

**YIDDISH IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION SINCE 1959:  
A STATISTICAL-DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS\***  
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The language situation of today's Ashkenazi Jewry in the former Soviet Union (FSU) has not yet been the object of special statistical-demographic study. Moreover, in most analysis this Jewry was usually mixed with other Jewish groups. Nor have the results of the first post-Soviet Russian microcensus of 1994 been studied in this regard. This paper aims, within the space available, to fill this lacuna.

Yiddish in the Soviet Censuses

Soviet censuses have amassed a long and rich series of data on ethnic nationality (*nationalnost'*) and language. In the post-war period there have been four population censuses: in 1959, 1970, 1979 and 1989. Not only did these censuses not require documentary evidence for answers to any question, but in regard to ethnic nationality the census takers were explicitly given instructions that ethnic nationality was to be determined solely by the person polled - without any corroboration (Kingkade, 1989).

Data from the Soviet censuses are based entirely on self-declaration of respondents, and they are regarded as "a good example of a large and empirically measured core Jewish population in the Diaspora" (Schmelz and DellaPergola, 1995, p. 481). The "core" Jewish population is the aggregate of all those who, when asked, identify themselves as Jews, or in the case of children, are identified as such by their parents; it does not include persons of Jewish origin who reported another ethnic nationality in the census (DellaPergola, 1993, p. 277). However, most scholars agree that the Soviet census figures on Jewish ethnic nationality (adults only) were very similar to "legal" ethnic nationality as recorded in internal passports.

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In the first post-war census of 1959, as well as in the previous census of 1939 only one question on language was asked - "native language" (*rodnoi iazyk*). This term was not clearly defined in the instructions to census takers, so answers to this question are a problematic linguistic indicator (e.g., see: Silver, 1986, pp. 88-89). It can not, of course, be seen as the equivalent to a "language of early childhood".

Beginning with the census of 1970, in addition to the question on native language, a question on a second language of the various "peoples of the USSR" which respondents "freely command" was asked. The phrase "freely command" is important; due to its use we have information on persons who named the language of their ethnic group as their second language of which they have speaking knowledge, whereas "native language" may have been only an ethnic symbol, and the language was not actually known or spoken.

Correspondingly, for some Jews Yiddish was an ethnic symbol, so that answers to the question on native language were sometimes unrelated to linguistic behaviour. For others Yiddish was not declared as the native language even in cases where the respondents were raised in Yiddish-speaking homes and were educated in this language, but as from the 1970 census it can be declared a second language. Thus, the 1959 census which contained only one question on language gave Jews less opportunity to declare Yiddish than later censuses (for Yiddish in the 1959 census, see especially: Kantor, 1971, p. 150).

Results of the post-war Soviet censuses presented data on a "Jewish language" (*evreiskii iazyk*). Study of the census documentation showed that this term was equivalent to Yiddish (e.g., see: Goskomstat SSSR, 1988, p. 55). Other Jewish languages such as "Jewish-Tat" (*evreisko-tatskii iazyk*) and "Jewish-Tadzhik" (*evreisko-tadzhikskii iazyk*) were noted separately in census documentation (ibid.).

It is difficult to separate Ashkenazi Jews from other Jewish groups in the FSU in order to define the Jewish population under consideration. Although in the last Soviet census of 1989 Mountain Jews, Georgian Jews, Central Asian (Bukharan) Jews, and Krymchaks appeared separately, we can not be sure that this was done successfully for the Jews of Central Asia and Transcaucasia, or for those of the North Caucasus (Dagestan, Checheno-Ingush, Kabardino-Balkar, and North Ossetin autonomous republics). It is even more difficult to deal with the results of the previous Soviet censuses when the non-Ashkenazi groups were haphazardly counted. For this reason, in our analysis we will discuss only the situation in

Russia (excluding the autonomous republics of the North Caucasus) and the European republics of the USSR (Ukraine, Belorussia, Moldavia, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia).<sup>1</sup>

### The Decline of Yiddish in the Post-War USSR

In the post-war period not many Soviet Jews declared Yiddish as their native tongue in the censuses, thus continuing the process of decline which had already begun between the two world wars. According to my estimate, based on the data of the 1939 census, only about 40 per cent of the Ashkenazi Jews in the three Slavic republics of the FSU declared Yiddish as their native language. According to the same census this indicator was as low as about 25 per cent for Ashkenazi Jews in the Russian Federation (including Crimea) and 45 per cent for Ukrainian Jewry. Only in Belorussia was Yiddish declared to be their native language by slightly more than half (55 per cent) of the Jews (see: Altshuler, 1993, pp. 17-18).

Table 1. Percentage Declaring Yiddish as Native or Second Language among Ashkenazi Jews in Russia and the European republics of the USSR,<sup>(a)</sup> 1959-1989

|                    | 1959               | 1970 | 1979 | 1989 |
|--------------------|--------------------|------|------|------|
| Declaring Yiddish: |                    |      |      |      |
| Native Language    | 17.7               | 11.0 | 10.3 | 8.7  |
| Second Language    | ... <sup>(b)</sup> | 8.5  | 5.7  | 4.3  |
| Total              | ...                | 19.5 | 16.0 | 13.0 |

(a) Author's estimate; excluding the Jews of Dagestan, Checheno-Ingush, Kabardino-Balkar, and North Ossetin autonomous republics.

(b) The data were not collected.

Sources: 1959, 1970, 1979 and 1989 censuses.

According to the first post-war census of 1959, Yiddish was named the native language of the Ashkenazi Jews in Russia and the European republics of the USSR by an estimated 17.7 per cent. In the next census (of 1970) Yiddish was noted as the native or second language by 19.5 per cent of the Ashkenazi Jews, with only 11 per cent declaring it as native. By the eve of the current great exodus (based on data from the 1989 census) the estimated share of Yiddish as native or second language among these same Ashkenazi Jews in the FSU was 13 per cent, while only 8.7 per cent named it as native (Table 1).

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper only official data of the Central Statistical Administration of the USSR and the Russian Federation have been used: Goskomstat SSSR, 1989 and 1991; Statkomitet SNG, 1993; and Goskomstat Rossii, 1990 and 1995. For a synopsis of Jewish data from the censuses of 1959 and 1970, see: Altshuler, 1987, Chapter 7.

Since the Second World War the Ashkenazi Jewish population of the FSU has aged substantially. In 1959 the median age of the Jews was 41.2 in Russia, 39.3 in Ukraine and 33.7 in Belorussia. But by the 1989 census, the median age of the Ashkenazi Jewish population had risen to 52.6 in Russia, 51.6 in Ukraine and 47.0 in Belorussia. Correspondingly, during the same period the proportion of the group aged 65 and above within the total Ashkenazi Jewish population dramatically rose from 9 to 27 per cent in Russia, from 9 to 25 per cent in Ukraine and from 7 to 20 per cent in Belorussia (Tolts, 1997a, p. 163; Tolts, 1997b, p. 153).

Naturally, in the censuses, older Jews more often declared Yiddish as their native or second language (see below). Thus, the process of aging has partly offset and camouflaged the decline of Yiddish in the FSU.

#### Geography of Yiddish on the Eve of the Great Exodus

According to my estimate, based on the data of the 1989 census, on the eve of great exodus there were in Russia and the European republics of the USSR about 107,000 Ashkenazi Jews who named Yiddish as their native language, and 52,000 who noted it as their second language; giving us a total of approximately 159,000 Ashkenazi Jews who declared Yiddish in this census (Table 2). According to the data of the 1959 census, to the one question on language which was asked, there were about 350,000 Jews who declared Yiddish as their native language.

According to the data of the 1989 census, most of those who declared Yiddish as either a native or a second language lived either in the Russian Federation (56,000) or Ukraine (54,000). In Moldavia 21,500 Jews named Yiddish as their native or second language. At the same time, fewer Jews (16,000) in Belorussia declared Yiddish, although 70 per cent more Jews lived in Belorussia than in Moldavia.<sup>2</sup> Most of the remaining Jews who declared Yiddish were in Latvia (more than 6,000) and Lithuania (4,600). The shares of these two republics in the estimated total number of Jews declaring Yiddish were higher than their shares in the total number of Jews by factors of 2 and 3, respectively. The rest of the Jews who declared Yiddish lived in Estonia (less than 700).

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<sup>2</sup> However, in the census year readership of the single Soviet Yiddish-language magazine *Sovetish Heymland* was higher in Belorussia than in Moldavia (Estrakh, 1995, p. 19).

Table 2. The Number Declaring Yiddish as Native or Second Language among Ashkenazi Jews in Russia and the European republics of the USSR, 1989

| Republic <sup>(a)</sup> | Total Jews | Thereof declaring Yiddish as |                 |                           |
|-------------------------|------------|------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
|                         |            | Native language              | Second language | Native or second language |
|                         |            | <u>Number</u>                |                 |                           |
| Russia <sup>(b)</sup>   | 521,964    | 36,888                       | 19,453          | 56,341                    |
| Ukraine                 | 486,326    | 34,635                       | 19,386          | 54,021                    |
| Moldavia                | 65,672     | 17,016                       | 4,538           | 21,554                    |
| Belorussia              | 111,883    | 8,530                        | 7,514           | 16,044                    |
| Latvia                  | 22,897     | 5,159                        | 1,013           | 6,172                     |
| Lithuania               | 12,314     | 4,398                        | 241             | 4,639                     |
| Estonia                 | 4,613      | 570                          | 108             | 678                       |
| Total <sup>(b)</sup>    | 1,225,669  | 107,196                      | 52,253          | 159,449                   |
|                         |            | <u>Percentage of total</u>   |                 |                           |
| Russia <sup>(b)</sup>   | 42.5       | 34.4                         | 37.2            | 35.3                      |
| Ukraine                 | 39.7       | 32.3                         | 37.1            | 33.9                      |
| Moldavia                | 5.4        | 15.9                         | 8.7             | 13.5                      |
| Belorussia              | 9.1        | 8.0                          | 14.4            | 10.1                      |
| Latvia                  | 1.9        | 4.8                          | 1.9             | 3.9                       |
| Lithuania               | 1.0        | 4.1                          | 0.5             | 2.9                       |
| Estonia                 | 0.4        | 0.5                          | 0.2             | 0.4                       |
| Total <sup>(b)</sup>    | 100.0      | 100.0                        | 100.0           | 100.0                     |

(a) Ordered according to the total number declaring Yiddish as native or second language.

(b) Author's estimate; excluding the Jews of Dagestan, Checheno-Ingush, Kabardino-Balkar, and North Ossetin autonomous republics.

Source: 1989 census.

The large discrepancy in the census figures between the distribution of Jews declaring Yiddish as a native or second language, and the total number of Ashkenazi Jews in each republic is caused by the very different percentage declaring Yiddish in each republic.

#### Yiddish in the Former Soviet Republics

According to the data of the 1989 census, the share declaring Yiddish as their native language was the same among Ashkenazi Jews in Russia and Ukraine - 7.1 per cent, and only slightly higher in Belorussia - 7.6 per cent. During the decade preceding the great exodus, this percentage was almost unchanged in Russia, but fell by more than a fifth in Ukraine, and even more (by a third) in Belorussia (Table 3).

In 1989 the highest shares of Jews declaring Yiddish as their native language were in the three republics annexed by the Soviet Union during the Second World War - Lithuania (35.7 per cent), Moldavia (25.9 per cent) and Latvia (22.5 per cent). However, in each of these three republics, this percentage decreased over the decade between 1979 and 1989. In the fourth republic annexed during the Second World War - Estonia - the share of Jews declaring

Yiddish as their native language was not as high as in the other three; in 1989, in this republic whose territory had not been part of the Jewish Pale of Settlement in the Tsarist Empire before 1917, 12.4 per cent of the Jews declared Yiddish to be their native language.

Table 3. Percentages Declaring Yiddish as Native or Second Language among Ashkenazi Jews in Russia and the European republics of the USSR, 1979 and 1989

| Republic <sup>(a)</sup> | Native Language |      | Second Language |      | Total |      |
|-------------------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|-------|------|
|                         | 1979            | 1989 | 1979            | 1989 | 1979  | 1989 |
| Lithuania               | 41.0            | 35.7 | 2.0             | 2.0  | 43.0  | 37.7 |
| Moldavia                | 33.1            | 25.9 | 6.0             | 6.9  | 39.1  | 32.8 |
| Latvia                  | 28.3            | 22.5 | 3.9             | 4.4  | 32.2  | 26.9 |
| Estonia                 | 15.1            | 12.4 | 2.4             | 2.3  | 17.5  | 14.7 |
| Belorussia              | 11.2            | 7.6  | 12.5            | 6.7  | 23.7  | 14.3 |
| Ukraine                 | 9.0             | 7.1  | 5.0             | 4.0  | 14.0  | 11.1 |
| Russia <sup>(b)</sup>   | 7.2             | 7.1  | 5.1             | 3.7  | 12.3  | 10.8 |
| Total                   | 10.3            | 8.7  | 5.7             | 4.3  | 16.0  | 13.0 |

(a) Ordered according to the total percentage declaring Yiddish as native or second language in 1989.

(b) Author's estimate; excluding the Jews of Dagestan, Checheno-Ingush, Kabardino-Balkar, and North Ossetin autonomous republics.

Sources: 1979 and 1989 censuses.

According to the data of the 1989 census, the highest shares of Jews who named Yiddish as their second language were in Moldavia (6.9 per cent) and Belorussia (6.7 per cent). During the decade preceding the great exodus this percentage increased in two republics (Moldavia and Latvia), and Lithuania was the only republic where it remained unchanged. In the same period in Belorussia where the share of Yiddish as second language among the Jews had been the highest in 1979, even exceeding the share of those Jews who declared Yiddish as their native language (12.5 and 11.2 per cent, respectively), it decreased dramatically. Between 1979 and 1989 the share of Yiddish as second language decreased in all the other republics as well.

Correspondingly, according to the data of the 1989 census, the total share of Jews declaring Yiddish as their native or second language was highest in Lithuania (37.7 per cent). This total share was also high among the Moldavian Jews (32.8 per cent) and Latvian Jews (26.9 per cent). In Belorussia and Estonia the total share of Jews declaring Yiddish as their native or second language in the census was much lower (14.3 and 14.7 per cent, respectively). According to the data of the 1989 census, Russian and Ukrainian Ashkenazi Jews had the lowest percentages declaring Yiddish as their native or second language (10.8 and 11.1 per cent, respectively).

According to the data of the 1989 census on the Jewish populations of the capitals of the republics, the highest total share declaring Yiddish as its native or second language was in Vilnius (39.1 per cent) which coincides with the indicator for Lithuanian Jewry as a whole, which was found to be the highest among the republics. Vilnius Jewry was the only exception among the capitals in showing about the same level of declared Yiddish in 1989 as in the 1979 census (Table 4).

Table 4. Percentages Declaring Yiddish as Native or Second Language among Ashkenazi Jews in Capitals of Russia and the European republics of the USSR, 1979 and 1989

| City <sup>(a)</sup> | Native Language |      | Second Language |      | Total |      |
|---------------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|-------|------|
|                     | 1979            | 1989 | 1979            | 1989 | 1979  | 1989 |
| Vilnius             | 39.3            | 37.3 | 2.4             | 1.8  | 41.7  | 39.1 |
| Kishinev            | 28.9            | 22.3 | 6.2             | 6.8  | 35.1  | 29.1 |
| Riga                | 27.7            | 22.6 | 4.0             | 4.3  | 31.7  | 26.9 |
| Tallin              | 15.8            | 13.2 | 2.6             | 2.4  | 18.4  | 15.6 |
| Minsk               | 7.8             | 5.4  | 7.4             | 5.4  | 15.2  | 10.8 |
| Moscow              | 5.8             | 5.5  | 4.9             | 3.6  | 10.7  | 9.1  |
| Kiev                | 5.6             | 4.7  | 4.5             | 3.1  | 10.1  | 7.8  |

(a) Ordered according to the total percentage declaring Yiddish as native or second language in 1989.

Sources: 1979 and 1989 censuses.

The Jews of Kishinev, Riga, Vilnius and Tallin had levels of declaring Yiddish which closely resembled the respective averages of the republics in which they are located. At the same time, the Jews in the capitals of the three Slavic republics clearly showed lower propensities to declare Yiddish in the censuses. It is especially interesting to note that according to the 1989 census data, the total share declaring Yiddish in Kiev was considerably lower than that in Moscow (7.8 and 9.1 per cent, respectively). This is further evidence of the lower propensity of Ukrainian Jewry to declare Yiddish in the census on the eve of the great exodus, despite their obviously greater knowledge of the Yiddish language as compared with Ashkenazi Jews in Russia.

At the same time, differences between the capitals and regions and the total figure for the republics in declaring Yiddish were so significant in the three Slavic republics that this should be analyzed separately.

#### Differentiations in Declaration of Yiddish within Ukraine, Belorussia and Russia

According to the data of the 1989 census, in Ukraine the highest total share of Jews declaring Yiddish as their native or second language was in Chernovtsy oblast (33.9 per cent). In 1979

this share was even higher there and in Zakarpat'e oblast (44.6 and 37.2 per cent, respectively). Thus, the Jews of these two oblasts declared Yiddish at a level about the same as in Moldavia, and much higher than the Ukrainian average (in 1989 as much as by a factor of 2.6 for Chernovtsy Jewry).

According to the data of the 1989 census, there were another five oblasts where more than 17 per cent of the Jews named Yiddish as their native or second language: Vinnitsa, Zhitomir, Khmel'nitsky, Ivano-Frankovsk and Kiev (Table 5; unfortunately, we have no separate data for the Jewish population of Zakarpat'e, Ternopol and Volyn oblasts). All of these oblasts are situated in the Southwest region of Ukraine and they were part of the Tsarist Pale of Settlement before 1917. Moreover, some of them, such as Chernovtsy, Zakarpat'e and others, were included in the Soviet Union only during the Second World War.

Table 5. Percentages Declaring Yiddish as Native or Second Language among Ashkenazi Jews in some Oblasts of Ukraine and Belorussia, 1979 and 1989

| Oblast <sup>(a)</sup> | Native Language |                     | Second Language |                    | Total |                     |
|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------|---------------------|
|                       | 1979            | 1989                | 1979            | 1989               | 1979  | 1989                |
| Ukraine               |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Chernovtsy            | 36.7            | 27.4                | 7.9             | 6.5                | 44.6  | 33.9                |
| Zakarpat'e            | 36.8            | 21.1 <sup>(b)</sup> | 0.4             | 1.4 <sup>(b)</sup> | 37.2  | 22.5 <sup>(b)</sup> |
| Vinnitsa              | 19.3            | 15.3                | 5.5             | 6.7                | 24.8  | 22.0                |
| Zhitomir              | 17.7            | 12.7                | 7.4             | 7.0                | 25.1  | 19.7                |
| Khmel'nitsky          | 20.4            | 13.7                | 4.6             | 5.3                | 25.0  | 19.0                |
| Ivano-Frankovsk       | 19.4            | 15.5                | 3.5             | 3.1                | 22.9  | 18.6                |
| Kiev <sup>(c)</sup>   | 19.1            | 13.4                | 5.0             | 3.9                | 24.1  | 17.3                |
| Belorussia            |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Mogilev               | 16.5            | 10.7                | 13.5            | 10.1               | 30.0  | 20.8                |
| Minsk <sup>(d)</sup>  | 17.6            | 13.3                | 8.9             | 6.3                | 26.5  | 19.6                |

(a) Ordered according to the total percentage declaring Yiddish as native or second language in 1989; only the oblasts with levels of more than 17 per cent were presented.

(b) Including Ternopol and Volyn oblasts, for which we have no separate data.

(c) Excluding the city of Kiev.

(d) Excluding the city of Minsk.

Sources: 1979 and 1989 censuses.

According to the data of the 1989 census, the Jewries of two big industrial oblasts showed the lowest total level of declaring Yiddish: Dnepropetrovsk (6.3 per cent) and Kharkov (6.5 per cent). As noted above, in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev this total percentage of declaring Yiddish was much lower than the average of the total republic (7.8 compared with 11.1 per cent).

According to the data of the same census, in Belorussia the highest total shares of Jews who declared Yiddish were in Mogilev and Minsk oblasts (about one fifth). At the same time, the Jewish population of the Belorussian capital, the city of Minsk, declared Yiddish at the lowest level in the republic (10.8 per cent, compared with 14.3 per cent for the total Jews of Belorussia).

The territory of the Russian Federation is much greater than the territories of Ukraine and Belorussia, and it consists of many regions on oblast level (for data on most of them, see: Appendix 1; regional data for Ukraine and Belorussia, see: Appendixes 2-3). For the purposes of analysis, Russia's Jewry can be divided into three large groups by area: the Jews of Moscow, St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad), and those of the provinces (excluding the Jews of Dagestan, Checheno-Ingush, Kabardino-Balkar, and North Ossetin autonomous republics).

According to the data of the 1989 census, about 174,700 (34 per cent) of Ashkenazi Jews in Russia lived in Moscow, 106,100 (20 per cent) in St. Petersburg and approximately 241,100 (46 per cent) in the provinces. There were serious socio-demographic differentiations between these three groups of Jews (for details of these, see: Tolts, 1997b, pp. 164-171).

First of all, the previous analysis reveals that Moscow and St. Petersburg Jews have a much higher level of education than those of the provinces, and at the start of the great exodus the majority of Moscow and St. Petersburg Jewry under the age of 40 consisted of intelligentsia, as was true of their parents before them. This was not true of provincial Jewry. From this we may assume stronger cultural assimilation of Moscow and St. Petersburg Jews.

Table 6. Percentages of Ashkenazi Jews in the Russian Federation Declaring Yiddish as Native or Second Language, by Area, 1979 and 1989

| Area                     | Native Language |      | Second Language |      | Total |      |
|--------------------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|-------|------|
|                          | 1979            | 1989 | 1979            | 1989 | 1979  | 1989 |
| Moscow city              | 5.8             | 5.5  | 4.9             | 3.6  | 10.7  | 9.1  |
| St. Petersburg           | 4.4             | 5.0  | 4.9             | 3.7  | 9.3   | 8.7  |
| Provinces <sup>(a)</sup> | 9.5             | 9.1  | 5.3             | 3.9  | 14.8  | 13.0 |
| Total <sup>(a)</sup>     | 7.2             | 7.1  | 5.1             | 3.7  | 12.3  | 10.8 |

(a) Author's estimate; excluding the Jews of Dagestan, Checheno-Ingush, Kabardino-Balkar, and North Ossetin autonomous republics.

Sources: 1979 and 1989 censuses.

In fact, according to the data of the 1989 census, Moscow and St. Petersburg Jews showed a much lower share of declaring Yiddish as their native language than did those of the provinces (5.5 and 5.0 per cent against 9.1 per cent, respectively). However, there was no real

difference in percentage of those declaring Yiddish as second language between these three groups of Jews (Table 6).

Of course, Russia's provincial Jewry was not homogeneous in declaring Yiddish. In 1989 the Volga region had the largest number of units with high totals declaring Yiddish: Astrakhan oblast (19.6 per cent), Tatar republic (18.9 per cent) and Penza oblast (18.4 per cent). In Birobidzhan, the "Jewish" oblast, this percentage was lower: 18.2 per cent.

#### Declaring Yiddish and Jewish Population Structure

In most demographic analyses we usually devote special attention to the role of the age and sex structure. A comparison of the data on Yiddish showed that in all the republics, more females than males declared it either a native or a second tongue (Table 7).

Table 7. Percentages Declaring Yiddish as Native or Second Language among Ashkenazi Jews in Russia and the European republics of the USSR, by Sex, 1989

| Republic <sup>(a)</sup> | Native Language |         | Second Language |         | Total |         |
|-------------------------|-----------------|---------|-----------------|---------|-------|---------|
|                         | Males           | Females | Males           | Females | Males | Females |
| Lithuania               | 34.5            | 37.0    | 1.8             | 2.1     | 36.3  | 39.1    |
| Moldavia                | 24.4            | 27.3    | 6.5             | 7.3     | 30.9  | 34.6    |
| Latvia                  | 21.2            | 23.8    | 4.0             | 4.9     | 25.2  | 28.7    |
| Estonia                 | 11.6            | 13.2    | 2.1             | 2.6     | 13.7  | 15.8    |
| Belorussia              | 6.9             | 8.3     | 5.8             | 7.5     | 12.7  | 15.8    |
| Ukraine                 | 6.7             | 7.5     | 3.6             | 4.3     | 10.3  | 11.8    |
| Russia <sup>(b)</sup>   | 7.0             | 7.1     | 3.5             | 4.0     | 10.5  | 11.1    |
| Total                   | 8.4             | 9.1     | 3.9             | 4.6     | 12.3  | 13.7    |

(a) Ordered according to the total percentage among Jewish females declaring Yiddish as native or second language in 1989.

(b) Author's estimate; excluding the Jews of Dagestan, Checheno-Ingush, Kabardino-Balkar, and North Ossetin autonomous republics.

Sources: 1989 census.

The female Jewish population is much older than the male Jewish population (according to the data of the 1989 census, in the FSU as a whole, the median age of Jewish females was more than 6 years higher than that of Jewish males), and in older ages, the proportion declaring Yiddish was higher. Despite this, there were no great discrepancies between the percentages for males and females by age (e.g., for Russia's Jewish population, see: Appendix 4).

The lowest percentages of those declaring Yiddish in the censuses related to Jews of middle age, many of whom are mixed-married and highly assimilated. A higher percentage of young children were declared to use Yiddish as their native language than middle-aged Jews,

a fact which may be explained by the assumption that these children were born into homogenous Jewish families, or mixed families which chose Jewish ethnic nationality for their children. The incidence of Yiddish as a second language decreases gradually from older to younger birth cohorts.

Naturally, the highest share declaring Yiddish as their native or second language is in the older ages. According to the data of the 1989 census, in the Russian Federation the total share of those from the pre-Revolutionary birth cohorts who declared Yiddish was only about one fifth (Table 8). However, in the Soviet censuses the question on “free command” in the second language was not clearly defined.

Table 8. Percentages Declaring a Jewish Language as Native or Second Tongue among Jews in Some Older Birth Cohorts, the Russian Federation

| Birth cohorts                                  | Age at census date | Native language | Second language | Total |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------|
| <u>1970 census of population<sup>(a)</sup></u> |                    |                 |                 |       |
| Before 1910                                    | 60+                | 17.7            | 18.4            | 36.1  |
| 1910-1919                                      | 50-59              | 10.6            | 13.7            | 24.3  |
| Before 1920                                    | 50+                | 15.0            | 16.6            | 31.6  |
| <u>1979 census of population<sup>(a)</sup></u> |                    |                 |                 |       |
| Before 1919                                    | 60+                | 12.8            | 10.1            | 22.9  |
| <u>1989 census of population</u>               |                    |                 |                 |       |
| Before 1919                                    | 70+                | 12.1            | 8.9             | 21.0  |

(a) Including those who were counted as Mountain Jews, Georgian Jews, Central Asian (Bukharan) Jews, and Krymchaks.

Sources: 1970, 1979 and 1989 censuses.

In the process of aliyah and emigration even elemental knowledge of Yiddish can help make contacts with part of the local population. We may suppose that a majority of the Ashkenazi Jews who had such knowledge belonged to the pre-Revolutionary birth cohorts. By the start of the great exodus these cohorts consisted of about 200,000 Jews.

#### Recent Data

Since 1989, the situation of the Jews has changed dramatically in the FSU. Local Jews received rights, and community building activities were initiated with the help of world Jewry. Emigration, which had been curtailed during the long period of Soviet oppression, became free. On the other hand, official governmental anti-Semitism was abolished, only to be replaced by Pamyat-like activity (on these see, e.g.: Brym, 1994; Gitelman, 1994 and 1995; Ryvkina, 1996).

And the Jews, along with the rest of the population, experienced general political instability and crises, or even wars in some parts of the FSU, as well as critical ecological situations (consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe and others) which exacerbated the already severe difficulties caused by the problems of economic transition in all the Newly Independent States. Given these factors, the Jews began to leave in great masses to Israel and the West. After 1989 the total number of Jews in the FSU decreased dramatically by a factor of 2.5, and by the beginning of 1997 fewer than 600,000 Jews remained in all the Newly Independent States.

During the same period the geography of the Jews remaining in the FSU also changed dramatically. At the start of the great exodus Russia's Jews made up 39 per cent of the total number of Jews in the FSU. Today their share approaches 60 per cent, and the ex-Soviet Jewry still in the FSU is concentrated more and more in Russia, thus rapidly turning into Russian Jewry by place of residence. Fortunately for our analysis, the Russian microcensus of February 14, 1994, which encompassed a 5 per cent sample of the total population, included those Jews and presented new data on Yiddish.

Table 9. Percentages of Ashkenazi Jews in the Russian Federation Declaring Yiddish as Native or Second Language, by Area, 1989 and 1994

| Area                     | Native Language |      | Second Language |      | Total |      |
|--------------------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|-------|------|
|                          | 1989            | 1994 | 1989            | 1994 | 1989  | 1994 |
| Moscow city              | 5.5             | 8.6  | 3.6             | 2.6  | 9.1   | 11.2 |
| St. Petersburg           | 5.0             | 4.9  | 3.7             | 1.8  | 8.7   | 6.7  |
| Provinces <sup>(a)</sup> | 9.1             | 9.7  | 3.9             | 2.9  | 13.0  | 12.6 |
| Total <sup>(a)</sup>     | 7.1             | 8.5  | 3.7             | 2.6  | 10.8  | 11.1 |

(a) Author's estimate; excluding the Jews of Dagestan, Checheno-Ingush, Kabardino-Balkar, and North Ossetin autonomous republics; in the estimate for 1994 the language indicators of the 1989 census were used for these republics.

Sources: 1989 census and 1994 microcensus.

In the 1994 Russian microcensus, "Jewish language" (*evreiskii iazyk*) appeared in the list of languages as it did in previous Soviet censuses. Thus we may compare the results of the 1989 Soviet census and the 1994 Russian microcensus (Table 9).

Between 1989 and 1994 declaring Yiddish as a second language fell among Russia's Jews as a whole, as well as in all its areas individually. At the same time, in the city of Moscow in 1994 a higher percentage of Jews declared Yiddish as a native language than in 1989: 8.6 as compared with 5.5, respectively. However, according to the data of the 1994 Russian

microcensus the total share remained larger among the Jews of the Russian provinces than of those in the capital: about 12.6 and 11.2, respectively.

Among the Jews of St. Petersburg, whose number decreased dramatically between 1989 and 1994 - by as much as 43 per cent - the share declaring Yiddish as their native language did not change, but the corresponding total share declaring Yiddish decreased. In this period the number of Ashkenazi Jews in the city of Moscow fell by only 24 per cent, and in Russia as a whole it fell by 27 per cent (Tolts, 1998).

In the 1994 Russian microcensus a question on the primary language of conversation at home was first asked (Goskomstat Rossii, 1993, p. 9). Unfortunately we can not exclude from the microcensus total for this question the data which cover republics of the North Caucasus where, as was delineated above, many Mountain Jews were usually counted in combination with the Ashkenazi Jews. However, based on the microcensus data we can analyze the situation in the city of Moscow and Birobidzhan, the "Jewish" oblast (Table 10).

Table 10. Percentages Conversing in Yiddish at Home among Different Groups of Ashkenazi Jews in Moscow City and Birobidzhan Oblast, 1994

| Group                                                       | Moscow City | Birobidzhan Oblast |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Total Jews                                                  | 2.4         | 3.4                |
| Jews living in uninational households of two or more people | 5.4         | 6.3                |
| Jews declaring Yiddish as native or second tongue           | 16.6        | 19.3               |

Source: Computed from the 1994 microcensus.

Among total Jews only 2.4 per cent in Moscow-city and 3.4 per cent in Birobidzhan declared Yiddish to be their primary language of conversation at home. However, many Jews live in mixed marriage, and not all Jews live in families. Naturally any comparison of the numbers conversing in Yiddish at home must be made only with the total of those living in uninational Jewish households of two or more people. Such a comparison shows that in the city of Moscow 5.4 per cent of Jews living in uninational Jewish households converse primarily in Yiddish at home, and of those Jews in Birobidzhan 6.3 per cent did so.

Among the Jews declaring Yiddish as their native or second language only about 17 per cent in the city of Moscow and 19 per cent in Birobidzhan converse primarily in this language at home. A plausible explanation of this is the fact that many Yiddish speaking Jews

live alone or with non-Jews. Thus, we see the demographic reasons behind the fate of Yiddish in today's FSU.

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Appendix 1. Percentage Declaring Yiddish as Native or Second Language among Ashkenazi Jews in the Russian Federation, by Region, 1979 and 1989

| Region                             | Native Language |                     | Second Language |                    | Total |                     |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------|---------------------|
|                                    | 1979            | 1989                | 1979            | 1989               | 1979  | 1989                |
| <b>North</b>                       |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Karelian republic                  | 3.9             | 3.0                 | 2.4             | 3.6                | 6.3   | 6.6                 |
| Komi republic                      | 10.5            | ...                 | 2.5             | ...                | 13.0  | ...                 |
| Murmansk oblast                    | 4.2             | 6.0                 | 3.0             | 2.2                | 7.2   | 8.2                 |
| <b>Northwest</b>                   |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| St. Petersburg<br>(Leningrad) city | 4.4             | 5.0                 | 4.9             | 3.7                | 9.3   | 8.7                 |
| Leningrad oblast                   | 7.9             | 6.9                 | 4.6             | 3.8                | 12.5  | 10.7                |
| Novgorod oblast                    | 5.7             | 7.8                 | 2.7             | 3.3                | 8.4   | 11.1                |
| Pskov oblast                       | 9.9             | 8.5                 | 6.6             | 4.3                | 16.5  | 12.8                |
| <b>Central Region</b>              |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Bryansk oblast                     | 10.7            | 7.9                 | 5.9             | 4.6                | 16.6  | 12.5                |
| Kaluga oblast                      | 6.0             | 6.5                 | 5.6             | 3.2                | 11.6  | 9.7                 |
| Moscow city                        | 5.8             | 5.5                 | 4.9             | 3.6                | 10.7  | 9.1                 |
| Moscow oblast                      | 8.8             | 8.2                 | 6.0             | 4.3                | 14.8  | 12.5                |
| Orel oblast                        | 9.2             | 13.0                | 3.4             | 2.9                | 12.6  | 15.9                |
| Ryazan' oblast                     | 7.1             | 6.5                 | 4.3             | 4.0                | 11.4  | 10.5                |
| Smolensk oblast                    | 8.8             | 12.3                | 6.1             | 3.3                | 14.9  | 15.6                |
| Tver' (Kalinin) oblast             | 6.6             | 8.2                 | 5.5             | 3.8                | 12.1  | 12.0                |
| Tula oblast                        | 6.9             | 6.7                 | 3.5             | 3.6                | 10.4  | 10.3                |
| Vladimir oblast                    | 8.8             | 9.9                 | 4.1             | 3.4                | 12.9  | 13.3                |
| Yaroslavl' oblast                  | 5.5             | 4.9                 | 3.8             | 4.4                | 9.3   | 9.3                 |
| <b>Volga-Vyatka</b>                |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Nizhny Novgorod<br>(Gor'ky) oblast | 8.3             | 7.4                 | 7.5             | 5.7                | 15.8  | 13.1                |
| <b>Central Chernozem</b>           |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Kursk oblast                       | 10.5            | 10.6                | 7.8             | 6.8                | 18.3  | 17.4                |
| Voronezh oblast                    | 5.8             | 7.6                 | 5.9             | 3.3                | 11.7  | 10.9                |
| <b>Volga</b>                       |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Astrakhan' oblast                  | 16.0            | 16.7                | 4.1             | 2.9                | 20.1  | 19.6                |
| Penza oblast                       | 14.2            | 13.4                | 6.8             | 5.0                | 21.0  | 18.4                |
| Samara (Kuibyshev)<br>oblast       | 10.7            | 8.4                 | 6.5             | 4.8                | 17.2  | 13.2                |
| Saratov oblast                     | 10.1            | 9.4                 | 6.3             | 2.8                | 16.4  | 12.2                |
| Tatar republic                     | 19.6            | 16.5                | 5.7             | 2.4                | 25.3  | 18.9                |
| Volgograd oblast                   | 8.9             | 11.6                | 4.8             | 3.7                | 13.7  | 15.3                |
| Ul'yanovsk oblast                  | 11.7            | 13.3                | 4.9             | 4.0                | 16.6  | 17.3                |
| <b>North Caucasus</b>              |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Rostov oblast                      | 6.0             | 8.9                 | 4.1             | 3.6                | 10.1  | 12.5                |
| Stavropol' krai                    | 17.7            | 22.5 <sup>(a)</sup> | 5.5             | 3.8 <sup>(a)</sup> | 23.2  | 26.3 <sup>(a)</sup> |
| <b>Ural</b>                        |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Bashkir republic                   | 12.7            | ...                 | 4.5             | ...                | 17.2  | ...                 |
| Chelyabinsk oblast                 | 10.2            | 10.1                | 5.5             | 3.4                | 15.7  | 13.5                |
| Orenburg oblast                    | 14.3            | 10.8                | 5.8             | 4.6                | 20.1  | 15.4                |
| Perm' oblast                       | 10.0            | 8.7                 | 5.2             | 3.9                | 15.2  | 12.6                |
| Sverdlovsk oblast                  | 7.7             | 8.2                 | 5.1             | 3.6                | 12.8  | 11.8                |
| <b>West Siberia</b>                |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Kemerovo oblast                    | 9.5             | ...                 | 4.0             | ...                | 13.5  | ...                 |
| Novosibirsk oblast                 | 4.9             | 5.3                 | 3.1             | 2.6                | 8.0   | 7.9                 |
| Omsk oblast                        | 5.8             | 5.8                 | 4.1             | 2.8                | 9.9   | 8.6                 |
| Tomsk oblast                       | 8.8             | 7.2                 | 4.4             | 3.9                | 13.2  | 11.1                |

Appendix 1 (Continued)

| Region                           | Native Language |      | Second Language |      | Total |      |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|-------|------|
|                                  | 1979            | 1989 | 1979            | 1989 | 1979  | 1989 |
| <b>East Siberia</b>              |                 |      |                 |      |       |      |
| Buryat republic                  | 7.6             | ...  | 1.9             | ...  | 9.5   | ...  |
| Irkutsk oblast                   | 5.6             | 6.9  | 3.1             | 2.5  | 8.7   | 9.4  |
| <b>Far East</b>                  |                 |      |                 |      |       |      |
| Birobidzhan ("Jewish")<br>oblast | 13.4            | 11.7 | 8.9             | 6.5  | 22.3  | 18.2 |
| Khabarovsk krai <sup>(b)</sup>   | 9.6             | 8.0  | 6.2             | 5.2  | 15.8  | 13.2 |
| Magadan oblast                   | 6.3             | 3.5  | 4.0             | 1.5  | 10.3  | 5.0  |
| Primorsky krai                   | 5.7             | ...  | 3.3             | ...  | 9.0   | ...  |
| Sakhalin oblast                  | 4.4             | 4.5  | 2.5             | 2.3  | 6.9   | 6.8  |
| Kaliningrad oblast               | 5.0             | 4.1  | 3.9             | 3.1  | 8.9   | 7.2  |

(a) Excluding Adygey republic

(b) Excluding Birobidzhan ("Jewish") oblast.

Sources: 1979 and 1989 censuses.

Appendix 2. Percentage Declaring Yiddish as Native or Second Language among Ashkenazi Jews in Ukraine, by Region, 1979 and 1989

| Region                          | Native Language |                     | Second Language |                    | Total |                     |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------|---------------------|
|                                 | 1979            | 1989                | 1979            | 1989               | 1979  | 1989                |
| <b>Donetsk-Dneper</b>           |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Dnepropetrovsk oblast           | 4.5             | 3.5                 | 4.2             | 2.8                | 8.7   | 6.3                 |
| Donetsk oblast                  | 4.1             | 5.7                 | 5.0             | 3.6                | 9.1   | 9.3                 |
| Kharkov oblast                  | 3.1             | 3.7                 | 4.9             | 2.8                | 8.0   | 6.5                 |
| Poltava oblast                  | 6.1             | 7.5                 | 5.9             | 2.3                | 12.0  | 9.8                 |
| Sumy oblast                     | 7.2             | 10.8                | 4.4             | 3.9                | 11.6  | 14.7                |
| Lugansk (Voroshilovgrad) oblast | 5.7             | 5.1                 | 5.5             | 3.5                | 11.2  | 8.6                 |
| Zaporozh'e oblast               | 4.5             | 4.7                 | 3.9             | 3.2                | 8.4   | 7.9                 |
| <b>Southwest</b>                |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Cherkassy oblast                | 18.2            | 10.9                | 5.0             | 4.3                | 23.2  | 15.2                |
| Chernigov oblast                | 8.6             | 4.9                 | 5.7             | 4.1                | 14.3  | 9.0                 |
| Chernovtsy oblast               | 36.7            | 27.4                | 7.9             | 6.5                | 44.6  | 33.9                |
| Ivano-Frankovsk oblast          | 19.4            | 15.5                | 3.5             | 3.1                | 22.9  | 18.6                |
| Khmel'nitsky oblast             | 20.4            | 13.7                | 4.6             | 5.3                | 25.0  | 19.0                |
| Kiev city                       | 5.6             | 4.7                 | 4.5             | 3.1                | 10.1  | 7.8                 |
| Kiev oblast                     | 19.1            | 13.4                | 5.0             | 3.9                | 24.1  | 17.3                |
| Kirovograd oblast               | 11.5            | 7.7                 | 4.1             | 3.4                | 15.6  | 11.1                |
| Lvov oblast                     | 5.7             | 9.8                 | 5.5             | 2.2                | 11.2  | 12.0                |
| Rovno oblast                    | 14.1            | 11.9                | 2.8             | 2.4                | 16.9  | 14.3                |
| Vinnitsa oblast                 | 19.3            | 15.3                | 5.5             | 6.7                | 24.8  | 22.0                |
| Zakarpat'e oblast               | 36.8            | 21.1 <sup>(a)</sup> | 0.4             | 1.4 <sup>(a)</sup> | 37.2  | 22.5 <sup>(a)</sup> |
| Zhitomir oblast                 | 17.7            | 12.7                | 7.4             | 7.0                | 25.1  | 19.7                |
| <b>Southern</b>                 |                 |                     |                 |                    |       |                     |
| Crimea oblast                   | 7.6             | 6.1                 | 5.0             | 4.6                | 12.6  | 10.7                |
| Kherson oblast                  | 5.7             | 5.8                 | 4.0             | 4.3                | 9.7   | 10.1                |
| Nikolaev oblast                 | 6.3             | 4.2                 | 5.4             | 4.0                | 11.7  | 8.2                 |
| Odessa oblast                   | 7.2             | 4.6                 | 4.4             | 5.2                | 11.6  | 9.8                 |

(a) Including Ternopol and Volyn oblasts.

Sources: 1979 and 1989 censuses.

Appendix 3. Percentage Declaring Yiddish as Native or Second Language among Ashkenazi Jews in Belorussia, by Region, 1979 and 1989

|                | Native Language |      | Second Language |      | Total |      |
|----------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|-------|------|
|                | 1979            | 1989 | 1979            | 1989 | 1979  | 1989 |
| Brest oblast   | 11.1            | 10.1 | 8.0             | 6.3  | 19.1  | 16.4 |
| Gomel' oblast  | 11.2            | 7.5  | 20.6            | 6.5  | 31.8  | 14.0 |
| Grodno oblast  | 10.0            | 9.3  | 3.9             | 3.9  | 13.9  | 13.2 |
| Minsk city     | 7.8             | 5.4  | 7.4             | 5.4  | 15.2  | 10.8 |
| Minsk oblast   | 17.6            | 13.3 | 8.9             | 6.3  | 26.5  | 19.6 |
| Mogilev oblast | 16.5            | 10.7 | 13.5            | 10.1 | 30.0  | 20.8 |
| Vitebsk oblast | 11.1            | 7.3  | 10.1            | 7.3  | 21.2  | 14.6 |

Sources: 1979 and 1989 censuses.

Appendix 4. Percentages of Jews Declaring a Jewish Language as Native or Second Tongue among Jews<sup>(a)</sup> in the Russian Federation,  
by Birth Cohort and Sex, 1989

| Birth Cohorts | Age in 1989 | Native Language |         |                   | Second Language |         |                   | Total |         |                   |
|---------------|-------------|-----------------|---------|-------------------|-----------------|---------|-------------------|-------|---------|-------------------|
|               |             | Males           | Females | Males and Females | Males           | Females | Males and Females | Males | Females | Males and Females |
| Before 1919   | 70+         | 12.3            | 12.0    | 12.1              | 9.3             | 8.7     | 8.9               | 21.6  | 20.7    | 21.0              |
| 1919-1923     | 65-69       | 9.5             | 8.3     | 8.8               | 5.5             | 5.7     | 5.6               | 15.0  | 14.0    | 14.4              |
| 1924-1928     | 60-64       | 7.7             | 8.0     | 7.9               | 4.0             | 4.0     | 4.0               | 11.7  | 12.0    | 11.9              |
| 1929-1933     | 55-59       | 6.5             | 7.2     | 6.8               | 2.6             | 2.8     | 2.7               | 9.0   | 10.0    | 9.5               |
| 1934-1938     | 50-54       | 6.0             | 6.5     | 6.2               | 2.4             | 2.1     | 2.3               | 8.4   | 8.6     | 8.5               |
| 1939-1943     | 45-49       | 6.3             | 6.3     | 6.3               | 2.2             | 1.9     | 2.0               | 8.5   | 8.2     | 8.3               |
| 1944-1948     | 40-44       | 6.0             | 5.7     | 5.9               | 2.0             | 1.8     | 1.9               | 8.0   | 7.5     | 7.8               |
| 1949-1953     | 35-39       | 7.4             | 7.5     | 7.4               | 2.0             | 1.5     | 1.8               | 9.4   | 9.0     | 9.2               |
| 1954-1958     | 30-34       | 9.2             | 9.0     | 9.1               | 1.8             | 1.4     | 1.6               | 11.0  | 10.4    | 10.7              |
| 1959-1963     | 25-29       | 10.5            | 10.2    | 10.3              | 1.7             | 1.3     | 1.5               | 12.2  | 11.5    | 11.8              |
| 1964-1968     | 20-24       | 11.6            | 10.5    | 11.1              | 1.4             | 1.3     | 1.3               | 13.0  | 11.8    | 12.4              |
| 1969-1973     | 15-19       | 9.9             | 9.6     | 9.8               | 0.8             | 0.8     | 0.8               | 10.7  | 10.4    | 10.6              |
| 1974-1978     | 10-14       | 10.3            | 10.6    | 10.4              | 0.4             | 0.3     | 0.4               | 10.7  | 10.9    | 10.8              |
| 1979-1982     | 6-9         | 11.7            | 11.4    | 11.6              | 0.5             | 0.4     | 0.4               | 12.2  | 11.8    | 12.0              |
| 1983-1988     | 0-5         | 12.3            | 13.2    | 12.7              | 0.3             | 0.3     | 0.3               | 12.6  | 13.5    | 13.0              |

(a) Not including those who were counted as Mountain Jews, Georgian Jews, Central Asian (Bukharan) Jews, and Krymchaks.  
Source: 1989 census.