Jewish Identity and Religion in the Soviet Union

Historical Background

Russia in the early 1900s was an environment that was ripe for revolution. Millions of serfs and workers lived in abject poverty while they were ruled by an out of touch, elite class. Communism seemed like an attractive alternative: it meant that property and wealth were confiscated from individuals, and divided equally among all. However, in order to establish a Communist state, the Czar and his family had to be removed from power as did all elites who might question and threaten the new regime. There was in-fighting among the various Communist upstarts (such as the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks) as to the best way to achieve a Communist state. This caused the Russian path to Communism to be messy, bloody, and unstable. The progression stretched from the first uprisings in the early 1900s to the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922. The following focuses on the Jewish experience during and beyond this tumultuous period.

The February Revolution of 1917 brought changes to the anti-Jewish policies of the Empire and cancelled restrictions on Jews imposed by the Czarist regime. Jews became involved in all areas of public life, rose in the ranks in every profession, and were active politically. However, the weakening of the provisional government led to a return of anti-Semitism and to occasional pogroms. In October of 1917, the Bolshevik revolution led to civil war in Russia which lasted until 1921. The Red and White armies assaulted and massacred Jews as they passed through their territory. Officially, the Red Army rejected anti-Semitism, however they did not succeed in totally oppressing it. In contrast, the White Army was extremely anti-Semitic as can be seen from its slogan "Strike at the Jews and save Russia!" They massacred Jews in over 500 communities. The Balfour Declaration in November, 1917 greatly affected the Jews and gave them new hope. It motivated them to establish an organization to represent all Jews in Russia.

In 1922, the USSR emerged as a socialist state run by the Communist Party (led by Vladimir Lenin), of which several officials were Jewish (including Leon Trotsky). Joseph Stalin took over the Communist Party after Lenin's death. He persecuted his opposition, arresting them, sending them to forced labor camps and even executing them. Among others, Jews suffered

economically due to the shift in power which abolished private commerce and confiscated property. Stalin and the Communist Party officially rejected anti-Semitism, but wanted the Jews to assimilate. They took on anti-Semitic policies under the term "anti-Zionism", as the term "anti-Semitism" was associated with Nazi Germany. However, because of its official policy against anti-Semitism, the soviet regime gained the support of the Jews who eagerly joined the red army and became high ranking officials. Jewish sections were set up within the Communist Party whose job it was to deal with the affairs of the Jews.

While freedom to hold religious services was guaranteed by the constitution, the Communist Party regarded religion as incompatible with Marxism and therefore used a range of official measures to discourage religion and curb activities of religious groups. The secular state put forth anti-religious laws which led to persecution of members of all religions. Public teaching of religion was forbidden and churches, synagogues and mosques were closed. All religious institutions were monitored by the soviet government, but the persecution of Judaism was incomparable to that of other religions. Schools were closed, Jewish cultural activity was hindered, and usage of Hebrew was banned. This led to the flourishing of the Yiddish language and literature, the content of which, however, needed to be Communist. Several secular Yiddish schools opened, however, most children still attended Russian schools. The general secularization of the Soviet Union led to high assimilation rates among the Jews. By the end of the 1930's no Jewish organizations existed. The Zionist movement did survive, however it was forced to go underground as it was seen as a threat to the Soviet regime because it strengthened Jewish nationalism and used intellectuals who would otherwise be valuable to the regime. Many Zionists were arrested and or sent to work in labor camps. Many were exiled. Jews suffered in silence in the violent police state which was the Soviet Union.

WWII brought with it a continuation of suppression of Jewish national activity, education, and culture. Communication was cut off between Jews of the Soviet Union and the rest of the Jewish world. When the Germans invaded in 1941, they targeted the Jewish population, killing all who crossed their path, including Jews who had previously shed their Jewish identities. A quarter of the Jews in occupied parts of the Soviet Union managed to escape their hands, but over 2.5 million were killed. In areas not occupied by the Germans, many Jewish solders fought in the Soviet army. The Nazis succeeded in arousing anti-Semitism among the Soviet public who in some ways served as accomplices to their evil acts. The Holocaust solidified the destruction of Jewish culture and identity which had begun decades before.