

**JEWISH STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY ST. PETERSBURG:  
A RESPONSE TO ANDREW REED**

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**Abstract:** Despite the drastic decline in the Jewish population of St. Petersburg, Russia, Jewish studies is undergoing a renaissance thanks to the dedication of activists, scholars, and specialists.

Jewish life in St. Petersburg represents a paradox. On the one hand, the numbers of Jews in St. Petersburg has declined precipitously over the last half-century. On the other, Jewish life in the second capital of the Russian Federation is undergoing something of a renaissance, as Andrew Reed points out in his fascinating paper. The numbers of Jews in Russia as a whole and in St. Petersburg in particular has been steadily growing smaller and smaller. From a high point of 891,000 in 1939, the number of Jews on the territory of the present Russian Federation declined to 537,000 in 1989 (Iurkov 1998: 64). But the greatest decline occurred in the post-Soviet period. The 2002 census reported only 233,439 Jews (including 3394 Dagestani Mountain Jews, 53 Georgian Jews, and 54 Central Asian Jews) in all of Russia (Itogi 2004: 10). In the 1990s, nearly two of every five Jews in the former Soviet Union chose to leave their post-Soviet homes and establish themselves abroad (primarily in Israel, the United States, and Germany) (Gitelman 2012: 2).

Russia's second city, Leningrad/St. Petersburg, reflects this general trend. In 1959, there were officially 162,344 Jews in Leningrad, of whom 13,728 spoke Yiddish as their mother tongue (Itogi 1963, 1: 312). Jews represented the second largest nationality in Leningrad after the Russians. By the 1989 census, the number of Jews had dropped to about 106,100 and had moved to third place in the ethnic make-up of the city (Klupt 1993: 12). The 2002 census recorded only 36,570 Jews in St. Petersburg (Itogi 2004, 4: 56), and the latest census in 2010 lists only 24,132 Jews in St. Petersburg and 156,801 Jews in all of Russia (Federal'naia sluzhba 2012). In other words, today in all of Russia there are about five thousand fewer Jews than there were in Leningrad alone in 1959. I am using official census figures here, which regard Jews as a nationality or ethnic group. Religion is or can be something quite different—and this is one of the big issues in the study of Jews in Eastern Europe. But there is little question that by any measure the number of Jews in Russia as a whole and in St. Petersburg in particular has undergone a steep decline (Smirnov 2012).

At the same time, Jewish life in St. Petersburg is clearly being revived. A quick look at the English language web site of the Great Choral Synagogue of St. Petersburg

(<http://eng.jewishpetersburg.ru/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=302>) provides a list of 51 Jewish institutions from Jewish community centers to legal aid societies in the city, including places where tourists can find kosher meals. Part of this renaissance is thanks to the fall of the iron curtain and the international contacts, like the ones we are trying to establish between Arizona State University and Jagiellonian University, that have brought new ideas and new resources to the Jewish communities in Russia. Of international contacts, Israel is particularly important, of course, and in 2010, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs approved an Israeli consulate in St. Petersburg, that helps facilitate academic contacts with Israel.

Primarily, however, this renaissance is the fruit of the hard and heroic work of Soviet Jewish scholars and activists who, at great cost to themselves, kept Jewish studies alive even during the difficult years of Soviet atheism. They also must be given credit for taking full advantage of the democratizing period of perestroika (reconstruction) under Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, who served as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991. Before Gorbachev came to power, Soviet censors placed strict controls on the practice of Judaism and the study of Jewish culture. For example, unlike Orthodox Christians, Baptists, Muslims, and Buddhists, religious Jews were not permitted to organize a national denominational structure until 1989. Despite such impediments, in the 1970s and 1980s, Soviet Jews in Leningrad held underground seminars on Jewish culture, collected items of Jewish material culture, studied Hebrew and Yiddish, and wrote works of history and ethnography about Jewish life, such as the *samizdat* (illegally self-published) journal *Leningrad Jewish Almanac*. As early as 1981, Jewish scholars created the Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Commission, whose name recalled the pre-revolutionary Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society of St. Petersburg. But rather than study Biblical archeology, the new JHEC wanted to explore contemporary ethnic history and the current state of Soviet Jews (Mochalova 2011). Mikhail Beizer, one of the pioneers in promoting the study of Jewish history in the late Soviet period, conducted unofficial tours of Leningrad that pointed out places important for the history of Jews in the city until he emigrated to Israel in 1987. There he published the histories of Jews in Leningrad/St. Petersburg that the Soviet censors had rejected (Beizer 1989; Beizer 1999).

Gorbachev's religious policies allowed greater liberty to students of Jewish history and culture, and Jewish studies scholars took immediate advantage of the new freedom. From 1988, a group of Jewish studies scholars under the leadership of Il'ia Saulovich Dvorkin (b. 1954) organized expeditions to shtetls in Ukraine, gathering materials that were later published in two volumes as *100 Jewish Shtetls of Ukraine* (Khaimovich 1994; Lukin & Khaimovich 1998-2000). Although formally trained as an engineer in a polytechnic institute, Dvorkin actively developed Jewish studies in the late Soviet period. His ethnographic work helped to create the extensive archive of Jewish literary and material culture now housed at the Petersburg Institute of Jewish Studies, which he helped to found; the archival holdings include fourteen collections with about 30,000 items (Mochalova 2011). In 1989, Dvorkin became rector of the Leningrad Open Jewish University, a private initiative made possible by Gorbachev's reforms (Dvorkin [no date]). In 1991, when Leningrad once again became St. Petersburg, the university changed its name to the Petersburg Jewish University; in 1998, this private

university became the Petersburg Institute of Jewish Studies (*Peterburgskii Institut Iudaiki*). Since 2000, it has successfully passed the rigorous standards of state accreditation three times. After Dvorkin emigrated, the historian Dmitrii Arkad'evich El'iasevich (b. 1964), who had been teaching at the institute since 1990, became rector, a post he holds to this day. In 2000, El'iasevich defended his doctoral dissertation on state policy and the Jewish press in Russia from 1797 to 1917 at the Russian Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences—one of the first doctoral dissertations on Jewish history in post-Soviet Russia (Lokshin & El'iasevich 2011; *Peterburgskii* [no date]; Mochalova 2011).

In founding the Jewish University, Dvorkin and his companions were anxious to preserve and rebuild Jewish spiritual and intellectual culture after seventy years of Soviet atheism and repression. About the same time, Christians in Leningrad/St. Petersburg created similar private religious universities. In March 1989, Orthodox Christians established the Russian Christian Institute of the Humanities that later in 2004 became the Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities (Burlak 2010). Similarly, in the fall of 1990, Russian Protestant Evangelical Christians established a Bible institute in Krasnodar that in 1992 moved to St. Petersburg to become the St. Petersburg Christian University (*Sankt-Peterburgskii khristianskii universitet* 2010). Like the Jewish university, these new institutions were not religious seminaries or theological academies designed only to prepare clergy. Instead, they sought to deepen general knowledge about their religions among their own laity and to build a bridge between their faith communities and society as a whole. More broadly, they sought to lay a spiritual and philosophical foundation for education that went beyond the “scientific atheism” of the Soviet years. For example, in its mission statement, the Petersburg Institute for Jewish Studies aims to develop and popularize academic Jewish Studies, to investigate the very rich history and culture of the Jewish diaspora of Eastern Europe, to train the Jewish laity of St. Petersburg, to work out a system of preschool and primary school Jewish education, and to strengthen tolerance and interethnic communication in Russian society (<http://www.pijs.ru/>).

With its 50,000 volumes, the Petersburg Institute of Jewish Studies has one of the best Jewish libraries in Russia. The institute also maintains an extensive publishing program that focuses on reference works, bibliographies, archival descriptions, and pedagogical questions (Mochalova 2011). Although several of the early pioneers in post-Soviet Jewish Studies, including Beizer, Lukin, and Khaimovich, emigrated to Israel, they continue to maintain contacts with their institutions in St. Petersburg.

As Andrew Reed notes, other universities have also begun to incorporate Jewish studies into their curriculum. The most important public university in St. Petersburg, St. Petersburg State University, has just created a separate Department of Jewish Culture, led by Professor Igor' Romanovich Tantlevskii (b. 1961), within the broader philosophy faculty. Many of the professors who now teach full-time or part-time in this new unit were once Jewish dissenters and activists in the 1970s and 1980s. Il'ia Dvorkin and Boris Khaimovich, now affiliated with Hebrew University in Jerusalem, are listed as “foreign faculty” and return occasionally to give lectures in Russia's second city (*Zarubezhnye* [no date]). Students of the new department can take advantage of the city's rich collections of Hebrew manuscripts that are in many ways superior to the collections in New York, Jerusalem, and Oxford (Mochalova 2011).

In 1999 the private, non-governmental European University of St. Petersburg established an academic home for the interdisciplinary Jewish studies center, “Petersburg Judaica.” Directed by the chemist-turned-folklorist Valerii Aronovich Dymshits, the center offers courses on Jewish history, anthropology, ethnography, art, and architecture. Viktor Efimovich Kel’ner, the author of an extensive biography of Shimon Dubnow (1860-1941), serves on the faculty as does the architectural historian Alla Sokolova (Sokolova & Dymshits 2003; Kel’ner 2008). The center also conducts ethnographic expeditions and puts on expositions to introduce the general public to Jewish culture. Its valuable archive contains a large collection of 320 photographs, including many taken by the great Jewish photographer Solomon Borisovich Iudovin (1892-1954) during ethnographic expeditions on the eve of the First World War. Once housed in the Museum of the Petersburg Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Society, these photographs are among the few that survived the forced closure of the society and its museum in 1929. The center’s impressive publication program includes several catalogues of its expositions, a study of shtetl culture and architecture, and the memoirs of prominent Soviet Jews, including those of the publisher and encyclopedist Aron Filippovich Perel’man (1876-1954) (Tsentr “Peterburgskaia Iudaika” [no date]; Dymshits et al. 2008; Kotik 2008; Perel’man 2009; Pervyi evreiskii muzei v Rossii 2009).

The revival of Jewish life and the creation of new institutions to celebrate and support the Jewish community and Jewish studies occurred in a broader context of a general revival of religious life. The year 1989 saw not only the establishment of the Jewish university, but the creation of the Va’ad, a council designed to serve as an umbrella group for the over 200 Soviet Jewish organizations that had come into existence during perestroika (Gitelman 2012: 4). For the first time in the Soviet period, Jews were also allowed to establish a legally recognized centralized Jewish religious organization in January 1990, the All-Union Council of Jewish Religious Communities of the USSR (*Vsesoiuznyi sovet evreiskikh religioznikh obshchin SSSR*). After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, a new organization, the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organizations of Russia (*Kongress evreiskikh religioznykh obshchin i organizatsii Rossii*, KEROR), came into existence (Rossiiskie evrei 2004).

Like many other religious communities in the former Soviet Union (including Muslims, Buddhists, Baptists, and Orthodox), religious Jews suffered a schism in the 1990s between the Soviet-era leaders who had exercised limited spiritual authority under the atheistic Communist regime and a new generation of believers. Founded in 1993, the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organizations is led by rabbis who grew up and received their theological education in the USSR; chief among these is Adol’f Solomonovich Shaevich (b. 1937). Born in Khabarovsk, Shaevich spent his childhood in Birobidzhan, the capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region in Siberia near the Chinese border. In 1980, he began serving as rabbi of the Moscow Choral Synagogue, and he took a leading role in the formation of the Congress in 1993 (Shaevich 2010). But the participation of Reform and progressive Jews in the Congress provoked opposition from some of the Orthodox Jews. Just five years after its founding, in November 1998, the Italian-born Hasidic rabbi Berl Lazar (b. 1964) led the formation of a rival denomination, the Federation of Jewish Communities, supported by the wealthy Russian Jewish tycoon Roman Arkad’evich Abramovich (b. 1966) (*Federatsiia evrei’skikh obshchin*

Rossii 2013). Despite being foreign born and a Lubavitcher Hasid who had received his rabbinic education in the United States, Lazar has developed close ties with Vladimir Putin, and the two were allied in Putin's effort to emasculate the powerful media magnate Vladimir Aleksandrovich Gusinskii (b. 1952). As a Lubavitcher, Lazar is dismissive of Reform Judaism, and his alliance with Putin gives his movement considerable influence (Koptev 2000; Charnyi 2003; Charnyi 2004; Glezarova 2005; Kurudimov 2011).

Despite their religious differences, both Lazar and Shaevich serve together on the board of the Russian Jewish Congress (*Rossiiskii evreiskii kongress*), a philanthropic organization founded in 1996 to help Jewish causes. Led by its president, the wealthy businessman Iurii Isaakovich Kanner (b. 1955), who was elected in 2009, the Russian Jewish Congress actively supports Jewish studies, the Petersburg Institute of Jewish Studies as well as the Department of Jewish Culture at St. Petersburg State University. The presidium of the congress includes some of Russia's richest "oligarchs," such as the financial and oil magnates Mikhail Maratovich Fridman (b. 1964), the president of Alfa-Bank, and German Borisovich Khan (b. 1961), president of the petroleum joint venture TNK-BP (Struktura [no date]; Fridman [no date]; Khan [no date]). Kanner's personal commitment to philanthropy and academic integrity has, however, been recently questioned in the Russian press. When the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaaia gazeta* ran Kanner's 2004 *kandidat* dissertation on economics through anti-plagiarism software, it found a suspiciously high degree of coincidence with five earlier dissertations. Moreover, insiders have complained that Kanner has turned the Russian Jewish Congress into a personal public relations bureau and tourist agency for his own benefit (Kuznetsov 2013). Whether these charges are true or not, they reflect the cutthroat nature of the Russian business, religious, and political scene, and they illustrate the atmosphere in which new academic programs must try to find financial support. In their search for money, deans and chairs must negotiate the religious and business rivalries of the patrons that they cultivate.

Russian Jewish studies programs also face the task of integration into the broader systems of Russian and European higher education. The Bologna Process, which seeks to create a single system for degrees from European universities, has greatly affected Russian university education. Bologna imposes a standard four-year bachelor's and a two-year master's program, which replaces Russia's traditional five-year university program. The rector of the Petersburg Institute of Jewish Studies, Dmitrii El'iashevich, recently complained about this change:

I cannot reconcile myself with the imperative to switch to a four-year system of education, but such are the requirements of the Ministry of Education. ... In our case, this leads to colossal problems in structuring the educational program. There is less and less of a place for specialized disciplines connected with Jewish studies (Lokshin & El'iashevich 2011).

El'iashevich's comments raise broader questions: What is the optimal way to organize Jewish studies? Should Jewish studies be concentrated in an interdisciplinary center (as in the European University of St. Petersburg)? Should they be considered a branch of philosophy (as in St. Petersburg State University)? Or should such programs be offered in an independent institute, such as the Petersburg Institute of Jewish Studies? What is the relationship between Jewish studies and the disciplines of religious studies

(*religiovedenie*), anthropology, philosophy, and history? These questions, which are also hotly debated in the West, are clearly linked to different conceptions about the mission of Jewish studies programs: are they “value-free” social-sciences enterprises or should they promote a particular moral and ethical approach to the world? At Arizona State University, we welcome the opportunity to engage in a discussion of these important questions with our colleagues in Eastern Europe, and we look forward to a long and fruitful exchange with Jagiellonian University.

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