the German-speaking Jewish population of about 30,000 at the time of German re-unification, increasing the country’s Jewry to officially 105,000 members. Including family members who were not considered *halakhic* Jews, the number

²⁷Quoted by Jasper and Vogt, “Integration und Selbstbehauptung,” p. 218.

²⁸Jasper and Vogt, “Integration und Selbstbehauptung,” pp. 217–218.

²⁹Quoted by Jasper and Vogt, “Integration und Selbstbehauptung,” p. 218.

³⁰Herzig, p. 68.

³¹Cf. Jasper and Vogt, “Integration und Selbstbehauptung,” pp. 214–216; Herzig, p. 69.

of such post-Soviet migrants comprised about 200,000.³² Arguably, this caused internal conflicts of representation, with religious communities hesitating to accord a greater degree of proportional representation to the immigrants, for various reasons. This included the fear of alienation in the face of the new majority.³³ Consequently, Russian-speaking Jews established their own cultural clubs, community centres and synagogues, thereby facilitating a Jewish religious, cultural and linguistic pluralism that had been unheard of in post-war Germany.³⁴ Precisely such an experience of “not being fully accepted wherever one may turn” had been well captured by the early twentieth-century expressionist writer Franz Werfel (1890–1945). He had composed the following lines: “So I was a Jew! I was someone other! I wasn’t a human being like everyone else! Alien here, alien there, alien beyond imagination! Alienation, the arch-feeling of my life.”³⁵

Even though there is much more analysis about this situation in its own right and more sociological precision to be offered on this subject,³⁶ let us here link up our discussion again with our introductory words concerning Derrida’s view of his being what one could summarise as a “French-Algerian-Jewish non-Jew.” Such a phrase expresses a complex, fractured and multi-layered structure of identity which simultaneously wishes to account for various identity reference points and their dimensions and magnitudes. Jewish by descent but not by religiosity, Algerian Jewish by birth and culture, and French by language and residence, he thought of himself as the “last Jew”:³⁷

I am a bad Jew... but also “I am the end of Judaism,” that is, the death of Judaism, but also its only chance of survival, I am the last one who can say it, the others don’t even deserve to say it, they’ve forfeited the right, because to say “I am a Jew” one should perhaps say how hard it is to say “I am a Jew.”³⁸

³²Herzig, p. 68.

³³Jasper and Vogt, pp. 214–216; Herzig, p. 68. Lau reported that the Russian speaking immigrants and their children constituted about 90 per cent of the overall membership of Jewish communities in Germany (Jörg Lau, “Juden in Deutschland: Leben statt mahnen,” *Die Zeit*, 4 February 2010, No. 6, <http://pdf.zeit.de/2010/06/Juedische-Gemeinde.pdf> (para. 14 of 31) [accessed 21 September 2025]).

³⁴Herzig, pp. 68–69; Lau, “Juden in Deutschland.”

³⁵Cited by Jasper and Vogt, “Integration und Selbstbehauptung,” p. 220.

³⁶For more comprehensive and sociological studies on this subject, see for example, Jannis Panagiotidis, *Postsowjetische Migration in Deutschland: Eine Einführung* (Weinheim: Beltz Juventa, 2021); Julius H. Schoeps, Willi Jasper and Bernhard Vogt, eds., *Ein neues Judentum in Deutschland? Fremd- und Eigenbilder der russisch-jüdischen Einwanderer*, Neue Beiträge zur Geistesgeschichte, II (Potsdam: VBB, 1999); *Russische Juden in Deutschland: Integration und Selbstbehauptung in einem fremden Land*, ed. by Schoeps, Jasper and Vogt (Weinheim: Beltz Athenäum, 1996); Schoeps, “Russian-speaking Jews and Germany’s Local Jewry,” in: *Transnationalism: Diasporas and the Advent of a New (Dis-)Order*, ed. by Eliezer Ben-Rafael et al. (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2009), pp. 295–302; Schoeps, “Russisch-jüdische Zuwanderer in Deutschland: Hoffnungen, Schwierigkeiten und Integrationsmaßnahmen,” in: *Erwachsenenbildung und ethnische Minderheiten: Situation und Perspektiven im internationalen Überblick*, Festschrift für Joachim H. Knoll zum 65. Geburtstag, ed. by Gundula Frieling et al. (Münster: agenda, 1997); Lena Gorelik, “Juden — Russen — Deutsche: Der Wahrnehmungswandel der russischen Juden in den deutschen Medien 1989–2006 vor dem Hintergrund der deutsch-jüdischen Beziehungen,” Master Thesis, University of Munich / Munich: Grin Verlag, 2006).

³⁷Derrida, *Circonfession: Jacques Derrida par Geoffrey Bennington* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), cited by Ofrat, p. 9.

³⁸Weber, p. 78.

Gideon Ofrat highlights the ambiguity inherent in Derrida's statement about being the "last Jew." He suggests that it can be read as a declaration of remoteness from Judaism, as "the last person one could call a Jew," as much as a reference to his being the last witness and the only remaining promise of survival for Judaism.³⁹ In Ofrat's words, Derrida's "past (i.e., his identity) is doomed to fracturing and internal antagonisms."⁴⁰

It is proposed that our understanding of the experience of post-Soviet Jews both in ex-Soviet Russia and in German emigration, with their largely non-religious view of Judaism and their assimilated Russian cultural background, may benefit from viewing it through the eyes and experience of Derrida. Derrida captured so well the duality of a secular Jew's yearning for, and simultaneous distance from, Jewish culture and identity. Derrida wrote about himself as "a little French Jew from Algeria... more and less French... but also more *and* less Jewish than all the French, all the Jews, and all the Jews of France."⁴¹ The Jewish population at the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union may well have been the country's "last Jews" — the last individuals whom one could identify as Jewish for all their loss of religious significance. And perhaps they even would have been one of the last generations of Soviet Jews, had the atheistic Soviet Union not ceased to exist.

Furthermore, they also may be viewed as the "last Jews" in the sense of their being the last witnesses of their Russian, Ukrainian or Soviet "motherland" (*rodina*) having once been home to the largest Jewish population in the world. In the first two post-Soviet decades, some 200,000 of such post-Soviet "last Jews" emigrated to Germany, experiencing a similar fracturing of identity. At the same time, therefore, they also bore witness to the continuous existence of Judaism, reinvigorating Jewish life in Germany, the very nation which about seventy years earlier had been in full swing of annihilating the Jewish people.

Our earlier thumbnail analysis of a passage from Khurgin's short story "From the Life of a Cyclist" demonstrates how the writer engages with the conflicting religious, ethnic and regional identities and loyalties of post-Soviet Jewry in his writing. In a later story entitled "Braces: From the Lives of Foreigners" ("Podtiazhki: iz zhizni auslenderov") [2004],⁴² he fictionally portrays the lives of three post-Soviet immigrants to Germany. The short narrative focuses on the discrepancy between the comfort and ease that a life in Germany was often expected to offer, on the one hand, and the lack of human warmth and deeper meaning, on the other. The three protagonists of three individual short episodes are linked to each other by the fact that they are staying in the same government dormitory for refugees and by their subsequent use of one single set of braces. Their experience of a highly structured and organised society which is characterised by the primacy of technology provides another link.

The first hero, Aaron Khataevich, who, in spite of his Jewish name, had been an important person in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in particular in the prison service and in business. He had emigrated with great enthusiasm,

³⁹Ofrat, p. 9.

⁴⁰Ofrat, p. 5.

⁴¹Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996), p. 23, cited by Ofrat, p. 17 (emphasis in original).

⁴²Khurgin, "Podtiazhki: iz zhizni auslenderov," khurgin.de (author website), <https://khurgin.de/rasskazy/podtyazhki-iz-zhizni-auslenderov/> [accessed 20 September 2025].

looking forward to enjoying peace, public safety, social security, and to escaping the backwardness of his motherland. His initial enchantment with highly developed civilisation gives way to his realisation that in exile, he is suddenly a nobody whom no one seems to know or care about. Ultimately, the meaninglessness which he senses for himself, far from home, appears to be more powerful than the benefits of a life marked by prosperity in Central Europe. Subsequently, he hangs himself, using a pair of fashionable braces.

Valia, the story's second hero, arrived from the steppes of Kazakhstan together with his wife, who, owing to her descent, was permitted to immigrate to Germany. At home, he used to work as a sheep butcher, a profession which he had hoped to take up again in Germany. However, butchers who had been trained to do their work manually were redundant in a Europe where livestock are often slaughtered industrially. In great despair he kills himself, having accidentally found Khataevich's braces.

The third episode concerns one ex-Soviet military doctor, Colonel Rozenberg, who emigrated together with his wife. Upon arrival in the country of destination, his wife gives birth to a son, which is why he visits her in the hospital. There, he is excited about the modern hospital equipment and the high standard of medical care afforded to the patients. With his wife still in hospital, he returns home to the dormitory, where he stumbles upon the set of braces. On this note, the story ends, with no suggestion as to its further development.

In this story and Khurgin's oeuvre more generally, humour is created by means of a hyperbolic and sometimes absurdist presentation of cause and effect between the characters' environment and their often tragic fate of a meaningless life, often of individuals at the margins of society.⁴³ Khurgin's briefly examined fiction pays attention to the theme of Jewish identity and immigration to Germany. The exaggerated treatment in his narratives seems to emphasize the lack of a higher moral significance to post-Jewish existence. Many post-Soviet immigrants seemed to make such an experience in Germany in spite of greater economic security and public safety which they may have enjoyed. As it appears, Khurgin's works illustrate not only the difficulties of life in emigration. More profoundly, they foreground the experience of despondency and loss of meaning for individuals who had been socialised in a more collectivist society.

Conceivably, Soviet society ascribed a certain ideological meaning to the individual, whereas Western liberal society does not in any comparable way. For some Westerners, consumption and pleasure may fill any ideological void. Possibly, of course, the objects of consumption of Soviet Jews were different from those of Western Jews and society at large.⁴⁴ Perhaps they had been, even if not by choice, in greater measure used to consuming official ideology and were accordingly somewhat conditioned to accept scant material resources.

⁴³For a more detailed discussion of the role of humour in Khurgin's fiction, see Nicolas Dreyer, *Literature Redeemed: "Neo-Modernism" in the Post-Soviet Fiction of Vladimir Sorokin, Vladimir Turchkov, and Aleksandr Khurgin* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2020), pp. 214–245.

⁴⁴See *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society Since Gorbachev*, ed. by Adele Marie Barker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), for a study of early post-Soviet Russian cultural consumption habits.

Conclusions

In conclusion, certain dynamics concerning the identity and the sense of belonging of ex-Soviet Jews may be highlighted. We discussed Post-Soviet Jewish identity in parts of the ex-USSR as well as in Germany. With respect to Jews in the former Soviet Union, our discussion concluded that it appears, above all, to have been a national and ethnic identity interspersed with elements of a local and regional, perhaps social identity, rather than a religious or cultural one. Owing to the Soviet ideology's rejection of religion *per se*, a real knowledge of Jewish tradition and religious practice was, to a large degree, lost.

The Soviet Union's system of registering its citizens' nationality or ethnic affiliation contributed to the preservation of a national and ethnic identity by Soviet Jews. Likewise, the official antisemitism in the country prevented a genuine assimilation into Russian-dominated society. This very lack of religious identity of post-Soviet Jews was one of the major factors that, for immigrants in Germany, added yet another problem. Above and beyond their being foreigners away from home and without their former social support network, they often lacked sufficient knowledge of the German language. Many faced difficulties gaining acceptance by the wider Jewish religious community.

Derrida's reflections on being torn between being Jewish physically but not so religiously may offer an illustration of Russian-, Ukrainian-, ex-Soviet-Jewish identity in both the former Soviet Union and Germany. Furthermore, it was suggested that immigrants from the former Soviet Union paid a high price for leaving their motherland. While they gained a higher level of material well-being, health provision and safety, in effect, they had to renounce certain social and cultural values and meaning which a more developed and perhaps more materially orientated German society could not offer them in the same way. Our brief analysis of two short narratives by Aleksandr Khurgin exemplifies the complex issues involved in defining ethno-religious minority identity specifically, as well as the experience of alienation in emigration more generally.

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