

CONVERGENT AIMS: THE REVIVAL OF JEWISH STUDIES IN ST. PETERSBURG AND THE SEARCH FOR RUSSIA’S “UNAFFILIATED JEWS”*

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Abstract: Twentieth-century events in Russia and Eastern Europe resulted in complex definitions of Jewish identity and communal relations. When the Soviet Union disbanded, foreign agencies pushed funds and resources to rebuild Jewish communities and institutions. One of the avenues for this funding is the creation and support of academic research centers responsible for training students and scholars. Organizations interested in Russia’s “unaffiliated Jews” and the research centers responsible for the revival of Jewish Studies form unique partnerships that bridge academic and public arenas. Reclaiming Jews who do not identify with Judaism or Jewish culture (unaffiliated Jews) in Russia is a significant goal of some Jewish funding agencies in the United States and Israel. An examination of mission statements by these philanthropic agencies reveals narrow definitions of “Jews” that ignore major contributions from Jewish Studies scholars focused on understanding a diverse population with disparate self-understandings.

Edgar Bronfman, Sr., president of the World Jewish Congress (1981-2007), sought collective action when he exclaimed, “If we do not want to lose them as Jews, we must teach them to be Jews.”¹ Referring to Jews in the Soviet Union, Bronfman urged immediate action to reclaim Russia’s Jewish population. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, so did efforts to build a post-national state that emphasized common identity over diverse categories of ethnicity, nationality, or religious preference. This dramatic period proved to be critical for the Jewish minority that remained in Russia, Ukraine, and other post-Soviet states. Following significant waves of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe to the United States and Israel, there existed in those countries large groups with connections to the depleted Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. In an effort to revitalize and recover a fading Jewish culture and past, Jewish philanthropic groups and individuals funneled money into the countries of the former Soviet Union.

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¹ Ro’i & Beker 1991: xviii.

Funds were used for a wide range of projects aimed at identifying and supporting Jews that remained in the region.

While some of the projects focused on humanitarian efforts, others sought to invigorate Jewish culture and develop community identity. As part of this second set, scholars received support to begin studying Jewish history and culture in greater numbers than previously possible. Today the field of Russian-Jewish history is a major subset within the historiography of Eastern Europe and Eurasia. When Russian archives became more accessible to scholars, the topic of Jewish history quickly emerged as a central research agenda. Partly, this was a response by researchers in the United States and Western Europe to what they perceived as a lost civilization. At the same time, the field benefited greatly from a young generation of academics in the former Soviet Union who found reason to reclaim (often for personal as well as professional reasons) the heritage of Russian Jews. This new generation benefited from increased access to archival materials, open conversations with colleagues in the United States and Europe, and a more creative academic setting.

Growth in the number of publications and conferences focused on Jewish life within the Russian Empire and Soviet Union is remarkable. At an international conference of the European Association for Jewish Studies, Stefan Schreiner argued that the field of Jewish Studies—as evidenced by the growth in the number of research centers—is now a “fashion” and commands the attention of scholars outside the field as well.² Statements such as this tend to lift scholars’ spirits, in part because they legitimize our efforts, but also because they provide a hopeful outlook on the future of Jewish Studies. Indeed, international conferences like the one held at Arizona State University last November help reinforce that hope and push practitioners to rethink assumptions about historical actors and events, methodological approaches, and theoretical claims. In a field as diverse as Jewish Studies, these conferences prove the importance of collaborative efforts. Collaborative opportunities are not limited to the academy and one of the tasks of this paper is to explore the relationship between scholarship and community. The development of Jewish Studies in Russia suggests that this relationship is a vital one, though these connections are often beset with ideological issues. Jewish Studies serves as an important intersection between philanthropy, scholarship, and public activism. My goal in this article is to highlight one aspect of these intersections, namely, the way that funding bodies and research centers conflict at times in their efforts to revitalize Jewish culture in Russia. In order to understand how these are related, a brief overview of the history of Jewish Studies in Russia is followed by an analysis of funding agencies and their aims, and finally, a look at several recent scholars’ attempts to grapple with the issue of Jewish identity.

The history of Jews in Eastern Europe cannot be divorced from the larger political, social, and religious context. In her recent biography of Moses Montefiore, Abigail Green reminds us, “Jewish history is never simply about the Jews, but always about their relationship with the rest of society.”³ To reduce Jewish history to a narrow focus on what Jews wrote, their thoughts, or how they acted as Jews in connection only with other

² Schreiner 2005: 107. Schreiner focuses on the Baltic region, Poland and Central Europe, and not on Russia, though his conclusions are useful and relevant to this examination of St. Petersburg.

³ Green 2010: 6.

Jews is to ignore the historical evidence. The Russian-Jewish historian, Iulii I. Gessen (1871-1939), in his appeal to halt an effort aimed at reorganizing Jewish archival materials in 1918, likewise argued, "it needs to be kept in mind that documents on Jews are an integral part not only of the historiography of Jews, but the historiography of Russia as well."⁴ Gessen, like most historians, possessed a deep respect for archival documents, yet his desire to see Jewish materials remain part of Russia's central archives derived from his broad understanding of the history of the Russian Empire. Indeed, it may be thanks to the fact that Jewish materials remained interspersed among other documents that they were preserved during the twentieth century. The desire to reinsert Jewish culture, literature, and life back into Russian history is an ongoing effort today. Jews, though always a minority population, were an important factor in shaping modern Russia. Jewish Studies once again owns a position of relative prominence in Russian academia. The reemergence (or 'revival') of Jewish Studies in Russia, largely in St. Petersburg and Moscow, signals the return to an age of impressive scholarship, produced by "men [and today we can most definitely say women] of action as well as scholarship."⁵

The current state of Jewish Studies programs in Russia, and St. Petersburg specifically, varies greatly by institution. The development of institutional units (usually research centers, but increasingly full departments) dedicated to Jewish Studies, follows the pattern familiar to programs in Canada and the United States. Wealthy benefactors support department and center development, supply necessary funds for research conferences, student scholarships, and other activities. Large and often renewable grants from individuals, families, or philanthropic organizations are essential contributors to the success of these endeavors. As these funding agencies enter into agreements with scholars and universities, they also help shape the nature of the work carried out in these centers. Funding agencies often ask directors and scholars in these institutions to participate in the social teaching and public education of local Jewish communities. The nature and form of these events can be quite disparate, ranging from public lectures (where most scholars would feel more or less at home), to "less rigorous" cultural, religious, and social activities. One of the ideas explored here is the interplay between these two spheres of activity, one in the academy and the other as part of a community.

Within the exploration of this relationship emerges a fundamental question about scholarship and community development. On one side of the argument are those who claim intellectual distance from the object they study, as opposed to those who seek active participation within the religious or cultural groups they research. Part of the issue that arises out of this apparent dichotomy is the ability of scholars to remain disinterested and objective in their analysis of history or politics when they might have cause, due to pressure from funding agencies, or as a matter of their own political or religious views, to write about their subject more passionately than professional standards dictate. The battle over these two positions emerged long ago, beginning within the Enlightenment project and gaining ground in nineteenth-century universities. Jewish studies faculties are not the only departments where this debate is raging. Currently, there is a significant argument among a small group of American historians about the ability of "believing"

⁴ Gessen 2004: 198.

⁵ Klier 1986: xii.

historians to write objectively about their own religious community.⁶ Critics of those who study their own religious tradition, for example, fear that active participation in the tradition one studies undermines any claim to professionalism in the academy.

At stake in both the funding and objectivity debates is the underlying question of the role of universities, research institutes, and scholars in the modern world and their reach beyond the ivory tower into the public sphere. At a time when the humanities in university curriculums are under attack from many sides, this is the debate worthy of earnest participation and serious consideration. In the case of Jews and Eastern Europe there is a traditionally strong connection between Jewish scholarship, political and social activism, and cultural regeneration that cannot be ignored. This tradition is as relevant today as it was in the nineteenth century. The current context needs to be viewed in light of this tradition and the complex unraveling of Jewish culture and identity in the twentieth century alongside subsequent attempts to rebuild a cohesive Jewish community. Where these two elements combine and how they alter the current situation is the focus of this article.

In many ways, this co-dependence between academic institutional fiscal necessity and the desire for community development reflects the reality of the twenty-first century research university. More and more, university administrators are urging faculty members to bridge academic research and public utility in new ways. Jewish Studies, as an academic field, has largely done this over the past century and a half out of necessity. These types of relations in academic centers, felt poignantly in Jewish Studies and other area studies centers, can be effective both in producing first-rate scholarship and supporting the revival, expansion, and sustainability of Jewish culture and community. At the same time, partnerships frequently fill shortfall gaps in university funding. I argue however, that it is beneficial to ask questions about whether such relations are sustainable over the long-term and what the consequences, both positive and negative, might be over the next ten to fifteen years.

Like their counterparts throughout Eastern Europe, Russian universities, particularly in St. Petersburg and Moscow, possess a rich heritage of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hebraic scholars who, before the revolutions of 1917 and during the early 1920s, produced volume upon volume of critical scholarship about Jewish history and texts. The success of Soviet propaganda and its emphasis on class conflict rather than national or ethnic identity in the 1920s and early 1930s led many young Jews to adopt an identity that only tangentially bore resemblance to the Jewishness of their parents and grandparents. During the 1930s, the study of religion was removed wholesale from academic programs and university training. In the 1950s and 1960s, there existed a small number of courses in “comparative religions” that looked at the history of the Abrahamic traditions and the development of religious attitudes throughout the centuries. One can see how this type of course would allow room for discussion about religion while also remaining true to Marxist-Leninist economic interpretations of world history. Although no courses were offered in Jewish history or Judaism, clandestine groups continued to foster

⁶ See a summary of one arena where this debate formed a significant body of literature in Coffman 2004; Kuklich, Noll & Bushman 2005. See also James Tracy’s 2000 presidential address of the American Catholic Historical Association: Tracy 2000. This debate ranges across the religious spectrum and includes Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Muslims and others.

discussion as private scholars and intellectuals loaned books to interested students when possible. Students were not formally trained in Hebrew as Soviet law prohibited it. After the Six-Day War (1967), an important turning point in Jewish-Soviet relations, students joined ad hoc language courses to prepare for *aliyah* in the 1970s and 1980s. The desire to learn Hebrew as a mean to successfully move to Israel meant two things for Jews in the Soviet Union. First, students who wanted to learn Hebrew affiliated themselves with other Jews and Jewish identity, thereby adding strength to a growing *samizdat* literature bent on exploring Jewish culture and history.⁷ Second, the catalyst behind their interest in Judaism and Jewish culture—the expectation or hope of migration—meant that many ultimately left for Israel and elsewhere.

With perestroika under Gorbachev, restrictions on emigration relaxed and an overwhelming majority of those who developed a sense of Jewish identity quickly exited the Soviet Union. As government control weakened and then collapsed, scholars in Russia found the openness of the late 1980s and 1990s refreshing, and with that freedom they began to explore Jewish subjects.⁸ A small number of students and faculty worked indirectly on Jewish topics and found ways to bring their interest to an emerging field in Jewish Studies. It was out of this early development in the late 1970s and 1980s that the origins of today's Jewish Studies programs began. Viktor Kel'ner, now of European University at St. Petersburg, in his obituary of one of the great contributors of Russian Jewish history, the late John Klier, wrote regarding Jewish research:

This was a forbidden subject in the USSR, though I had long been interested in it. But working in the Russian National Library had given me the opportunity to compile relevant bibliographical material. I did this automatically, quickly, and unscientifically. Between 1970 and 1980, I did not imagine that in my lifetime I'd be lucky enough to witness Jewish history's return to Russia as a legitimate academic topic.⁹

There are many stories from researchers and others in Russia who conducted unofficial research and were conversant with non-Russian scholars (to the extent that such relations were possible). Another example of the important advances made during this period include Shimon Iakerson's painstaking work to collect and publish a guide to Hebrew incunabula housed in the St. Petersburg archive of the Oriental Institute—the premier collection of Hebrew manuscripts and books in Russia today.¹⁰ Their work, however “unscientific,” served to lay the important groundwork for the emergence of Jewish Studies programs and the systematization of important bibliographic collections that those of us using Jewish sources in Russian archives find essential.

In 1989, the St. Petersburg Jewish University (*Peterburgskii Evreiskii Universitet*), opened its doors as an “unofficial” institute. The term “university” refers more to what we in the United States might call an institute or center, rather than a full-fledged university. By 1992, the university gained official recognition and was therefore able to further its aim of providing high-level, critical scholarship on Judaism and Jewish life. This

⁷ Hoffman 1991: 90-94.

⁸ For a summary of the challenges that faced scholars during these critical early years, see Zhuravlev et al. 2009: 292-293.

⁹ Kelner 2008: 253.

¹⁰ Iakerson 1985; Iakerson 1988.

university, like others in Kraków, Vilnius, and Moscow, serves as an important center for training young scholars (both Jewish and non-Jewish students). It is important to remember that many of those who learned Hebrew and took an interest in Jewish history during the late Soviet period, no longer lived in Russia after the mid-1980s. Therefore, the small cohort of students and researchers able to carry out work in Hebrew, Yiddish, and other languages needed to expand in number and training. The linguistic variety of the sources related to Eastern European Jewry demands that scholars possess a broad set of tools to approach them. This is not uncommon in many fields, but the repression of such training for two or three generations caused a deep void that took time to fill once the opportunities arose. There are many reasons that these new entrepreneurial or private institutions of higher education developed in the early 1990s in Russia. As Nikolai Sergeevich Rozov argued, many scholars feared in those difficult years that the bureaucratic nature of traditional institutions made them unable or unwilling to “*serve as intellectual centers that unite the structure of ruling authority, business, and the institutions of civil society for the purpose of detecting and solving problems.*”¹¹ Out of that hesitancy, a large number of private institutions developed, many of which thrive today. Yet, the major Russian traditional universities carry with them prestige, international awareness, and structures that these smaller, more mobile universities do not possess.

One of the major institutional developments in St. Petersburg is the newly established Department for Jewish Culture (*Kafedry evreiskoi kul'tury*) at St. Petersburg State University (SPbGU). As one of the oldest universities in Russia, St. Petersburg State University, remains at the heart of the Russian academic circle, with its close association with the Russian Academy of Sciences. After ongoing negotiations within the university, the Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies (CBJS, *Tsentr bibleistiki, gebrais-tiki i iudaiki*) housed in the Philosophy department, was elevated on 5 March 2011 to full department status by order of Nikolai Kropcheyev (Rector of SPbGU).¹² The Department of Jewish Culture, founded as an academic research and teaching unit claims, as part of its mission, to play a role “in the development of Jewish study and life.”¹³ The relevance of the title “Department for Jewish Culture” should not be overlooked. The existence of a full department, albeit a small one, is impressive as it is one of two in the country today. The title ‘Jewish Culture’ reveals the aim of the unit, namely, to serve a broad set of interests among students. The move away from Biblical and Jewish Studies signified an effort to bring in those students with interests in modern Jewish culture rather than Judaism or ancient languages. The department emphasizes the academic study of Jewish culture and history but also recognizes its significant role in public education and events meant to encourage Jewish culture. Professor Igor Tantlevskii, a prolific scholar, leads the department with a broad set of skills and knowledge to help navigate this new venture at the university.¹⁴ Locating the new department in St. Petersburg “is historically significant,” argues Tantlevskii, because it is a city “in which serious research in academic Judaica

¹¹ Rozov 2008: 79-80. Italics in original.

¹² The Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies was founded in 2000. I thank Professor Igor Tantlevskii, faculty head of the new department for Jewish Culture at SPbGU, for kindly responding to my many questions about the department and its functions. During the 2012-2013 academic year, there are 26 undergraduates, 10 master's degree students, and 5 doctoral students.

¹³ Lipman 2011.

¹⁴ SPbGU 2012.

began in the 19th century, as well as where many Jewish cultural and educational institutions existed in pre-Communist times.” He noted further “the department’s creation will play a key role in both academic circles as well as the development of Jewish study and life.”¹⁵ The department also maintains a close relationship with local Jewish groups and also the Israeli Cultural Center (*Israil’skii kul’turnyi centr*) in St. Petersburg. These relationships allow the department to draw on the resources of these local and international institutions to support teaching and research. At the same time, the department plays a critical role in facilitating cultural events. From its outset the department projected a dual role for faculty and the intellectual and organizational projects they pursue.

As a full-fledged department, students can now take degrees (Bachelor and Masters) in Jewish Studies. In addition, students can now defend doctoral dissertations in the department. This is a major step in the effort to make these institutions sustainable in the long term. The department now conducts courses in ancient, medieval, and modern Jewish history, as well as ancient languages and Yiddish. University degree programs are evidence of the university’s commitment to meaningful scholarship and teaching that is not separate from, but rather connected to a public outcome. The importance of scholars like Tantlevskii who lead these new centers and departments cannot be underestimated. As recognized leaders in their field, they join the tradition of essential and pressing scholarship that can address the complex reality of Jewish life in Russia today.

One of the most important and exciting centers for Jewish Studies is the one associated with European University at St. Petersburg (EUSP). In 1999, the Interdepartment Centre “Petersburg Judaica” was established as part of the non-state funded university. The success of the university has at times drawn interference from Russian government officials, most notably when the government cited fire hazards as cause for closing the university. The connection between EUSP’s acceptance of the substantial grant (to monitor upcoming Duma elections) that it received from the European Union and its subsequent forced closure sparked widespread international protests. The interdepartment center is, like many others, the recipient of critical funding from external agencies and organizations. In 2004, the university officially recognized the center as an academic unit. The center is staffed by a small group of affiliated faculty that bring their various specialties to the study of Jews and Judaism. Petersburg Judaica at EUSP operates in the tradition of the “Science of Judaism” applying “historical-anthropological research methods and fieldwork” to Jewish culture and life from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first century.¹⁶ Fulfilling its three-fold aim, the center trains graduate students in a one-year program to undertake fieldwork in Jewish studies, promotes an active agenda of publication, and develops expositions that highlight its diverse collections. EUSP’s program in Jewish studies is one of the most developed programs in St. Petersburg and one that continues to attract students enrolled in other disciplinary degree programs across the university. Additionally, the European University library added a growing selection of publications related to Jews and Judaism generally, but also those with a significant focus on Eastern Europe. The collection was purchased with funds provided to the university from the Chais Family Foundation. Though the “Chais Family Library of Jewish Thought” is a modest collection, it provides students and scholars at EUSP access

¹⁵ GPG 2011.

¹⁶ EUSP 2012.

to some of the most important works in Jewish historiography in the past twenty years. While the significance of this small library collection is important for what it contains and its availability, it also symbolizes the university's commitment to continue the work of building expertise in critical areas of interest to historical as well as contemporary Russia.

The institutions listed above are noticeably limited to St. Petersburg, and much more can be said about other centers and locations throughout Russia. They represent a link to the distant past when Jewish scholarship flourished in the city and a return to the intellectual tradition that was placed on hold for many years. These centers would not exist today were it not for generous donations that supported the universities in developing institutional structures for the promotion of Jewish culture. The flood of foreign money into nearly every aspect of Russian society in the early 1990s is a familiar phenomenon. Not surprisingly, during this period money from Israel and American Jewish philanthropies poured into the country with the intention of supporting Soviet Jews. An intense cultural war raged during this period—evidenced by internal and external efforts to understand and revive a culture that struggled to survive the twentieth century. In 1986, a key conference focused on Jewish identity in the Soviet Union convened at Bar Ilan University. The scholars who participated were largely based in Israel, and many were repatriated Jews from the Soviet Union. A volume of papers from the conference was published in 1991 and serves as a reminder of those uncertain years.¹⁷ When it was published, *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union* offered a broad view of the central issues raised by participants about the difficult path forward. In his forward to the collection, Martin Gilbert suggested “the fact that so many hundreds of Jews can now contemplate leaving, makes it imperative that they should know as much as possible of their heritage and their history. To leave is good, to leave as Jews is even better; and to leave for Israel is best of all.”¹⁸ The emphasis rests on teaching Jews how to be Jews and then encouraging migration to Israel.¹⁹ These statements are not cloaked in any kind of subtle rhetoric; they are transparent and focused on one goal. The project to bring Soviet Jews to Israel, so popular and successful in the 1980s, has lost some of its enthusiasm in recent years. Part of the reason for waning migration is that as the euphoria of openness expired; many Soviet Jews chose not to affiliate themselves actively with Judaism or Jewish culture.

The uncertainty of the years surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union prompted a messianic response from those who sought to gather Russia's Jews. This is not surprising, particularly when many western Christian denominations also flooded Eastern Europe to proselyte in the cities of Eastern Europe. Accompanying many of these missionary groups were deep pockets of humanitarian support, community projects, and efforts to “reclaim” Soviet citizens as Christians. The motives and perspectives of those early efforts to gather Jews are central to the approach taken by funding agencies that pour money into Jewish Studies centers in the region today. The drive towards bringing Russia's Jews to Israel has lost some of the urgency of that earlier period, but the desire

¹⁷ Ro'i & Beker 1991.

¹⁸ Ro'i & Beker 1991: vx.

¹⁹ Although it is not a right place to do so in this article, the teaching aspect and Israel connections, highlighted by Bronfman's argument, cited at the beginning of this paper, merits greater consideration in light of the Zionist debates so prevalent in the early twentieth century.

to teach Jews how to be Jews by awakening in them a sense of belonging and reemphasizing their Jewishness continues today. The main claim of some of these organizations is that they desire to find Jews who do not identify with the Jewish community through religious associations or cultural activities, and bring them back. This approach presents a broad set of issues that are not clearly defined just yet, but an effort is made here to understand some of the complexity associated with the current state of Jewish Studies and Jewish identity in Russia today. Zvi Gitelman raises this issue in his recent book *Jewish Identities in Post-communist Russia and Ukraine: an uncertain ethnicity*. Soviet policies—in theory at least—were designed to create a post-ethnic, post-national, and post-religious world.²⁰ In a broad survey of over 6,000 Jews in Ukraine and Russia, Gitelman and two Russian scholars found that respondents' self-understanding of their Jewishness was highly variegated.²¹ After 1992, Jews, like other nationalities and ethnic groups, were left to sort out who they were, what the past meant to their identity, and which cultural values to elevate. In this process of self-definition, what the survey suggested was that Russian Jews chose different forms of identity and cultural affiliation than Jews in Israel or America. Gitelman attributes this generally to the social, political, and cultural environments that surrounded these groups. Whereas "America accepted Jews as a religious and not ethnic group," Gitelman argues, "in the USSR, by contrast, no faith was considered legitimate, but ethnic identity was imposed on all. Being Jewish became an ethnicity with no connection to religion."²² These different perceptions of "being Jewish" contribute to the issues that arise when outside agencies attempt to shape the nature of Jewish identity in the former USSR.

In a climate of economic uncertainty felt poignantly within universities in recent years, the development of successful academic units depends upon funding from outside agencies like AVI CHAI, Genesis Philanthropy Group (GPG), and others. This close connection between departments of Jewish Studies at state-funded and private universities and funding agencies causes one to consider the relation between the aims of the university and the mission statements of such funding agencies. AVI CHAI, GPG, and the Chais Family Foundation include in their mission statements key words such as community formation, revitalization of Jewish life, or "engaging this elusive audience" (referring to those who are unaffiliated with Jewish activities), and to "foster a strong connection to Jewish life, study, and ideas."²³ It should be noted that efforts to find "unaffiliated Jews" are also the focus of similar Jewish outreach programs in the United States and Europe.²⁴

The Chais Center for Jewish Studies in Russian (a joint venture of the Institute of Jewish Studies and the International Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization at Hebrew University of Jerusalem) focuses its activity on a three-pronged approach to Jewish Studies: education, research, and publications. According to the Chais Center website:

²⁰ Gitelman 2012: 7. Gitelman's book is the most comprehensive survey of the question of Jewish identity and community in post-communist states.

²¹ The two Russian scholars who worked with Gitelman on the survey are Dr. Valeriy Chervyakov and Professor Vladimir Shapiro. For more on the nature of the survey, see Gitelman 2012: 1-7.

²² Gitelman 2012: 328.

²³ AVI CHAI 2013.

²⁴ Lipman 2009.

The purposes of the Chais Center are much broader than purely academic. Special emphasis is placed on the training of future teachers and formulation of new education programs for elementary and high-schools. Cooperating with the most prestigious academic institutions, we work toward enhancing the status of Jewish culture in the FSU. One of the by-products of our work which should not be overlooked may be defined as the “community forming” factor. In the FSU, our activities unite a large number of scholars, students, and young professionals, who otherwise were not involved in Jewish life.²⁵

This “community forming” factor and the connection with academic research centers is a brilliant, yet potentially troubling partnership. It may be that this type of relationship is one of the only viable options to achieve philanthropic goals and academic agendas. The model harkens back to nineteenth-century approaches to improve Jews and Jewish life in the Russian Empire. While this may be appropriate for the current state of affairs, it remains critical to observe how this process will continue to unfold in the years to come.

Genesis Philanthropy Group, a major player in this search for “unaffiliated Jews” provides their mission statements and project information on their webpage. The mission of GPG is “to develop and enhance a sense of Jewish identity among Russian-speaking Jews worldwide, with particular emphasis on the former Soviet Union, North America, and Israel, where up to three million Russian-speaking Jews reside.”²⁶ GPG’s mission statement is particularly relevant to my argument here because it draws upon the long history of Jewish civilization in the world and acknowledges Jewish contributions over millennia and places hope in the future perfectibility of the world. With reference to the state of Jewish affairs in the FSU, the mission statement declares, “Jewish identity and continuity has suffered dramatic lapses in the Russian-speaking communities of the former Soviet Union. The legacy of a totalitarian past has left vast numbers of Russian-speaking Jews profoundly disengaged from their Jewish heritage.”²⁷ Again, this is not an argument that many today would challenge as erroneous. What is interesting however is that this became a central aim of the organization generally, and indeed, is the major focus of its branch in the FSU (under the title of Charitable Aid Foundation, Russia) located in Moscow.

The desire to enrich, revive, and perpetuate Jewish culture in Russia is inspired by benevolence and hope for the future, but also out of fear of cultural apathy and waning Jewish affiliation. If the latter aspect dominates the state of Jewish life in Russia, the hope for a perfected world (with Jews as Jews) cannot be achieved. Stan Polovets, co-founder and CEO of GPG, shared this concern in his “Message from the CEO” on the organization’s Web site.²⁸ Polovets appeals to this sense of hope but also to the lingering sense of despair over the current situation of Jewish existence in Russia. He writes:

The history of mankind can be defined by an impact of different cultures upon each other—and of the changes that ensue within each of those cultures. Thus, history shows us many examples of the breakdown, the assimilation and even the extinction of highly advanced civilizations. In that regard, the Jewish people are unique. Our ancestors, over the course of many centuries—centuries that include some of history’s most tragic moments—managed to preserve

²⁵ Chais Center 2012.

²⁶ GPG 2012.

²⁷ GPG 2012.

²⁸ Polovets 2012.

what was most essential: the inherent identity of the Jewish people. This distinctive culture has enriched humanity and continues to this day to champion the betterment of the world.²⁹

After arguing for the tenacity and incredible endurance of Jewish civilization, Polovets continues by turning to Russian speaking Jews specifically, hailing them as “classic examples of this persistence.” Even through the persecutions of the nineteenth century and the atrocities of the twentieth, they “preserved their identity,” by clinging to “a common body of values and priorities.” The values that unified them included their emphasis on family and “a commitment to productivity and efficiency, a passion for learning, a striving for self-realization, a responsibility toward the individual, the community, the world.”³⁰ Polovets staked out the importance of Jewish civilization in world history, applied a similar laudatory attitude to Russian speaking Jews, and praised them for their contributions to science, politics, and humanity.

After praising Russian Jews, Polovets turns the emphasis of his argument to the current situation and his fears about Jewish life in the future. “Globalization” according to Polovets, “created the potential for disseminating that culture worldwide as well as the potential for destroying it.” This is the heart of his message, and he further clarifies this line of thinking by suggesting the crumbling effect of globalization is seen in the “blurring of Jewish identity and tradition.” Following Polovets further, if the process continues the consequences are dire:

Such an identity loss would endanger Jewish culture and impoverish civilization. Genesis was established to preserve that identity and continue the advancement of Jewish culture developed over thousands of years. We believe that the main instrument for the preservation of Jewish identity is education in general and Jewish education in particular.³¹

Statements like this one by Polovets, are difficult to assess because they are frequently written to appeal to the widest possible audience and must state their often complex and broad aims in a few short paragraphs. To capture a worldview bent on fixing centuries of historical development and atrocities in a single webpage surely proves impossible, and yet, these statements provide institutional direction and agency goals.

The statement above warrants further comment because of its appeal to a monolithic Jewish past, based on the fear of Jewish apathy to their heritage. Polovets begins with the idea that Russian Jewish persistence is rooted in the Jewish values of family, productivity, learning, and responsibility. Along with this, Russian Jewish contributions to science, ideologies, political, and social movements are notable and Polovets is not wrong in staking claims to the significance of these contributions. However, Polovets’ claims, based on some coherent (yet unstated) and discernible Jewish identity, seems overly simplistic because they does not account for those who viewed nineteenth-century science as flawed, dangerous, and destructive of Jewish life in the Russian Empire. Authors of a recent volume argued, “Judaism has never had the exclusive capacity to form the identities and subjectivities of individual Jews. Judaism is a total system only in the sense that every act committed in its name indexes a set of institutional practices that does not

²⁹ Polovets 2012.

³⁰ Polovets 2012.

³¹ Polovets 2012.

necessarily respect the boundaries that ideally define the autonomous realms of modern civil society.”³² Polovets seems willing to suspend these arguments in favor of a monolithic understanding of prescriptive Jewish identity. Likewise, he ignores the wide variety of ideologies and movements that divided more than unified Russia’s Jewish population. Perhaps, given more space, Polovets might refine his arguments to account for such things. Current scholarship on Jewish life and culture emphasizes the remarkable diversity, rather than any normative Jewish identity. An impressive set of scholarship in the past several decades explores Jewish civilization globally, and, as those familiar with these works will recognize, they tend to be very lengthy and complex. Many writers spared little ink in their attempts to understand the complexity of Jewish identity—a task increasingly difficult since the Holocaust and the founding of Israel. Russian Jewish identity falls into a myriad of potential categories.³³ These possible categories include a wide range of religious, political, cultural, and linguistic varieties that simply cannot be subsumed into any one category. Indeed, to do so, serves to reduce Jewish identities—a tool that anti-Semitic ideologues in the nineteenth and twentieth century used to disastrous ends.

The obvious is overstated here not to criticize Polovets and GPG for their sincere desire to revitalize Russian-Jewish culture and life through education. Instead, it serves to remind us that for decades now, scholars have taken seriously the multiplicity of Jewish identities that often competed with each other for dominance, adherents, or the ability to determine what “being Jewish” meant. While Genesis (GPG) calls for singularity and a straightforward Jewish identity, such a monolithic construction is a difficult thing to carve out of modern society. During a discussion with students after a recent lecture, two of them demonstrated this point. Both students have Russian-Jewish grandparents, so when asked about their reading of *Tevye the Dairyman*, one responded that it was “an awful portrayal of Russian Jewish life. My family, we’re not like Tevye’s Russian Jews.” The other noted, “these are my people, I can see my grandparents in Tevye.” While these comments are anecdotal, they strike at the heart of the issue. Given the similar background (geographic and chronologic) of these students’ grandparents, these comments reveal the difficulty in finding a common understanding of what that lineage means for them today. Regardless of the rubric employed to classify ‘Russian-Jewish identity’ it will likely include lengthy footnoted clarifications and long lists of caveats.

Following Polovets’ statement further, fear of “globalization” as a potentially destructive force in Jewish life, is a bit off the mark. The intention of Polovets and GPG, according to his statement, is to reaffirm the localized, distinctive nature of Russian Jewish life, falling back on a romanticized ideal. This rejects the work of Stanislawski and others who argued that Jewish Studies today must avoid placing too much emphasis on “lachrymose and romanticized stereotypes” of Jewish life in Eastern Europe.³⁴ If efforts of funding organizations focus too heavily on the destructive elements of Russian—Jewish relations, then the current efforts will fail to establish a strong collective of teachers and students that can improve the current situation. The effort to redirect the historiography is tied to finding new avenues for improved relations. As with other issues in the

³² Boustan, Kosansky & Rustow 2011: 20-21.

³³ See, for example: Seltzer 1980; Vital 1999; Gartner 2001; Brenner 2003; Sachar 2007.

³⁴ Stanislawski 2002: 408.

broad field of Jewish—Christian relations, scholarship can lead to better relations by tackling the challenging topics in a rigorous manner rather than avoiding them. Scholars who attend conferences and conventions where histories of Ukrainians, Russians, Poles, and Jews in interaction are discussed, appear to know too well the hostilities of dealing with difficult issues.³⁵ One of the challenges for the groups highlighted in this paper as well as for scholars, revolves around understanding “Jewish identity” that is particularly non-Jewish by choice or circumstance. This is a convoluted issue since individuals may draw upon a wide range of components to formulate their identity or self-understanding. They may rank “being Jewish” anywhere on that scale and their definition of it will vary. This acceptance cannot be done at the expense of other identities, but rather in combination with religious, cultural, or any number of other hybrid versions.

By now, it is clear that Jewish Studies departments, centers, and institutes, occupy a bifurcated space between community and scholarship in Russia. On the face of it, the Department of Jewish Studies at St. Petersburg State University, like others, emphasizes and values good and accurate scholarship, and the dissemination of knowledge through publication. However, because of the financial dependence on external (usually foreign) agencies and groups to float the fiscal side of these endeavors, the boundary between academic research and public education may result in conflicting aims at times. I am not claiming that these joint endeavors must, by their very nature, detract from the scholarship produced in Jewish Studies centers and departments. Rather the question is whether these funding approaches can be sustained and prolonged, and if so, how? A sustainable approach for Jewish Studies programs will require a relationship that emphasizes a set of common interests between generous benefactors, university administrations, scholars, and increasingly, local populations. Those common interests will vary depending upon location and political or socioeconomic climates. As the development of Jewish studies in Russia shows, local and national history will continue to play a central role.

In the economic climate surrounding universities today, the politics of funding agencies, particularly ones that promote a “highly conservative” or extreme “liberal” position, come into play. Blogs, journals, and magazines are replete with critiques of various funding agencies. The divisive nature of the debate is characterized by Zachary Braiterman’s recent article about the Tikvah Fund. Braiterman, a self-titled “liberally-minded professor of Jewish Studies and modern Jewish thought,” argues that the Tikvah Fund promotes “a distinct set of conservative ideological leanings, and it does so by establishing roots inside and outside the university.”³⁶ Regardless of how one views the Tikvah Fund and others like it, the point is clear that scholars—committed to academic standards—are also ideologically driven and politically motivated. Though the motivations and perspectives differ, the fact remains that individuals in the academy are no less ideological than the general public. Braiterman suggests that despite efforts to create boundaries between scholarship and ideology by donors, scholars, and university administrators, even the best-laid plan must deal with the gray areas where these values

³⁵ Though space does not allow for lengthy discussion of the topic, for those interested in some of these hot-button topics will find ample reading material related to the Holodomor/Great Ukrainian Famine or the ‘neighbors’ debate around Jan Gross’s *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*.

³⁶ Braiterman 2011: 1.

intersect.³⁷ The central tenets of the argument are not limited to Jewish studies, although the complex Jewish political spectrum makes the issues particularly poignant.

The post-Soviet Russian context further complicates these relationships between scholarship, funding, and ideology. One of the results of the Soviet system was the highly disparate conception of Jewish community, identity, and self. Soviet ideology was focused around the absence of religious affiliation and the determination to shed religious identities. By the end of the Soviet period, Jews who remained in the Soviet Union were often successful in shedding their communal and Jewish national ambitions. The convoluted history of Zionism and Jewish-Russian relations contributed to a highly stratified Jewish existence in the twentieth century. Since the early 1990s, Jewish organizations, funding agencies, and foreign governments contributed large amounts of money to rebuild, recast, and redefine Jewish culture in the former Soviet Union. This competitiveness for Jewish affiliation is perhaps best understood through Peter Berger's analysis of religion as one of many competing alternatives in a secularized modern world. Berger argues that in a world of secularized modern governments, religions now occupy very different spaces than they did centuries ago.³⁸ The argument is not new, but it bears relevance to the debate about academic research centers and funding bodies. Berger suggests that religion and religious affiliation is a matter of choice that is adopted or abandoned without significant consequence.³⁹ If Jewish identity, historically tied to Judaism, can be defined in secular terms, logic would suggest that it could also be rejected, embraced, or reshaped. As a result, it is therefore marketable. Thus, when agencies promote their preferred form of identity, they are in essence bidding for individuals to find in their "brand" relevance for their individual lives. As long as that bidding remains individualized, the critics have few complaints. However, when the same funding agencies start contributing money toward research centers and the scholars housed in them, critics like Braiterman take notice.

Another aspect of the intricate situation in Jewish philanthropic funding of academic programs is perpetuity. In terms of sustainability, I offer one example of how these funding agencies, modeled on a "spend-down" approach, rather than a perpetual funding philosophy, will likely not exist in ten to twenty years. The late Zalman Chaim Bernstein (1926-1999), the Tikvah Fund and AVI CHAI's founding donor, believed that his philanthropic foundation should strive to develop Jewish life in the North America, Israel, and elsewhere. Two years after his death, AVI CHAI expanded their scope to include the former Soviet Union. In 2005 AVI CHAI joined forces with the Chais Family Foundation to publish or republish books related to Jewish themes. AVI CHAI in the Soviet Union continues to fund important republications of monographs and historical literature in Russian that have fallen out of print and are difficult to obtain. In this way, scholars benefit directly from the organization's commitment to preserving Jewish culture and texts. Many scholars in Russia also benefit from the organization's emphasis on education and research, finding gainful employment in difficult economic times.⁴⁰

³⁷ Braiterman 2011: 2.

³⁸ Berger 1990.

³⁹ Berger 1990: 242.

⁴⁰ Fleishman 2010: 1.

Since its founding in 1984, AVI CHAI's mission is "to strengthen Judaism, Jewish literacy, and Jewish tradition wherever his [Bernstein] foundation was to operate—North America, Israel, and the former Soviet Union—and to sustain, enlarge, and enrich Jewish commitment to the State of Israel."⁴¹ In May 2007, AVI CHAI and the Chais Family Foundation approved a two-year grant to the Center for Jewish and Biblical Studies at St. Petersburg State University for curriculum and faculty development and library support. As of 2007, thirty-six undergraduate students were enrolled in such courses along with six graduate students. Additionally, fifty students from other faculties were auditing courses at the Center. To give some idea of the grant size for these institutions, AVI CHAI had a total expenditure in program grants and costs of \$41,730,314 for all of its programs in 2007. The Center for Jewish Studies and Project Judaica in St. Petersburg received (as of 2007) \$171,000 and the Department of Jewish Studies at Moscow State University received \$542,000 over a six-year period.⁴²

Before his death, Bernstein, ever the wise fiscal planner and investor, when commenting on the future of his philanthropic group, recommended "those who knew me should spend the money in their lifetime. I do not know who is coming next. The history of philanthropy in America is that things get corrupted the further you go from the vision of the founder and those who shared it with him."⁴³ As a result of Bernstein's vision for AVI CHAI, the organization plans to distribute all the assets and conclude its grant work by 2021. The organization has focused some of its efforts on building up current grant projects and finding others who can continue support into the future, but to date, this has been a difficult process and the earliest studies suggest that some of these current projects may lose critical support when AVI CHAI's funding disappears. Although the FSU is the third branch of the organization's targeted locations, it is severely underfunded when compared to the other locations; a fact that suggests a somewhat difficult road ahead. The annual spend-down reports from AVI CHAI (available on their webpage: <http://avichai.org/annual-reports/>) provide a cautious projection toward the future of these projects, particularly in Russia.

The history of Jewish Studies in nineteenth-century St. Petersburg (taking together those historians, Hebraic scholars, and others who operated within a loosely defined scholarly cohort interested in Jews and Judaism) shows the complexity of the relationship between Jewish scholarship and Jewish activism. For Daniil A. Khvol'son, Simon M. Dubnov, Iulii I. Gessen, and others, the connection between their scholarship and their active role in society suggests a tradition marked by this duality of purpose. It is important to remember that in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia, the most prominent secular Jewish historians—the works of whom we still read and study today—benefitted greatly from their participation in, and association with the Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia, known by the acronym OPE (*obshchestvo dlia rasprostraneniia prosveshcheniia mezhdv evreiami v Rossii*). Indeed, it is thanks to the Society's work that we have the sixteen-volume *Evreiskaia Entsiklopediia* (1907-1913) and other valuable journals and lectures. It should not be forgotten that the OPE was deeply concerned with the education of Jews and the overall improve-

⁴¹ Fleishman 2010: 1.

⁴² All figures above based on AVI CHAI 2007 Annual Report: 64.

⁴³ Fleishman 2010: 7. Fleishman is summarizing AVI CHAI Trustee meeting minutes (June 2001).

ment of Jews in the Russian Empire. In his still useful *Jewish Scholarship and Scholarly Institutions in the Soviet Union, 1918-1953*, Alfred A. Greenbaum reflected this duality of purpose, noting that although a particularly Russian *Wissenschaft des Judentums* developed several decades later than in Germany, the major figures also harbored the goal of Jewish emancipation.⁴⁴ Whereas scholars in nineteenth-century Russia sought to protect or defend Jews from pernicious accusations of blood libel, forced conversion, pogroms, and legal restrictions, scholars today face the unique challenge of bringing Jews back, or, reawakening the Jewish community, fostering camaraderie and re-establishing Jewish ties.

In part, this duality of institutional mission is the result of the location, historical context, and conditions under which such institutions were established. It is difficult to argue that such institutions could exist in Russia today without generous funding from concerned individuals, prominent citizens, and philanthropic agencies. I raise the question of institutional development of Jewish studies centers focused on teaching and research not because they are somehow inadequate in their scope or aim. The relevance of such centers for the further development and training of scholars of Jewish history is made clear by recent publications in Russia and Eastern Europe that testify to the quality of work being done. Rather asking how, and by whom, these institutions are funded raises a fundamental question about the nature of these centers and their role as 'active citizens' in support of the Jewish community in St. Petersburg and elsewhere. Although the reasons that scholars study the objects and events or processes that they do differ, the mere act of recognizing their role as citizens and participants in the very processes and communities of study allows them to more clearly understand that position. Recognition of the dual nature of the professorship is a key step toward negotiating the relationship between institutional demands from funding agencies, research agendas, and personal investment.

The desire to educate and unify Jews is built into the very nature of modern Jewish culture. We see the rich connections between synagogue and community in nearly every country where Jews live today. However, what bearing then these agencies have on the projects that scholars take up in their own research? It is a question that we have yet to successfully answer. These two processes require two distinct thought patterns. The aim here is to identify where those two processes or spheres of activities intersect. A common frustration felt by many in the academy regardless of location, is the constant tug-of-war between their methodical and technical scholarship and the fast-paced world of public lectures, teaching, and collaborative community projects. Individuals, who find outlets outside of the academy for their intellectual work and expertise, whether in popular media or in public discussions and community events, serve as important bridges to understanding difficult interethnic and interfaith relations.

Recent scholarship on the history of Jews from within Russia, as well as contributions from "outsiders," shattered the monolithic interpretations of Jewish life in Russia by examining the border areas between Jewish communities and institutions, as well as exploring the richness of Jewish secular culture in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa (though not limited to these cities). The Jewish community, then in pre-

⁴⁴ Greenbaum 1994: 9.

Soviet Russia, was hardly a monolithic community at all, though we cannot ignore a certain sense of connection between Jews in the center and those in the periphery. Yet, as Brian Horowitz and Benjamin Nathans show in their work on late imperial Russian Jewish organizations, this was not a relationship without serious disagreement over the projects, their aims, or the process of fulfilling them.⁴⁵ Though the center and periphery may be very different locations today, the debate still rages between these two poles. While the centers of Jewish philanthropic ventures are often based in Israel, the Jews sought by those groups are largely located in Russia. As one Russian scholar argued in an article about “the Russian lobby in Israel,” Russia is firmly fixed in contemporary Israeli politics and culture.⁴⁶ This is as true of philanthropy as it is for politics. There is much sorting to do in the future, and we can only hope that scholarship will improve our collective understanding of this unique relationship between activism, politics, funding, and scholarship.

To say just a few words about the direction of Jewish Studies in Russia I look at some of the areas where scholars in St. Petersburg and Moscow are advancing the field into exciting and challenging new territories. Given the expansive nature of current publications, I highlight just a few to suggest where the field might be headed and why I find these particular scholars useful. Jewish Studies in Russia tend to focus chronologically on the Russian Empire. The twentieth century, with its destructiveness and rupture with Jewish life limited the development of a broad research program. Although significant work is underway, the process of formulating new theories and approaches to understand the current situation is still in the future. The field needs an updated survey along the lines of Greenbaum’s work that remains a useful, though hopelessly outdated analysis of the state of the field. More important will be an ambitious project to reevaluate and overhaul our standard categories of historical and social inquiry to better understand the interactions of Jews and their neighbors in Eastern Europe.

In Moscow and St. Petersburg today, a growing number of faculty and students are conducting impressive research into a surprisingly broad range of topics in Jewish Studies. Many of these projects involve subjects that examine Jewish life, thought, and culture as part of a broad dialectic with other groups and worldviews. Dominic Rubin, who trained at the University of Oxford and University College London, is a lecturer in Philosophy, Hebrew, and Old Testament at St. Philaret’s Orthodox Christian Institute and Moscow Higher School of Economics. Rubin’s book, *Holy Russia, Sacred Israel: Jewish-Christian Encounters in Russian Religious Thought* is a major work that takes seriously the need to reconsider Jewish and Russian Orthodox relations in modern Russia. Rubin’s work is highly complex in scope and analysis and brings together numerous strands (perhaps to a fault) from a diverse set of Russian intellectuals.

Rubin, begins with Vladimir Soloviev, the major figure in the Russian Silver Age, covers the major religious philosophers (Bulgakov, Florensky, Frank and others), and then concludes with a discussion about the late Aleksander Men—and finally addresses Grigorii Benevitch, a patristic scholar and frequent commentator on Jews and Jewish

⁴⁵ Nathans 2002; Horowitz 2009a; Horowitz 2009b.

⁴⁶ Khanin 2008.

conversion to the Russian Orthodoxy living in St. Petersburg today.⁴⁷ Rubin's contribution to Jewish Studies in Russia is significant because it brings together a group of Orthodox intellectuals relatively unknown outside of small scholarly circles, in sharper detail and scope than earlier works have done. Frequently, scholars produce short articles about Soloviev, Bulgakov, Florenskii, and on, but Rubin attempts to show how this group of intellectuals—who sought to understand the seemingly perpetual conflict between Judaism and Christianity (and by extension, between Jews and Christians)—responded to contemporary issues within the context of their rapidly changing world in the early decades of the twentieth century. Rubin's attempt to understand this period of incredible Christian theological creativity relies on an understanding of these theologian's efforts to redefine the relationship between the two religions. This is more than just an intellectual activity, because it also represents a personal attempt to understand what it means to be Jewish today in the post-Soviet context.

In the introduction to his book, Rubin argues that he had three goals in mind when he began the project. The first was to explore how these Russian thinkers thought about Judaism. The second aim of his book is to offer a sampling of these writers' theological discussions and ideas to other "theological readers" (his target audience is non-Russian Orthodox readers) and see how they respond to his interpretation of this Jewish-Christian discourse. The final objective, and the one I find most interesting, is that Rubin sought to engage them on a personal level as well. It is useful to note that Rubin was born in Britain to a highly assimilated Jewish family (his grandparents were Russian Jews). His eventual conversion to the Russian Orthodox Church helps explain, at least in part, the direction the book takes. His own religious perspective is important in light of the earlier discussion about the dual role of Jewish Studies centers in St. Petersburg because it calls into question, once again, complex relations of community development, scholarly appeals to scientific objectivity, and the role of individual religious curiosity.

Rubin's book also represents an often strife-ridden area of Jewish Studies that involves what some might consider a sub-category in Jewish – Orthodox relations. Rubin's book certainly does not answer all of the big questions here, but he does at least provide a good introduction for readers of the immensity and breadth of the issues. While traditional approaches to Jewish Studies suggest, and perhaps rightfully so, that the field should be more concerned with Jews and less with the non-Jews that lived around them, for Russia particularly, the interfaith component of this history is relevant and may well open new avenues for exploration and investigation.

In terms of innovation and theoretical development, Olga Belova's (Institute for Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences) work on myth and 'otherness' provides a stout attempt at rethinking myths about Jews in the Russian Empire. Belova approaches myth through ethno-cultural stereotypes using ethno-linguistic evidence and folk studies. While Belova does not focus solely on Jews in the Russian Empire, they occupy a major strand of her research agenda, as evidenced by the frequency of her publications referring to them as one part of the binary relation Slavs/Jews.⁴⁸ Belova is interested in

⁴⁷ For Rubin on Benevitch, see Rubin 2010: 520-522. See also Benevitch "The Jewish Question in the Russian Orthodox Church."

⁴⁸ Belova 2007; Belova & Petrukhin 2008.

the intersection between myth, ethnicity, culture, religion, and other possible points of contact. In one of her more theoretically important articles, she suggests:

The binary “our own/other” in the social context is understood through multi-level human relations: blood relations and family (our own/other descent, family), ethnic (our own/other people, nation), linguistic (our own/other language, dialect), denominational (our own/other faith), social (our own/other community, class).⁴⁹

From here, Belova argues that the expansion of this concept about human relations also takes similar forms when people begin thinking in terms of “other” groups and “other” individuals. The importance of this discussion about one’s own people and the “other” is critical component for understanding the Russian-Jewish identity crisis and the calls for gathering Russia’s unaffiliated Jews. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt’s work on Jews in the Soviet and post-Soviet period explores this matter and suggests that as a result of the conditions imposed upon Soviet Jews by the government, many Jews created alternative identities that simply do not fit this Jewish/Christian binary.⁵⁰

Those familiar with post-Auschwitz theology will recognize that Belova’s work is part of the project of unpacking and redefining identities and perceptions of the Jewish ‘other’ that centuries of hatred and hostility reinforced. When traits that people recognize about their neighbors transform into universalized perceptions of identity, an eerily familiar, though distant “other” emerges. Belova writes:

Notions about “our own” and an “other” people, when rendered in folk etiological legends, apparently demonstrate the most universal themes (irrespective of particular nationalities), belonging to the folkloric image of an ‘other’ ethnicity: beliefs about the “primacy” of our own ethnicity, its primordial “correctness,” the “inhuman” nature of others—their “animal” essence, or their connection with the world beyond. Moreover, the idea of ethnocentricity remains fundamental in the system of “folkloric ethnology,” in which a positive evaluation of “our own” and a negative evaluation of “others” is often rendered within the categories of mythological thought.⁵¹

When these ideas become generalized to the point of obscuring perceptions of the real person or people, such differences are easily ascribed into worldviews and “mythologized” historical facts. While Belova studies folklore as a means of grappling with the idea of myth and its uses, her work also deals with the ways those myths continue to operate within society today and how perceptions of the other are rooted in cultural experience.

The interdisciplinary nature of Jewish Studies is reflected in the development of methodologies and theoretical approaches current in Russia today. In the Russian context, as elsewhere, literary scholars, philosophers, and anthropologists are finding meaningful ways to influence what historians, religious studies scholars, and political scientists study and how they interpret the texts they read. This shift reflects a broad emphasis on interdisciplinarity in the modern university, but it bears potential to have a profound influence on the Russian academy. Whereas the disciplines of history and philology,

⁴⁹ Belova 2007: 336.

⁵⁰ Deutsch Kornblatt 2004.

⁵¹ Belova 2007: 336.

along with biblical studies, occupied prime positions within traditional Jewish Studies, recent developments, and wider inclusion of fields such as anthropology, comparative literature, and gender studies opens up new ‘texts’ and encourage new approaches and interpretations. Within this strand of wider inclusion rests work, such as Belova’s, that examines how people and communities form identities in contrast to other groups. A recent collection on anthropology and Jewish Studies reminds us that boundaries that separate “Jews from others are determined neither entirely by Jews, as theorists of Jewish agency would have it, nor by others, as ideologues of Jewish victimization in the diaspora once held. Rather, Jewish identity is established dialogically by Jews and non-Jews who possess, wield, and resist the power to set those boundaries.”⁵² The exploration of this process promises fruitful scholarship in many areas, but the field of Jewish-Russian interactions may well be one area where it stands to make meaningful contributions for the present. In part, it is the examination of these separate identities in interaction that is valuable, but studies of these blended identities are even more stimulating. In recent years, literary studies of the great Russian and great Russian-Jewish writers generated a wide range of theories about Russian anti-Semitism, its distinctive characteristics, and the ways that Jews responded to verbal and ideological confrontations, to say nothing of physical attacks.⁵³ The historiography of Russian-Jewish relations continues to undergo dramatic changes and time will tell how scholars interpret and make sense of the currents of Jewish identity in contemporary Russia.

Jewish studies in the former Soviet Union are indeed alive and well, though not without a broad set of issues that remain unanswered. Michael Stanislawski argued “the study of the modern history of East European Jews is not a field riven at present by deep conceptual or ideological divides or abiding scholarly or methodological controversies.”⁵⁴ Perhaps the reason for lack of deep conceptual divides might be that there simply is a very large amount of work to be done in the field and scholars have not had to fully stake out some of their claims. As the past twenty years prove, however, the scholars involved in the field are attempting with varying degrees of success to develop approaches and theories that enrich and expand our understanding of the impact that the events of the twentieth century had on Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe. Although the looming figures from the past continue to cast a formidable shadow over the field, Jewish Studies in Eastern Europe will continue to push conceptual boundaries, systematically explore archival materials, and draw new conclusions about the Jewish experience in Russia.

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⁵² Boustan, Kosansky & Rustow 2011: 20.

⁵³ Katsis 2000; Safran 2000; Katsis 2006; Safran 2010.

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