“My Brother’s Keeper”: American Jewish Youth and the Making of the Soviet Jewry Movement

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ABSTRACT

“My Brother’s Keeper”: American Jewish Youth and the Making of the Soviet Jewry Movement

A thesis presented to the Graduate Program in Global Studies

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
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An analysis of the first years of the global movement for Soviet Jewry, “My Brother’s Keeper”: American Jewish Youth and the Making of the Soviet Jewry Movement is an in-depth study that gives credence to the oft-overlooked American youth branch that galvanized the American Jewish community to action. Primarily focused on the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, it chronicles the coming of age of diasporic Jewish students in the post-Holocaust era. The analysis accounts for those at the cross section of “Jewish,” and “youth” during the tumultuous era of countercultures.

The first chapter profile the American and Diasporic Jewish community and the currents behind it; the economic and social changes, and Jewish intergroup structures, as well as the deteriorating condition of Soviet Jews. Chapter two dissects the Eichmann Trial as an awakening of Holocaust memory and a turning point from complacency. Chapter three, the largest section of the chronology, incorporates the Student Struggle
for Soviet Jewry as the leading voice among youth organizations across borders. It is framed as a response to Jewish spaces, the youth rebellion, growing particularism of the 1960s, and post-Holocaust Jewish trauma. The chapter also details the momentum given to the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry by the Six Day War and a gradual acceptance of Jewish grassroots by the Jewish establishment. Lastly, chapter four catalogs Soviet Jewry Movement as an active, international body through the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Using primary sources accessed in multiple American archives and building on previous research, the study weaves the distinctly Jewish narrative into the counterculture era. The Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry was not rare for its time, but for its place inside the Jewish community. Its dynamism was a retort to the era, the need for justice, and the complacency of the American Jewish establishment; as a movement, it permeated all aspects of Jewish and American life. “My Brother’s Keeper”: American Jewish Youth and the Making of the Movement to Save Soviet Jewry” is the attempt to raise the important organization from obscurity.
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INTRODUCTION

On May 1st, 1964, one thousand young Jews gathered outside the Soviet mission to the United Nations in New York. Their picket signs read *I Am My Brother’s Keeper* and *Let Them Pray*. The activists—the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, or Triple-S-J as they later called themselves, were tired of the American Jewish community’s policy of “quiet diplomacy.” They remembered the Holocaust, and the neutrality of the world as Jews were exterminated. The oppressive conditions of their Jewish counterparts in the Soviet Union would only be stopped through confrontational tactics, they believed. A student alternative to American Jewish advocacy was born that day. In the following years, they would lead tens of thousands of people in protest.

This study will analyze what led to the cataclysmic event. It begins nearly twenty years earlier, with the profile of American Jewry and the condition of Soviet Jewry after World War II. In the period, American Jewry broke down barriers of social and economic mobility. American Jewish advocacy groups were on the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement and the fight for equal rights. They were increasingly aware of the condition of Soviet Jewry, but had failed to raise public concern.

Activism for Soviet Jewry had its roots in the Jewish reclaiming of the Holocaust. One event—the Eichmann Trial—accelerated widespread Holocaust consciousness around the world. The Eichmann Trial was broadcast from Israel on primetime television and written about in the media; 112 Holocaust survivors testified on the atrocities Adolf
Eichmann had committed. For the first time, the distinct Jewish nature of the Holocaust was broadcast to the world.

Jacob Birnbaum, the founder of the SSSJ, saw hypocrisy in the American Jewish community’s inaction for an ailing Soviet Jewry. He drew parallels: the silence during the Holocaust was no different from the silence of mainstream American Jewish organizations. Young Jews attuned to his words—they, too, understood that complacency was partially to blame for the Holocaust. They desired equality; they had participated in the 1964 Freedom Summer *en masse*; between one-third and one-half of all the student volunteers who went down to the south to educate Black Americans were Jewish. The SSSJ similarly called for equality for Jews in the Soviet Union.

In founding SSSJ, Birnbaum tapped into Holocaust trauma and the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement. The group adopted the cry for justice that paralleled the enlivened American 1960s. Their actions would characterize the early Soviet Jewry Movement, and eventually lead the American Jewish community to embrace a more confrontationist style to advocacy. The Soviet Jewry Movement would use SSSJ-inspired actions to pressure the USSR to free its Jews until its collapse.

In the body of work on the Soviet Jewry Movement, the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry is often just a footnote. The usual analysis of begins after the Six Day War, and ends with the fall of the Soviet Union. Using this scholarship, there is an assumption that the Soviet Jewry Movement is a response to the concern of a “second Holocaust” in the Six Day War, or a response to the growing Black Power movement that was forming around the same time. While it is true that the Soviet Jewry Movement was reinforced by
diasporic Jewry’s turn inwards after 1967, this breadth of literature ignores the groundwork that laid the road for the movement’s success in the years before.

Until recently, few works have given a serious analysis of SSSJ. Gal Beckerman’s *When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone* is thus far the most comprehensive, and thus authoritative work on the Soviet Jewry Movement. Beckerman recounts the beginnings of SSSJ, but by drawing a parallel to adult activist groups in the United States, he devalues the central role SSSJ played in galvanizing tens of thousands of activists around the United States, and specifically in New York, the hub of Jewish institutional life. In *Ritualized Protest and Redemptive Politics*, Shaul Kelner frames SSSJ through the lens of the 1960s political culture. Kelner moves beyond Birnbaum, defining SSSJ as a social movement strategically placed to innovate inside the Jewish community—and with success. In “To Be a Jew on America’s Terms is Not to Be a Jew at All”: The Jewish Counterculture’s Critique of Middle-Class Affluence, Rachel Kranson takes Kelner’s approach one step further, placing the SSSJ in the distinctly Jewish counterculture of the 1960s. Both limit their frameworks to seeing SSSJ as a Jewish movement concerned solely with adapting the strategy of the New Left. Perhaps because the movement came about before 1964 or perhaps for other reasons, they fall short of realizing SSSJ was a response to Holocaust trauma.

In her Brandeis PhD dissertation “Let My People Go!” The Struggle for Soviet Jewry and the Rise of American Jewish Identity Politics, Amaryah Orenstein presents an argument outside Beckerman, Kelner, and Kranson: that the SSSJ was a Jewish human rights movement that moved parallel to the broader campaigns for human rights. Her hypothesis falls short on two accounts. The first is the distinctly redemptive nature that
characterized the Soviet Jewry Movement, a reaction to the silence of the American Jewish community. The second is the overlooking of the Soviet Jewry Movement’s international campaign.

The task at hand, therefore, is an attempt to show the full influence of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry on the international Soviet Jewry Movement. This thesis supports previous claims that the SSSJ was foundational to the early Soviet Jewry Movement and left its mark far past 1967. Retracing the comprehensive history of the SSSJ’s activism, it too makes the case that the group was the underlying cause of the American Jewish community’s confrontationist tactics and ritualized language. However, the study addresses the two points unmentioned in previous recounts of SSSJ: the Soviet Jewry Movement as a response to Holocaust trauma, and its influence on the international Jewish youth movement. By weaving the emergence of SSSJ through the American Jewish tapestry of a newfound social mobility and post-Holocaust trauma, it challenges the belief that American Jewry awakened to the Holocaust through the threat of another genocide before the Six Day War. Using primary sources, the study adds an international dimension.
CHAPTER 1: PROFILING POST-WAR JEWRY

1.1: The ‘Golden Decade’ of American Jewry

Jewish baby boomers were raised in a changing Jewish American landscape; their parents were a generation from a predominantly working-class background, and came of age as a prosperous American middle class. In the early 1950s, Jewish federations surveyed American Jews and determined that more than three quarters, if not more, worked in professional fields.¹ Twelve percent of Jewish households earned more than ten thousand dollars annually in 1951, significantly higher than their white counterparts.² At the turn of the 20th century, most Jews held blue collar occupations—yet, only half a century later, the majority lived comfortably.

The increasingly homogenous group of upwardly mobile Jews reshaped the American Jewish community. Traditionally close to labor movements and Left politics, mainstream American Jewish advocacy organizations all but abandoned the labor movement. The social transformation was in part due to a loss of faith in the Soviet Union; the campaigns against Jewish communists in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the USSR woke left-leaning American Jews to Stalin’s anti-Semitism. More than the Soviet Union, however, the post-

World War II Red Scare in the United States, McCarthyism triggered a panic, as prominent segregationists like Mississippi Congressman John Rankin spread canards linking Judaism to communism. In red baiting, Jews saw authoritarianism and Hitlerite tactics. During the Rosenberg Trial, one Jewish American Jewish journalist suggestively inquired, “Is this the Dreyfus Case of cold-war America?”

Jewish organizations were particularly influenced by the Red Scare—they did not want to give a “new propaganda line” to anti-Semites peddling conspiracy theories. Recognizing that McCarthyism had a direct impact on Jewish Americans, Jewish advocacy organizations took an anti-Communist turn. The American Jewish Committee announced that communism was the primary threat to Jewish security. They upheld liberal commitments to civic justice, all the while affirming that communism was criminal.

Notwithstanding, identifying as Jewish no longer isolated American Jews from other faith or ethnic communities. Pre-war interfaith relations created a front against anti-Semitism. 1954 poll commissioned by the American Jewish Committee revealed that the interfaith efforts bore fruit—only one out of every hundred Americans felt threatened by Jewish neighbors, a significant drop from the past. With fewer limitations, Jewish groups carried the battle for equal rights in a loose alliance with the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The coalition was particularly vigilant in their call for secular institutions; the Board of

Rabbis regularly negotiated with the Catholic representatives, declaring “sectarian religious practices have no place in the public school.” After decades of marginalization, they heeded the call for social justice.

The Jewish establishment also took an active role in antidiscrimination legislation. In 1945, the American Jewish Congress began the legal battle for civil liberties as part of its "Jewish values" vision. It was joined in its mission by the major Jewish advocacy organizations, the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League; from 1945-1955, the so-called “big three” were the driving force behind legislation in eleven statewide worker discrimination cases and led antidiscrimination campaigns statewide and nationally. The overwhelming campaign for civil liberties demanded significant time and resources from the Jewish community, calling Commentary Magazine’s Milton Himmelfarb to question whether AJCongress president Joachim Prinz was more interested in civil rights or Jewish causes like Zionism. While the advocacy organizations believed that such campaign would reinvigorate a vibrant Jewish life, some like Rabbi Arthur Herzberg warned that Jewish assimilation would not be curtailed simply by catch-all collective action.

While suburbanization expedited after the war, Jewish populations in concentrated Jewish hubs like New York City still grew through most of the 1950s. Brownsville may have been known for its egalitarian nature, but every New York Jewish enclave had its

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10 Ibid 89-97.
own character. In Williamsburg, Brooklyn, everybody “felt the Sabbath.”"\(^\text{13}\) Borough Park, Brooklyn, where the \textit{Jewish Press} was distributed, was more Zionist and insulated; “we watched the world from a distance,” activist Yossi Klein Halevi described his childhood.\(^\text{14}\) Wealthy Jews settled in the Upper East Side of Manhattan.\(^\text{15}\)

The emergence of the postwar middle class gave more Americans than ever the opportunity to buy property. However, only at the end of the 1950s did Jewish families join their Protestant neighbors in the suburbs. Racially-motivated redlining pushed Black and Puerto Rican families into working-class environments like Crown Heights and Brownsville, causing social conditions to deteriorate and racial tension to increase. Economically mobile Jews left. By 1970, only 4 percent of Brownsville was white.\(^\text{16}\) The flight from the City shattered Jewish connection with traditional Jewish enclaves, packed with kosher butcheries and nearby synagogues—a change that was particularly difficult on the elderly population who had lived in the neighborhoods most of their lives.\(^\text{17}\)

Affluent Jewish Americans recreated their Jewish communities outside the city. Enclaves surfaced in the surrounding areas of New York and Boston. Dubbed “gilded ghettos,” suburbs like Newton, Massachusetts doubled in Jewishly-identifying residents—and areas around New York, like Nassau County, increased their Jewish populations by


\(^{17}\) Ibid.
more than 1700%.\textsuperscript{18} The move felt sudden to many; some non-Jewish residents felt their neighborhoods became “too Jewish.”\textsuperscript{19}

Jewish women conformed to suburban domesticity, adopting post-war household norms. Despite a higher percentage attaining college degrees, Jewish women dropped out of the workforce at higher rates than non-Jews after marriage; Jewish men earned enough for the family to subsist on a single income.\textsuperscript{20} Jewish women also dealt with the Jewish social pressures to have large families, to reduce the demographic burden of the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{21}

On one hand, many Jewish demographic trends were hardly affected by the new move to suburbia and still preferred to be independent professionals, gravitating to occupations like law, medicine and small business. They may have feared a bureaucracy historically based on patronage and situations where discrimination may hinder their merit—a personality trait their fathers brought with them from 19\textsuperscript{th} century Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{22} On the other hand, American Judaism went through a radical transformation. The Reform and Conservative movements, more attuned to the need of suburban life, flourished; From 1937 to 1956, the number of Conservative congregations doubled and the number of families belonging to Reform temples multiplied five times over.\textsuperscript{23} Through the 1950s,

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{19} Urofsky, M. I. (1978). \textit{We are One!: American Jewry and Israel}: Anchor Books. 210-211.
\end{thebibliography}
nearly six hundred new synagogues were constructed.\textsuperscript{24} Jewish families’ adoption of laxer strands of Judaism gave them an experience similar their suburban Christian neighbors.

The State of Israel was foundational to the American Jewish identity before its existence. The American Jewish establishment generally supported the State of Israel, through groups like the American Council for Judaism vocally opposed it—soon, the Council saw itself on the fringes of the Jewish community.\textsuperscript{25} After the creation of the State of Israel, American Jews aided Israel during its War of Independence and lobbied US government officials to support the new state with armament shipments.\textsuperscript{26} In Israel’s first years, the community donated to build the state. Hundreds of thousands of new European, North African, and Arab Jewish refugees, living in displacement camps in Israel, needed to be resettled; in this, Golda Meir noted in her bibliography, “the United Jewish Appeal had become a magnificent instrument.”\textsuperscript{27} Israeli officials, the UJA, and the Joint Distribution Committee raised annual pledges and bond plans; from 1946 to 1962, American Jews provided over 2.29 billion dollars through various charities.\textsuperscript{28} The cause was widespread—56 independent Zionist organizations, big and small, made it their cause just in New York.\textsuperscript{29} The plan made its way to the oval office, where President Harry Truman gave his approval.

Still, the relationship between Israel and American Jewry was strained. Israel emerged as the new center of the Jewish world, circumventing Jewish organizations;

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid 297.
\textsuperscript{26} Urofsky, M. I. (1978). \textit{We are One!: American Jewry and Israel}: Anchor Books. 180.
\textsuperscript{28} Urofsky, M. I. (1978). \textit{We are One!: American Jewry and Israel}: Anchor Books. 203, 227.
“Israel was bent on developing its own channels to Washington, not always bothering to use its New York intermediaries.”30 Israeli leaders believed they spoke for world Jewry, and outweighed the loosely-organized federation of American Jewish groups—in their eyes, New York was not as legitimate. Furthermore, neither the diaspora right nor the left had a clear-cut stance on Jewish issues and Zionism in the diaspora. Paul Robeson, who became a “became a symbol of Communism itself” in the early post-war era, was an outspoken Zionist (though he himself was not Jewish).31 Prominent liberal-Jewish Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan struggled with the meaning of Diaspora, choosing ultimately did not emigrate and to remain in the United States.32

Yet, Israeli leaders were considerate of diaspora Jewry, as they were not yet economically independent. To prevent conflict between diasporic Jewish communities and the State, then AJC president Jacob Blaustein, leading an organization that was arguably the most powerful Jewish lobbying group in Washington, reached a mutual understanding with David Ben-Gurion in 1950.33 The clarifying statement “between Israel and the Jews in other free democracies, especially the United States,” made clear that Israel does not speak on behalf of world Jewry, that it will not demand aliyah, and that American Jews have an allegiance to the United States alone.34 The mutual statements demonstrated that Blaustein had the upper hand in the negotiation.

The relationship Israeli and American Jewish heads progressively worsened at the end of the decade, coming to a head after Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion called for *aliyah* at the 1960 World Zionist Organization Congress and declared diasporic Judaism to be bankrupt. Provoked, AJCongress President Joachim Prinz split from the WZO, announced, “Zionism is—for all practical purposes—dead.”35 The statement also triggered a response from the AJC. The Israelis, still sensitive to the opinion of American Jewish leaders, reaffirmed their commitment to the Blaustein-Ben-Gurion agreement a decade prior.36

An instability, rooted in uncertainty, kept at bay in the American Jewish psyche. There was no vocabulary to fully grasp the trauma of the Holocaust; “how could you begin to write of the slaughter of one-third of the Jewish population of the world?” questioned Harry Golden, the editor of *Carolina Israelite*, in 1957.37 American Jewish thinkers, many of which had themselves fled shortly before the start of the war, did not mention it in the public sphere, unable to come to terms with a tragedy so personal, and yet distant.38 This was not to say, however, that American Jews failed to memorialized the Holocaust. During this unique period of social solidarity among Jewish Americans, there was no singular form of memory. Each community choosing to enshrine the enormous loss of Jewish life in their own way through sermons, songbooks, and speeches. Jewish holidays

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marked a special time to remember. Though public memorials were uncommon, those that were held often commemorated the resistance in Warsaw Ghetto.\(^{39}\)

The American public experienced first encountered Jewish persecution through the perspective of former American correspondents. Popular titles framed their stories on the courage and resistance of Jewish protagonists, though the Holocaust was not explicitly mentioned.\(^{40}\) In *The Wall*, the fourth best-selling work in 1950, prominent war correspondent John Hersey’s saw humanity in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The historically-based, yet fictitious work, Jewish heroes and heroines became the epitome of Western civilization, keeping culture and tradition alive through their adversity.\(^{41}\)

Outside the Jewish community, the national narrative around the Holocaust was of collective Nazi victimhood, not Jewish singularity. The *Diary of Anne Frank* was framed as a tragedy that befell all peoples—the relatable story of teenager coming to terms with the world around her became an instant classic. In the 1955 Broadway adaptation of the *Diary*, the play took a universalistic tone, declaring, “we’re not the only people that have had to suffer. There’ve always been people that have had to…”\(^{42}\) The Holocaust was universal in an optimistic American aura that came with the Allied victory.

The optimism of the 1950s welcomed Holocaust survivors, but largely ignored the horrors of their past. Individual experiences were the focus of the press, centering the survivors’ successful adaptation to American society. The *New York Times* described the


\(^{41}\) Ibid 32-33.

\(^{42}\) Ibid 35-37.
successfully integration of survivor children, stressing, “sixty-four of the eighty-six are self-supporting.” In 1953, Czech survivor Hanna Bloch Koehler was paraded on *This Is Your Life*, a popular TV show at the time. Recounting her biography including the murder of her husband and her life in four concentration camps, she was told: “to you in your darkest hour, America held out a friendly hand. Your gratitude is reflected in your unwavering devotion and loyalty to the land of your adoption.”

1.2: Soviet Jewry: Waves of Uncertainty

The war dramatically shifted the Jewish Soviet demographic—the Holocaust reducing the Jewish population in Soviet areas by some one hand a half million. More than one and a half million more temporarily evacuated east during the German advance, and remained in the evacuated areas. Overall, the Jewish populations in areas occupied by the Nazi invasion diminished by 39%. Recuperating from the Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust on the Eastern front, Soviet Jews were met by Iosif Stalin’s paranoia. A thinly disguised anticosmopolitan campaign was a tool for accusing intellectuals—an overwhelming number of whom were Jews—of treason. Prominent Jewish figures and Yiddish cultural icons disappeared, Jews were denied entry in universities, and prominent Jewish doctors accused of conspiracy

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were put on trial. From 1949-1952, Soviet cultural, political and scientific institutions received hundreds of complaints that Jews were taking the positions of the USSR’s “main” ethnicities. The AJC closely followed these events, commissioning extensive reports on Stalin’s anti-Semitism.46

Nevertheless, to the West, the era of anti-Jewish repression had ended with Stalin's death in 1953; the threshold event marked an end to the country's heavy-handed approach. The period after Stalin’s death was characterized with widespread reform. Jewish doctors accused in the anti-Semitic Doctor’s Plot were released and Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev admitted the Communist Party’s wrongdoing.47 Jewish citizens gradually returned to their professions; before the war. More than three-quarters of Soviet Jews held white-collar jobs, compared to just 15% of the general Soviet population. The Jewish population comprised about 1% of the total Soviet population in the 1959 census, yet constituted 14.7% of all doctors, 8.5% of all writers and journalists, 10.4% of all lawyers, and 7.7% of actors and artists.48

Religious citizens benefitted from the factional struggles that arose in the post-Stalin Communist Party apparatus. In late 1954, the Central Committee of the Communist Party published a resolution declaring that although they held atheism to be the norm, religious institutions would be tolerated. In the period of increased religious laxity, synagogue

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attendance increased. Jews gathered for the High Holidays; “on Yom Kippur—in the second half of the day—it was hard to tell which age was more prevalent: elderly or middle-aged; women or men…the synagogue hall, with its 750 or so seats, was full.” Jews in twenty-two towns petitioned to build prayer houses, though only two were granted permission: overall, there was a negligible change in the number of registered congregations, from 135 in 1954 to 133 on the eve of the official anti-religious campaign in 1959. Private “permanent minyans resumed operation almost in the open.”

Still, an unspoken anti-Semitic barrier to power lingered. Though the “Jewish question” was decided under Stalin through the creation of Birobidzhan and Jews were prevalent in intellectual and cultural life, Jews held few positions in the Party and the Red Army. Nearly a decade after the “rootless cosmopolitan” campaign came to an end, few Jews returned to positions of power in provincial Supreme Soviets, with some exceptions in far less influential peripheral regions. Khrushchev kept the anti-Jewish suspicion alive; in a 1958 interview with the French newspaper Figaro, he stated the ‘individualist’ Jewish people had not molded to communism: “…if you take building or metallurgy—mass professions—you might not, to my knowledge, come across a single Jew there. They do not like collective work, group discipline.”

The general Soviet mistrust of its Jewish populace permeated other Soviet initiatives. The late 1950s reinvigorated a push for scientific atheism. Anti-religious actions brought

51 Ibid, 61-63.
the Russian Orthodox inside the USSR to their knees when authorities closed churches, prevented pilgrimages, and began monitoring the sale of icons. Unlike the assault onOrthodoxy or other sects of Believers, the Soviet Union struggled to separate Judaism from national identity, as there was not a clear Jewish policy. Instead, authorities interfered indirectly with Jewish practice. Rather than the classical assault on practice—after all, most Soviet Jews were non-observant and felt Jewish by nationality—the anti-Jewish campaign entwined political and ethnic frameworks.

Zionist sentiments were a growing concern for the Soviet leadership. After Israel declared its independence, synagogues became convening spaces to celebrate the State. In Moscow, nearly ten thousand people came to the Choral Synagogue to hear thanksgiving prayers read alongside the telegrams of Stalin and Zionist leaders. The Israeli embassy staff attended Rosh HaShanah services at the Choral Synagogue in October 1948 with another ten thousand people. Authorities highlighted the ethnocentrism in Jewish religious texts. In a 1959 study for the CPSU CC, Ukrainian secret police notified the authorities that Jewish prayer book Mir, issued in 1956 by the Jewish religious community in Moscow, was “Zionistic” because it included prayers expressing a longing for Jerusalem. In a memorandum submitted the following year, the Ukrainian SSR took into consideration that Kievan Zionist elements infiltrated its industrial

and intellectual circles. Judaism was incompatible with the Marxist-Leninist doctrine because of the “overriding nationalistic character and its “exclusiveness,” one pamphlet distributed in Ukraine noted.\(^{58}\) Per the Ukrainian Central Committee, citizens with Zionist leanings were spreading bourgeoisie nationalist and anti-socialist sentiment, collaborating through meetings in synagogues.\(^{59}\) Judaism, and its overriding Zionist-nationalist nature, became the enemy of the USSR and the relationship between Israel and the Soviets soured.

To some extent, the nationality question was guided by Stalin’s 1913 theoretical work *Marxism and the National Question*, which devalued peoples without a permanent territory.\(^{60}\) Unlike other national groups, Jews were not a people—and therefore did not need territory. At the same time, the “fifth line,” or nationality, on Soviet passports identified Jews as a distinctive group, and Soviet Jews themselves identified with a Jewish nationality. A foreign journalist brought the pressing contradiction to First Deputy Chairman Lazar Kaganovich, the only Jewish member of the Party presidium (soon to be ousted as Khrushchev consolidated power), who replied, “the great majority [of Jews] live happily in the great and mighty Russian culture.”\(^{61}\)

The major turn in the anti-Judaism campaign came after Khrushchev ousted his political rivals and solidified his power. By 1958, the Mukhitdinov Commission outlined the extent of the anti-Jewish campaign. Presented behind closed doors to the Communist

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Party’s Central Committee, the Commission was simultaneously secretive and extensive.

The principal author, Nuritdin Mukhitdinov, Secretary of Uzbek SSR, himself presided over a multi-ethnic Jewish population in one of the largest of the southern republics. Its authors include Viktor Grishin of the All-Union Council of Trade Unions, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Semenov, Deputy Minister of Culture Ivan Bol'shakov, Head of the Diplomatic and Foreign Trade Cadre Department Alexander Orlov, Head of the CC International Department Vladimir Tereshkin, and Iosif Shikin, head of the Department of Party Organs for the Republics. The only Jewish member of the Politburo, Veniamin Dymshits, was excluded from the group.

The commission to “unmask Zionist propaganda” organized the editorial boards of central newspapers, including Pravda, the cultural magazine Literaturnaia gazeta, and several provincial newspapers into a smear campaign. Jewish names disappeared from the party press and that, from 1957 on, Jewish caricatures appeared in press publications. To undertake its mission, the press campaign elevated the Yiddish-speaking Jewish Autonomous Region as the alternative to the State of Israel, emphasizing Jewish citizens with distinct Jewish surnames. In the 25th commemoration article in Sovetskaya Rossia, the press organ of the Supreme Soviet, Birobidzhan was described with same homely reminiscence a displaced Ukrainian Jew would use to depict their Odessan childhood. In 1961, the Yiddish Sovietish Heymland magazine resumed

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64 Ibid, Kindle Locations 1011-1014.
Pakhman, V. (1958, September 17). Around the Russian Republic with a Notebook: The
publishing for the first time in more than a decade, taking a distinctly anti-Zionist stance.\textsuperscript{67} From 1959 to 1964, the propaganda machine turned 46,000 books and pamphlets about Judaism, totaling eight percent of all “antireligious literature” (though Jews accounted for 1% of the Soviet population).\textsuperscript{68}

The Soviet Union tackled Hebrew circles by uplifting the works of Yiddish artists, including works by those that were disappeared during Stalin’s anti-cosmopolitan campaign. The Mukhitdinov Commission planned and created Yiddish programs to counter underground Hebrew publications. From 1956; ninety-two works were translated in Russian and thirty-one into other languages in the next five years. Yiddish performances at the theater returned and were heavily publicized.\textsuperscript{69} The end of the decade was marked with the public commemoration of Sholem Aleichem’s 100\textsuperscript{th} birthday in 1959. The \textit{Collected Works of Sholem Aleichem} was the first such work published in over ten years.\textsuperscript{70}

Khrushchev vied for public opinion, including that of the USSR’s satellite states, and sought to reinvent the Soviet Union on the world stage. In 1956, the Soviet delegation introduced a statement at the United Nations on Jewish religious freedom.\textsuperscript{71} The new

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\textsuperscript{70} Unsurprisingly, the mandate to publish the compilation came as a recommendation to the CPSU CC by Aleksei Romanov, the deputy head of the Department of Propaganda and Agitation. Morozov, B. (1999). \textit{Documents on Soviet Jewish Emigration}. Portland, OR: Frank Cass. Kindle edition.. Kindle Location 1108.
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1959 criminal code banned the persecution of entire categories of people.\textsuperscript{72} Jewish religious figures as prominent as Moscow Chief Rabbi C. M. Schliffer were granted meetings visiting delegations in the mid-1950s, showing tourists that the Moscow Synagogue operated and that matzot were baked for Passover.\textsuperscript{73}

1.3: A Web of Motives

Though the American Jewish community was committed to human rights, they lacked concrete action on behalf of Eastern European Jewry. Only a few fringe Yiddish newspapers noted the vanishing of Soviet Yiddish icons in the late 1950s.\textsuperscript{74} It would be naïve to assume, however, that the American Jewish establishment did not pay attention to anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union; after all, organizations like the AJC were founded by Jews to assist Jewish refugees of Eastern Europe of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. They worried about the lack of Jewish life—if there was no distinctly Jewish knowledge or presence, whether be it religious or cultural, Jews would lose their connection—and to some extent, they were correct.\textsuperscript{75} A diplomatic approach, establishment leaders thought, would not risk

worsening the condition of Soviet Jewry. In 1953, the AJC circumvented the issue and refused to cosponsor a rally to protest Soviet anti-Semitism due to its non-sectarian basis. In 1955, World Jewish Congress President Nahum Goldmann sought permission for an official visit by the World Jewish Congress. It was rejected.

The Jewish establishment’s actions were caught in a web of motives, from worries about their own precarious position as historically Left organizations during the Red Scare, to anxiety about aggravating the “sensitive Soviets.” Still, “quiet diplomacy” produced no tangible progress. When Eleanor Roosevelt raised the issue to Khrushchev, he replied, “a Communist could not be anti-Semitic.”

Until the mid-1960s, vocal concern for Soviet Jewry was not heard in the United States—and world Jewry faced many of the same issues as American Jewry. For example, in the United Kingdom, Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie tried to bring together an emergency conference on the issue, but was accused by the president of the Board of Deputies, the main representative body of British Jews, of overreaching.

Despite the inaction, Israel was working behind scenes; to be both Jewish and democratic, it needed a Jewish majority, and the second largest Jewish population—the

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77 Though the Soviet authorities rejected most admission requests, on occasion delegations were admitted if they could be leveraged for propaganda purposes. For example, in 1956, the Rabbinical Council of America’s traveled to four congregations, which were given specific directions on how to act. Altshuler, M., & Sternberg, S. (2012). Religion and Jewish identity in the Soviet Union, 1941-1964. Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press. 233-234.

78 Beckerman, G. (2010). When They Come For Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 69-70 (hereafter referred to as “Beckerman, When they Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone”).


two and a half million Jews in the USSR—became a primary target for *aliyah* (immigration). The “*Lishkat HaKesher,*” (the Liaison Bureau) or simply “*Lishka*” (the Bureau) as it became known, formed under former Mossad agent Shaul Avigur to tackle the issue.\(^{81}\)

Originally focused on smuggling Jews out of Soviet Union and dispersing religious gifts, by the mid-1950s the *Lishka* realized purely cultural agitation would be directionless and ineffective. With the Cold War heating up and Khrushchev consolidating power, as well as the newly-formed Soviet alliance with Egypt and its allies, diplomatic channels were off the table. However, new initiatives under Khrushchev to improve the image of the Soviet Union in the West opened another door. A campaign to encourage the issue among public intellectuals surfaced. Under Avigur, an academic group at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem formed to build the knowledgeable base. In London and in Paris, Jewish libraries on current affairs provided additional materials that then made their way to editorial boards. If intellectuals were to embrace the humanitarian cause, the *Lishka* deduced, the Soviets could be pushed to take action.\(^{82}\)

In New York, still the cultural and intellectual center of world Jewry, *New Leader* magazine editor Moshe Decter became the principal communicator. His role was to disseminate credible information on the imminent condition of Soviet Jewry in manner that was factual, but not bombastic. To retain secrecy, Decter formed the Jewish Minorities Research Center, and operated as single man team out of a cubicle at the

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\(^{82}\) Ibid 72-75.
World Jewish Congress office in New York City.\textsuperscript{83} Slowly, momentum built; Decter mobilized his network of prominent sociologists, actors, and two Supreme Court Justices. Nevertheless, without the support of American Jewish establishment organizations, Soviet anti-Semitism still did not merit President Eisenhower or Secretary Dulles’ attention.\textsuperscript{84}

Jews that came of age lived in an organized Jewish community. Jewish communal life stood on four major pillars: a liberally charged advocacy base, a socially mobile and culturally affluent Jewish life in the suburbs, and a newfound relationship to Israel, however strenuous it may have been. Traditional obstacles rooted in anti-Semitism receded to the past, though new ones emerged with the Red Scare. At the same time, the memory of the Holocaust was forming into a concrete fourth pillar of Jewish identity. With an Israeli push, the Holocaust took center-stage, and with it arose an interest in global anti-Semitism and Soviet Jewry.

\textsuperscript{83} Beckerman, \textit{When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone}. 87-88.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid 162.
CHAPTER 2: REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST: FROM SILENCE TO THE
EICHMANN TRIAL

Activism for Soviet Jewry had its roots in the Jewish reclaiming of the Holocaust from its universal overtones, when world Jewry began digesting the atrocity. In the 1960s, Holocaust survivor Rabbi Emil Fackenheim was bewildered that young Jews did not understand the Jewish experience of only two decades ago; “What about cannibalism? What about Nazism?...but others were prepared to regard even Nazism with relativistic ‘impartiality.’” Others, like Milton Himmelfarb, condemned Jewish civil rights lawyers who volunteered to defend Nazis.85 The lack of Holocaust understanding caused widespread anxiety in the Jewish community.

Simultaneously, the anti-communist radical right swelled to tens of thousands of dues-paying members at the turn of the 1950s—though not explicitly anti-Semitic, their anti-communism was eerily akin to the previous redbaiting era. The founding of George Lincoln Rockwell’s American Nazi Party in 1958 alarmed the Jewish community and was undoubtably linked to the wave of swastikas that targeted Jewish and Christian religious sites in the United States (and West Germany) from 1959-1960.86

Jewish apprehension needed to be properly accosted. The ADL initiated an education campaign on Nazism and anti-Semitism to combat the growing

misrepresentation of fascism, marking a distinct shift from their broad-based concern with prejudice.\footnote{Ibid 185.}

Having looked inward, Jewish interested in the Holocaust subverted its universalistic tone. Though American Jews were still chewing on the events, the Holocaust was now presentable. After twelve years of circulation, Primo Levi's \textit{This is a Man}, one of the first early accounts of the concentration camps, was translated to English in 1959. Eli Wiesel's English edition of \textit{Night} was published in 1960, though it was significantly more optimistic than the original Yiddish work published a few years earlier. Reviewing \textit{Eva} by Meyer Levin, one author in the late 1950s observed, "we have an abundance of books and articles on the story of the annihilation of the Jews of Europe."\footnote{Aderet, Ofer (2016, May 1). Newly Unearthed Version of Elie Wiesel's Seminal Work Is a Scathing Indictment of God, Jewish World. \textit{Haaretz}. Retrieved from \url{http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/news/.premium-1.717093}; Diner, H. R. (2009). \textit{We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962}. New York: New York University Press. 89.}

\section*{2.1: The Eichmann Trial: Shaking the Jewish Consciousness}

One specific event—the Eichmann Trial—catalyzed widespread Holocaust consciousness around the world. Expecting the Nazi defeat in 1945, Adolf Eichmann, one of the primary organizers and managers of the Final Solution, fled Germany to Austria, and then to San Fernando, Argentina. Living under the alias Ricardo Klement, he took up work in a factory. After a long search by Nazi hunters and the Israeli
government, sheer luck led to his discovery and subsequent capture on March 11, 1960. Two months later, Ben-Gurion announced that Eichmann was detained in Israel.\textsuperscript{89}

Though few Americans were directly affected by the Holocaust, the drama hit the front pages. Within days, \textit{Time} magazine, tipped off by Argentinian agents, described the Israeli capture in Argentina. The press responded with mixed opinions. On one hand, newspapers exhibited widespread condemnation, with several opinion pieces calling the upcoming trial “reactive justice” and “divorced from justice.” Popular conservative William Buckley of the \textit{National Review} opined that the Israeli trial “advanced Communist aims,” and echoed classic anti-Semitic tropes reminiscent of the Red Scare.\textsuperscript{90} On the other, the New York \textit{Herald Tribune} and the Philadelphia \textit{Inquirer} gave favorable reviews. The viewpoints on the trial largely corresponded to the newspapers’ views on the State of Israel.\textsuperscript{91} “Few papers failed to print at least one editorial at this time,” wrote George Salomon for the \textit{American Jewish Yearbook 63}, “and many ran several in close succession.”\textsuperscript{92}

For Ben-Gurion, the trial communicated to the world that Jews were no longer weak. The Holocaust validated the State of Israel’s right to deliver Jewish justice. Ben-Gurion responded that it was hypocritical of the trial’s critics that only now worry about Eichmann, when they had been silent for so many years.\textsuperscript{93} His affirmations fanned the flames of a growing American and Israeli divide, further shaping American Jewish

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid 85.
leaders an American Jewish discomfort with Israel’s self-representation of diasporic Jewry. The AJC leadership unanimously confronted Meir, then the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Though they recognized the impartiality of the Israeli court, the AJC hoped the trial would commence outside of the State since Nazism afflicted “not just Jews.”94 For obvious reasons, Meir rejected their request.

Suddenly, the Holocaust was illuminated, center stage. The Israeli government organized the Eichmann Trial as a public event to show the distinct Jewish nature of the Holocaust, and to further validate its existence. For a full 56 days, the proceedings were covered through the news reels, documentaries, and television dramas. Chief Prosecutor and Israeli Attorney General Gideon Hausner understood the need to capture the hearts and minds of viewers, and utilized as many presentable witnesses as possible.95 This was likely the first time most Americans had heard the word Holocaust, let alone divorced the unique experience of Jewish victimhood from the general World War II narrative. The testimonies of Holocaust survivors, a significant portion of the 112 witnesses against Eichmann, were presented on American primetime television five evenings a week over sixty stations.96 The Final Solution was on trial and the whole world was there to see it.

In the Soviet Union, the Holocaust was cast through a universalist lens. Reporting on the Eichmann Trial, the Party press did not specifically mention Jews and primarily focused on Eichmann’s “crimes against humanity.”97 There was, of course, Radio Free

94 Ibid 34-35.
Europe that provided the western narrative to Soviet citizens. The newfound reporting on the Trial in Israel may have enhanced a Jewish consciousness awakening, as vocal Jewish voices emerged. At his 70th birthday celebration, the prolific Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg asserted, “I am a Russian writer, but so long as there is even one antisemite, I will continue, when asked about my nationality, to answer with pride and vigor, ‘a Jew.’”98 The former Refusenik Yosef Mendelevich observed, “in the early 1960s, a new phenomenon appeared: young Jews began to gather next to the synagogues on holidays.” The group was not there to pray, but to celebrate the holiday as a community. With fellow Jews, he would volunteer to clean up at the neglected Holocaust gravesite at Rumbuli in 1963. The 1960s, whether because of the Eichmann Trial or other forces, marked a pivot: Pockets of Soviet Jews proudly proclaimed their Jewish identities.99

The Eichmann Trial coincided with an internal thaw; in 1962, Khrushchev held undisputed power and applied his policy of destalinization without any obstructions. His liberalization was most notable in literature. Nearly a month after the conclusion of the Eichmann Trial, on September 19, 1961, Literaturnaya Gazeta, the official press organ of the Federation of Unions of Soviet Writers, published “Babi Yar,” the iconic poem by the Soviet poet Evgeniy Evtushenko. The poem protested the forgotten anti-Semitism of the Holocaust. Yevtushenko, a native Russian, identified with Russia’s Jewish minority:

“No monument stands over Babi Yar.
A steep cliff only, like the rudest headstone.
I am afraid.
Today, I am as old
As the entire Jewish race itself.”100

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98 Ibid 369.
100 In the original Russian: ‘Над Бабьим Яром памятников нет. Крутой обрыв, как грубое надгробье. Мне страшно. Мне сегодня столько лет, как самому еврейскому народу.’ Yevtushenko, Y. “Babi Yar.”
Yevtushenko reminded the Soviet Union that they had not given credence to the destruction wreaked on the Jewish people. He had waited for the appropriate moment to publish “Babi Yar,” he explained to the Parisian publication L’Express, and only got the courage to do so after he had visited the ravine himself. The poem caused an uproar among well-known Soviet critics, many of whom condemned it for Jewish particularism. When Yevtushenko recited it in front of a gathering of hundreds of intellectuals in December 1962, Khrushchev disciplined him; “Comrade Yevtushenko, this poem has no place here.” Notwithstanding, the damage had already been done; Yevtushenko had been featured in Time magazine earlier that year, and famed Soviet pianist Dmitri Shostakovich had composed music to accompany the reading of “Babi Yar.”

The coverage of the Eichmann Trial did not end with the guilty verdict. The newfound American Holocaust awareness led to a flood of literature, film, and televised specials. The trial was an important entry point to the debate on morality. Moral philosopher Hannah Arendt’s reported on the events in Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, published in 1963, and sparked a controversy among scholars. In her analysis, Arendt contented that Eichmann had no motives whatsoever, simply worked in a corrupt system, and “never realized what he was doing.” The work


102 Under Soviet pressure, Shostakovich was unable to perform the piece, leading Yevtushenko to add the line, “here, together with Russians and Ukrainians, lie Jews.” A second line was also added. Ibid 66-67.

103 Beckerman, G. When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone. 31.


was contentious in the academic world, and was denounced by other academics—many of whom had themselves, like Arendt, fled Nazi persecution on the eve of the Holocaust.

Arendt’s account hit a nerve among the New York Intellectuals, a group of predominantly Jewish left-wing thinkers. Irving Howe, the editor of Dissent magazine, called it “violent.” 106 Howe asserted Arendt looked upon Israelis with the tone of “the supreme assurance of the intellectual,” a claim affirmed by Arendt’s longtime correspondent, Israeli scholar Gershom Scholem. 107 Hausner addressed a large crowd in New York to only to condemn Arendt’s provocation. 108 Notwithstanding, she had her share of defenders. Daniel Bell, a Jewish New York intellectual, rebutted literary critic Lionel Abel in Partisan Review, was further rebutted, and was then defended by Mary McCarthy in an ongoing dispute. 109

Regardless of the accuracy of Arendt’s seminal work, the debate led to a greater attention to the human condition under totalitarian regimes. The debate concerned those like Holocaust survivor and psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, who argued that totalitarianism, not Eichmann, was principally responsible for the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism was systemic; Eichmann was just one actor in a long history of anti-Jewish persecution. 110

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107 Ibid 143-147.
110 Ibid 146.
The sensitivity brought with the Eichmann Trial reshaped Jewish American culture. Increasingly aware of the anti-Semitism that threatened them in the West, awakened to the horrors of its manifestations of totalitarianism, and in the constant presence of the Holocaust, Jewish organizations closely followed the lives of Jews in Eastern Europe. Jewish groups undeniably recognized Soviet authorities rejected Jewish life by closing most synagogues, and cautiously acknowledged that “references to the Jews as a national group disappearing from official publications.” Their worries intensified in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Jews comprised half of the defendants in the “economic trials.” Despite Khrushchev’s policy of destalinization, equal rights were not restored to Jewish residents. Unlike other religions, who could travel and communicate with their coreligionists abroad, Jews had no representative body in the Soviet Union. The ban on baking matzoh in 1962 showed outright that Khrushchev, like Stalin, would not allow Jewish life to blossom in the East. The Synagogue Council of America held a special Passover prayer in 1963, where Rabbi Julius Mark asked: “the Nazi holocaust destroyed the body of the European Jew. Is the Soviet Union seeking to destroy his soul?”

Establishment organizations took their concern to Capitol Hill. At the height of the Cold War, Republican Senator Jacob Javits called for a “world scale protest against the anti-Jewish persecutions in the Soviet Union” in the Senate, and Democratic Congressman Abraham Muler followed suit in the House.\textsuperscript{116} John F. Kennedy intervened, asking his advisors to deliver a personal message to Khrushchev and raising the issue at the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 20, 1963; Khrushchev, however, deemed it an “internal matter and none of America’s business.”\textsuperscript{117} Diasporic Jewish communities failed to leverage intervention as well. When Bertrand Russell (a contact of \textit{Lishka} agent Binyamin Eliav\textsuperscript{118}) wrote to Khrushchev in February 1963 concerning the economic trials, Khrushchev quickly retaliated. His reply, published in \textit{Izvestia} and \textit{Pravda}, the press organs of the USSR and Communist Party of the USSR respectively, as well as in a full-page spread in the United Kingdom-based \textit{Daily Mail} tabloid. The response outlined the Soviet position on the trials, and expressed once more that “there has been no policy of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union.”\textsuperscript{119} Khrushchev’s declaration was followed by letters in the Soviet press of various letters from Soviet Jews that agreed with him.\textsuperscript{120} Accordingly, Guy

\textsuperscript{120} Shapiro, L. “Eastern Europe.” \textit{American Jewish Yearbook 65}, 274. 1964. Online.
Mollet, the general secretary of the French Socialist Party, un成功地 attempted to bring up the issue in his meeting with Khrushchev.\textsuperscript{121} The Kremlin would not budge.

\textbf{2:2: The Stirring of Holocaust Memory}

Shortly before the High Holidays in 1963, a powerful voice emerged from the American Jewish community. The respected theologian, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a friend of Martin Luther King Jr. and civil rights activist in his own right, was one of the first prominent Jewish figures to address Soviet anti-Semitism. Observing the urgency of the Soviet Jewish condition and the American ignorance of it, Heschel stood at a podium in front of thousands of Conservative rabbis and gave a powerful sermon on September 4, at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York:

"When leaders of Jewish organizations are asked the question...their answer is always the same: there is little we can do, there is so much else we are committed to.

If we are ready to go to jail to destroy the blight of racial bigotry, if we are ready to march off to Washington in order to demonstrate our identification with those who are deprived of equal rights, should we not be ready to go to jail in order to end the martyrdom of our Russian brethren?

The six million are no more. Now three million face spiritual extinction. We have been guilty more than once of failure to be concerned, of a failure to cry out, and failure may have become our habit."\textsuperscript{122}


Heschel’s message was one of universal human rights and, simultaneously, profoundly Jewish. He made it clear that the issue of Soviet Jewry was one of general humanity; “discrimination against the political rights of the Negro in America and discrimination against the religious and cultural rights of the Jews in the Soviet Union are indivisible.” He called for equal rights, just as he had done on the forefront of the Civil Rights struggle and would do so again at Selma in 1965.

Above all, Heschel made clear that saving Jews in the USSR was a Jewish issue. The clearly Jewish disposition was ridden with Holocaust analogies. Heschel had barely escaped Nazi Germany in 1940, and was exacerbated by the presence of the Holocaust in everyday life; he, like many Jewish Americans, was tormented by Holocaust guilt. His sermon signaled one of the first Holocaust comparisons to the condition of Soviet Jewry issue, and the “failure” he spoke of was a finger pointed at the American Jewish establishment and its slow response to the genocide. Heschel confronted the Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council with an ultimatum: either they create a national organization to address the Soviet Jewish condition, or he will.

The address was far-reaching. David Roskies remembers his father carrying a Yiddish newspaper under his arm with the transcription, “visibly shaken.” Lewis Weinstein, the president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, was informed of it on his trip in Ethiopia. Heschel had convinced Weinstein to budge after a

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124 Orenstein, A. Let My People Go. 42.
short meeting. Preparations for an official body to represent Soviet Jewry were set for the following spring.127

From April 5-6, 1964, the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry formally convened for two days in Washington DC, against a backdrop of great global alarm. Shortly before the AJCSJ event, the Lishka had distributed translated copies of Judaism Without Embellishment, a pseudo-academic anti-Semitic brochure filled with Nazi-style caricatures by academic Trofim Kichko, published by the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences.128 Condemnation from around the Western world, even from Soviet sympathizers, led the Kremlin to recall and denounce the brochure, but the damage had been done.129 The conference-goers were already reckoning with the lack of synagogues, the upcoming Passover holiday, and the ban on matzoh.130

Every significant American Jewish community representative was present, along with non-Jewish senators, congressmen, and other leaders that were sympathetic to the cause. The event had a firm media presence, with reporters from Pravda and Izvestia. Messages of solidarity from Martin Luther King, Jr., George Meany, and various religious and political groups were read aloud.131 Curiously, the conference, simply by its standing,

131 Conspicuously, an Israeli presence was absent. It was later understood that there was secret ongoing negotiation between Israel and the Soviets was taking place, and Israel did not plan to participate in an event that could be deemed “anti-Soviet.” The Lishka, however, was present at every level of the conference planning. Beckerman, G. When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone. 70; Weinstein, L. H. (1988). Soviet Jewry and the American Jewish Community 1963-1987. American Jewish History, 77(4), 600-616. 602-604.
did not herald the usual universalist undertones so common to the Jewish establishment for nearly two decades, as speeches invoked Jewish themes, texts, and holidays.\textsuperscript{132}

Despite strong condemnations and various resolutions, there was no sense of urgency. Shortly after the conference, the sponsoring organizations met with Secretary of State Dean Rusk and presented their list of demands, while assuring that this was not “in any sense an exacerbation of political conflict between East and West.”\textsuperscript{133} The ask to the Secretary of State, to address their concerns as a matter outside foreign policy, was near contradictory and showed that the Jewish community was not interested. Nahum Goldmann, who was not in attendance, contemptuously scolded the event from Vienna; “demagogic speeches and exaggerated resolutions may do a lot more of harm, not only to the demands for which we fight but to the three million Soviet Jews.” The establishment still held that anti-Soviet agitation would not move the needle, and meddling another government’s internal issues was unnecessarily antagonistic to a fragile-minded Soviet regime. The sponsoring organizations did not provide a budget for a permanent staff for the AJCSJ, delicately balancing their diplomatic approach. In place of a home, the organizations offered to rotate the group every six months.\textsuperscript{134}

A conscious acknowledgement of the Holocaust arose at a crucial juncture in American Jewish history, as establishment organizations where deciding where to place their focus. Able to present the Holocaust but realizing that the generation that followed the tragic destruction was unable to understand it, they spearheaded education

\textsuperscript{133} Beckerman, G. \textit{When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone}. 82.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid 69-71, 83.
campaigns. The threat of home-grown anti-Semitism made the need ever-more necessary. Likewise, Jewish organizations took upon themselves to defend Jewish-specific causes. Abroad, they were unwilling to take active measures against the other Jewish populations threatened by anti-Semitism, though the demand for security of their Soviet brethren was increasingly grew. Small actions were not enough. Jewish organizations were at a disjunction: was Jewish history a model for humankind, as Arendt and her followers asserted, or were Jews to focus their energy on their own? The answer, of course, was an amalgam of both. The Jewish community’s youth, attuned to the Holocaust’s distinctly Jewish nature, found an answer. The frontier of Jewish youth activists was to draw on the Holocaust for moral courage, and utilize the Civil Rights Movement’s call for the equal rights for Soviet Jewry.
CHAPTER 3: A POLICY OF PICKET LINES

A week before the Passover of 1962, a friend asked Johnny Halpert, then a senior at Yeshiva University High School Manhattan, if he wanted to attend a protest for Russian Jews. “The Russians are not letting Jews bake matzoh,” he told Halpert. Compelled to act, Halpert went door to door, recruiting students. On Thursday, April 12, 1962, Halpert joined hundreds of high schoolers and college students in the first action for Soviet Jewry. 135

The passionate energy of young Jews like Halpert drove Jacob Birnbaum, a thirty-seven-year-old recent émigré from London to New York City. While in Israel in the early 1960s, Birnbaum met a group of young Jewish Theological Seminary rabbis and American Jews participating in gap year programs. The lively discussions Birnbaum had with students such as Arthur Green, a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Yitz Greenberg, a young Brooklyn rabbi, on how to make Judaism relevant for an acculturating Jewry compelled him to move to Washington Heights, Manhattan in 1963. 136

Birnbaum, like Heschel, had firsthand knowledge of Jewish silence during the Holocaust—in his youth, his well-respected family (his grandfather, Nathan Birnbaum coined the term “Zionism” in 1890) narrowly avoided death by escaping central Europe before the war. He heeded the cause of Soviet Jewry with the same vigor as he had the

136 Beckerman, G. When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone. 73-75.
call to help resettle Jewish refugees after the Holocaust. Birnbaum thought Jews needed to act through mass protest and knew the American Jewish community had the resources to make it happen. He heard about the Washington D.C. conference shortly after its happening, and was frustrated; the establishment were nothing more than “talking heads which lacked redemptive passion and drive.” Instead, he looked to Jewish youth as agents of change.

Birnbaum hypothesized that if American Jews were reminded of their Soviet brethren, they would mount a national movement to effectively pressure the weakening Soviets. Settling in a small apartment near Yeshiva University, he set out to sway American Jewish students to act. He thought that confrontational tactics—those used by the Civil Rights Movement—would force Jewish establishment figures to listen to him. Soon, he developed a following among students in the City. Behind his back, they jokingly referred to him as the Messiah, but would be moved by his expressive diatribes.

3:1 Challenging “American” Jewish culture

In hindsight, Birnbaum struck gold. The prime targets for his operation, Jewish students, at crossroads of “American youth” and Jewishness, had been shaped by a new landscape of culture and politics. Born in an era of optimism, young Jewish Americans were raised in the American popular culture of the 1950s. Children in densely Jewish

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137 Ibid 72-77.  
138 Orenstein, A. Let My People Go. 51.  
140 Ibid  
141 Beckerman, G. When They Come for Us. 77-78; Orenstein, A. Let My People Go. 48-49.
areas like Crown Heights in Brooklyn may have heard Yiddish on the street among older residents, but likely spoke English at home. Rock and roll was commonplace and sports became the great equalizer; Jackie Robinson and Sandy Koufax became role models where “fair play and ability ruled and race and religion were irrelevant.” Prominent liberal Jewish activist Irving Levine “identified with black kids on a number at levels” growing up. The carefree street life made racial acceptance more acceptable among Jewish, Italian, and Black kids in deeply working-class neighborhoods like Brownsville, in Brooklyn.

The intentional redefinition of “youth” of the postwar era radically transformed the role of children. While the previous generation relied on their children to support the household, the general affluence of postwar families gave Jewish children more social freedom. In the 1950s, three quarters of American Jews were born in the United States.

The Conservative and Reform presence enhanced Jewish educational programming in the emerging Judaism of the suburbs. Considerably distressed over the breadth of cultural and institutional destruction in Europe, Jewish cultural leaders doubted that there would be a subsequent generation of Jewish leadership. Leaders the likes of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan stressed that it was the role of rabbis to “redeem” Jewish children from the apathy of their parents, and declared that, in the postwar era, Jewish youth were

the most important part of the community. Youth programs and summer camps became the modes of transition for the Judaism of the next generation.¹⁴⁶

Denominational (or similar Zionist or mixed Zionist-denominational) camps provided a new way for adolescents to practice Judaism and to connect to their peers. Summer camps gave Jewish educators opportunities to explore experimental learning techniques. Programs incorporated unique simulations of oppressor-oppressed narratives, ideological trials, and Hebrew classes. The freedom and role-playing of summer camp subverted relationships with authority. On the periphery of communal structures, campers affirmed their Judaism in their own intimate way.¹⁴⁷

In some regards, the Jewish youth that came of age in the 1960s followed in the footsteps of the previous generation. They were acutely aware of the Holocaust; famed Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt remembers being captivated by the Eichmann Trial: “dinner in our home was timed so that we could watch the televised news clips from Jerusalem.”¹⁴⁸ Lipstadt’s family members were not the only ones that tuned in. Reflecting on his childhood, Yossi Klein Halevi remembers his family mesmerized, watching the live broadcast. Halevi could not understand such cruelty; “the Dracula story seemed tame compared with what had actually happened to Jews in Transylvania.”¹⁴⁹ In their happy, insular upbringing, the darkest horrors of Jewish memory penetrated the minds of Jewish children.

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¹⁴⁷ Ibid 91-94.


The lessons of injustice were also passed down from parent to child. In an American Jewry tinged by progressive politics, the stand against anti-Semitism included a stand against racism. Young Jews were more militant than their predecessors, however. The efforts at desegregation and racial discrimination were disproportionately represented by Jewish students.\textsuperscript{150} The radicalism of Jewish youth was part of a national counterculture; “I felt a common cause with these good men and women who had been moved to midwife freedom in the south,” wrote Betty Altschuler, a participant on a prayer pilgrimage to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1962, “I wanted to understand the nature of the struggle firsthand, and by my presence to lend support to the side of freedom.”\textsuperscript{151} Jewish students heeded the call of Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964; between one-half and one-third of the volunteers that summer were Jews.\textsuperscript{152}

At the core of the Jewish criticism was a critique of middle-class Jewish life. By the early 1960s, Jews had broken down most socioeconomic obstacles, including those in higher education.\textsuperscript{153} Focused on reforming their communities, Jewish baby boomers at the forefront of the counterculture became more ethnically conscious.\textsuperscript{154} Materialism alienated them from an “authentic” Jewish life, they believed; “hyphenating” their


\textsuperscript{152} The Freedom Summer was a major effort by the Civil Rights Movement to register Black Americans in Mississippi to vote. Largely reliant on volunteers, it recruited workers across the country. For a comprehensive reading, see \textit{Risking Everything: A Freedom Summer Reader} by Michael Edmonds. 2014. Dawidowicz, L. (1965). “Civil and Political.” \textit{American Jewish Year Book, 66}. New York: American Jewish Committee.175.


\textsuperscript{154} Kranson, R. (2015). “To Be a Jew on America’s Terms is Not to Be a Jew at All”: The Jewish Counterculture’s Critique of Middle-Class Affluence. \textit{Journal of Jewish Identities, 8}(2), 59-84. 59-60.
American Jewish identities, American Jews failed at Jewish literacy. The luminaries responded with innovative forms of Jewishness, feeling the need to reinvent Jewish life.\footnote{The Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry the first major organized Jewish counterculture movement, preceding those that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Though pockets Zionism, the Havurah movement, and other Jewish liberation movements existed before they fragmented from the New Left in the late 1960s. Ibid; Prell, R.-E. (2006). America, Mordecai Kaplan, and the Postwar Jewish Youth Revolt. \textit{Jewish Social Studies}, 12(2), 158-171. 159-160.}

American Jewish political complacency was the \textit{cause célèbre} for the budding Soviet Jewry Movement. From its inception, the movement for Soviet Jewry fixated on militant action. Birnbaum and his young colleagues adopted the terminology and style of the New Left; Birnbaum spoke of justice and stylized the first meeting the “College Students’ Struggle for Soviet Jewry.”\footnote{The name was a wordplay on the class struggle of Marxism. “College Students’ Struggle for Soviet Jewry” (April 1964). SSSJ Records (1:1). Mendel Gottesman Library, Yeshiva University, New York (hereby referred to as SSSJ Records).} Birnbaum hoped to direct the experiences of young American Jews in the Civil Rights to the cause for Soviet Jewry.

3.2: The Making of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry

Less than a month after the first American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry, Birnbaum, together with a group of students, obtained permission from Columbia University to gather in the Philosophy Lounge. The meeting was set for Monday, April 27\textsuperscript{th}, 1964.\footnote{Beckerman, G. \textit{When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone}. 78.} The organizers planned to clarify the issue, probe possible plans of action, and create a citywide committee to carry them out. “They modeled after the Civil Rights Movement:

\begin{quote}
“Just as we, as human beings and as Jews, are conscious of the wrongs suffered by the Negro and we fight for his
\end{quote}
betterment, so must we come to feel in ourselves the silent, strangulated pan of so many of our Russian brethren.”

“We, who condemn silence and inaction during the Nazi holocaust,” the meeting flier added, “dare we keep silent now?” The foundational meeting affirmed the long list of forcible assimilation, synagogue closings, and a “concerted effort at spiritual and cultural strangulation.” Fliers were distributed at every university with a significant Jewish presence in New York City, including Yeshiva University, New York University, Columbia University, Jewish Theological Seminary, and the City University. The Holocaust narrative communicated a need to act, and the Civil Rights Movement was an example of how to do it.

Birnbaum began the first meeting with remarks and an impassioned plea of a Romanian rabbi for “truth.” Though he spearheaded the meeting, those that attended were far from uninformed. The group of two hundred held an open discussion on ways to achieve their goal of reaching Moscow. Of the ten suggestions that were prefaced the open discussion, a Friday morning protest and employing the US election year to begin the campaign for Soviet Jewry were offered as suggestions. The reason for inaction, it was decided, was that there were no organizations solely dedicated to the cause of Soviet Jewry. The demonstration for that Friday, only four days later, was agreed to. The gathering achieved two goals: a permanent committee and the scheduling of the beginning event of “a mass movement—spearheaded by the student youth.”

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159 Beckerman, G. When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone. 78.
160 Jewish Students Will Picket Embassy Friday. (1964, April). Kol Hamevaser of Yeshiva University. 1, 3. SSSJ Records (1:1).
Birnbaum defined four goals for the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, or triple-S-J (SSSJ) as they were soon calling themselves. First, they were to galvanize the American Jewish community, which he believed could be done using a grassroots approach. Next, the SSSJ and the American Jewish community would leverage public opinion and move the US government to action. Once the issue was a priority for American political figures, the Soviets could would be confronted on the Jewish issue. Birnbaum later stated, “New York City is the largest center of Jewish life in the world, and from New York we could generate pressure on Washington.... first to convert the Jewish community and then convert Washington.” A powerful ally in Washington could situate human rights, and with it Jewish rights, at the negotiation table. Lastly, Birnbaum planned to utilize the favorable public opinion to boost the morale of Soviet Jews.

That week, the steering committee—many of whom, like Glenn Richter, were veterans of the Civil Rights Movement—met daily in Birnbaum’s apartment and churned leaflets that read, “history shall not repeat.” The phone was in use non-stop and letters were sent to professors and public officials; some responded—New York Congressman Leonard Farbstein agreed to join them at the rally. The protest was to take place outside the Soviet Mission to the United Nations—it was intentionally on the same day as the May Day parade in the Soviet Union. At the top of some leaflets was an excerpt translated from Yevtushenko’s now-famous poem, subverting Soviet symbolism:

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165 Glenn Richter Notes. SSSJ Records (1:2); Beckerman, G. *When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone*. 80.
“the whole world is watching; there can be neither silence or denial.” They demanded religious freedom and cultural equality.166

Nearly one thousand students from thirteen New York campuses picketed the Soviet Mission that Friday morning, carrying placards reading, “I am My Brother’s Keeper” and “Let Our People Pray,” as well as other signs in Hebrew and Russian. Joined by campus faculty and fifteen Jewish organizations, they called for equal rights for Jews in the Soviet Union: against the “strangulation” of Yiddish culture, the closing of prayer spaces, the ban on matzoh baking, and opposing unprosecuted anti-Semitic personalities.167 The large crowd chanted religious songs like “avenu malkenu” (My Lord, My King) and “ani ma’amín,” (I Believe), the latter a melody that was increasingly attributed to the Holocaust, a gloomy reminder of the cost of silence. The four-hour event was covered by the three major television networks and reported on by New York newspapers, making the second page of the New York Times.168

Birnbaum and the action’s steering committee responded to American society: to achieve their goals they decided on “responsible” protest. Just two weeks before, American public figures, including Senator Jacob Javits, an outspoken advocate for Soviet Jewry, and leaders in Civil Rights organizations had denounced “irresponsible activities” by factions of the Civil Rights Movement.169 The SSSJ pragmatic approach

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168 “Let My People Go” was not yet the group’s anthem, but was seen on picket signs. The reference was to Moses asking Pharaoh for his people’s freedom. Only later did the SSSJ adopt the call for emigration. File 1/2, Glenn Richter Notes. SSSJ Records (1:2); 1000 Students Picket Soviet Consul, Demonstate Against Anti-Semitism. (1964, May 5). SSSJ Records (1:2); May 5, 1964; 1000 College Students March Against Soviet Persecution. (1964, May 9). Jewish Press, 1; Soviet U.N. Mission is Picketed by 700 Over Anti-Semitism. (1964, May 2). New York Times, 2. SSSJ Records (1:2).
steered clear of radicals: “it would have been foolish to go in for uncontrolled antics which might have been a sop to our own feelings but would have achieved nothing, neither with the American public nor with those that claim to speak for American Jewry,” Birnbaum told the *Jewish Press*.\(^ {170}\) The protest was described “well arranged” and “orderly.” The attendees were well dressed. The *New York Times* reported that the “silent protest,” demonstrating the forced silence of Russian Jewry, “was the keynote of the picketing.”\(^ {171}\)

Staying within their experiences, the SSSJ avoided protesting the economic trials, feeling that the issue was contentious, or at best difficult to prove. Moreover, irrespective of the Hebrew chants, no pickets were written in Hebrew, to avoid others from being able to “identify the demonstrators with the Zionists.”\(^ {172}\)

The Jewish students made clear that they were also protesting the AJCSJ; they were dissatisfied with the well-oiled Jewish establishment’s pace. A student representative told *The Jewish Chronicle* that the purpose of the rally was to pressure the Soviets and “enlighten American Jews.” The students demonstrated a keen concern with Jewish cultural survival, drawing on analogies to the Holocaust. The rally was a show of strength; Birnbaum heralded the surge of the student responses at the May Day Rally as “the greatest since the founding of the State of Israel.”\(^ {173}\) The direct-action event was the first of many campaigns that SSSJ would run. Their tactical repertoire marked a disjuncture from the mainstream Jewish community.

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\(^{172}\) While most, if not all, of the demonstrators were Zionists, it may have been important for Birnbaum to identify the issue of Soviet Jewry as separate. *National Jewish Post & Opinion*, 1. Friday, May 8, 1964; May 5, 1964.

3.3: “Who is leading whom?”

The movement took hold shortly after the 1964 May Day rally; by mid-May, the SSSJ had a clear mission: to influence Moscow through a campaign to “lead to the mighty awakening of the American consciousness.”\textsuperscript{174} The platform was like the one proposed at the AJCSJ, but the purpose—an organized movement to end the “spiritual and cultural strangulation” of Soviet Jewry—warranted Birnbaum to put forward that, within seven to nine months, the Soviets will be forced to address the matter.\textsuperscript{175} That summer, the SSSJ leveraged the American election year and incorporated innovated campaigns, aligning their vision with other progressive causes. Within a year, SSSJ had made criticism of the Soviet Union’s Jewish populace the norm.

SSSJ organizers embraced guerilla theater tactics. From June 7\textsuperscript{th} to 14\textsuperscript{th}, they held an interfaith fast-in; the fasting clergy—a Protestant reverend, a Catholic priest, and a rabbi—attracted various media outlets, support, and donations.\textsuperscript{176} Workers from the Soviet Mission stopped by and told them, “things aren’t so bad for the Jews.”\textsuperscript{177} More importantly, Decter stopped to offered suggestions and encouragement.\textsuperscript{178} Birnbaum had been inspired by Decter’s article, “The Status of Jews in the Soviet Union,” in Foreign Affairs magazine the previous March.\textsuperscript{179}

The organizers built on the momentum, retaining their focus on their original target: youth. Taking a page from the Freedom Schools Project in Mississippi, the SSSJ

\textsuperscript{174} SSSJ Plans New Protest; Students to Undergo Fast. (1964). Kol Hamevaser of Yeshiva University. 1. SSSJ Records (1:3).
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{176} Richter, G. (1964, June 10). Wednesday, June 10\textsuperscript{th} Notes. SSSJ Records (1:3); Richter, G. (1964, June 9). Log: Tuesday, June 9. SSSJ Records (1:3).
\textsuperscript{178} Richter, G. (1964, June 10) “Wednesday, June 10\textsuperscript{th} Notes.” Records (1:3).
\textsuperscript{179} Beckerman, G. When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone. 78-79.
launched an education campaign, distributed a summer kit to Jewish camps in July. In
the kit were stories, reenactments, and materials that would stir campers to the plight of
Soviet Jewry. In August, they sponsored resolutions at the convention of the National
Student Association. At the time, the SSSJ was a shoestring operation, reliant on minor
donations from students. Birnbaum knew that the AJCSJ had some, even if limited,
resources. Lacking funds for the summer kits, Birnbaum barged into an AJCSJ meeting
to ask for help. George Maislen, then the chairman of the Steering Committee of the
AJCSJ and the President of the United Synagogue Council of the Council of America,
asked if SSSJ was willing to work within the frameworks of the conference. Birnbaum
maintained that the group’s independence was vital to its goals and left empty-handed.
Reflecting on the meeting in his memo, the Maislen compared the “Birnbaum group” to a
similar group he denied a month before, telling the latter, “not in our best interest.”

The SSSJ was undeterred. Birnbaum believed the Student Struggle for Soviet
Jewry was moved not by emotion, but by righteousness; the movement had to win, as
their cause was just. Though the AJCSJ rejected their efforts, the SSSJ found support
in the New York Board of Rabbis and jumped to Birnbaum’s second goal—advocacy in
the American political arena. Once again taking a page from the Civil Rights Movement,

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180 Orenstein, A. Let My People Go. 70.
181 A part of the larger education efforts of the Freedom Summer, Freedom Schools began in 1964 as an
alternative supplement to the government-sponsored, segregation-ridden education that marginalized
Black folks. The plan was first proposed by Charlie Cobb, an activist with the Student Nonviolent
Coordinating Committee, and grew to nearly 3,000 students in 40 schools. See Chapter 5 in Risking
Jewish Student Organizations, I61.AJHS Records (57:20) (Hereafter referred to as AJHS Records).
182 Beckerman, G. When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone. 84.
Brown. 53.
they planned to influence the Democratic Party during an election cycle. Birnbaum postured SSSJ’s values to that of the Party in a moral-ridden letter to the Democratic National Convention chairman;

“The Democratic Party with its famous humanitarian record has always enjoyed extensive support from Jews. We are hopeful that you will be able to make this issue a strong plank in your Platform.”

Birnbaum planned an all-faith service at the Democratic Convention on August 25th, 1964 in Atlantic City. Close to two weeks before the convention, the DNC rejected his request for a place to hold the service on the grounds of “no space.” In disbelief, Birnbaum came to Atlantic City to investigate and found “more than ample room for three tens of people to hold a brief service without inconvenience to anyone.” Leveraging his relationship with Congressman Farbstein, he was given permission to host the all-faith Prayer Service for Soviet Jewry.

During both convention days, the SSSJ and the New York Board of Rabbis conducted the service near the meeting hall. The editors of the service described its purpose as to “lift up the hearts of the oppressed,” and the “final goal” was the “spiritual redemption and freedom” of the Jews in the Soviet Union. The prayers abounded in liturgy, with a reading from psalms and chanting of “el moleh,” the traditional Jewish memorial prayer. The ceremony also delivered a “message of sympathy to brethren in Russia,” while simultaneously addressing the SSSJ’s primary audience: the Jewish

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184 The (Mississippi) Freedom Democratic Party came out of the Freedom Summer and challenged voter laws by forming their own state party, which they brought to the Democratic National Convention. The MFDP was seated, but not given voting rights at the Convention. See Risking Everything: A Freedom Summer Reader by Michael Edmonds. 2014. 173-184.


establishment: “we must confess that we have been partially asleep. Now we are awakening and remembering.” Most notably, SSSJ sounded the shofar, a distinct symbol of their early movement, to end the observance. The public shofar sounding—a uniquely Jewish ceremony usual reserved for the special Jewish occasions—symbolized the call to consciousness and the hope for redemption, in the freedom for Soviet Jews.  

The twenty-four American Jewish organizations of the AJCSJ delivered their own message to the Convention through Senator Abraham Ribicoff, of Connecticut. Ribicoff, testifying before the Platform Committee, proposed a platform position similar to the one he had co-sponsored with sixty-three other senators in Congress earlier that year. “It is especially appropriate that the party of human dignity and peace take an official stand on the Soviet Government’s systemic policy of attrition against the three million Jewish citizens of the USSR,” he affirmed. George Maislen, also in the room, affirmed Ribicoff’s humanitarian approach to the Platform Committee: “it is a moral and humanitarian issue, not a political debate which concerns us.”

Despite their well-situated position, the AJCSJ could not sway the Democrats include the Soviet Jewry plank in their platform. Instead, the Democratic platform incorporated a blanket call for minority rights in the Eastern Bloc countries. It was another failed attempt at hushed diplomacy with nothing to show for it. The Democrats had not realized the importance of the problem, because the Jewish community had not shown it was serious enough about the issue; they had lobbied for a symbolic statement,

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188 Ribicoff Calls on Democratic Party to Denounce Soviet Anti-Semitism (1964, August 20).
not action. The AJCSJ had offered the platform plank, but few constituents had raised the issue to their representatives before the convention. “Who is leading whom?” asked Birnbaum of Senator Jacob Javits in a letter sent nearly a month before the convention, “this is leadership in a vacuum, lacking in a grassroots basis.” The old problem of Soviet anti-Semitism required an untried solution, Birnbaum wrote to Senator Javits, as the current engagement would produce no change in Soviet policy. “The Twenty-Four” organizations of the AJCSJ failed to reach the three hundred thousand “sitting” American Jewish youth on campus, let alone engage countless others.190

The SSSJ did not rest—their next action was planned for October 18th, 1964, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan at Straus Square. Birnbaum believed that Straus Square held a unique place in the heart of New York’s Jews: in these historic working class Jewish neighborhoods, families lived and workers through the first half of the 20th century. By September 10th, 1964, he had received the backing of the New York Board of Rabbis, the Jewish Labor Committee, and the American League for Russian Jewry. Two Yiddish-language publications pledged their support, and two more Jewish English-language papers would “certainly” give them the publicity. They were joined by many union and veteran organizations.191 Birnbaum assumed returning to the area would revive memories of “mass rallies there at times of crisis,” and would further move American Jews to act.

Less than a week before the occasion, the SSSJ was given a full free front-page publicity in the Jewish Press with the report on the protest of the Raduga Dancers, a

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troupe from Russia. Around fifty students circled the entrance of the Lincoln Center’s Philharmonic Hall holding sights that read “Khrushchev, why Ukrainian Culture—Yes, but Jewish culture, no?”, while another read, “why freedom for dance, but not for prayer?” The article made note of the incredibly orderly, non-violent protest, and ended the spread with information about the upcoming mass protest, by now practically a staple a SSSJ events.192

The action was the largest success to date. Present were Senators Jacob Javits and longtime SSSJ supporter Representative Leonard Farbstein, New York Attorney General Louis Lefkowitz, New York senator and incumbent Republican candidate Kenneth Keating, as well as State Comptroller Arthur Levitt, who delivered a letter from Keating’s Democratic opponent, Robert F. Kennedy, still on the senatorial campaign trail. President Lyndon B. Johnson’s special counsel Myer Feldman informed the crowd of three thousand, “it takes public protest to form world opinion,” and expressed Johnson’s sympathy for the cause. Raised pickets read: “Why are matzohs subversive?” and “Let My People Live or Let Them Leave.” 193 The keynote speech was delivered by Rabbi Heschel Schachter, who had visited the Soviet Union with a delegation of American rabbis in 1956.194

The rally was designed with American Jews in mind, and thus was another noticeable departure from Jewish universalism. Led by a mainly Jewish coalition, hosting predominantly Jewish speakers, and located in a historic Jewish neighborhood, Birnbaum

and SSSJ concentrated on their base: the American Jewish community. Birnbaum salted the wounded AJCSJ, noting in his invitations to speakers that the October 18 demonstration has “no relationship with many of the major Jewish organizations who often claim to speak on behalf of American Jewry. “These are self-perpetuating oligarchies,” he lambasted, “with little of any grassroots support.”195 As luck (or more likely, SSSJ’s intention) would have it, the October 18th Straus Square rally was held at the same time as a diametrically opposing event at the lavish Hotel Astor: the annual Bnai B’rith Metropolitan New York Council conference. Label Katz, the president of B’rith B’rith, pronounced his hope for a change in policy against “state-inspired discrimination against Soviet Jews.”196 Birnbaum was shaping the character of the movement by dichotomizing it with establishment bureaucracy; one group was in the streets, the other was making empty requests behind closed doors. In all too many ways, the SSSJ program pointed to a new stage in the pursuit of equality for Soviet Jews.

As the Soviet Jewry Movement picked up steam, the Lishka acted generally in the shadows. The Lishka agents in London, Paris, and New York influenced the State Department, various politicians, and the press. They, too, concluded that the American Jewish community moved too slowly—but were also wary of grassroots groups. Yet, despite the unstable nature of the “grassroots radicals” like SSSJ and like-minded adult groups that appeared independently in Cleveland and New York, Lishka agents assisted them. On November 1st, 1964, Decter, through his role as the principal researcher at the Jewish Minorities Research Center, held a four-hour discussion on Soviet persecution for

SSSJ activists. “What can we do?” he asked them. Decter was sensitive about giving them concrete directions: he did not know what the Soviets themselves wanted. He answered his own question: “Our hope is that the Soviets may be sufficiently sensitive that they may succumb to the pressure of world opinion.” All the same, the agents balanced the tightrope; Decter often sided with the establishment and calmed the unrealistic, and often counterproductive ambitions of Soviet Jewry grassroots groups. The foreign agency decided that it was necessary to have a permanent presence on Capitol Hill the following year in 1965, and appointed Nehemiah Levanon as the minister’s council in Washington. At minimum, Levanon expected that these grassroots would whip American Jewry into shape.\footnote{Levanon, N. “Israel’s Role in the Campaign.” Friedman, M., & Chernin, A. D. (1999). A Second Exodus: the American Movement to Free Soviet Jews. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press. Published by University Press of New England. 78.}

### 3.4 Moving the Establishment Needle

On October 28, 1964, only ten days after the Straus Square action, Maislen opened the New York Conference for Soviet Jewry, the New York branch of the AJCSJ, at Hunter College with the “Appeal to Conscience for the Jews of the Soviet Union,” a statement that flatly imitated the SSSJ. In a declaration that could only flattered Birnbaum, Maislen called to:
"address ourselves to the moral consciousness of the World to bring the pressure of World opinion to bear upon the Soviet Union that it but an end to its discriminatory practices against the Soviet Jews...we have come together tonight to declare to all the world: that we condemn the acts of spiritual murder…"¹⁹⁸

Replete with religious symbolism, the statement outlined seven specific grievances, the statement was signed by more than two hundred academics. It asserted, "we cannot keep silent so long as justice is not done on this problem."¹⁹⁹ President Johnson delivered a message to the event through Robert F. Kennedy, reiterating that “the official actions available to us must be reinforced by the pressures of an aroused world public opinion.” He related that, “over vigorous objections of the Soviet delegate,” the USA introduced an article specifically naming anti-Semitism at the UN Commission on Human Rights.²⁰⁰ Kennedy attested that if elected, he would call for a Senate resolution to condemn Soviet anti-Semitism. Off-script he added a show of non-partisanship, “If I am not elected, I know my opponent will do the same."²⁰¹

The conference ended with two thousand demonstrators converging on the Soviet Mission to the United Nations. Holding candles, they marched in silence. Senator Keating delivered the list of appeals to Soviet officials alongside Rabbi Heschel, Maislen, the Vice President of the American Jewish Congress Theodore Bikel, and Phillip Baum, the coordinator of the New York Conference of Soviet Jewry. Unable to get access to the Soviet Mission, Bikel left the list of grievances under the door.²⁰²

²⁰² Ibid.
Jewish advocacy work slowly embraced the fight for Soviet Jewry, moving SSSJ’s to the mainstream. Operations headquarters transferred from Birnbaum’s apartment to a large office space donated by sympathetic businessmen. The SSSJ was no longer the lone voice advocating—though it was still one of the few organizations dedicated solely to the issue. for grassroots action and now served as a coordinating agency for other Soviet Jewry groups, as well as on various subcommittees for Soviet Jewry; Birnbaum described the relationship to the establishment as “reasonably friendly.”

The 1965 summer kit was well-funded and much larger, and placed more importance on activism. The authors prefaced the kit with two SSSJ aims: “to arouse a concern which will be transformed into an inner personal commitment to justice and for a suffering part of Klal Yisroel—the world Jewish community,” and “to give guidance in translating this concern into effective action—that is, to show what people can do in terms of follow-up at home.” The SSSJ geared students to bring the fight home, and to change public opinion.

To highlight but a few of the countless vigils, protests, and petitions held over the next few years: on November 30, 1964, five hundred rabbis publicly demonstrated near the United Nations headquarters in New York. A week later, the American Jewish Youth Conference for Soviet Jewry formed and, on December 20th, the representatives of twenty-one youth movements across the social, ideological, and religious spectrum came together in New York. A year later, at the “Menorah March” on December 20th, 1965,

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203 The SSSJ History. SSSJ Records (1:10); Birnbaum to Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel (1965, November 22) 1. SSSJ Records (1:14).
204 Save Soviet Jewry: Call to Action: Summer 1965 Handbook, 1. In Orenstein, A. Let My People Go. 72.
New York students demonstrated on the Soviet Mission to the United Nations behind a giant menorah made of pipes. In 1966, an all-night vigil was held across from the United Nations headquarters. Behind them stood the Isaiah Wall, with the biblical inscription, “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

The AJCSJ, now with a budget, moved in sync with the SSSJ. Nearly 16,000 people came to their June 3, 1965 rally at the Madison Square Garden. This was the largest gathering ever for its New York chapter. The usual supporters were there: Senator Javits and newly-elected New York Senator Kennedy addressed the audience. New York Mayor Wagner declared June 3rd to be “Conference on Soviet Jewry Day in New York City.” New York Governor Nelson announced “A Day of Protest in New York Against Anti-Semitism.” Madison Square Garden held historical weight for New York’s Jewish community; it had been used by the Jewish establishment in times of crisis—tens of thousands of Jews had packed the arena during to protest Nazi Germany in 1937 and challenged the British policy in Palestine in 1946.

In the fall, the AJCSJ flexed their strength in Washington. Ten thousand Jews arrived “by trains and buses…and by planes from all parts of the Unites States” for the Eternal Light Vigil in Lafayette Park, across from the White House. The delegation representing the Vigil handed a petition to the Soviet embassy with one million signatures

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(though the Embassy shut their doors to it). President Johnson delivered a statement to the rally: “Your cause is the cause of all men who value freedom.” A moving address came from Civil Rights leader Bayard Rustin, who linked the liberation of Black Americans to the liberation of Soviet Jews. He informed the attendees that Martin Luther King Jr. and A. Philip Randolph voiced their solidarity with the Soviet Jewry Movement. The Jewish establishment joined the ranks of the Soviet Jewry Movement, and brought with them their deep kinship with the older generation of Civil Rights leaders. The support of Civil Rights leaders showed a younger generation of Jewish Americans that their fight was justified.\textsuperscript{210}

Two SSSJ actions from the early Movement for Soviet Jewry period pinpoint SSSJ’s changing relationship with the Jewish establishment during the early days of the Soviet Jewry Movement. The first was the Jericho March on April 4\textsuperscript{th}, 1965, early in the SSSJ’s engagement with the establishment. The United Synagogue, likely still aligned with Goldmann’s cautious line of thought, decided against partaking in the event, and their non-participation led the New York Metropolitan region of the Social Action Committee to cancel.

Regardless, the SSSJ and its allies got plenty of traction: three thousand attendees. “Seven shofars sounded piercingly seven times yesterday afternoon as a symbolic reminder of the collapsing wall at the Battle of Jericho,” wrote Irving Spiegel for the New York Times, “and in denunciation of the Soviet Government’s suppression of Jewish religious and cultural rights.” The Borough of Manhattan President, Mrs.


There were three parts to the protest: the sounding of ram’s horns while symbolically encircling the Soviet Mission to the United Nations, the march to the Isaiah Wall at Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, and a general rally at the plaza, where petitions were delivered to President Johnson and the United Nations. It was here that noted singer, the rabbi Shlomo Carlbach introduced the SSSJ’s ballad, “Am Yisrael Chai” (the people of Israel live) for the first time.\footnote{While Rabbi Shlomo Carlbach had composed the melody, it was Birnbaum who proposed a tune be made to “Am Yisrael Chai.” The song became the anthem of the SSSJ. Beckerman, G. When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone. 127-128.} Not long after, similar demonstrations were held in Cleveland, Los Angeles, and elsewhere around the United States. “History shall not repeat,” pickets reminded the audience—this time, there will be no silence.

The Jericho March marked the first time SSSJ’s actions reached across national borders. Shortly before the protest, the Jewish Student Club of Stockholm, an affiliate of the World Union of Jewish Students, the representative body of Jewish students around the world, received a letter from the SSSJ, asking them to participate in a world demonstration. The Club accepted the request and collected signatures for a petition.
signed by Jewish and non-Jewish students in Lund and Stockholm. On April 4\textsuperscript{th}, 1965, the day of the Jericho March, two-hundred Swedish students walked to the Soviet embassy in Stockholm to deliver the petition. “The event lead to so much media attention,” wrote Vera Hansson and Andras Kerek of the Jewish Student Club that initiated the effort, “that the Soviet Embassy found it necessary to make a counter-action [of an informative dinner for journalists].”\textsuperscript{213} Support came from elsewhere in the world, too: “We have heard about the demonstration organized in New York on April 4\textsuperscript{th},” wrote Edy Kaufman, the National Union of Jewish Students, to SSSJ from Jerusalem, “and would like to express our solidarity and sympathy with this sincere expression.”\textsuperscript{214}

Another occurrence was the Passover Youth Protest on April 8\textsuperscript{th}, 1966, by the New York Youth Conference for Soviet Jewry, on which Birnbaum sat on the committee. The \textit{Lishka} was of assistance, represented by Decter through the Jewish Minorities Research on the subcommittee.\textsuperscript{215} The previous year, Decter accused Hillel, the national organization for campus youth, of a of being a “top-heavy, tired and moribund organization of empty rabbis.”\textsuperscript{216} The date coincided with Good Friday that year. Police would not allow the expected ten thousand people to gather in front of the Soviet Mission. “Therefore,” Rabbi Jacob Goldberg, the chairman of the Youth Conference maintained, “we will symbolically encircle the building.” The event was co-sponsored by all twenty-two major American Jewish youth organization, including SSSJ.\textsuperscript{217}

\textsuperscript{214} The SSSJ – A History. 2. SSSJ Records (1:10); Western Union Telegram, Joel Brooks to Birnbaum (1965, April 6). SSSJ Records (1:10); “Dear Friends.” (1965, May 3). SSSJ Records (1:11).
\textsuperscript{216} Beckerman, G. \textit{When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone}. 142.
The rally attracted nearly fifteen thousand people. Senator Javits addressed the audience. Yeshiva University student Ephraim Dimant’s read a script titled Geulah, (redemption) denoting parallel between the Exodus narrative and the Jews of the Soviet Union, and a large original art piece representing the parting of the waters to the words “Soviet Jewry,” was carried nearby. The theme of redemption communicated not just the cries of thousands of Soviet Jews, but the salvation of American Jewry—this time, they would not be silent. The rally ended with the singing of ani ma’aim (I believe).”

The Jericho March and the Passover Youth Protest dichotomized two realities. On one hand, the Jericho March brought with it old sectarian divides. Despite the vocal support from the Jewish community for the issue of Soviet Jewry and the adoption of SSSJ’s language, some members the Jewish establishment were skeptical of confrontation with the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the SSSJ’s campaigns went largely unhindered, and were at times assisted by the Jewish community. The Passover action was “sponsored equally by all the participating youth organizations,” though it was Birnbaum who coordinated it. Under Birnbaum’s leadership, the youth movements performed as a unified body, and organized fifteen thousand people.

Of course, the effort for Soviet Jewry did not move the Jewish establishment in concert. The World Zionist Organization, of which World Jewish Congress President Nahum Goldmann was also president, still argued that mass protests would be counterproductive and anger the Soviets. When Goldmann heard about the Madison

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Square Garden rally, he released a statement disassociating himself from it. He still refused to condemn the Soviet Union, let alone draw comparisons to it from the Holocaust. These voices, however, were becoming the minority.

A contentious point among those in the Soviet Jewry Movement became the immigration of Jewish families separated after World War II by the Iron Curtain. Family reunification doubted the sovereignty of the Soviet Union and made the issue much more than just equality for Soviet Jews, a call too radical for the likes of Goldmann. Furthermore, those that opposed the aggressive move argued, who were the SSSJ to know what Soviet Jews themselves wanted? Notwithstanding, SSSJ insisted that the doors to immigration be open. “Hitherto must public statements have been of a somewhat vague and general nature….it is high time we became more specific and sharpened in our demands,” wrote Birnbaum in an invitation letter to the Menorah March in 1965. The Jewish establishment was soon insisting on family reunification as well.

3.5: Inspirations Around the World

The World Union of Jewish Students, the only representative body for Jewish students, had distributed educational material on the Soviet Jewish condition as early as 1963. The SSSJ, however, inspired them to take greater measures. After Swedish students made headlines with their participation in the Jericho protest, WUJS heeded the

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221 Dear Rabbi Felman (1965, December 14). SSSJ Records (1:14); Beckerman, G. When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone. 140-141.
call to action. In early 1965, Michael Hunter, the Chairman of the Inter-University Jewish Federation, the British subsidiary of the World Union of Jewish students (and the future chairman of the World Union of Jewish Students) convened with fellow British activists to found the first European activist chapter, the Universities’ Committee for Soviet Jewry.222

From April 28th to May 2nd, 1965, the World Union of Jewish Students convened in Brussels for “The Situation of Jews in the Soviet Union” seminar, with representatives from Belgium, Holland, France, Britain, Denmark, Austria, Switzerland, and Israel. At the final session, the student group unanimously adopted similar demands to that of the SSSJ: equality of culture, religious rights, and the prevention of anti-Jewish propaganda. They also asked for family reunification, a rallying call not yet endorsed by most of the Soviet Jewry Movement.223 The WUJS newsletter that summer described the new political role of WUJS:

"It is more than time for Jewish students to take a definite stand and to voice a coherent opinion on various issues in the world to-day…it is not sufficient in this age of plenty in which the students of the western world find themselves, to strive for knowledge merely to increase the “plenty” in which they live. There are millions who need help. At least three million of them are Jews."224

The seminar was the start of the WUJS' international Soviet Jewry campaign. At the seminar a traveling exhibition was proposed “in order that people might learn what was being stifled and lost by the threatened destruction of the Soviet Jewish community.”

In mid-September, WUJS appointed Ariel Whine, its first Foreign Officer. Whine’s role was to address “those Jewish problems to which we feel the general Jewish organizations do not pay sufficient attention, e.g. Russia; Neo-Nazism.” To a Jewish student population that was born Like the SSSJ, the anti-Semitism and of the USSR was not so different from the anti-Semitism of fascism. WUJS’s plan was also to move Jewish organizations to action and change public opinion. The planned mass action, a traveling exhibition with speakers, informational material, and a petition, aimed “to bring student notice to the existence of the problem,” and “to make an effective protest, both through the mass media, and through the Soviet embassies in Europe.” By December 1965, Soviet Jewry student groups existed in the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and United Kingdom.

The British campaign was the most aggressive. Earlier that year, Aron Vergelis, the editor of Soviet Yiddish Sovetish Heymland magazine, toured the United Kingdom and the Board of Deputies did not object. Troubled, the Universities’ Committee for Soviet Jewry fought against the silence of the Board of Deputies and followed Vergelis around the country, warning those he spoke with of the plight of Jews in the Soviet Union. WUJS

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declared the following year to be the “Year of Protest” modeled after the activism of the SSSJ and established a Soviet Jewry dossier distribution network for Europe’s many non-Jewish student groups.\textsuperscript{228}

From January until March 1966, WUJS coordinated the “European Action on Behalf of Soviet Jewry” with the participating unions in the four countries where Soviet Jewish groups existed, as well as in France and Belgium. The exhibition tour was transported from campus to campus across Europe. It was accompanied with a petition that was signed by 30,000 students and academics, half of them in United Kingdom.\textsuperscript{229}

The well-organized effort led to a series of victories across Europe. Soviet Embassies in Belgium, France and in Switzerland accepted the petition. On April 31\textsuperscript{st}, 1966, Aase Lionaes, a Socialist deputy in the Norwegian Parliament, denounced the Soviet embassy in Stockholm for failing to present the WUJS petition to the USSR. A petition, sponsored by the Italian Jewish Youth Federation, was passed during the Union of Italian Jewish Communities Congress in Rome, which expressed support for family reunification and the cultural and traditional rights of Soviet Jews.\textsuperscript{230} The WUJS actions were shown on television in Denmark and Switzerland. Major European newspapers such as \textit{La Derniere Heure} in Belgium, \textit{Berlingske Tidende} and \textit{Aktuelt} in Denmark, \textit{Neue Zürcher Zeitung} in Switzerland, and \textit{La Figaro} in France covered the action— “a degree of publicity far more


than its newsworthiness.” The WUJS action spread to its chapters on other continents. After the annual conference in Canberra, Australia, the National Union of Australian Jewish Students and the Union of New Zealand Jewish Students organized a large (and orderly) protest outside the Soviet embassy.

On May 8th, 1966, the WUJS campaign peaked in London: one thousand students silently marched on the Soviet Embassy. The Soviet delegation, pressured to respond, accepted a four-person student delegation with the petition. During the ninety-minute discussion, the Soviet diplomats assured the students “there is no Jewish problem in the USSR.” They replied, “the presence of a Negro in the American cabinet did not mean the grave moral problem of the Negroes in the USA was solved.”

The highly publicized event was followed by thirty-two prominent British citizens that criticized the Soviets refusing the petition in the British daily The (London) Times on June 27, 1966. One month later, 235 professors co-signed an advertisement in The Times to save Soviet Jewry. “This present action should be considered, not as an end in itself, but as a beginning. The coming five to ten years will be crucial ones for the continued existence of the Soviet Jewish community, and if the entire world, let alone the student world, is not effectively roused, the possibilities of saving Soviet Jewry will greatly diminish,” wrote Whine in the campaign report. Just as the SSSJ was doing in the United States, WUJS, too, was moving the international Jewish community.
3.6: The Six Day War

On June 11th, 1967, the State of Israel signed a ceasefire with its neighbors, ending six days of war. Three weeks of heightened tensions in the Middle East awakened memories akin to the genocide during the Holocaust for Jews worldwide. They remembered the failure of other nations to come to the assistance of the Jews. Again, the world was neutral.

Concern for the Jewish State’s survival led to widespread hysteria; American Jews flocked to synagogues in record numbers. Hundreds of cities across the United States began unsolicited campaigns to support Israel, raising more than one hundred million dollars through the United Jewish Appeal. In his memoir, Halevi remembers the circles in his Borough Park childhood neighborhood forming around transistor radios in the streets, and newspapers being passed around. “Every Jewish organization worked on behalf of Israel,” wrote Lucy Dawidowitz in the 1968 American Jewish Year Book. Synagogues and community centers congregated meetings and provided spaces for volunteers. A Washington rally held on June 8th drew 40,000 people, dwarfing the mass rallies of the Soviet Jewry Movement. Similar gatherings of exorbitant numbers met elsewhere. With Israel’s victory, the collective Jewish world exhausted in relief.236

Three days after the war’s end, Yasha Kazakov publicly renounced his Soviet citizenship: “I consider myself a citizen of the State of Israel. I demand to be freed from the humiliation of Soviet citizenship.” Soon, he was not the only Soviet Jew longing for

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Israel. But applying for an exit visa was dangerous and equivalent to the betrayal of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, those applying faced the wrath of disgrace in public life, as workers were shamed at work or were left unemployed. Still, an ever-growing underground movement distributed illegal Zionist literate and teaching materials among Soviet Jews.237

Soon, names of individuals, not just abstract reports, became the focus of the SSSJ’s mass rallies and petition drives. The group’s actions in the following years were characterized by their adopted “Let Them Go” motto and personified campaigns for family reunification. In February 1970, for instance, eighteen young Jews chained themselves to the gates of the Soviet Embassy in Washington, symbolically protesting the eighteen Georgian Jewish families that had forwarded their appeal to emigrate to the United Nations. Holding up the replica of the ten commandments, they read their statement: “it is up to all freedom-loving individuals to bring the voice of freedom to the steps of those who oppress it.”238 The SSSJ sponsored mass demonstrations with four goals in mind:

“To cause the Soviet government concern about its image due to its mistreatment of Jews;
To convince the White House that the situation of Soviet Jews is a matter of burning concern to a very large segment of American citizenry;
To give much needed encouragement to Soviet Jews; and
To arouse among young Jews a new spirit of concern for the welfare and destiny of the suffering segments of the Jewish world.”

237 Beckerman, G. *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone.* 106-110.
The group claimed to have “either organized or coordinated many of the national youth protests concerning Soviet Jewry in the past two and a half years” in 1969.239

WUJS also became a success story. A total of twenty-four countries participated in the international campaign for Soviet Jewry on May 22nd, 1968. The Soviet embassy was still the target; telegrams were sent to the embassies in Iran, Uruguay, Peru, Mexico, Costa Rica, Chile, South Africa, and Sweden. In Argentina, a delegation of 11 people presented a letter to the embassy and were received by the Secretary of the Consulate. The Soviet diplomats in London agreed to debate Gordon Hausmann, the co-chairman of the Universities Committee for Soviet Jewry, on television. The Soviet embassies in German, Sweden, the United States, and Canada were picketed. “I am happy that students of the World Union of Jewish Students are engaging in a special effort to make the facts more widely known,” Bertrand Russell wrote to WUJS.240

WUJS served a purpose like SSSJ in the Soviet Jewry Movement. It aimed to provoke Soviet diplomats through negative press in every country and force them to reply. They also hoped to fill the gap of ignorance that existed on the issue of Soviet Jewry through seminars. Like SSSJ, it was clear to them what Soviet Jewry wanted; “Let My People Go!” they cried, aligning themselves with the global Soviet Jewry Movement. “One does not have to be an imperialist to wish to see families, torn asunder by the war, re-united once again,” they wrote in their Soviet Jewry handbook in 1969.241

3.7: The “New Jews”

The Six Day War marked a turning point for Jewish advocacy around the world. Before, during, and after the war, Jewish students volunteered for Jewish community service, gave money, collected petitions, and attended vigils, marches, and demonstrations. In total, about 7,500 students enlisted in the Israeli civil service. Hillel Houses on campuses across the country flooded with people. At the University of California at Los Angeles, one thousand students including many of whom had previously been unaffiliated with the Jewish community, attended a peace vigil. Many young Jews felt similar to the student who wrote the letter to the editor of Village Voice:

“I think it must have been this way for many of my generation, that the Israeli-Arab collision was a moment of truth . . . Us. Two weeks ago, Israel was they; now Israel is we . . . I will never again be able to talk about how Judaism is only a religion, and isn’t it too bad that there has to be a such a thing as a Jewish state.”242

He was not atypical. At City College in New York City, one hundred students signed up for a volunteer program in Israel in a matter of four hours. One of these students, a leader in an extreme-left campus group, admitted their shame in never having done “anything for his people.” Jews around the world took pride in the changed image of the persecuted Jew; the Jewish people no longer were the victims of history. The fear and then excitement awakened young American Jews to a new sense of Jewishness.243

In the years that followed the Six Day War, many Jewish students turned inwards to the Jewish community, and devoted their time to Jewish activities. Their common

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denominator was still a criticism of American Judaism. “It took us several years to recognize our confusion of form and essence and recognize that there was more to Judaism than its poor expressions in the American Jewish community,” Hillel Levine, a Harvard graduate student, told the audience from a stage he forcibly seized at the conference of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds in 1969. The Jewish Liberation Project of New York came together in 1968-1969 “to express a strong commitment to Jewish values, to Israel, and to social change” with the goal of “radicalization of the American Jewish community.” Arthur Green, who’s discussions with Birnbaum in Israel inspired Birnbaum to come to the United States, and who had sat on SSSJ’s steering committee in its first years, returned to Brandeis University for his doctorate degree in 1967. The following year, he founded Havurat Shalom, the first alternative Jewish seminary.

Activists with newly awakened Jewish identities were drawn to the SSSJ, as the Soviet Jewry Movement echoed the call for equal rights that had infused the campus environment. As much as a quarter of SSSJ activists in the early 1970s had been involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and more than half were active in the anti-war movement. Many of the students that joined the SSSJ had a commitment to securing human rights—whether it be Vietnam, or in the Soviet Union.

Jewish Student Press Service gave the Jewish counterculture its voice. They supplied a platform for local events, from Jewish holiday celebrations and mass mobilization efforts.

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for the Soviet Jewry Movement. In 1970, the Jewish Student Press Service boasted 36 papers, with a circulation of 300,000 copies. Many local Jewish newspapers came about in response to non-Jewish radicals taking anti-Israel stances in campus newspapers. The press published on Jewish student issues and stood with much of the New Left, despite rebuking its anti-Zionism on campus.247

The new particularism was in part due to the alienation Jewish students felt in the New Left, as the philosophy of Black Power moved mainstream. Black nationalism led to the expulsion of all white volunteers (many of whom were Jews) from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in 1966. At the 1967 Conference of New Politics in Chicago, the black caucus advocated for a resolution against “Zionist imperialism.” Jews were not victims, but oppressors of a third world people. “Black nationalism was progressive. Jewish nationalism was reactionary. Just like that,” wrote M. Jay Rosenberg.248 Rosenberg, previously Jewishly unaffiliated and a member of the New Left, started a radical Zionist society at the University of Albany that supported Israel and various leftist causes. Three hundred students came to the first meeting.249

The Jewish youth currents of the early 1960s developed into fully-formed organizations. If from May 1964 to June 1967, the SSSJ was the only alternative Jewish youth organization, the period after June 1967 marked a movement that challenged to the Jewish community in every aspect—a Jewish counterculture. Uncountable Jewish

249 Ibid 170-171.
expression sprouted from the activities of the “New Jews,” from Jewish Student Unions on campus to Jewish electric dance parties. The number of Jewish youth groups mushroomed.

In 1965, the SSSJ was frustrated that some Jewish students were more concerned with the Civil Rights struggle than the plight of Soviet Jewry. Their press release printed shortly before Jericho March complained, “Jewish students are all aflame – and credibly so – about Selma. But injustice in the Ukraine must also be fought, though it is distant but surely no more distant than Vietnam.”250 The Six Day War flipped the image; Jewish students previous active in leftist causes were interested in kindling their Jewish passions through groups like SSSJ. Birnbaum had clearly moved far beyond stirring the American Jewish community to action, his first goal back in 1964.

3.8: Conclusion

“There is a persistent inability on their [“The 24”] part to understand that the heart of our work has to be on the drive to awaken a nationwide grassroots ferment,” Birnbaum complained in a letter to Rabbi Heschel shortly before the 1965 Menorah March. He outlined four faults: the programming deficiency, the shortage of staff, the lack of seminars from rabbis and community leaders, and “the refusal of leadership to reorder their priorities, financially speaking.”251 Yet, by the decade, many of Birnbaum’s qualms with the Jewish establishment had been addressed. It had agreed to work with Birnbaum, and even follow his lead during the Passover protest. They had distributed two hundred and

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fifty thousand booklets that instructed Jews around the world to include extra matzoh in their Seders to be reminded of the lack of matzoh in the Soviet Union. Even half a year before the war, on December 11, 1966, the groups organized a massive national demonstration in thirty-seven American cities, with 50,000 attendees. Despite their reluctances, the New York chapter of the American Jewish Committee for Soviet Jewry had adopted the SSSJ’s language and learned to link Jewish symbolisms to mass protests. They had heard the commotion down below and responded. Instead of working separately towards the same goal—as they had started out—the AJCSJ and the SSSJ, along with like-minded activist groups across the United States, now focused on public opinion.\(^{252}\)

The Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry forged the narrative that was the early years of the Soviet Jewry Movement. Through mass protests, they led thousands, if not hundreds of thousands around the world, to united behind their cause. While there was still plenty to do to move Washington to action, by the end of the decade, the SSSJ had effectively achieved Birnbaum’s foremost goal: pushing the Jewish establishment to grassroots action. Their mass rallies defied the gentle push of Jewish institutions.

SSSJ’s strategy intentionally incorporated Jewish symbolism in what Professor Shaul Kelner of Vanderbilt University calls “ritualized protest.”\(^{253}\) Jewish youth, led by Birnbaum, denotated Jewish concepts usually reserved for prayer spaces. The performances asserted a sacredness only used in the private sphere. Their emblems—


shofars, liturgy, and menorahs—cemented the distinctly Jewish nature to the demonstration in an era of protests. “The symbols we used were easy to understand,” Richter later explained, “it was easy for us as Jews to understand, and it was easy for non-Jews after a while to identify it as a Jewish symbol.” Furthermore, in these early years, the SSSJ organized around Jewish speakers and led campaigns in Jewish neighborhoods, and sowed the seeds that formed the first expression of Jewish counterculture. Birnbaum tapped into a disenchanted Jewish youth with the call for “spiritual redemption,” as SSSJ energized a dissatisfied generation concerned with the “inauthentic” state of their Jews in the United States. The SSSJ’s novel form of protest—Jewish expression in a public space—amalgamated Jewish membership and universalized humanity into one space. “I visualize the day when a great menorah—symbolizing the light of freedom—should be set up annually in a place like Times Square,” penned Birnbaum to various American leaders in 1965.

The SSSJ embraced the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement. Their success partially came from the cry for justice that plagued the American 1960s—the group exhibited the same motives of other liberation movements. The Civil Rights Movement marched to religious hymns, and the SSSJ marched and sang. The anti-war movement held pickets, as did the SSSJ. Young Jews and their allies gravitated to the SSSJ’s call for justice.

But SSSJ’s distinctive nature came from its ability to channel the energy of Holocaust trauma—it ran deep through the identity of the group. In Hadassah magazine spread printed in December 1965, Birnbaum described the motivating factor behind the Soviet Jewry campaign:

“the imagination of youth to whom the Nazi disaster represents not simply a historical fact but a pressing reminder of the need for Jewish brotherly concern. Fate prevented these students from being alive in the 1930s and early 1940s and they are determined that this horror, in any of its manifestations, not be repeated in their generation.”

For young teenagers like Yossi Klein Halevi, who joined the SSSJ in 1965 shortly after the Jericho March, the SSSJ delivered a generational answer. “Instead of fighting the American Nazi Party, holdovers from my father’s war,” Halevi wrote, “I’d be playing out the next phase of Jewish history.” In securing equal rights for Soviet Jews, they would not fall into the trap of American Jewish silence of the 1930s and 1940s. Halevi found himself in SSSJ’s ranks: the movement drove young Jews like him, with a feeling of connection to the Jewish community to join a community that would redeem a history of inaction.

Birnbaum was especially proud that his organization became a dynamic platform to develop young activists’ Jewish passions. He believed that SSSJ and alternative Jewish youth groups like it would be the breeding ground on which the Jewish community’s future leaders would emerge. In many regards, he was right—today’s Jewish communal, religious, and political leaders got their start as Soviet Jewry

Movement activists. To name but a few Jewish leaders not yet mentioned: Dennis Prager, today an American political Conservative leader and vocal Zionist advocate, was a founding member of the SSSJ. Rabbi Hillel Goldberg, also a founding member of SSSJ, has written numerous publications and runs arguably the longest standing Jewish newspaper column. Malcolm Hoenlein, today the president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, had been an early SSSJ activist in the 1960s. The movement counter later Jewish leaders as well from Yossi Abromowitz, an Israeli pioneer in green energy, to David Makovsky, the director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy Project on the Middle East Peace Process.

The SSSJ, and by extension the World Union of Jewish Students, were the first youth group to respond to the Soviet Jewish plea for freedom. Remembering the Holocaust, they channeled the spirit of the 1960s to call for equal rights halfway across the globe. Their actions mobilized a consciousness for Soviet Jewry that, by the end of the 1960s, were normative in the American Jewish community. While at first a polarizing group, the SSSJ’s practices from its founding May Day Rally in 1964 became the Jewish community’s common practice. Without a doubt, the Soviet Jewry Movement was beholden to SSSJ—for its campaign to move the American Jewish community away from “quiet diplomacy,” for its confrontational leadership style, and for its unique ability to galvanize Jewish youth.
EPILOGUE: JACKSON-VANIK AND THE ROAD TO WASHINGTON

The Jewish community near-unanimously joined the Soviet Jewry Movement. “Towards the end of the 1960s, most of the Jewish communities in the free world had gradually become actively involved in the campaign, both nationally and locally,” wrote Nehemiah Levanon.\textsuperscript{260} The Jewish petitions after 1967 to leave the Soviet Union changed the totality of the Soviet Jewry Movement. The \textit{Lishka} oriented its movement goals to personify Jewish asylum seekers in the USSR. For the first time, the State of Israel publicly criticized the Soviet Union’s mistreatment of its Jews. During a televised address on the Knesset floor in November 1969, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir read the passionate letter from the eighteen Georgian Jewish families that petitioned to leave. Meir declared that there would be no more “quiet talks and quiet diplomacy,” and demanded that all Jews who wish to emigrate may be able to do so. The AJCSJ followed suit, adopting the personification of Soviet Jewish refugees into their campaigns of mass protest.\textsuperscript{261}

As the Soviet Jewry Movement grew, so did its base. A federation of New York-based Jewish organizations materialized under Malcolm Hoenlein, a former SSSJ activist, and modeled the SSSJ’s organizing style. The AJCSJ was replaced with the National


\textsuperscript{261}Klein, Halevi Y (2004). Jacob Birnbaum and the Struggle for Soviet Jewry. \textit{Azure Journal}. Jerusalem. 14; Beckerman, G. \textit{When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone}. 164-165.
Conference on Soviet Jewry, an organization like the AJCSJ, but with a budget and staff (and now composed of twenty-seven organizations, instead of twenty-four). The NCSJ was an independent umbrella organization with one purpose: Soviet Jewish freedom. The Soviet Jewry Movement’s sheer strength was shown from February 24 to February 27th, 1971, as eight hundred delegates from thirty-eight countries, including youth groups and diplomats, gathered in Brussels, Belgium. The movement’s first success came in 1969, when 3,019 Jews were granted exit visas. While immigration slowed to 992 in 1970, successful mass protest led to 12,839 more Soviet Jews making their way to Israel in 1971. Despite various limitations put on Soviet Jews, 33,652 refugees left in 1972.

The mounted international campaign had pressured the Soviet Union, but still failed to move it. One of the NCSJ’s main activities was lobbying on Capitol Hill; they utilized the Cold War, finding help in the many members of Congress who were staunchly anti-Communist and saw the Soviet Union as the embodiment of evil. They found their Cold Warrior in Washington senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, who held staunchly anti-Soviet views. Jackson disagreed with Nixon’s policy of détente; while Nixon and Kissinger were working on trade agreements with the Soviets, Jackson’s main worry lied in keeping an undemocratic global force in power.

Jackson furiously attacked the Soviet “diploma tax” imposed on August 3, 1972 on Soviet citizens wishing to emigrate, forcing those wishing to leave to pay off the state for the higher education they received. He referred to in Universal Declaration of Human Rights, holding the conviction that “everyone has the right to leave any country, including

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262 Beckerman, G. *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone*. 224-225, 279.
264 Beckerman, G. *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone*. 274-275.
his own.”

Jackson knew that Soviet Union, facing stagnation and a deficit, needed trade agreement with the United States. He unveiled a new type of proposal to on September 26th, 1972: one that would tackle Soviet domestic policy. The proposed bill would be an amendment to any trade act with the Kremlin, and would deny “most favored nation” status to any country that limited migration. American Jewish organizations jumped on board unanimously.

In a span of weeks, with the help of a fast-acting NCSJ and various Soviet Jewry groups, Jackson gathered the symbolic support of three-quarters of the Senate floor. Representative Charles A. Vanik introduced the bill to the House of Representatives in January 1973, and by February he had majority support. The amendment played politics. Nixon, who only spoke of the Soviet Jewry Movement in regards to Leningrad Trials that had sentenced Soviet Jews to death in 1970, was forced to make a decision. Though problematic in terms of his and Kissinger’s détente, Nixon needed the Jewish vote to secure the presidency and addressed the proposed bill with ambiguity.

The Jackson-Vanik Amendment pinned the American Jewish community against the Nixon administration, a conflict they had tried to avoid. Nevertheless, the NCSJ responded to grassroots demands and firmly stood behind it. Nixon and Kissinger conceded that the amendment would pass in 1974. The Soviets, too, were astonished at the “Zionists.” At the closed-doors meeting of the Central Committee Secretariat in Moscow in March 1973, Soviet Premier Brezhnev badgered Andropov, the head of the

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KGB: “this is why Zionists are yelling. Jackson relies on this…. when the Zionists have incited a campaign around the Jackson Amendment and around the bill on granting us [most favored nation] status, we need to let them out.” 267

President Gerald Ford signed the legislature for the Trade Reform Act, with its Jackson-Vanik Amendment, into law on January 3, 1975. The Soviet Union kept to its promise in the coming years, and Soviet Jews migrated in record numbers. 28,000 thousand Jewish refugees migrated in 1978, and more than 51,000 left in 1979. The Jackson-Vanik Amendment was a tremendous victory for the Soviet Jewry Movement and for human rights. 268

The 1980s marked the final push for the Soviet Jewry Movement. Escalating Cold War tensions closed the straights to emigration in December 1979. Soviet leaders reversed their emigration policy and repressed internal Soviet dissent, taking measures to prevent Jews, and for that matter, any minorities, from leaving. In general, Soviet internal repression had reached new heights in the first half of the 1980s. The rate of emigration for Soviet Jews dropped to a level not seen in two decades. 269

The Soviet Jewry Movement organized daily to keep Soviet Jewry on the agenda in Washington and in the minds of everyday people. They did so successfully, as American diplomats saw the Soviet Jewry issue as one of human rights. The issue was

on the top of the Cold War agenda. President Ronald Reagan, an adamant Cold Warrior with no trust for the Soviets, met Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev to discuss nuclear disarmament at the 1986 Geneva Summit. Soviet Jewry was on the table. Morris Abram, a confidant of Reagan, later reported that Reagan had told him, “if the Soviet Union cannot be trusted to keep its word with respect to existing international obligations on emigration and other Jewish rights, it cannot be trusted to keep its word with respect to arms.”

Two-hundred and fifty thousand people descended on the National Mall on December 6, 1987, for the Freedom Sunday for Soviet Jewry, twenty-four hours before Gorbachev’s visit. Jews and non-Jews flew in from around the United States, Canada, and Israel in what was the biggest rally for the movement. In the spirit of SSSJ, the singing of “Let My People Go” and the sounding of the shofar opened the rally. The speakers cast Gorbachev’s domestic reforms of openness and transparency; “But openness begins at the border,” Vice President George Bush Sr. declared to the large crowd. He promised to personally raise the issue to Gorbachev.

By 1989, Western pressure and a crumbling empire opened the USSR’s borders to emigration. That year, 72,000 Jewish refugees emigrated, and that number nearly tripled, to 213,000 in 1990. In 1991, the Soviet Union’s last year of existence, 180,000 more made their way out, mostly to Israel. The Soviet Jewry Movement had been validated.

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270 Beckerman, G. When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone. 478.
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