

*Cahiers du*  
MONDE RUSSE

## **Cahiers du monde russe**

Russie - Empire russe - Union soviétique et États  
indépendants

**49/2-3 | 2008**  
**Sortie de guerre**

---

### **Jews under Soviet Rule**

Attempts by religious communities to renew Jewish life during the  
postwar reconstruction period The case of Belorussia, 1944-1953

**Leonid Smilovitsky**

---



#### **Édition électronique**

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/9139>  
DOI : 10.4000/monderusse.9139  
ISSN : 1777-5388

#### **Éditeur**

Éditions de l'EHESS

#### **Édition imprimée**

Date de publication : 20 septembre 2008  
Pagination : 475-514  
ISBN : 978-2-7132-2196-5  
ISSN : 1252-6576

#### **Référence électronique**

Leonid Smilovitsky, « Jews under Soviet Rule », *Cahiers du monde russe* [En ligne], 49/2-3 | 2008, mis en  
ligne le 01 janvier 2011, Consulté le 30 avril 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/9139> ; DOI : 10.4000/monderusse.9139

---

Cet article est disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

[http://www.cairn.info/article.php?ID\\_REVUE=CMR&ID\\_NUMPUBLIE=CMR\\_49&ID\\_ARTICLE=CMR\\_492\\_0475](http://www.cairn.info/article.php?ID_REVUE=CMR&ID_NUMPUBLIE=CMR_49&ID_ARTICLE=CMR_492_0475)

---

## Jews under Soviet Rule. Attempts by religious communities to renew Jewish life during the postwar reconstruction period

par Leonid SMILOVITSKY

| Editions de l'EHESS | *Cahiers du monde russe*

**2008/2-3 - Vol 49**

ISSN 1252-6576 | ISBN 9782713221965 | pages 475 à 514

---

Pour citer cet article :

– Smilovitsky L., Jews under Soviet Rule. Attempts by religious communities to renew Jewish life during the postwar reconstruction period The case of Belorussia, 1944-1953, *Cahiers du monde russe* 2008/2-3, Vol 49, p. 475-514.

---

Distribution électronique Cairn pour les Editions de l'EHESS.

© Editions de l'EHESS. Tous droits réservés pour tous pays.

La reproduction ou représentation de cet article, notamment par photocopie, n'est autorisée que dans les limites des conditions générales d'utilisation du site ou, le cas échéant, des conditions générales de la licence souscrite par votre établissement. Toute autre reproduction ou représentation, en tout ou partie, sous quelque forme et de quelque manière que ce soit, est interdite sauf accord préalable et écrit de l'éditeur, en dehors des cas prévus par la législation en vigueur en France. Il est précisé que son stockage dans une base de données est également interdit.

LEONID SMILOVITSKY

## JEWS UNDER SOVIET RULE

### Attempts by religious communities to renew Jewish life during the postwar reconstruction period The case of Belorussia, 1944-1953

During World War II, Jewish life in Nazi-occupied territory came to a complete stop. Among thousands of refugees who managed to escape and were sent to Siberia, the Povolzh'ie, the Urals, Central Asia and Kazakhstan, were practicing Jews who joined small local communities. It was a difficult thing to preserve tradition under the circumstances of war. In the summer of 1944, when Belorussia was liberated, virtually no synagogues or prayer houses had remained intact. Buildings had been destroyed and looted of their ritual objects, interior decorations and furniture, and old Torah scrolls and precious libraries had been ravaged by the Nazis and their collaborators. Most people hoped to return to their place of residence after the liberation. These hopes, however, failed to materialize. The rise of Jewish national consciousness was regarded by the authorities as a challenge aimed at defying the regime, a challenge that cast doubt on the virtues of the Socialist way of life.

Studies of Jewish national and religious life are of great importance. Western scholars were long denied access to archives and had to confine themselves to official materials available from Soviet sources. These consisted of publications on history, politics, law, scientific research, legislative acts related to religious matters, periodicals, as well as indirect evidence derived from memoirs of contemporaries who had participated in or witnessed particular events. Recently, the source corpus related to the problem has expanded, and many archive materials are now available, which in combination with the evidence collected from contemporaries makes it possible to tell the real history of Belorussian Jewry.

Major works here were conducted by B. Goldberg<sup>1</sup>, A. Gershuni<sup>2</sup>, J. Rothenberg<sup>3</sup>, N. Gottlieb<sup>4</sup>, Y. Ro'i<sup>5</sup>, A. Greenbaum<sup>6</sup> and M. Altshuler<sup>7</sup>.

Some documents shedding light on religious life have appeared in recent years.<sup>8</sup> The former Communist Party and State archives in Moscow and Belorussia have preserved a lot of important data on the topic. Most of them had top secret status and remained closed for more than 70 years because they gave a real picture of the regime's activity against practicing Jews and their congregations. General information on the situation of the religious population in the Soviet Union is provided in the works by John Anderson, Jane Ellis, John Forest, Walter Kolarz, Robert Conquest and others.<sup>9</sup>

1. Ben Zion Goldberg, *Yidn in Ratn-Farband : zeyer lage, zeyere problemen, zeyer tsukunft* [The Jews in the Soviet Union] (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1965).

2. A.A. Gershuni, *Yehudim ve-yahadut bi-Verit ha-mo'atsot, Yahadut Rusyah mi-tekufat Stalin ve-'ad ha-zeman ha-aharon* [Jews and Judaism in the USSR. Russian Jewry from the Period of Stalin until Recent Times] (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1970); Idem, "Bor'ba khasidov Chabada za vyezd iz SSSR" [Struggle of the HADB's khasids for exit from the USSR], *Vozrozhdenie*, no. 8 (1986):158-169; no. 9 (1986):170-197.

3. Joshua Rothenberg, *Judaism in the Soviet Union: "A Second Class" Religion?* (Waltham (MA): Brandeis University, 1971); Idem, *The Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union*, (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1971).

4. Rabbi N.Z. Gottlieb, *In the Shadow of the Kremlin: Personal Sagas of Jews who Risked Their Lives and Suffered Imprisonment in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Mesorah publications, 1985).

5. Yaacov Ro'i, "The Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union after World War II," in Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union* (London-Portland: Frank Cass (Cummings center series, 1995).

6. Abraham Greenbaum, "The Soviet Rabbinate after World War II," *Shvut*, 14 (1990): 197-202; Idem, "Rabbi Shlomo (Solomon) Shliffer and Jewish Religious Life in the Soviet Union, 1943-1957," *Shvut*, 8, 24 (1999): 123-132.

7. Mordechai Altshuler, "Synagogues and Rabbis in the Soviet Union in the Light of Statistics, 1953-1964," *Jews in Eastern Europe*, 1, 35 (1998): 39-46; "Synagogues in the Soviet Union on Passover 1953," *Jews in Eastern Europe*, 3, 46 (2001): 58-76; *Judaism in the Soviet Vise: Between Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union, 1941-1964*, (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar le-toldot, 2007).

8. Felix Corley, *Religion in the Soviet Union: An Archival Reader* (London-Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); N.N. Pokrovskii, S.G. Petrov, eds., *Arkhivy Kremliia: Politbiuro i tserkov', 1922-1925* [Kremlin's Archives: Politburo and Church] (M.: Ross. polit. Enciklopediia — Novosibirsk: Sibirskii khronograf, 1997); U.I. Navitskii, ed., *Kanfessii na Belarusi, kanets 18-20 st.* [Religious Dominations in Belarus in 18-20<sup>th</sup> centuries] (Minsk 1998); O.V. Budnitskii, ed., *Evrei i russkaia revoliutsiia: Materialy i issledovaniia* [Jews and Russian Revolution: Materials and Research] (Moscow-Jerusalem: Gesharim, 1999).

9. John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and the Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jane Ellis, *The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); John Forest, *Religion in the New Russia: The Impact of perestroika on the varieties of Religious Life in the Soviet Union* (New York: Crossroad, 1990); Walter Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union* (London: Macmillan, 1961); Robert Conquest, ed., *Religion in the USSR* (London: Bodley Head, 1968); Sholom Duber Levin, *Toldot habad be-russia ha-sovetit* [History of HABAD in Soviet Russia] (Brooklyn, 1989); Sabrina P. Ramet, ed., *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Meir Galperin, ed., *Ha-Gadol mi-Minsk. Rabbi Yeruhm Yehuda Perelman* [Great Rabbi of Minsk] (Jerusalem, 1999); Michael Beizer, *Sinagogi SNG v proshlom i nastoiashchem: nashe nasledstvo / Our Legacy: The CIS Synagogues, Past and Present* (M.: Mosty kul'tury — Jerusalem: Gesharim, 2002).

The main idea of the present paper is to characterize Soviet religious policy in Belorussia during the first postwar decade, when observing Jews, upon their return from evacuation and the Red Army, tried to rebuild and reopen synagogues, legalize prayer houses, perpetuate a memory of the Holocaust, rebirth national self-awareness and tradition. For such purpose, we make a general description of the Jewish population and observers in Belorussia immediately after the liberation of the republic and in the following decade. Special attention is paid to the establishment of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC) and its representatives' activity in the BSSR, to worshippers' attempts to renew their congregations, to the role of *minyans* and *shtiebels*, to the obstacles standing in the way of Jewish religious revival, to victimization and persecution as a logical continuation in the process of putting an end to postwar religious revival.

Some aspects of these efforts have been described in a number of our previous papers.<sup>10</sup>

### 1. The Jewish population and worshippers of Belorussia

The tragedy of the Holocaust had a great impact on Jewish observers. Before World War II, 375,000 Jews lived in the eastern parts of the republic (BSSR). When the USSR annexed Brest, Pinsk, Grodno, Molodechno and some other regions of western Belorussia from Poland in September 1939, the Jewish population of the republic increased by more than 400,000, to nearly 800,000. During the short period between 1939 and 1941, the Jewish population within the new borders of Belorussia grew to nearly 1,000,000 people as a result of the arrival of approximately 200,000 Jewish refugees from Central Poland to the BSSR.<sup>11</sup>

The Holocaust reduced the Jewish population of Belorussia by 80% and changed its social and cultural composition. The greatest number of victims was among Yiddish speakers, non-intellectuals who lived in small towns and clung to the old Jewish traditions of the Pale. In 1946-1948, only 2,500 Jews remained in the

---

10. Leonid Smilovitsky, "Jewish Religious Life in Bobruisk, 1944-1954," *Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2, 27 (1995):43-54, Centre for Research and Documentation of Hebrew University of Jerusalem; "Jewish Religious Life in Minsk, 1944-1953," *Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2, 30 (1996): 5-17; "Jewish Religious Leadership in Belorussia, 1939-1953," *Shvut*, 8, 24 (1999): 87-122; Y. Basin, ed., "Izdanie religioznoi evreiskoi literatury v Sovetskom Soiuzе na primere Belorusii, 1921-1941 gg." in *Belarus u 20 stagoddzi* ["Publication of Jewish Religious Literature in Belarus" in *Belarus in 20th century*], vol. 2 (Minsk, 2003), 301-309; "Rabbi Arye-Leyb ben Meyshe ber Shifman from Pukhovichi," *Journal of The Federation of East European Family History Societies*, Salt Lake City (USA), 12 (2004): 26-29 (<http://www.jewishgen.org/Belorussian/newsletter/RabbiShifman.htm>); "Turov: religioznaia zhizn' evreiskogo mestechka cherty osedlosti," [Turov: Religious Life of Shtetl in the Pale], *Arkhiv evreiskoi istorii* [Archive of the Jewish History], vol. 3 (Moscow, 2006), 143-165 ([http://souz.co.il/clubs/read.html?article=3222&Club\\_ID=1](http://souz.co.il/clubs/read.html?article=3222&Club_ID=1)).

11. Projektgruppe Belorussian, ed., *Die Partizipation der Juden am Leben der Belorussischen Sozialistischen Sowjetrepublik (BSSR) im ersten Nachkriegsjahrzehnt, 1944-1954. "Existiert das Ghetto noch?" Weissrussland: Jüdisches Überleben gegen nationalsozialistische Herrschaft* (Berlin: Assoziation A, 2003), 277-278.

city and oblast of Polotsk;<sup>12</sup> in the Mogilev oblast — 12,000.<sup>13</sup> In the small town of Kalinkovichi, Jews numbered 1,460 (as compared to 3,386 in 1939), and in Mozyr — 4,500 (6,307 in 1939).<sup>14</sup> More than 15,000 Jews lived in Minsk in 1950-1953 (70,998 in 1939). In some places of the republic, the number of Jews was supplemented by migrants from the rural areas. By 1953, the total population of Belorussia reached 7,693,400, partly due to an increased birth rate. It included people who had returned from the hinterland (Central Asia, Kazakhstan, the North Caucasus, and Russia), discharged soldiers and officers, work seekers from other Soviet republics, repatriates from Germany and other European countries.<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to estimate the number of Jews in Belorussia, because no overall statistical data were collected in the years 1945-1958, and the last census had been in 1939. However, judging by the results of the 1959 All-Union census, which listed 150,100 Jews out of a total population of 8,046,700 in Belorussia, one may assume that in 1953 no less than 130,000 Jews lived there.<sup>16</sup>

Statistics of observant Jews and synagogues frequently contained figures relating to the overall Jewish population as well.<sup>17</sup> In 1947, Mozyr had a Jewish population of 4,500, or 26% of the town's total population, but only 350 were officially listed as regular synagogue members; whereas in Kalinkovichi, 100 out of a population of 1,460 Jews were regular synagogue members.<sup>18</sup> In 1948 there were 360 observant Jews in Orsha, over a thousand in Bobruisk,<sup>19</sup> and 2,500 in the Polotsk oblast. In 1950-1953, about 3,000 of a total of 15,000 Jews in Minsk observed Jewish traditions to some degree and celebrated Jewish holidays. At the same time, 200 of the 300 Jewish families in Brest described themselves as “not

12. Report of Kechko, CARC representative of the Polotsk oblast for the first quarter of 1948, GARF (Gosudarstvennyi arhiv Rossiiskoi Federacii — State Archive of Russian Federation), f. 6991, d. 336, l. 39.

13. E. Eberlin, “Evrei na Mogilevshchine” [Jews in the Mohilev Oblast], archives of the newspaper *Einigkeit*, GARF, f. 8114, op. 1, d. 1131, l. 539.

14. Response of Volchkov, chairman of the Executive Committee of Mozyr Town Council to Ulasevich on December 17, 1947: CAHJP (Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem), RU 153.

15. Petr G. Nikitenko, Andrei A. Rakov, *Demograficheskie problemy sotsiuma; sostoianie i tendentsii razvitiia v Respublike Belarus'* [Demographic problems in the Republic of Belorussia, modern situation and development trends] (Minsk:Pravo i ekonomika, 2005), 16.

16. *Itogi Vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1959 goda. Belorusskaia SSR* [Results of the All-Union Population Census of 1959 Belorussian SSR] (M., 1963), 124-132; M. Altshuler, ed., *Distribution of the Jewish Population of the USSR, 1939* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1993), 38-40.

17. Report of Ulasevich, chairman of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR, to Poliansky, Gusarov and Ponomarenko on July 1, 1947, GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 257, l. 196.

18. Response of D. Strazhnikovich, chairman of the Executive Council of Kalinkovichi and secretary of the Executive Council of Kalinkovichi to Ulasevich on December 26, 1947, NARB (Natsional'nyi arkhiv Respubliki Belarus — National Archive of the Republic of Belarus), f. 952, op. 1, d. 13, p. 1, 13.

19. Report from N. Tagiev, member of the Executive Committee of CARC in Moscow on June 15, 1949, GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 24, p. 52.

indifferent to religion.” The same pattern appears in the religious congregations of Gomel’, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Zhlobin, Rechitsa and Pinsk, numbering in each city between several hundred and 5,000 members.<sup>20</sup>

The war had brought about basic changes in the demographic and social profile of the religious Jewish community in Belorussia. The Holocaust had reduced their numbers drastically, altered age and gender patterns of congregations, and caused changes in occupational and educational patterns as well. The prayer services mostly drew elderly people, for whom observing the traditions remained an integral part of their lifestyle. In time, their efforts to retain their faith became stronger, while temporary indulgences on the part of the authorities produced vain hopes that the situation would change for the better. Far fewer women than men in the observant community came to the prayer houses, which made it even more difficult for the authorities to establish the exact numbers of religious Jews. Yet many women observed the traditions at home behind closed doors, and they often encouraged their husbands to retain the faith of their forebears.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the authorities did not succeed in their attempts to force observant Jews to abandon their faith and their values. This was probably because Jewish tradition was preserved mainly inside the home and not in public venues. Though the number of observant Jews had shrunk, this did not shatter the faith of a core of stalwart people. On the contrary, restrictions and prohibitions imposed by the regime only strengthened the Jews’ national consciousness.

## 2. Establishment of CARC

In May 1944, the CARC<sup>21</sup> was opened under the auspices of the Soviet government (the Council of People’s Commissars). While its main office was in Moscow, it had commissioners in each of the union republics, the one in Minsk being assigned the task of regulating relations with all official religious minorities in Belorussia, including Jews, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Muslims, Buddhists, and other religious sects.<sup>22</sup> The Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church had been established in 1943 to oversee the majority religion.<sup>23</sup> Regarding interfaith relations, the regime constantly reiterated that all

20. Report of Dzezhko to Ulasevich from Brest on October 30, 1954: GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 277, l. 249; d. 336, l. 39.

21. CARC: Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the Council of Ministers of Belorussia [SDRK — Sovet po delam religioznykh kul’tov pri Sovete Ministrov BSSR].

22. The terms “sect” and “sectarian” were used pejoratively since Tsarist times to refer to religious associations formed by minority congregations or communities engaging in religious activities that were not officially approved. The Soviet regime never used the terms “congregation” or “community” for minorities such as Protestants, Seventh Day Adventists, Baptists and Evangelic Christians, but consistently employed the word “sect” instead.

23. *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov’ i Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina, Sbornik dokumentov* [The Russian Orthodox Church and the Great Patriotic War. Collection of documents] (M., 1943), 5; Ellis, *The Russian Orthodox Church...*, p. 6.

religious denominations in the Soviet Union should enjoy equal rights, without dominating or persecuting one another.<sup>24</sup>

The Council was to draft religious legislation, to oversee the execution of governmental acts and decrees, to register congregations, prayer houses and their equipment, and theoretically was meant to provide religious communities with ritual items and religious literature. In addition, CARC was to act as a neutral arbitrator in cases of disputes between religious communities and local Soviet authorities, and had the right to demand information from regional Party committees and Soviet State organs of power related to religious cults. All state and public institutions and departments had to get Council approval for any activity related to religious life. As CARC's purpose was to exert greater control over the activities of minority religions, it did not introduce changes in state policy but functioned chiefly as a bureaucratic organization.

Soviet policy towards religion had been spelled out in the following pieces of legislation. The decree "On the Separation of the Church from the State and the School from the Church," issued on January 23, 1918,<sup>25</sup> deprived all religious organizations of the status of legal entity and of the possibility to own property, including synagogues and cemeteries. Private (individually owned) synagogues were expropriated together with other property of their owners. Jewish schools were transferred to the authority of the People's Commissariat (Ministry) of Education, Jewish hospitals — to the Commissariat of Public Health and Jewish almshouses — to municipal departments that provided social services, etc. Religious communities were forbidden to collect membership fees and wealthy contributors were either bankrupt due to the imposition of Soviet rule or had emigrated. Hence, due to the lack of financial resources, after the Revolution old synagogues were hardly ever repaired and new ones were not constructed. Many synagogues in Belorussia were damaged, destroyed, or desecrated during military operations or pogroms of the Civil War from 1918 to 1921.

During the NEP (New Economic Policy, 1921-1928), there was a short period of liberalization in state policy towards religion. The years 1928-1929, when the remnants of the market economy were liquidated, were marked by new antireligious legislation. The Law on Religious Associations of April 8, 1929<sup>26</sup> greatly restricted the rights of the congregants. Freedom of religious and antireligious propaganda was changed to "freedom of religious confession and antireligious propaganda." The regime referred to synagogues as clubs for businessmen and Zionists, and networks for the spreading of anti-Soviet slander. Campaigns of mass closure of churches and synagogues started.

---

24. "Ob organizatsii Soveta po delam religioznykh kul'tov" [The organization of CARC. Decree of the Soviet government]. Postanovlenie SNK SSSR no. 572, May 19, 1944, GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 1, l. 2-6.

25. P. Gidulianov, *Otdelenie tserkvi ot gosudarstva v SSSR* [The separation of church and state in the USSR] (M., 1926), 138-147.

26. N. Orleanskii, *Zakon o religioznykh ob'edineniakh RSFSR* [The Law on religious associations in the RSFSR] (M.: Izd. Bezbozhnik, 1930), 6-25.



Article no. 124 of the Soviet Constitution (1936) declared freedom to hold religious services. It was claimed that religion in the Soviet Union had no social roots and retained relevance only for a fraction of the population as a remnant of capitalism. The “tenacity of religious superstitions” was described as a temporary phenomenon, since the majority of observers were actively engaged in building communist society.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, in 1936-1938 came a new wave of repression against Jewish religious activity. This time the majority of the remaining synagogues — often the last ones in their respective cities — were closed. In September 1939, in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Red Army occupied western Belorussia with a large traditional Jewish population. After the beginning of the Soviet-German war in June 1941, all synagogues stopped functioning, were destroyed or burnt down, and those Jews who were not evacuated or exiled, perished.

Despite its clearly negative attitude to religion, against the backdrop of the war, the regime wanted to gain maximal political support. As the economy also had to be rebuilt, the regime considered it politically expedient to avoid tension among the populace<sup>28</sup> and to moderate local authorities’ antireligious tendencies. Between 1921 and 1941, while atheists had enjoyed widespread approval for their activities, observers had been persecuted, many places of worship had been destroyed or sequestered, and massive repressions, arrests and deportations of religious figures had taken place. CARC now recommended that local authorities refrain from imposing administrative sanctions on religious people and be guided entirely by prudent political considerations. The July 1945 conference of CARC commissioners in Moscow criticized the attitude of certain administrative and party officials in some regions of the country who regarded the establishment of CARC as a temporary, war-related measure that was unworthy of serious cooperation or involvement. This lack of motivation in cooperating with CARC either resulted from skeptical attitudes concerning the viability of religions or from the shortage of resources local authorities suffered in the postwar years. The conference organizers made it clear that the mission of CARC was a “long-term responsibility of high importance,”<sup>29</sup> and ordered local authorities not to obstruct the religious revival occurring nationwide.

But it was one thing to make political declarations, and quite another to implement them. The actual attitude towards the various religious denominations was quite different from the official one. Religious people had been branded as public enemies of the regime for the last twenty years, and local authorities were not inclined to cooperate with them after 1945. This difference was especially pronounced in Belorussia with its traditionally multinational population and

---

27. Artur G. Dalgatov, *Pravitel'stvennaia politika po otnosheniiu k etnokonfessional'nyim men'shinstvam: "evreiskii vopros" v zhizni sovetskogo obshchestva (okt. 1917go-nachalo 1930kh godov.)* [Government policy towards ethno-confessional minorities: the “Jewish question” in the life of Soviet society, Oct. 1917-early 1930s] (SPb.: Nestor, 2002), p. 129.

28. Navitsky, ed., *Kanfessii na Belarusi* ..., p. 234-235.

29. “The role and goals of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the Council of Ministers of the USSR.” Informative report. Only for CARC staff members, Moscow, June 1, 1945. YVA (Yad Vashem Archives), M-46/3, p. 11.

multiconfessional religious structure. Western Belorussia had become a part of the USSR only in 1939, and its socio-economic system had not yet undergone total sovietization or russification. Almost all the faiths were represented in Belorussia despite its relatively small size (220,000 km<sup>2</sup>): the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, Protestantism, Islam and Judaism.

### 3. CARC commissioners

The Institution of CARC commissioners was in charge of working with religious communities at the local level. At this local level, it is essential to note how on the one hand, central policies of tolerance in the immediate postwar years were often contradicted by resistance on the part of local officials, while on the other hand, impotence of local officials could also be exploited by congregants to soften central repressive policies. We will try to shed some light on those paradoxes of the local implementation of centrally promoted policies by examining the recruitment, work conditions and activity of CARC commissioners.

CARC's assignment included control over the situation and trends within religious communities, coordination of communication between the state and party leadership, local authorities and religious communities. CARC was also in charge of monitoring observers' political views, state of mind, and reaction to political and social developments in the republic.

On May 29, 1944, CARC staff were appointed at Councils of People's Commissars (after 1946, Councils of Ministers) of union and autonomous republics, as well as at region and territory (*krai*) councils of deputies; the officials were to report directly to the USSR Council of Ministers. This was intended to endow them with broad powers. It was emphasized at the first All-Union convention of CARC commissioners (1945) that their work with observers should be conducted with utmost seriousness as they represented the Soviet state. Analysis of duties, staff membership and salary scales gives an insight into tasks, functions and routines special to the commissioners' work.<sup>30</sup>

The top leadership of CARC consisted of the Council's chairman, deputy chairman, two members of the Council and executive secretary. They were assisted by a staff of several consultants, a legal advisor and a librarian-interpreter. The administrative apparatus of the Council was divided into three departments. Affairs of Judaism, Buddhism and Islam were taken care of by the same department. Ivan Vladimirovich Poliansky, the first appointed CARC Chairman, was given the authority of a cabinet minister and received a monthly wage of 2,500 rubles. His deputy received 2,200 rubles monthly, and the wages of consultants, legal advisor and heads of departments were within the range of 1,600 to 1,400 rubles.<sup>31</sup>

---

30. YVA, collection M-46/25, p. 1-2.

31. One can get an idea of the scale of salaries by comparing them with those of CARC technical staff: clerk, courier — from 500 to 600 rubles; doorman, tea-counter attendant, janitor — from 250 to 300 rubles, GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 1, l. 1-7.

Starting from the autumn of 1945 and until the end of 1955, Kondratii Alekseevich Ulasevich, a functionary from Moscow, served in the capacity of CARC commissioner at the BSSR Council of Ministers.<sup>32</sup> Regional representatives of the CARC commissioner were subordinate to him (Doman'kov in Minsk, Kishkurno in Polesye oblast, Dzezhko in Brest, Chizh in Grodno, Brylev in Pinsk, etc.). The issue of cadre selection was of crucial importance, since CARC representatives were supposed to be individuals of broad horizons, with professional skills, competent in the history of religion and specific features of various religious denominations and able to follow the latest trends and changes in Soviet legislation. The political, educational and professional background of a CARC representative was required to be equal to that of a political lecturer (*propagandist*) of a regional communist party committee. However, the actual opportunities for performing service duties available to representatives were not even nearly equal to those enjoyed by party and Soviet apparatchiks at the regional level.

The office of representatives was not regarded as prestigious, and staffs in some parts of the republic were not always complete. Despite the fact that representatives were appointed at high administrative levels (departments of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belorussia and the BSSR Council of Ministers), positions often remained vacant. In 1946, due exclusively to the personal efforts of the Central Committee of the Communist Party staff department, three new representatives were appointed: Ivanov (Baranovichi), Deriabin (Mogilev) and Volodin (Vitebsk). The selection sometimes proved wrong. There is evidence that Volodin had a weak general and poor political background. Dzezhko, the curator of the Brest oblast, turned out to be not fastidious enough and failed to gain the respect of subordinates even though he held a candidate of science degree and had previous experience as a lecturer. Safonov (Gomel' oblast) occasionally misunderstood his job duties, and Bogdanovich (Pinsk oblast) not capable of making independent decisions; as a result, practicing Jews often complained about his actions or simply ignored him. Throughout the year 1947, party bodies could not find appropriate replacements of the functionaries who had failed in their tasks in the oblasts of Molodechno and Polotsk.<sup>33</sup>

The exact administrative status and welfare standards of local CARC staff remained ill-defined. When the position of CARC representative for the Minsk oblast became vacant, the intention was to appoint a teacher from Baranovichi, a holder of an academic degree, a diligent, respected and tactful person whose knowledge was appropriate for the position.<sup>34</sup> However, the office did not grant him service housing, and he took another job. Salary rates for CARC staff were set by executive committees of district councils, which inevitably limited representatives' degree of independence and made them dependent on local authorities. Comrade Chizh, representative for the Grodno oblast, was the only one who managed to

---

32. NARB, f. 7, op. 4, d. 532, l. 139.

33. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 257, l. 98.

34. The person's name is not indicated in the documents.

secure himself a monthly wage of 1,300 rubles, while his colleagues in other districts got less. For this reason, representatives preferred to move to other jobs — at the public prosecutor's office, or in educational and welfare bodies, etc.<sup>35</sup>

The leadership of district communist party committees (party bodies) and executive committees of region councils (state bodies) did not regard CARC commissioners' tasks as important. Some representatives had to combine their duties as CARC employees with other assignments which they fulfilled at the command of district authorities. In 1946-1947, Kishkurno, representative for Polesye oblast, also worked in the capacity of head of the district fuel industry and paid little attention to the affairs of religious cults.<sup>36</sup>

CARC functionaries were frequently sent on lengthy business trips that had nothing to do with their official duties. The representative for the Molodechno oblast was sent to the Iyve district to check if kolkhozes were ready for the harvest campaign, and to the Volozhin district to check crop yields and supervise the handing of crops over to the state.<sup>37</sup> In the first quarter of 1947, K. Ulasevich was sent on a business trip, "not limited in time," to supervise the sowing campaign. In 1949-1953, CARC representatives for the oblasts of Baranovichi, Brest, Pinsk and Grodno were repeatedly sent on trips with assignments related to agriculture or other sectors of the economy.

Some CARC staff's working conditions did not meet basic requirements. Their offices were often located in poorly equipped premises and they lacked professional literature and even stationery. Some representatives complained that their offices were too small to even seat a visitor. In other cases, due to the lack of an anteroom, representatives of different denominations ran into one another in the doorway, while a representative thought it undesirable that one would know what the other had talked about in his office.

Representatives faced major hardships with transportation. Worshippers might address one as "*sir minister*", but when the latter had to visit remote areas on inspections, he had to take a walking stick and set off on foot, while clergymen were riding around in horse carriages and cars. Sometimes observers offered some aid that a representative found hard to reject, like butter, eggs, cheese and meat, calling it "by no means a bribe," but "a humble gift" and adding that they knew about the difficult situation of CARC staff. Occasionally, congregants attempted to influence a representative through actions of questionable legality. In 1946, in Polotsk, the authorities seized a house intended for use as a synagogue that had been purchased with money donated by practicing Jews. The latter looked for another solution. It became known to representative Kechko that they had built a wooden frame on Ostrovsky Street and had brought boards to make the roof. When he came to inspect the site in March, Jewish observers asked him how much it would cost to register the community, to which Kechko replied that communities

---

35. NARB, f. 7, op. 4, d. 19, l. 491.

36. Ibid., f. 4, op. 87, d. 690, l. 17-18.

37. Ibid., op. 3, d. 334, l. 11.

were not for sale. Then he was offered refreshments with alcoholic beverages, which he rejected. According to an employee of Polotsk's *raispolkom* (district executive committee), Jews retorted by saying that Kechko "scorned their nationality" and they filed a complaint against him at the Council of Ministers of the USSR. This episode in Polotsk was another evidence of practicing Jews' desperate attempts to obtain a place for prayers after all their applications to various authorities had been rejected.<sup>38</sup>

One of the primary functions of CARC representatives was to see to correct and timely execution of religious legislation aimed at regulating community life. They collected information on the local population's attitudes towards religious activities, as well as on the behavior of congregants and clergy. Representatives often had no clear-cut guidelines or instructions that could help them in their interaction with worshippers in specific cases. This cleared the way for arbitrariness, since decisions were not made in view of the significance of the matter at hand, but rather on the basis of the representative's personal likes or dislikes.

The most common violations of practicing Jews' rights were indefinite delays and eventual refusal to grant community registrations and the reopening of synagogues. In 1945, employees of the Minsk executive committee were highly negligent and slow in preparing the file on the registration of the city's Jewish community. After a six-month waiting period, the observers' request was rejected.<sup>39</sup> In 1946, V. Ledenev, chairman of Polesye's oblast executive committee, and M. Zilber, secretary, refused to approve the decision of the Mozyr city council that ruled in favor of reopening the synagogue on Proreznaya Street. In Brest, Pastuhov, chairman of the city council, did not want to consider an application submitted by worshippers who requested premises for prayers. When asked why the application had not been considered for more than a year, Pastuhov answered: "The matter is not worth hurrying, have patience, there are more important things to do."<sup>40</sup> After that, it was announced that the application form "had been mislaid." In Gomel', Abramenko, deputy chairman of the regional executive committee, kept on saying he had no intention whatsoever even to consider the issue of prayer houses, since he saw no need for them.<sup>41</sup>

CARC leadership in Minsk expressed dissatisfaction with the activities of their representatives at the local level, namely with their low professionalism, as well as lack of desire and ability to study rituals and customs of religious cults. Some anecdotal evidence demonstrates sheer ignorance. In 1945, officials from Pinsk reported of three Zionist groups (in total, 350 strong) that were active in the city and district and were led by *presbyters*.<sup>42</sup> Brylev, representative for the Pinsk oblast,

---

38. *Ibid.*, I, 12

39. *Ibid.*, f. 952, op. 1, d. 5, l. 87; d. 20, l. 126.

40. One synagogue in Brest was occupied by a branch of the Red Cross, the other accommodated a movie theater.

41. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 275, l. 75.

42. *Presbyter* is an elected leader of a Protestant congregation.

had no idea what the Torah was, and Ivanov (Baranovichy oblast) wanted to know what a *shofar* was for. During one of his raids on *minyans* and *shtiebels* in 1947, he made a list of ritual objects and asked congregants what exactly they needed the ram's horn for.<sup>43</sup> Ulasevich reported to his superiors in Moscow that the rabbi and congregants of Minsk synagogues were planning to perform a burial of Torah scrolls, and requested advice as to what his response should be and whether or not he should forbid such practice.<sup>44</sup> In the 1940s and 1950s, the absurd term "Jewish churchmen", was common in the lexicon of party and state functionaries.

Officials' ignorance often outraged religious feelings and created difficulties for communities. The regime, however, believed that professional incompetence of local bodies played into the hands of energetic "religiozniks", above all the Judaic clergy, by providing them with reasons for intensifying their activities. It was emphasized at the All-Union convention of CARC's in December 1950 in Moscow that Judaism was not being studied deeply enough and some high-ranking CARC representatives knew nothing of Jewish holidays, while they should realize that "this cult is very active and demands constant attention."<sup>45</sup>

Despite criticism, CARC work routines remained unchanged. In 1947, the institution of CARC representatives for eastern BSSR territories was abolished "as not needed". The representatives' functions were transferred to the ideological organs of local Soviets and Communist Party Committees. The authorities decided that religious communities there were few in number and the congregants were unable to regain their prewar status and could thus be ignored. The main emphasis was now laid on the western areas of the republic, where a large-scale campaign had been under way including comprehensive "Sovietization" of all aspects of life, collectivization of agriculture, and a battle against local nationalism and against other phenomena that worried the regime.

The mere fact of establishing the institution of commissioners and their representatives for the affairs of religious cults immediately after the end of World War II indicated that the state acknowledged *de jure* the presence and role of religious communities in the Soviet Union. The status of CARC as a body reporting directly to the USSR Council of Ministers was meant to make it independent of local administration and able to expediently solve problems of religious communities. This intention was not carried through. A commissioner's staff was often too small, or formed of people who had failed at previous positions in party or state offices. Professional incompetence, poor cultural background and ignorance of religious matters, alongside rigid discipline and centralized administration, did not allow CARC staff to act expediently and efficiently in smoothing over conflicts between observers and local authorities. As a result, disappointed practicing Jews complained to higher leadership in Minsk and Moscow.

---

43. YVA, M-46/13, p. 7; GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 66, l. 177; d. 270, p. 63.

44. NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 17, l. 281.

45. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 66, l. 177.

The attitude to CARC's status and activities demonstrated by the central authorities (the Councils of Ministers of the BSSR and the USSR, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party and the Communist Party of Belorussia, state ministries and committees) was indeed indicative of the slight significance attached to the mission of CARC. Only two All-Union conventions of CARC and representatives were called during the postwar decade (1945, 1950). The agenda included lectures, explanatory talks given by experts on controversial issues and exchanging experiences. Commissioners felt a critical shortage of professional literature and reference materials, were not given in-service training and often distracted from their main duties to deal with matters in agriculture and propaganda. At the same time, representatives were constantly subjected to criticism on the part of worshippers. These factors, along with low salaries and low prestige of a CARC representatives' office caused turnover of personnel. In addition, local executive bodies were not ready to tolerate the interference of "intruders" from the All-Union center. CARC had little influence on the actual situation in the provinces, and in 1950 the office of its representatives for the western BSSR territories was abolished as "having served its purpose". The only official who had worked within the CARC system throughout the period from 1945 to 1955 was Ulasevich, commissioner for the republic, who was recalled to Moscow in 1955. CARC was not replaced by any other organizations and preserved its functions in the aftermath. Only CARC leadership members and staff on All-Union, republican and regional levels were replaced. They received new instructions relevant to the changes in the Soviet internal policy subsequent to Stalin's death.

To sum up, analysis of the tasks and methods of CARC demonstrates the double-standard policy pursued by the state in relation to the needs and aspirations of observers, discredits the claims of religious freedom in the socialist society, and unmask the hostility of the regime towards any manifestation of dissent.

#### 4. Attempts to renew the congregations

##### **Buildings and property**

In the period preceding the 1917 Revolution, there were 1,445 Russian Orthodox churches, 704 synagogues and 148 Roman Catholic churches in Belorussia (modern borders). By January 1937, many of them — 1,371 Orthodox churches, 633 synagogues and 95 Catholic churches — had been closed. This means that before World War II, after the 1939 annexation, the republic only had 71 active synagogues or 10% of their total number at the time of the Bolshevik revolution. On the eve of the German invasion in June 1941, two thirds of the functioning synagogues were situated in the western regions of the BSSR.<sup>46</sup> After the war the

---

46. T.S. Prot'ko, *Stanovlenie Sovetskoi totalitarnoi sistemy v Belarusi, 1917-1941 gg.* [Creation of the Soviet totalitarian system in Belorussia] (Minsk: Tesei, 2002), 299.

damage caused to the republic's religious institutions of different denominations amounted to 705,300,000 rubles (at the 1941 rate).<sup>47</sup>

Among the synagogues that survived, a number of them had historic and artistic value as architectural monuments that were theoretically under state protection. Among the partially destroyed buildings that could have been restored were the seventeenth-century fortress-like synagogues in Pinsk and Novogrudok (all in western Belorussia), the Holodnaia Synagogue in Minsk, the eighteenth-century synagogues in Ruzhana and Stolín and the wooden synagogues in Mstislavl, Narovlia (eastern Belorussia) and Zelva (western Belorussia). The oldest synagogues were in Shklov (1625), the citadel-like synagogue in Bykhov (1633, eastern Belorussia) and the baroque synagogue in Slonim (1642, western Belorussia). The synagogue in Oshmiana (western Belorussia) had a domed ceiling decorated with astrological and other motifs.

In Kobrin (western Belorussia), the nineteenth-century central synagogue, which was the sole prewar synagogue left standing out of seven, had become a brewery.<sup>48</sup> In Luninets (western Belorussia), four synagogues were demolished — two on Pripiatskii Street, one on Ob'ezdnaia Street (today Kulakevich Street) and another one on Panteleev Street. In Borisov local residents had dismantled the Slobodskaia Synagogue, built in 1840. Before World War II, it was the only functioning synagogue out of 13 that had once flourished there. The interior was looted, while the sacred scrolls, prayer books and religious tomes were used as roofing material and fuel.<sup>49</sup>

Synagogues with valuable architecture included the one in Baranovichi (1895, western Belorussia), the early-twentieth-century buildings in Krevo (western Belorussia) and those in Grodno, Volkovysk, Kaminets, Slonim, Pruzhany, Diatlovo (Zhetel) (all in western Belorussia), Gomel', Mogilev, Minsk, Vitebsk, Shklov and Bobruisk (all in eastern Belorussia).<sup>50</sup> Most synagogues and houses of prayer were, however, accommodated in ordinary buildings or occupied a few rooms in apartment houses with quite simple interiors.

In October 1945, Petr Maslov, chief CARC representative in Minsk (eastern Belorussia), reported to Moscow that prior to the war there had been "rather a lot" of Jewish synagogues functioning in the republic, that most had been destroyed, and that the few surviving ones had been converted into non-Jewish offices and institutions.<sup>51</sup> For instance, the Gomel' (eastern Belorussia) synagogue at

47. P.P. Lipilo, V.F. Romanovsky, eds., *Prestupleniia nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov v Belorusii* [Crimes of the German-fascists invaders in Belorussia] Collection of materials and documents, p. 347; GARF, f. 7021, op. 80, d. 111, l. 1-2, 14, 17.

48. A. Martynov, "Kobrin," *Aviv*, no. 1 (2000): 22.

49. A. Rosenbloom, *Pamyat' na krovi: Evrei v istorii goroda Borisova* [Memory in Blood: Jews in the History of the city of Borisov] (Petah Tiqwa, 1998), 46, <http://www.jewishgen.org/Belorussian/newsletter/BorisovReview.htm>

50. V.M. Lukin, B.N. Khaimovich, V.A. Dymshits, compilers, *Istoriia evreev na Ukraine i v Belorusii: Ekspeditsii, pamiatniki, nakhodki, sbornik nauchnykh trudov* [Jewish history in Ukraine and Belorussia. Expeditions, monuments, finds. Collection of scholarly works] (SPb.: Peterburgskii evreiskii universitet, 1994), 45-47.

51. Letter of P. Maslov, CARC representative in Minsk, to Poliansky on October 15, 1945, GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 30, l. 83.



156 Sovetskaia Street had been taken over by the regional department of domestic trade (*Oblmestprom*). Gomel's other synagogue at 41 Internatsional'naiia Street was occupied by the city military commissariat.

In Novo-Belitsa (eastern Belorussia), the synagogue building at 1 Kalinin Street housed an orphanage and a hostel for disabled war veterans.<sup>52</sup> In Kalinkovichi, a kindergarten and nursery occupied the former synagogue. In Mozyr (eastern Belorussia), one synagogue was used as a boarding house and the other as a bakery. The synagogue in Osipovichi (eastern Belorussia) was turned into a barber shop.<sup>53</sup> Stolin's Sovetskaia Street synagogue was now home to a coffin manufacturer. The other synagogue had been demolished, and a building housing the office of the public prosecutor was erected on its site.<sup>54</sup> In Bobruisk (eastern Belorussia), three synagogues were occupied by cultural and educational institutions, four were turned into dwelling houses, and two were used as manufacturing facilities.<sup>55</sup> In Borisov (eastern Belorussia), one synagogue accommodated the local Young Pioneer house, while the second was used as a printing facility.<sup>56</sup>

The same sad situation occurred in Minsk, where out of ten synagogues that functioned before the war five had escaped destruction. Among the five, the Great Synagogue of Borisov, which had been regarded as one of the finest in the region, was unscathed.<sup>57</sup> After the liberation of the city, one became the regional police museum, another housed the "Belorussian" movie theater, and the remaining three were taken over by the Belorussian State University, a cultural institution, and a warehouse.<sup>58</sup> In Mogilev, the synagogue at 21 Liebknecht Street became a boxing ring, while the one at 21 Lenin Street was used for gymnastics classes.<sup>59</sup> Most of the remaining synagogue buildings were used for non-religious purposes immediately after the liberation of Belorussia (1944) or soon thereafter (1945). At the time, this was not due to the implementation of some anti-Semitic policy on the part of the State and its local representatives. However, in late 1945 and the period between 1946 and 1948, Jews were rejected for political, ideological or simply economic reasons when they tried to reclaim their property.

52. Report of V.I. Safonov, CARC representative in Gomel', to K.A. Ulasevich, for the second quarter of 1946, GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 287, l. 2-4.

53. Letter of A.P. Kishkurno, Polesye oblast CARC representative, to Ulasevich on March 29, 1946, Ibid., d. 335, l. 3.

54. Grigori Ovsiannik, "Moy Stolin" [My Stolin], *Mezuza*, no. 7-8 (1997): 10.

55. Statistical summary of the prayer houses in Bobruisk oblast on Jan. 1, 1946, GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 272, l. 6.

56. Complaint of Borisov Jews to Ulasevich on March 12, 1946: CAHJP, RU-217/63, 9.

57. The Great Synagogue of Borisov was built in 1913; its dimensions were quite outstanding for a provincial center, the ground floor area being 483 square meters. The original outward appearance was lost as a result of the reconstruction performed in 1962, GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 1, l. 5; YVA, M-46/2, p. 9.

58. Report of D. Guliaev, CARC commissioner of the Minsk Oblast to Ulasevich and Poliansky on October 17, 1947, GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 307, l. 22.

59. A. Litin, "Evreiskii vopros v Mogileve" in *Gistoria Magileva: minulaye i suchasnaz'* ["The Jewish question in Mogilev" in History of Mogilev. Collection of articles] (Mogilev, 2003), chastka 2, s. 55.

Some synagogue buildings survived in Dedilovichi, Zembin, Plitchenko, Koshitsa, Chervneka and several other towns in the Minsk oblast. These buildings were generally plain wooden houses indistinguishable from the neighboring homes. On the site of the Mir yeshiva, local gentiles established an agricultural school. The synagogue in Zembin was dismantled by locals who carted away the bricks to build private homes.<sup>60</sup>

### Appeals for legalization of synagogues

In November 1944, a decree entitled “Procedure for Inauguration of Prayer Houses of Religious Cults” was adopted by the Council of the People’s Commissars of the USSR (later called Council of Ministers). This decree stated that availability of a prayer house (synagogue) was an indispensable condition for registering a congregation. A petition requesting the establishment of a synagogue or a prayer house had to be signed by at least twenty local observant Jews (known as *initsiativnaia dvadtsatka*, ‘the twenty initiators’), all being of full legal age, none of them ever disfranchised by a court decision. After the petition was submitted, the authorities carried out a preliminary verification of the information provided. This complex, circuitous registration procedure aimed to disqualify any unauthorized acts. At the first stage, applicants submitted a petition to the executive committee of the local Soviet, which then reached a decision and sent the file to the regional CARC representative. The representative, in his turn, prepared the file for the CARC commissioner at the republican level. Next the issue was considered by the Council of Ministers of the Union of autonomous republics, and finally it was sent for approval in Moscow.<sup>61</sup>

The executive committees of the Soviets had to verify that all conditions were met (that all petitioners were indeed of age, were local residents, and that none had ever been disfranchised by court decision or subjected to repressive measures). In addition, the authorities determined whether the signatories were indeed representatives of a larger congregation or represented only themselves. The condition of the provisional prayer house and its history — who had nationalized it and when — were also to be ascertained. The Soviets’ executive committees were to gather information on other prayer houses currently in operation within the relevant region or town. Moreover, they had to indicate the exact distance between the prayer houses and the petitioners’ place of residence.

Registration meant that the religious community was formally recognized and was ostensibly granted the right of free religious practice. However, the members of a congregation were forbidden to engage in “religious propaganda,” to participate in social and charitable activities, and to provide religious education for their children.

---

60. Rosenbloom, *Pamyat’ na krovi...*, p. 44.

61. Decree of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR from November 19, 1944, GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 1, l. 10-12.

On June 25, 1945, seven months after the procedural document was issued, statistics regarding the registration of congregations and related prayer houses of all religious denominations in Belorussia were as follows: of the 238 prayer houses belonging to different denominations, including Orthodox churches, only nine (3.7%) had been registered by the authorities. Out of the nine, only one synagogue in the entire republic — the one in Minsk — was officially recognized as legal. The Council of Ministers demanded that collecting relevant data be sped up.<sup>62</sup>

Jews naturally wished to reclaim those synagogue buildings that had escaped destruction and were now occupied by non-Jewish institutions and offices. However, state intervention was needed to legalize their restitution. In December 1945, a Directive letter “On the Religious Cults (with the exception of the Russian Orthodox Church)” was signed by Viacheslav Molotov, the vice-chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars. The document banned firstly unauthorized closing of prayer premises in use, then use of cult premises, not currently in operation, for unrelated purposes. Only in extraordinary cases could a building be demolished or dismantled.<sup>63</sup> In fact, the decree only alleviated the situation temporarily, and had no long-term effect.

In cases where it was necessary for congregants of the registered community to rebuild or to renovate a prayer house, the Councils of People’s Commissars, as well as district and regional executive committees, were advised to supply the building materials required. Registered religious communities were granted limited legal rights, including the right to open a bank account in the local branch of the State Bank (*Gosbank*), to buy means of transportation, and to rent, build and purchase premises. Ritual religious objects that had been confiscated by local authorities on behalf of the state were now regarded as ownerless property to be handed over to the religious communities. This 1945 decree was a significant supplement to the previously adopted decrees of the Soviet authorities (1918 and 1929) concerning the activities of congregations.<sup>64</sup>

Even before some of these national decrees went into effect, in the years 1944-1946, observant Jews from Minsk, Gomel’, Rechitsa, Mozyr, Kalinkovichi, Bobruisk, Borisov, Zhlobin, Mogilev, Orsha, Pinsk, Lepel and Vitebsk submitted the first requests to establish synagogues and register religious congregations. In Minsk, 70 observant Jews signed a petition submitted in early December 1944. They requested that the nineteenth-century stone building of the former synagogue at 1 Nemiga Street, occupied by the office of the chief archivist for the People’s Commissariat of the Interior (NKVD) of the BSSR, be returned to them. To the great joy of the city’s Jewry their request was granted in 1946. The restoration and

---

62. Report from Ulasevich to Poliansky on November 18, 1946: GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 257, l. 95-96.

63. Project of the Decree of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR, “On Religious Cults (with the exception of the Russian Orthodox Church),” on December 1, 1945, GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 10, l. 106-107.

64. Directive letter of CARC in Moscow on February 12, 1946, GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 1, l. 5.

refurbishing of the synagogue required substantial funds that were collected in a short period of time.

At the beginning of 1945, Bobruisk's religious Jews requested that the former synagogue building at 53 Liebknecht Street be handed over. The building had burnt down, but the petitioners promised to restore it quickly at their own expense. In April 1946 approval was finally granted. One month later, the religious community completed the reconstruction and refurbishing of the synagogue, after collecting 100,000 rubles. Such an accomplishment greatly impressed the authorities.<sup>65</sup> In Pinsk, a request for official registration of a congregation and for permission to use their synagogue in a legal way (as hitherto they had operated without permission from the central state administration of Minsk and Moscow) was signed by 83 observant Jews. It gained the support of Bogdanovich, CARC representative for the Pinsk oblast, who wrote that ever since the town's liberation the Jews had been using a synagogue that had escaped destruction under the Nazis.<sup>66</sup> Rabbi B.E. Rozenzveig was instrumental in organizing this and several other petitions for reestablishing Jewish religious communities in the towns and shtetls of the Pinsk region, where prior to the war there had been 35 active synagogues.<sup>67</sup>

In 1945, in Brest, 39 Jews signed a request to register the Jewish religious community to allocate premises for a synagogue.<sup>68</sup> In Orsha, Vitebsk, Zhlobin and Kalinkovichi, congregations built special premises to be used as prayer houses, first registering them as private homes and then receiving the necessary permits from local authorities.

### 5. Appeals to the regime for mercy

Soviet authorities used the restitution of synagogues and registration of Jewish communities as evidence of religious freedom in the USSR. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in Moscow was ordered to include such cases in reports sent abroad. In May 1946 Elizabeth Eberlin wrote an article, "Mogilev Jewry," which was sent to New York, London, Toronto and Tel Aviv. The article reported that prior to the war there had been 20 synagogues in the oblast, all of them destroyed by "the Hitlerite vandals." Two synagogues in Mogilev and Shklov had already been restored thanks to the assistance of Ivan Kazantsev, CARC representative for the Mogilev oblast.<sup>69</sup> Ulasevich, in his memorandum addressed to Panteleimon Ponomarenko, chairman of the BSSR Council of Ministers, reported that in almost

---

65. Smilovitsky, "Jewish Religious Life in Bobruisk, 1944-1954," *Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2, 27 (1995): 44.

66. Statistical summary of prayer houses in Pinsk oblast on January 1, 1946, GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 272, l. 7.

67. Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky, May 4, 1947, NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 8, l. 311.

68. Report from Maslov to Poliansky, September 2, 1945, YVA, M-46/14, p. 13.

69. Archives of the newspaper *Einigkeit*, GARF, f. 8114, op. 1, d. 1131, l. 541.

all cities and little towns where Jews resided, synagogues had been established in private apartments, although these had not received official permission to open. These makeshift synagogues were attended by “a quite significant number of practicing Jews.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, the regime could not ignore worshippers’ demands. In a context of official tolerance in the immediate aftermath of war, Jews often appealed to the benevolence of the Soviet government. Those appeals to Stalin’s mercy grew ever more desperate in the following years, especially at the end of the 1940s, as the regime adopted an openly repressive policy towards Soviet Jews.

In September 1945, in a Thanksgiving prayer, the Jews referred to Stalin as “the savior, the only unconquerable commander, who had engaged in a duel with a murderous vampire, with Panther and Tiger tanks and had smashed them, thus saving both the Jewish and Slavic peoples.” They prayed the Lord to grant Stalin long life, good health, great success in all his undertakings, vowing to pass on his blessed name to be extolled by their descendants. In a prayer called “Victory,” the following words were recited in Yiddish: <sup>71</sup>

Oh Lord, open the treasury of the heavenly blessings and shed your grace on our dearest savior Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin. Enlarge his power and might, grant him long years of life, let all his ways lead to success. Grant him strength wherever he goes, while seeking to increase the welfare of his people who have found haven under his care. Let the Lord’s blessings be upon his helpers and all those who labor hard to serve the people. May the spirit of wisdom, well-being and prosperity repose on them, for them to stand guard relentlessly and establish goodness and justice for all those living in the land of Russia.<sup>72</sup>

In Mozyr, on August 12, 1945, the local Jewish community arranged joint celebrations of the Sukkoth holiday and the victory over Germany and invited the top officials of the Polesye oblast and the bishop of the Mozyr Orthodox Church. Among the Jewish participants were twelve communists, five of whom were high-ranking officials. Five hundred guests, 70% of them youth, attended. A solemn prayer was offered in memory of 1,500 fallen Mozyr Jews and all Jewish victims murdered by the Nazis.<sup>73</sup> These included 60 Jews who burnt to death in the synagogue for not surrendering to the Nazis on August 31, 1941.<sup>74</sup> Seventeen thousand rubles were

---

70. Report from Brest to Ulasevich, late 1945 (missing exact date), NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 8, l. 202.

71. Telegram of Jewish observers in Minsk sent to the Kremlin, to Stalin’s attention on September 20, 1945, NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 12, l. 2.

72. The practice of offering prayers for the good health and well-being of the leaders of states where Jews resided was in compliance with religious tradition that advised Jews to demonstrate their loyalty to the ruling regime. Often prayers of this kind were said in the official languages of the state, while normally prayers were recited in Hebrew, the holy language.

73. Report from Kishkurno to Ulasevich on September 13, 1945, NARB, f. 845, op. 1, d. 12, l. 32; f. 861, op. 1, d. 12, l. 8.

74. Yakov Gutman, “Mozyrskie stranitsy Holokosta,” in *Minskae geta, 1941-1943. Tragedia. Geraizm. Pamiat* [“Mozyr’s Holocaust pages” in Minsk ghetto, 1941-1943. Tragedy, Heroism. Memory], Collection of articles (Minsk, 2004), 113; NARB, f. 4, op. 33-a, d. 63, l. 84.

collected, 4,000 to be donated to the Red Cross, and 13,000 for the reconstruction of the Mozyr Synagogue.<sup>75</sup> At the end of the ceremony, the participants formulated the text of a congratulatory telegram to be sent to Stalin. Similar ceremonies were held in Kalinkovichi and other towns and villages of the republic.<sup>76</sup> Many heartfelt appeals to the authorities to restore a semblance of Jewish life are on record. On behalf of the Borisov congregation, a personal appeal was sent to Stalin in 1948, signed by Liebenzon, Kagan, Rozenbloom, Aronchik and Dobkin, who called the leader “their own father.” The letter emphasized that the Jews had escaped “the German scum of the earth” thanks to Stalin’s personal kindness and care. The elderly petitioners asked for the opportunity to pray, saying that prayer was the only enjoyment left them in life. The authors expressed confidence that they would be granted permission from Stalin himself.<sup>77</sup> In 1949-1953, Jews from Vitebsk repeatedly sent appeals requesting the legalization of their religious practice. In one of their letters, they pleaded for a chance to serve God to the end of their days, promising in return to pray continuously “for our government and for Comrade Stalin, the founding father of the great Soviet Constitution.”<sup>78</sup>

The Jews of Gomel’ made three personal appeals (in 1946, 1947 and 1948) to Stalin in his capacity as chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, since the local authorities would not register the Jewish community or return the synagogue. Addressing Stalin as their “great mentor” and “best friend,” they pleaded for his immediate intervention. In all the letters, Jews spoke of their utmost devotion to the Motherland and to Stalin, expressing their confidence in a prompt positive resolution of this “matter of vital importance.”<sup>79</sup>

In their appeals, the enormous loss of Jewish lives caused by the Nazi occupation of Belorussia and the important contribution of Jews to the struggle against the Nazis were stressed. The Jews of Gomel’ wrote in July 1948 that the war had forced them to leave their native town in 1941, and when they returned they found it all in ruins: “Together with our homes, our prayer houses were burnt down. Fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters of those who had fought at the front are now deprived of the opportunity to observe religious rites and the commandments of their faith.”<sup>80</sup> Jews from Radoshkovichi reported that out of 2,000 Jews that used to live there, only a hundred had survived — those who had joined the partisans,

---

75. Though funds were collected for the Mozyr Synagogue, and it was rebuilt, the authorities used the building for an unrelated, non-religious purpose.

76. Report from Ulasevich to Poliansky, 1946 (missing exact date): YVA, M-46/14, p. 8.

77. Appeal from Borisov Jews to Stalin on October 25, 1948, NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 14, l. 209.

78. Application of Meier Popkov on behalf of Jewish believers of Vitebsk to Shvernik, chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet on April 1, 1948, *Ibid.*, d. 12, l. 53; d. 14, l. 173-174.

79. Complaint from Gomel’ Jews to Stalin on September 30, 1947, on August 30, 1948, to P.K. Ponomarenko, chairman of the BSSR Council of Ministers, NARB, f. 952, op. 7, d. 9, l. 161; d. 13, l. 380.

80. Complaint from Radoshkovichi Jews sent concurrently to Stalin, Shvernik, and Safonov, general prosecutor of the USSR, on July 28, 1948, NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 18, l. 48.

where, side by side with Belorussians, they “crushed German garrisons and wiped them out.” After the liberation, the Jews returned to their native lands and participated in the reconstruction process, “ready to do all kinds of jobs.” Most of the people who signed the appeal were well over sixty, among them shoemakers, tailors, and blacksmiths. They asked that the town’s only remaining synagogue at 3 Shkol’nyi Dvor Street, which had been built with Jewish community funds back in 1852, be turned over to them.<sup>81</sup>

In 1947 a petition from the town of Orsha was sent to Ponomarenko, chairman of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR. A group of Jews “who were fortunate to have survived the invasion of the Hitlerite thugs” told that they had found their native town in ruins with none of the sixteen prewar synagogues remaining. They wrote that, in seeking relief from their grief, they longed to pray for the memory of their children who had “fallen honestly” at the front in the Great Patriotic War, and for the memory of their relatives, the innocent victims of the Nazi genocide. According to their complaint, for two years they had repeatedly requested permission to establish at least one prayer house for the town’s Jews, but had never received an answer. Concurrently, a group of religious Jews from Lepel addressed a letter to the executive committee of the regional Soviet. They asked the committee to allocate them an uninhabited house on Volodar Street, whose Jewish residents had perished. In the meantime, Lepel’s local synagogue had been taken over by the town meat-and-dairy enterprise.<sup>82</sup>

In 1948 the Jews of Vitebsk requested that the executive committee of the regional Soviet grant them premises for a synagogue. They had found a temporary place for prayer in the house of the late Shveinas, a town resident who had been killed. A group had helped his widow build a stove and install the front door; in return for the favor, she allowed them to hold prayers in the house.<sup>83</sup> However, the executive committee of Zheleznodorozhnyi District of the city of Vitebsk had objected and sealed up the house.<sup>84</sup> In September 1948 religious Jews of Borisov wrote to Stalin that for seven months they had been waiting for a reply from Moscow to their petition sent to Lazar Kaganovich. CARC had passed on their letter to Ivan Poliansky at the USSR Council of Ministers but it had gone unanswered. The Borisov Jews begged for his “mercy” and asked for permission to pray in one of the six synagogues that had survived in the town after the invasion of “the German scum of the earth.”<sup>85</sup> In October 1949, the Jews of Gomel’ assembled in the houses of Aizik (Isaak) Leikin and Shevel Babitskii to pray for the memory of their children

---

81. Letter from Morduch Izigzon on behalf of practicing Jews of Radoshkovichi to Ulasevich on December 9, 1947, NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 7, l. 380.

82. Letter from Lepel Jews to the Executive Committee of Vitebsk Oblast Council on July 31, 1947, NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 7, l. 137.

83. Petition of Meir Popkov from Vitebsk to Shvernik, on April 1, 1948, *Ibid.*, d. 12, l. 52.

84. Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky on May 22, 1948, concerning a refusal of the request of Jewish observers from Vitebsk, *Ibid.*, d. 12, l. 53.

85. Letter to Stalin from Kagan, Liberzon, Rozenbloom, Aronchik, Dobkin on behalf of Borisov Jewish observers on October 25, 1948, *Ibid.*, d. 14, l. 209.

who had fallen in the war. Shevel, 67, was on an old-age pension and subsisted on aid he received as a father of a fallen soldier.<sup>86</sup> That same year a letter from Minsk to the authorities claimed that the majority of the city's Jews were working people, industrial workers and employees, many of whom had participated in the war against the Nazis, had reached pension age and deserved a more sympathetic attitude. The letter emphasized that the Jewish observers were true patriots who prayed to God for the prosperity and wellbeing of the Soviet motherland. In a prior case concerning the elderly, the Jewish employees of the local Soviets pleaded with the authorities to register their community so the old folk could have an opportunity to pray: "Don't be unkind! Let our old people pray for the dead!"<sup>87</sup>

These appeals reflect the atmosphere of a personality cult that credited all the accomplishments of the state to a single individual — a true reflection of that era of demagoguery. The cult hysteria was stoked by a propaganda campaign launched on the occasion of Stalin's 70th birthday (December 1949). The campaign revealed the unlimited power of the Communist Party over the destinies of all Soviet citizens, religious and secular alike.

## 6. The role of *minyans* and *shtiebels*

After the liberation of Belorussia, many underground "home synagogues" — *shtiebels* — were established in Mogilev, Minsk, Pinsk, Bobruisk, Baranovichi, Osipovichi, Polotsk, Orsha and Rogachev. *Minyans* functioned not only in big cities and regional centers where the Jewish population reached several thousand and the numbers of religious Jews could be several hundred, but also in small district towns and even in shtetls. Those *shtiebels* were an essential and sometimes legal part of Jewish religious life in the BSSR. In many places, repressive orders stemming from the center were often met with reluctance and skepticism by local officials faced with the unpopularity of too severe anti-religious actions, while in others, *shtiebels* faced constant harassment on the part of local officials, especially in the form of abusive taxation meant at discouraging participants and hosts.

*Minyans* had a special role in postwar religious life, coexisting with unregistered synagogues hoping for recognition. A *minyans* required a quorum of ten or more adult men aged over 13 enable believers to hold communal prayers. It had the authority to perform a number of religious rites. The presence of a *minyans* was necessary for reading the weekly portions of the Torah, giving the priestly blessing and saying the *kaddish*. The Torah Sages regarded *minyans* as an institution of great importance: "When ten men are together to study the Torah, God's spirit abides among them..."<sup>88</sup>

86. Report from Sazonov, senior CARC inspector in Minsk to Ulasevich on October 25, 1949, Ibid., d. 16, l. 132.

87. Report by Ulasevich at a CARC meeting in Moscow on December 19, 1947: GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 19, l. 488.

88. *Avot* 3:7.



The *shtiebel* played a special role in the religious life of Belorussian Jewry in the postwar years, coexisting with the unregistered synagogues that continued to hope for recognition. The *shtiebel* was usually just one room in an apartment or a house that was fitted out with the basics of a synagogue and was used regularly for prayer. In terms of Jewish Law it could perform all the functions of a synagogue. Some were more or less permanent, some were temporary. The authorities would not register *shtiebels* so they were all illegal. But despite their efforts, neither could the authorities close them down, since one that was closed in one building would simply move to other premises and open elsewhere.

To function, the *shtiebel* needed a *minyán*. The presence of a *minyán* is necessary for activities involving “matters of sanctity” such as communal prayer, public reading of the Torah, reciting the *Kaddish* as well as the performance of many other religious ceremonies. The Torah sages regarded the *minyán* with great reverence: “When ten men are together to study the Torah, God’s spirit abides among them...”<sup>89</sup>

As *shtiebels* were not subject to registration by the Executive Committees of Local Councils, attending one was a good way for State employees to participate in prayer services and yet keep their religious worship private. Elderly people who could not walk far to reach a synagogue and did not use transportation on Sabbath also found it convenient to pray in a *shtiebel*. *Shtiebels* were not affiliated with officially registered synagogues; indeed they sometimes functioned as a form of opposition to a registered synagogue, for those who considered official registration to be an unacceptable compromise with the authorities. When confronted by officials, *shtiebel* members would often simply refer to Article 124 of the Soviet 1936 Constitution that declared freedom to hold religious services.

In their outward appearance, *shtiebels* were ordinary houses or flats inhabited by Jewish families. On the one hand, this was necessary to maintain secrecy; on the other hand, it was more practical. After the recitation of prayers, congregants often had to agree upon a new place for the next gathering. Along with temporary *shtiebels*, there were permanent houses of prayer, their interior similar to “home synagogues” decorated and equipped in full accordance with Halacha rules. Torah scrolls were kept in a special case named *aron-kodesh* (‘holy ark’). In the center of the room, there was a rostrum-like structure, the *bima*, from which recitations and sermons were said for all the worshippers to hear properly. Since it was difficult to obey the Halacha rule requiring separate praying sections for men and women, the room was usually divided into two parts with a special curtain, *mehitsa* (literally, ‘partition’).

In the absence of a rabbi, prayers were led by a *gabai* (‘headman’), and order was maintained by a *shames* (‘warden’, ‘person on duty’). Seating complied with tradition. In the part facing East, on both sides of the case with Torah scrolls, were seats intended for the most respected members of the congregation. Younger people usually sat on their right and left.

---

89. *Avot* 3:7.

In 1947, there were *shtiebels* in almost every Belorussian town and city where Jews resided.<sup>90</sup> The authorities considered *shtiebels* to be a version of a synagogue and complained that “efforts to eliminate them have been going on for years, but no results have been achieved so far.” The techniques for eliminating unauthorized prayer gatherings were not remarkable for diversity. As a rule, administrative measures were taken, such as taxing landlords who leased their housing to *shtiebels*, threatening them, summoning them for “prophylactic” moralizing talks to a militia (police) station, preparing lists with the names of *shtiebels* landlords for public reprimand, performing militia raids aimed at revealing *shtiebels* yet unknown to the authorities, etc.

However, orders to put an end to prayer gathering, coming from the center, were not always readily obeyed. Actions aimed at putting an end to tradition, banning prayers and threatening practicing Jews, were not popular. In addition, those who hosted *shtiebels* were so old that it was impossible to put them under administrative detention or sentence them to 15- or 30-day forced labor. In 1947-1948, Rumtsov, then deputy MGB head in Rechitsa, reported that he had repeatedly demanded that Tarhkanov, the head of the town’s financial office, fine both the holders of illegal prayer houses and Jewish community leaders, but all his efforts had failed. Iurchenko, chairman of the town Council, refused to support Rumtsov, citing the pressure of work related to the organization of the plenary session of the town’s party committee. In 1948-1949, Jewish worshippers gathered in Pinsk on permission granted by the chairman of the oblast executive committee. Gomel’s Jews simply ignored the notices that demanded paying fines imposed on *shtiebels*. In 1950, most high officials from regional and district executive committees in Belorussia did not fulfill the directives to prevent Jewish holiday celebrations.<sup>91</sup> In 1951, despite the order, no “preventive measures” were taken by the authorities in Braslav, Gomel’, Orsha, Borisov, Mogilev, Vitebsk and other towns. CARC reported that *minyans* and *shtiebels* continued to gather in the republic as a result of local authorities’ “indifferent attitude.”<sup>92</sup>

When it became obvious that administrative pressure failed and “arbitrary gatherings” in private homes were still going on, the most far-sighted officials, Ulasevich and some of his assistants, suggested that communities be registered and synagogues opened in places with a large religious population.<sup>93</sup> It would help, they claimed, to avoid friction and unnecessary distrust on the part of congregants. In May 1948, a letter was sent from CARC at the USSR Council of Ministers to K.E. Voroshilov, then deputy-chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers. The

---

90. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 611, l. 57, Report from Ulasevich to Poliansky about Jewish religious activity in Belorussia for the 4th quarter of 1947.

91. CARC Report about the activity of the religious societies in the BSSR on December 10, 1950, GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 259, l. 301.

92. Report from Ulasevich to Poliansky and Patolichev on the fourth quarter of 1951, Ibid., d. 261, l. 46.

93. Report from Ulasevich to Poliansky about Jewish religious activity in Belorussia in the third quarter of 1947, Ibid., d. 257, l. 271.

letter described the unfavorable situation that had developed in Belorussia. The party leadership of the republic ignored multiple appeals from Gomel', Pinsk, Orsha, Mogilev, Bobruisk, Zhlobin and Vitebsk requesting registration of Jewish communities and the opening of synagogues and houses of prayer. Contrary to common sense, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belorussia recommended that no new synagogue be approved. The CARC commissioner at the Council of Ministers of Belorussia regarded this standpoint as "unwise" and asked the Union government to condemn the practice of rude interference into religious life in the BSSR. In particular, it was suggested in the document that Belorussian local authorities should not require synagogues to produce a list of individuals participating in religious activities. It was also recommended to open, in 1948-1949, three or four synagogues in addition to the two already approved.<sup>94</sup> These recommendations, however, did not meet with approval. The regime again gave preference to the policy of restrictions and prohibitions. Besides the two synagogues in Minsk and Kalinkovichi, not a single new synagogue was approved. Jewish congregations were denied registration. It was stated in a December 1949 report submitted to N.A. Suslov, then secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party, that *shtiebels* in the republic had been shut down, though the total number of "illegal synagogues," as party functionaries called fixed prayer meetings, remained significant.<sup>95</sup>

On the whole, the role of *shtiebels* in postwar Belorussia can not be overestimated. They became a manifestation of self-expression, showing how much Jews were dedicated to tradition and how eager they were to revive religious life. At the same time, Belorussian authorities did not regard *shtiebels* as a "religious underground" as the Ukrainian regime did. In fact, they agreed on a sort of informal compromise with practicing Jews, who, with the exception of Minsk and Kalinkovichi, were not allowed to register congregations. Defenseless in the face of direct pressure, *shtiebels* served as "safety valve," letting out the "steam" of public opposition to official policies. In addition, most *shtiebels* attendees were known to the authorities, which created a feeling of having the matter under full control. Nevertheless, *shtiebels* were considered to be the main obstacle to the elimination of "religious remnants." The authorities made it perfectly clear that they were just waiting patiently for *shtiebels* to exhaust the age potential of their attendees and disappear from the scene in a natural manner.

---

94. Report from I.V. Poliansky to K.E. Voroshilov, deputy chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers on May 10, 1948 about the attitude of the BSSR leadership to the religious cults in the Republic, GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 29, l. 66-67 (a copy of this document preserves at YVA, M-46/13, p. 10-11).

95. Letter from I.V. Poliansky to K.E. Voroshilov and N.A. Suslov, ideology secretary of the CPSU Central Committee on December 12, 1949, GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 61, l. 188 (a copy of this document preserved at YVA, M-46/24, p. 42).

## 7. Taxation

Taxation was another form of pressure on congregants. Taxes were imposed on those individuals who agreed to lease their living quarters, or part of them, for prayer meetings. The rates were set so high that paying the tax was hardly feasible. The difficult financial situation of the population was made even worse by postwar economic devastation and the fact that many families had lost their bread winners and could not afford even basic necessities. Therefore, the authorities hoped that people would voluntarily cease dealings with prayer congregations and that “the religious mass would eventually fade away”. In 1947, Nikitin, then chairman of the district executive committee in Drissa, Vitebsk oblast, was ordered to ban gatherings of the Jewish congregation and to impose a year-long tax on Shlemenzon, who “gained income” from leasing his home to a *shtiebel*.<sup>96</sup>

Gomel’s Jews showed remarkable persistence. According to N. Anishchenko, secretary of the executive committee of the Gomel’ oblast Council, from 1948 to 1951 Jews continued celebrating religious holidays despite the fact that their congregations were never registered; prayers were held in secret and the organizers’ names were carefully concealed. Anishchenko urged that more decisive measures be taken against practicing Jews: “We fine them but it does not stop them — we must hit the offenders really hard.”<sup>97</sup> Taxes were imposed on Jewish communities in Rogachev, Orsha, Zhlobin, Chechersk, Osipovichi, Lepel, Bobruisk, Minsk, Vitebsk and a number of other towns.

The outcome of this policy turned out to be controversial. On the one hand, observers no longer openly gathered for prayers. In case a stranger appeared in a clandestine place of prayer, there always was a suitable excuse to explain the gathering — a name day, a meeting of a hobby club, a friendly party, commemoration for the dead, etc. On the other hand, communities sometimes managed to raise the necessary sums and pay the tax. In Mozyr, Shusterman, who led the *shtiebels* at 17 Romashov Rov Street, paid a tax of 750 rubles in 1947 and was sure that by doing so he gained approval for his *shtiebel* from the local executive committee. In 1948, in Bobruisk, Kustanovich, a believer, reported having leased 30 square meters of her private premises at 8 Engels Street to a *shtiebel*. She paid the tax for three years; this sum including six thousand rubles paid to repair the house.<sup>98</sup>

In 1952, in Gomel’, there were six *shtiebels* accommodated at permanent premises. The town’s executive committee was well aware of their existence, but took no administrative action. The staff of the municipal and regional financial departments concluded that they were dealing with conscientious individuals who

96. Letter from Guliaev to Nikitin on December 25, 1947, NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 7, l. 372.

97. Reply from N. Anishchenko, secretary of Executive Council of the Gomel’ oblast Council to Ulasevich about Jewish religious activity in Gomel’ oblast on May 4, 1951, Ibid., d. 23, l. 162.

98. Informative letter from the BSSR CARC to Poliansky and Gusarov, first secretary of the Communist Party of Belorussia, for the third quarter of 1949, GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 258, l. 298, 300.

did not want to conceal their income and actually asked for the tax to be levied. Leikin paid 340 rubles in taxes for leasing his house at 17 Pechenko Street; Roza Gimler in Mozyr paid a tax of 220 rubles.<sup>99</sup>

In an attempt to avoid payments, practicing Jews tried to conceal the fact that they belonged to a congregation. In 1947, in Kalinkovichi and Mozyr, only 550 Jewish families agreed to report personal data, although many of them did participate in religious activities and observed traditions. Jewish communities in these towns were tenacious of life, and respected.<sup>100</sup> In 1948, in the Polotsk oblast, there reportedly were two and a half thousand Jewish worshippers who held prayers at clandestine sites.<sup>101</sup> In 1950, in western Belorussia, Jews of Baranovichi, Slonim and Novogrodek “did not speak candidly” about their religious beliefs, but chose to present themselves as non-observers. When such people were noticed at religious gatherings, they insisted that they had got there by mere chance, and yielded to no persuasion to make a “frank confession.”<sup>102</sup> By the early 1950s, the pressure intensified. The authorities were not ready to put up even with a limited number of citizens who did not accept atheism. They were concerned about any manifestation of aversion to Soviet policy, even when worshippers declared their complete loyalty and their readiness to avoid any actions that could be considered hostile.

In 1951, the idea emerged of drafting a new article to be included in the BSSR Criminal Code. The article was to stipulate the responsibility of all religious community leaders and organized groups of practicing Jews in case they illegally gathered for prayers in defiance of multiple bans.<sup>103</sup> While this proposal was not adopted, persecution persisted, evidence offered by observers was rejected; the officials did not trust documents provided by communities reporting the advanced age of attendees. The regime was sure that, in fact, the number of synagogue supporters was higher than reported and younger. Thus, tolerance towards Judaism would only increase the expansion and effect of “the Jewish intoxication.”

## 8. Obstacles to Jewish religious revival

In Moscow, the USSR CARC received a directive on April 1948 from the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party demanding that the growing number of religious associations and communities be contained. Following the directive, CARC sent an informal order to its commissioners in the union republics

---

99. Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky about the steps taken by the BSSR CARC against Jewish religious congregations for the second half of 1952, *Ibid.*, d. 261, l. 239-242.

100. Report from A.P. Kishkurno, Polesye oblast CARC representative, to Ulasevich on March 29, 1946, *Ibid.*, op. 3, d. 335, p. 34.

101. Report from Kechko, Polotsk oblast CARC representative, to Ulasevich on April 25, 1947, *Ibid.*, d. 336, l. 39.

102. Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky on January 10, 1951, YVA, M-46/22, p. 8-9.

103. Meeting of representatives of the USSR CARC in Moscow on December 20-22, 1950, GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 66, l. 143.

demanding to reduce the number of registrations to a minimum. Local authorities invented various pretexts in order to reject worshippers' legitimate requests. Using bureaucratic techniques, they managed to stifle the initiatives of practicing Jews even when the latter were ready to take care of all the expenses required to restore religious buildings.<sup>104</sup>

The regime's policy of refusing to grant registration to religious communities in Belorussia that had already formed and been acting *de facto*, inevitably led to a loss of trust in the Soviet state among practicing Jews. They developed indirect ways that enabled them to practice religious rites without registration. By 1948, there were 634 religious communities of different denominations acting *de facto* in the republic, in process of registration after their appeal according announced procedure by CARC. Among them: 277 Roman Catholic communities, 258 Evangelical Christian Baptist communities, 66 communities of Old Russian observers, 10 communities of the Seventh Day Adventists and 17 Jewish communities; 486 communities were in the end granted registration.<sup>105</sup>

Only three of the 17 synagogues in Belorussia were recognized by the authorities *de jure* — in Minsk, Bobruisk and Kalinkovichi. Executive committees of local councils reported to party and state leadership of the BSSR that, prior to the war, "Jews did not manifest that much zeal towards religion, but now they have gone overboard religious fanaticism, maybe even more so than any other national minority." CARC noted that new applications for opening synagogues continued to flow in from all over the republic, and in contrast to previous years, individual observers were inquiring almost daily. It was also emphasized that Jewish "nationalists", under the guise of religious zeal, tried to convince Jews to unite around synagogues and maintain contacts with Zionist organizations abroad.<sup>106</sup>

It was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore worshippers' requests because the applications were legitimate and all the requirements listed in the registration procedure were met, the main points being the indicated minimum number of community members, availability of prayer premises and the presence of a rabbi. Many unauthorized Judaic communities had already been active. In his letter to Poliansky, Ulasevich wrote that while it was not his intention to register all the seventeen Judaic communities, having only three synagogues for the whole republic was "evidently not enough, since this is the territory of the former Pale of Settlement which is densely populated by Jews." The CARC of the BSSR agreed that just three synagogues were not enough to satisfy the requirements of observers in Belorussia, and that "for the good of the cause it would be right to have them legalized." The general conclusion was that it appeared expedient to open a few synagogues in the republic, otherwise "Jews will anyway organize underground prayers."<sup>107</sup>

---

104. G.V. Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina: Vlast' i anti-Semitizm* [Secret policy of Stalin: Power and anti-Semitism] (M.: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2001), 495.

105. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 66, l. 197, 231.

106. *Ibid.*, l. 294.

107. *Ibid.*, op. 4, d. 19, l. 489.

Information arriving in Moscow from Belorussia was consistent with that from other republics. In a memorandum summing up its activities in 1944-1947, drafted for V.M. Molotov, CARC did mention the issue of opening prayer premises and registration of communities for all denominations, including the Jewish one, among its working priorities. The main emphasis was put on “monitoring and regulating religious movement.”

Synagogues functioning by January 1, 1949, were distributed over the Soviet republics as follows:

**Number of synagogues in the Union of the USSR  
(by January 1, 1949)<sup>108</sup>**

Name of Soviet republic	Jewish population (by January 1, 1959) <sup>109</sup>	Percentage of total Jewish population in 1949	Number of Synagogues	Percentage of total number of synagogues
The Russian Federation	875,307	38.6	33	18.3
Ukraine	840,311	37.1	70	38.9
Belorussia	150,084	6.6	2 (Minsk, Kalinkovichi)	1.1
Georgia	51,600	2.3	31	17.2
Moldavia	95,107	4.2	13	7.2
Lithuania	25,100	1.1	2	1.1
Latvia	36,592	1.6	5	2.7
Estonia	5,000	0.2	1	0.6
Armenia	1,000	0.04	0	0
Azerbaijan	40,200	0.2	3	1.7
Uzbekistan	94,300	4.2	10	5.5
Kazakhstan	28,000	1.2	1	0.6
Tajikistan	12,400	0.5	3	1.6
Kirghizia	8,600	0.3	1	0.6
Turkmenistan	4,100	0.2	-	-
Total	2,267,701		175	100

108. The table has been compiled by the author on the basis of materials from *Itogi Vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1959 goda. Soiuz SSR* [Results of the 1959 USSR General Census] (M., 1962) 202, 206-209; GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 23, l. 2; op. 3, d. 51, l. 196, 199, 201.

109. Though the number of synagogues relates to 1.1.1949, the size of the Jewish population relates only to 1.1.1959 which was the first time there had been a population census in the USSR since 1939. The Kremlin had been anxious not to inform the general public that between 30 and 40 million Soviet citizens had lost their lives in what was promulgated as “the great victory” against fascist Germany.

Prior to the 1917 revolution, there had been 3,147 synagogues officially registered in the territory of the Russian Empire. By the late 1940s, only 175 of them had been granted official recognition; 137 synagogues were registered at CARC as having functioned earlier and 43 as newly established. A total of 235 applications for opening synagogues had been rejected. On the whole, the general number of places of worship of all denominations had decreased from 39,511 in 1917 down to 8,381 in 1947. It is remarkable that most of the registrations were granted to synagogues in the Asian areas of the USSR (27.2%), while the Jewish population there was only 8.9%. In Georgia, whose Jewish population was only 2.3% of the total Jewish population of the country, 31 synagogues (17.2%) were registered. In Asian Soviet republics, Jews were more zealous in their religious observance, and local authorities made concessions more easily. In European areas, practicing Jews turned out to be more prone to secularization. The state of synagogues revealed striking differences among different Soviet areas. In postwar Belorussia, where the Jewish population was three times as large as that of Georgia, only two synagogues, one in Minsk and the other in Kalinkovichi, were granted registration permits. Many towns once renowned as prominent Jewish centers not only in Belorussia and Russia, but throughout Eastern Europe, now did not even have a single synagogue or legally recognized prayer house. According to the 1959 census, the Jewish populations in major Belorussian cities were as follows: 3,745 in Grodno, 6,012 in Brest, 15,600 in Bobruisk, 18,986 in Vitebsk, 28,438 in Mogilev and 45,007 in Gomel'. However, in none of these cities did the authorities grant permission for even one synagogue.<sup>110</sup>

All synagogues in the territory of the USSR, large, small and choral synagogues alike, were assigned uniform status regardless of their history. None had the status of the state's main synagogue, despite the fact that, in official documents, the Moscow synagogue on Arkhipov Street was occasionally referred to as "the main synagogue" and its rabbi (Solomon Shliffer, 1944-1957) as the chief rabbi of Russia or even of the USSR. These lofty terms did not, however, reflect the actual status of the synagogue, which in reality was the same as that of the other two small synagogues in Moscow's outskirts. When it served their purposes, the authorities found it useful to refer to the rabbi of the synagogue on Arkhipov Street as the senior representative of Soviet Jewry.

In the late 1940s, the Soviet regime made another attempt to weaken the national life of non-Russian populations. The Jews took the heaviest blow, being accused of "cosmopolitanism," "formalism" and "admiration for the bourgeois West." All over the country, Jewish clubs and cultural institutions were shut down, the printing of periodicals and books in Yiddish ceased, the USSR Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was disbanded.<sup>111</sup> The repressive policy against national symbols could

---

110. *Itogi Vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1959 goda. Belorusskaia SSR* [Results of the 1959 USSR General Census. Belorussian Union Republic] (M., 1963), 126.

111. Kostyrchenko, *V plenu u krasnogo faraona* [In the captivity of the Red Pharaoh] (M., 1994), 622-266, 177-178, 203-206.



not but affect the synagogue. In February 1948, Gusarov, then first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belorussia, argued that the two forces most hostile towards the regime in the republic were the Roman Catholic clergy and Jewish nationalistic elements. He was sure that synagogues were being used by Jewish nationalists as centers for developing and spreading their ideas among *all Jews*<sup>112</sup> because this was the only legal channel for carrying out their anti-Soviet activity. The State Publishing House (Belgoslitizdat) had planned publishing several works of fiction in Yiddish. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belorussia forbade these editions under the pretext that only rabbis and very old people could read Yiddish.<sup>113</sup>

In some sense, the authorities' concerns were not groundless. Reports were coming from officials at the local level that Jewish pressure to reopen synagogues was a "blaze that had spread from the eastern territories of the BSSR to the western ones." Unauthorized and unregistered communities were already active in Polotsk, Gomel', Mozyr, Rechitsa, Kalinkovichi, Khoyniki and Lida. The situation remained undecided in Orsha, where congregants were renting premises for prayers, and in Zhlobin where practicing Jews established a community and built a synagogue without any approval and, moreover, were not going to apply for any.<sup>114</sup> In the summer of 1948, observing Jews from Radoshkovichi, in the Molodechno region, sent a letter to Safonov, then prosecutor general of the USSR, complaining that local party and council officials ridiculed Jews in public, refused to reopen the synagogue which was the only one in the whole region, and tried to force congregants to give up observing tradition. The Molodechno oblast executive committee upon receiving a directive from Moscow held another deliberation on the matter and decided to reject the application for registration. Appealing to the fact that the *shtetl* had been badly damaged in the war and there was a shortage of housing, the authorities decided to hand the synagogue in Radoshkovichi over to the local library. In fact, this was only a pretext for refusal, since officials knew perfectly well that there existed neither means nor facilities to repair the building and set up the library in it, and the building, therefore, remained locked.<sup>115</sup>

To sum up, gradually backtracking from the policy of temporary concessions and liberalization of religious life adopted in the first postwar years, the Soviet state turned to restraining the resumption of community activities. Unjustified obstacles were put in the way of observers who attempted to register new congregations and open synagogues, even when all formal prerequisites were in place. Yet, the devastating consequences of the war, the Nazi genocide, the annihilation of the *shtetl*, the impoverishment of the population, the Jewish migration to larger cities — all these factors could not stop practicing Jews in their zeal to revive spiritual life. They aspired to this element of life not only as an opportunity to

---

112. Italics mine, L.S.

113. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 8, l. 175.

114. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 257, l. 153.

115. NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 10, l. 17; d. 18, l. 48; GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 332, l. 51.

observe tradition, but also as a way to relieve the burden of everyday troubles, to seek consolation in grieving for their losses, to find a harmonious personality.

### 9. Victimization and persecution

As the cold war started, the Soviet regime regarded the synagogue as an instrument of political pressure exploited by the West. Jewish observers were considered disloyal citizens who used their synagogues as a channel of communication with Moscow's foes. These suspicions only strengthened when the state of Israel was established in 1948, and soon afterwards reoriented its policy towards the United States of America. Communist ideologists viewed positive attitudes taken by Soviet Jews towards Israel as a manifestation of "Jewish nationalism" and readiness to cooperate with international imperialism. In view of this standpoint, persecutions of practicing Jews increased: registration of Judaic religious communities ceased, it was forbidden to restore synagogues and to establish *shtiebels*, to publish religious literature, to observe tradition, to study the Torah and to initiate or maintain contacts with international Judaic centers.

A wave of repressions swept across Belorussia in the winter of 1948, when community activists, *minyans* organizers and the most active among observers were arrested in several cities. In February 1948, Evel Brants was arrested in Gomel'; he had started one of the first *minyans* in the city. Only because of the defendant's advanced age did the court sentence him to six years probation while confiscating his house on Vetrennaia Street.<sup>116</sup> After several practicing Jews had been arrested and convicted in Minsk, Bobruisk and Kalinkovichi, the authorities imposed more sophisticated restrictions upon worshippers' activities. Officials strongly warned a number of observers about serious consequences of breaching the norms of behavior, among them Haim Gumenik, Hasya Feigina and Mendel Zacks from Rechitsa,<sup>117</sup> Meir Hoffman and Zalman Gluhovskii from Mozyr<sup>118</sup> and Haim Sverdlov from Braslav.<sup>119</sup> Executive committees of local councils gave strict warnings to congregants in the Minsk oblast (Borisov, Slutsk, Cherven' and Kopyl); in the Mogilev oblast (Bobruisk, Bykhov and Shklov); in the Vitebsk oblast (Orsha, Polotsk, Lepel and Osipovichi); in the Gomel' oblast (Zhlobin, Rogachev and Chechersk) and other places. At the same time, the authorities demanded that heads of offices and industrial enterprises conduct "prophylactic work" aimed at intimidating practicing Jews.<sup>120</sup>

---

116. CAHJP, collection RU-154.

117. NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 16, l. 8.

118. Ibid., d. 13, l. 13.

119. Ibid., d. 25, l. 33.

120. Smilovitsky, "Jewish Religious Leadership in Belorussia, 1939-1953," *Shvut*, 8, 24 (1999): 87-122.

The threat of repressions was so real that it forced many Jews to conceal their true attitude towards Judaic tradition.<sup>121</sup> Parents refrained from introducing their children to the essential of Jewish customs and rituals. Osher and Tamara Drozdinskiiy from Turov avoided talking about religion with their daughter Clara, whose brother Lazar had been arrested on charges of Zionist activity. Nevertheless, the girl saw Osher putting on *tefillin* every day and participated in celebrations of Jewish holidays in the family, though she did not understand their meaning. Her father would not answer her questions for fear that she could, quite by chance, share her knowledge with someone and thus encounter difficulties.<sup>122</sup>

There were numerous cases when local councils seized documents confirming that premises had been purchased by a community for establishing a *minyán*, baking *matsot* or celebrating holidays. In March 1948, employees of the executive committee of Gomel's Central district deceitfully took away the ownership certificate for a house on Telman Street that had been bought by practicing Jews, under the pretext that papers were needed for formal registration. Repeated complaints and appeals to the city council, district council, to the Gomel' region CARC commissioner and to the BSSR Ministry of Interior remained unanswered.<sup>123</sup>

In the same fraudulent way, documents confirming ownership of premises were seized from Jewish worshippers in Glusk, Parichi, Khoiniki, Grodno, Pruzhany and Brest. Those who protested or disobeyed were fined, as happened in Petrikov, Bragin, Lepel, Slutsk, Baranovichi and Mikashevichi. Local authorities often acted with undisguised arbitrariness, disconnecting the targeted house from electricity and water and refusing to deliver heating-fuel or sell necessary items to Jewish congregants. In 1949, observers in Kalinkovichi complained that Naumenko, chief of the Polesye oblast electricity network, having no permission or legal ground to do so, gave orders to cut off electricity in the synagogue. Observers felt especially outraged as they had paid the electric bills three months ahead of time. The BSSR CARC reluctantly admitted that Naumenko had acted "rather inappropriately," but he was never punished or reprimanded and the matter was quietly dropped.<sup>124</sup>

In 1949-1951 the policy towards worshippers became tougher. Attending *minyans* and observing tradition was now considered antistate treasonable activity. The authorities reported having disclosed so-called "secret" Jewish religious organizations in Baranovichi, Novogrodek and Slonim. Unauthorized prayer gatherings were recorded in Pinsk, Volkovysk, Zhitkovichi, Turov, Bragin and

---

121. Y. Basin, "Sovetskaia vlast' v bor'be s 'opiumom dlia naroda'", [Soviet Power in the struggle with opium of the people], *Mishpoha*, 10 (2001): 38-47.

122. Lazar, 14 years older than Clara, was arrested in 1929 as "a Jewish nationalist" and sent to Central Asia (Novo-Urgench). He was then exiled for another three years to Siberia (Krasnoirsk) on the charges of "participation in a *basmach* mutiny," despite the fact that he had never seen a single *basmach* (Central-Asian warlord). After his release, Lazar came to Turov with his wife and a three-month-old son, but was banished within the first 24 hours (author's archive). Letter from Clara Drozdinskaia from Ariel (Israel), March 13, 2000.

123. NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 13, l. 379; CAHJP, RU-153.

124. NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 16, l. 35.

Vetka. It was decided to resort to the assistance of the militia (police) to put an end to illegal prayer. In 1949, the Minsk city party committee compiled lists of activists among congregants as well as of individuals who hosted *shtiebels* at their homes; the lists were then passed on to the city Department of Interior to execute the operation.<sup>125</sup> In Mogilev, Nisanel Groboshchiner, a ritual slaughterer, was arrested and sentenced to twenty-five-years imprisonment.<sup>126</sup>

The BSSR Council of Ministers issued a directive to the heads of local authorities in Brest, Pinsk, Grodno and Orsha demanding that they put an end to the “illegal” activities of worshippers. Shupenia, the chairman of the Polotsk oblast executive committee, ordered the commander of the city militia branch to forbid gatherings in private homes and take administrative measures against those who refused to obey. In 1950, Kovalev, head of the Polotsk city committee of the Communist Party of Belorussia, summoned the secretaries of grass-roots party units and demanded that they mobilize the communists to fight Jewish religious groups. Heads of branches One and Two of the city Department of Interior were commissioned to disclose illegal Jewish groups. One of the “mobs” of practicing Jews was discovered in the house of Tsodik Ioffe on Proletarskaia Street, where 35 Jews were detained. The owner of the house was taken to the local militia station for a warning talk, but officials themselves regarded the measures as “absolutely insufficient.”<sup>127</sup> On Rosh ha-Shana, observing Jews in Cherven’ assembled a *shtiebel* and brought a Torah scroll from Minsk. Before they got together again for the Yom Kippur prayer, they were told it was forbidden. The district party committee warned Evel Velitovskii, son of the former rabbi, who had initiated the *shtiebel* that Jews should not hold public prayers anymore. After that episode, Velitovskii always went to another town to celebrate Jewish holidays. For some time thereafter, the *minyan* in Cherven’ assembled occasionally, but then broke up.<sup>128</sup>

In 1951, authorities in Bobruisk received an order from Minsk demanding that they investigate and detect places where Jewish groups illegally gathered, and bring the guilty to justice.<sup>129</sup> CARC representatives Dzezhko and Tsimonenko explained to the chairmen of the executive committees of district and city councils how exactly *shtiebels* were to be liquidated. Upon disclosure of a *shtiebel*, it was recommended to pay an unexpected visit there accompanied by militiamen and

---

125. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 258, l. 296.

126. Nisanel Groboshchiner served his sentence in a forced labor camp near the Polar Circle (Vorkuta, the Komi Republic of the Russian Federation). After Stalin’s death, he was amnestied and returned home in 1954. See Aleksandr Litin, “Religioznaia zhizn’ mogilevskikh evreev v poslevoennyi period v svete arkhivnyh izyskanii i vospominanii mogilevchan,” [Religious Life of the Mogilev Jews after the war in the light of the archival research and reminiscence of the Mogilev folks] in *Belorussia u 20 stagoddzi*, vol. 2, p. 229.

127. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 337, l. 9, 56-57.

128. Author’s archive. Letter from Rachel Sheinina from Kfar-Saba (Israel), November 21, 1999.

129. CAHJP, RU-155.

druzhinniks (volunteer civilian group assisting militiamen), to write down the names of all congregants present and draw up a statement of the case. The local officials of the Department of the Interior were assisted by local state security branches (MGB). The two systems exchanged intelligence information collected as part of their duties, revealed activists and initiators and took “appropriate measures.” With the help of the militia, 49 Jewish religious groups were liquidated in the Brest oblast, and a search was underway for the remaining six that were still “in hiding.”

In Vitebsk, Tsimonenko was responsible for repressive operations. He used informers to detect the places of practicing Jews’ gatherings and made surprise appearances there with militiamen and druzhinniks. He wrote down the names of congregants and passed the lists on to the executive committees of local councils. The chairmen of the committees then summoned the hosts of illegal *shtiebels* and demanded that they give a written pledge not to engage in such activities in the future. This stratagem allowed authorities to liquidate *shtiebels* in Vitebsk, Polotsk and Braslav. Representative Brylev reported that in January 1951, the Pinsk oblast executive committee sent a directive for termination of “Jewish activity” to the chairmen of all district councils. When the latter did not deliver the expected results, Roman Machulskii, secretary of the Pinsk oblast committee of the Communist Party of Belorussia, instructed the regional branch of *Gosbezopasnost’* “to do away with the groups.”<sup>130</sup>

Jewish youth was especially vulnerable, as being brought to a militia station could lead to complications at school and work. It was not surprising that young people tried to hide or escape when the militia appeared. In 1951, when a district militia officer and two druzhinniks suddenly turned up at a *shtiebel* in Polotsk, young men and girls jumped out of the windows. In 1952, in Glusk, when Khrapko, chairman of the local council, and a district militia officer took a prayer gathering of 70 worshippers by surprise, several girls hid under a table.<sup>131</sup> Similar cases took place in Bobruisk, Vitebsk, Gor’kii, Kostukovich, Mstislavl, Starobin and Starye Dorogi.

The Minsk synagogue did not escape repressions either. In 1950, a group of community founders led by Samuil Paler were arrested and charged with nationalistic and Zionist activities. After the arrest, some relatives of the accused broke all ties with their families. Paler’s son Isaak, who worked at the BSSR Union of Artists, announced at the meeting organized especially on the occasion that he condemned his father and wanted to have nothing to do with him.<sup>132</sup> In contrast, Kagan’s relatives did not betray their beliefs. Kagan’s daughter, who lived in Moscow and had a law degree, chose not to work in her profession: to be able to observe Sabbath, she worked as a saleswoman in a shop. Abram, Kagan’s son-in-

---

130. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 261, l. 108.

131. *Ibid.*, d. 262, l. 230.

132. Samuil Paler (1891-1957), a ladies’ tailor, observed *kashrut* while serving his sentence in a Soviet forced-labor camp. He ate almost nothing but bread, which undermined his health. Author’s archive, recording of conversation with Basya Zhitnitskaia in Ramat-Gan (Israel), August 16, 1999.

law, worked as a production line manager at a machine processing plant, and his grandson Iitskhak decided to emigrate to Israel.<sup>133</sup>

The arrests had their effect: several members of the *dvadtsatka* of the Minsk synagogue announced their withdrawal. As a result, the required quorum was not secured, and the community executive board lost its authority. Rabbi Berger, who combined rabbinical duties with those of head of community, faced great difficulties in organizing elections, and several times applied for a postponement. In May-June 1951, congregants Teplets, Svirsky, Lurie and Haneles accused Iakov Berger of practicing extortion and indulging in intrigues and called him “a scrounger.” In addition, Berger was blamed for having assisted authorities in arresting the problematic members of the synagogue’s board. Berger retorted by saying that Bronstein, a member of the community’s executive board, continued collecting donations and visiting observing Jews’ homes, despite the fact that he had been forbidden to do so; worse, Bronstein had been keeping part of the money for himself.<sup>134</sup> In July, the rabbi sent a confidential letter to CARC at the BSSR Council of Ministers informing them that a number of congregants demanded that he organized Bible studies, with the idea that this step could attract intellectuals and young people to the synagogue. Berger complained that the atmosphere in the community had become intolerable, and requested to be dismissed from the position of rabbi that he had been holding uninterruptedly since the end of 1945.<sup>135</sup>

In his report for the second quarter of 1951, sent to N.S. Patolichev, then first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belorussia, the commissioner of the BSSR CARC expressed his assurance that “the community in Minsk could be disbanded now if we take advantage of this *squabble*”.<sup>136</sup> This decision, however, was not implemented. Having consulted with the MGB of the BSSR, officials reached the conclusion that it was best “to let this scuffle go on for a while until it leads to positive results.” Some time later, the warring parties reached a compromise: three new members were elected to the community executive board, and Rabbi Berger was reelected its chairman. That was not, however, the end of the conflict at the Minsk synagogue, as shortly thereafter affairs took a dramatic turn.<sup>137</sup>

---

133. Rabbi Yitskhak Kagan died in prison a month after being arrested in Minsk. His grandson Yitskhak, after graduation from the Moscow Power Engineering Institute, worked as chief of a design bureau that developed submarine navigation systems (1969-1972). He refused to join the Communist party and applied for a permit to emigrate to Israel in 1973, became a *refusenik*, repatriated to Israel in 1986, served in Israeli Defense Forces. Having received a blessing from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, he went to Russia to lead the synagogue on Malaia Bronnaia Street in Moscow. See Yitskhak Kogan, “Upravliat’ sud’boi ne legche, chem podvodnoi lodkoi,” [To take command of one’s own destiny is no easier than taking command of a submarine], *Evreiskii kamerton*, February 13, 2003, p. 9.

134. NARB, f. 952, op. 3, d. 260, l. 100-101.

135. *Ibid.*, op. 1, d. 24, l. 6.

136. *Italics mine*, L.S.

137. Smilovitsky, *Evrei Belarusi: iz nashei obshchei istorii, 1905-1953 gg.* [Jews in Belarus. From Our Common History] (Minsk: ARTI-Fex, 1999), 300.

Practicing and non-practicing Jews were greatly alarmed by the campaign known as the Doctors' Plot, after the TASS Statement on January 13, 1953, that a sinister plot of physicians working in the Kremlin had been revealed.<sup>138</sup> Iosif Haitman remembers that on January 14, 1953 he came from Gomel' to visit his parents in Kalinkovichi. His father Bentsion worked as a house painter and acted secretly as leader of a *shtiebel* in Kalinkovichi. Having come to his father's work place, Iosif found him terribly frightened. Bentsion was sitting near a dye caldron, lamenting and repeating "What is going to happen to all of us now?" He had been subject to repressions in 1937 and understood immediately that "dark clouds" were gathering over Jews. Bentsion's daughter-in-law, Donia Sorkina, who worked as chief of a polyclinic in Kalinkovichi, was summoned to the Railway Authority in Gomel' and offered a voucher so that she could take a vacation in Kislovodsk (a spa health resort). While Donia was absent from work, she was dismissed from her job and downgraded to the position of an ordinary physician.<sup>139</sup>

Stalin's death, followed by rapid replacements of top political figures, temporarily allayed administrative pressure. This instilled hopes among observers for changes in the regime's attitudes towards religious denominations in general and Jews in particular. On April 6, 1953, the newspaper *Pravda* reported that "doctor-murderers" had been acquitted. On the following day, April 7, the last day of the Passover holidays, over 700 Jews came to the Minsk synagogue, and the prayers had to be held in two shifts. On April 8, the number of worshippers soared. According to Rabbi Berger, there were many people there whom he had never seen before. Many were not actually praying but discussing the latest news. One of the women cried out: "We are saved!" When the rabbi tried to find out what the matter was, she explained that she actually had no time for prayers but had just come to convey the news so joyous for the Jewish people.<sup>140</sup>

Throughout the year 1953, prayers at the Minsk synagogue were attended by many more people than before. In the rabbis' opinion, this was a manifestation of "gratitude for the change of attitude in the country towards the Jewish nation." In contrast, CARC staff were far from being happy and reported that observing Jews started to demonstrate impudent behavior.<sup>141</sup> Attendees of *minyans* who previously used to escape as quickly and quietly as possible when discovered, now demanded that they not be disturbed. A large *shtiebel* was functioning in Minsk in the area of the Komarovskii market. In previous years, some worshippers had occasionally visited the synagogue in order not to be suspected of attending the *shtiebel*. After 1953, they stopped making formal visits to the synagogue.<sup>142</sup>

---

138. For details, see Smilovitsky, "The Non-Jewish Reaction to the 'Doctors' Plot' in Belorussia: In the Light of New Documents (January-March 1953)," *Shvut*, 9, 25 (2000): 67-92; Smilovitsky, "Byelorussian Jewry and the Doctors' Plot," *East European Jewish Affairs*, 27, 2 (1997): 39-53.

139. Author's archive. Letter from Iosif Haitman from Nes-Tsiona (Israel), April 30, 2002.

140. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 261, l. 246.

141. Altshuler, "Synagogues and Rabbis in the Soviet Union..." 42.

142. *New York Times*, October 3, 1955.

These events took place throughout Belorussia and the Ukraine. In Bobruisk, where practicing Jews had not made even a single attempt to have their synagogue registered in the years 1948-1953, three such requests were made between April and December 1953 alone. In July 1953, the Jews of Gomel' petitioned to open a synagogue; in August, a similar request was submitted by the Jews in Pinsk. In the autumn of 1953, over 500 observers in Gomel' were holding prayers at eight locations; in Rechitsa — 50 congregants at two locations; in Mozyr — 70 congregants at two locations; in Slutsk — 90 congregants at two locations and in Borisov — 180 congregants at six locations. Officials had to admit that the activity of practicing Jews had grown considerably in comparison with the previous years, and that prayers were now attended not only by old people, "as we used to think, but people of other ages as well." Amounts donated were growing as well; in Minsk, the congregants of the synagogue alone, not taking into account donations made at *shtiebels*, collected 15,000 rubles, which was twice as much as in 1952.<sup>143</sup>

Lessening administrative pressure brought about friction and conflicts in several religious communities in the republic. One such case took place in Minsk, where the latent conflict between two groups of Jewish observers had been "smoldering" for a number of years. In May 1953, I.V. Neifakh, a member of the religious community, sent a confidential letter to the BSSR Council of Ministers claiming that Kaganovich, the *shames* ("attendant") of the Minsk synagogue, took the money donated by congregants for himself. In order to make his denunciation more plausible, Neifakh wrote that he was a Soviet pensioner and that his two sons had been killed in the war against the German invaders.<sup>144</sup> Izrail Faibyshevich Kaganovich had helped the rabbi in holding prayer services and was paid a monthly wage of 200 rubles. Besides, he recited memorial prayers and provided other services at practicing Jews' requests, charging fees of three to five rubles. The fact that he had been concealing the additional income from the tax department was used as a pretext for the letter of denunciation.<sup>145</sup> Kaganovich had been close to Rabbi Iakov Berger, who became the main target of criticism. The rabbi had to adjust himself to the changing situation. During the year 1953, Berger paid nine visits to Ulasevich, six times on his own initiative and three times on invitation. During these visits, current problems were discussed, like baking *matsot*, preparing kosher meat, restoring a ritual slaughterer to his previous job. The rabbi provided information on the current situation in the community and inquired where it was appropriate to offer prayers related to Stalin's illness and death, a prayer for the well-being of the government, etc.<sup>146</sup>

---

143. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 262, l. 114, 224, 228.

144. NARB, f. 952, op. 1, d. 36, l. 69.

145. *Ibid.*, d. 31, l. 125.

146. GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 262, l. 115-116.



### Aftermath

In the early postwar years, many observant Jews retained the illusion that there was a real possibility of resuming regular synagogue activities. People believed the official rhetoric proclaiming equal rights for the various religious denominations in the USSR. They were sure that now that the war was over, the state would show a more compassionate attitude towards its citizens, regardless of their creed. This illusion led to persistent requests for legal registration of Jewish communities. Bitter disappointment ensued when their appeals were ignored and most communities and congregations were denied registration.

As can be seen, in the late 1940s-early 1950s, the state refused to grant observers their legitimate requests and violated their rights, stopping at nothing. There was no one to appeal to. Victimization and persecution took place on district, city, regional and republican levels. In CARC records, as well as in records of party and state bodies, not a single case has been found when practicing Jews turned to the law or hired a lawyer to defend their rights. Discrimination of religious minorities that had previously been integral part of the general Soviet policy of violation of human rights now became an everyday matter. The regime, taking advantage of its monopoly of power and complete control over the media, was free to act as it chose. Civil rights declared in the USSR Constitution were not adhered to, pledges remained unfulfilled, and the implementation of decisions made in favor of congregants was intolerably delayed.<sup>147</sup>

The Jewish *shtetls* in Belorussia did not revive, and the observance of Jewish tradition (especially Sabbath and dietary laws) in big cities and industrial centers was difficult, as all the actions of the traditional and observant Jews were under the total control of the authorities, who required permits for everything. The smallest sector in this community consisted of children and adolescents, who lost their knowledge of Yiddish almost completely once teaching it was banned. Jews often decided not to introduce their children to religion; this was to avoid placing additional obstacles to their integration in Soviet society. The policy of state-supported anti-Semitism, the notorious campaign against cosmopolitanism, and the systematic denial of the consequences of the Holocaust were factors that, in many cases, actually fostered solidarity by observant Jews around a synagogue or prayer house.

Stalin's death in 1953 aroused an ambiguous response among the Jewish public. A period of mourning was proclaimed in some communities, memorial services for Stalin were held in the two officially registered synagogues and in many of the unofficial prayer houses, and some people wept. Telegrams and letters expressing

---

147. "O krupnykh nedostatках v nauchno-ateisticheskoi propagande i merakh ee uluchsheniia" and "Ob oshibkakh v provedenii nauchno-ateisticheskoi propagandy sredi naseleniia" (1954 g.) ["About the large inadequacies in scientific-atheistic propaganda and the measures taken to improve it" and "About the errors made in carrying out scientific-atheistic propaganda among population"], *Kommunisticheskaia partiia Sovetskogo Soiuz a rezolutsiakh i resheniakh s'ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK* (M., 1971), vol. 6, 502-507, 516-520.

“deep grief” were sent to Moscow. Patriotic eulogies were delivered from public forums, where Jews offered prayers for the government, for the party, for the new premier, Georgii Malenkov, and some even wore black armbands. At the same time, people were ecstatic when just one month after Stalin’s death they heard the radio announcement by the Interior Ministry exculpating all the doctors allegedly involved in the Doctors’ Plot, six of whom were Jewish.

Nevertheless, Jews continued to preserve tradition in all possible ways. The postwar history of the mutual relations of the Jews and the Soviet power in Belorussia gives many examples of their tenacity. The regime was unable to eliminate the last remnants of religious activities or to destroy the vestiges of Jewish identity and tradition that remained after the ravages of World War II. However, Jewish religious life in Belorussia continued to exist clandestinely.<sup>148</sup>

*Goldenstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center  
Université de Tel-Aviv*

*smilov@zahav.net.il*

---

148. At present time, in Belarus there are 108 buildings previously used as Jewish prayer houses and synagogues. Most of them are used for various purposes unrelated to Judaism, and some are in poor repair. Nine buildings have been returned to the Jewish community, with seven currently functioning as synagogues. There is still no law in the republic regulating restitution or procedures for restoring the rights of religious bodies to the property they once owned. However so, laws have been adopted in Russia, Moldova and the Baltic states. Today the only nine synagogues that are sanctioned by the state exist in Minsk, Pinsk, Bobruisk, Volozhin, Grodno, Kalinkovichi, Gomel’, Vitebsk, Borisov. Officially registered Jewish congregations now number 42, including 15 Orthodox (Litvak), 12 Hassidic (Chabad), 15 Progressive Judaism. All in all, we may estimate 42 places of prayer — synagogues and prayer houses — belonging to various Jewish congregations, existing both in buildings which are the property of the congregations and in rented dwellings as well (See Letter of Yuri Dorn on December 20, 2007).