

Israel's Soviet Immigrants

Dr Neill Lochery, Director of the Centre for Israeli Studies at University College London, has been conducting research on the impact of Russian immigrants on contemporary Israeli politics. Below, he considers the degree to which they have become assimilated within Israeli society and their influence on the political agenda.

THE arrival of Israel's Soviet immigrants and their assimilation into Israeli society during the 1990s is one of the most important developments in the State of Israel, and for the prospects of finding an accord between Israel, the Palestinians and the wider Arab world. Like most aspects of the development of Israel the arrival of this new Aliyah (wave of Jewish immigrants) has brought challenges, problems and unforeseen consequences. To a large degree, Israel's 750,000 Soviet immigrants (out of the total Jewish population of Israel of five and a half million) determined the outcome of the 1992 and 1996 elections in Israel. The first brought the late Yitzhak Rabin to power and led to the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and 1994. The 1996 election led to a slowing down of the peace process and its eventual derailment under Benjamin Netanyahu. The group's impact on Israel's more recent elections has only been reduced because of the fact that these contests resulted in landslide victories for one candidate – or party – over the other (Ehud Barak over Netanyahu in 1999, Ariel Sharon over Barak in 2001, and Sharon and Likud over Amram Mitzna and Labour in 2003).

Israel is an immigrant society – one in which the key aim of Zionism has been to gather Jews from the Diaspora into the state for Jews. The right of return for any Jew has been at the centre of the state's policy since its creation in 1948. This was not undertaken for selfless motives. The key battles in the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts have not only taken place on the battlefields, but also in the area of demography. Put simply, Israel has needed immigrants to help settle the lands both within Israel proper (within what is known as the Green Line) and, since 1967, in the areas known as the Occupied Territories. In recent years, with birth rates among the Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Arabs much higher than among Jewish families, Israel has looked more to immigration from overseas to help redress the changing demographic balance.

It was within the context of need that the first members of this Aliyah were welcomed at Ben-Gurion airport in Tel Aviv in 1988. For Yitzhak Shamir, the then Israeli prime minister, their arrival was a boost to his widely declared goal of settling extensively in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in order both to change the demographic balance in these areas that heavily favoured the Palestinians, and to make it extremely difficult for these lands to be returned to the Arabs by any future Israeli government. Shamir, in short, hoped that these new immigrants would settle in these areas and in new housing developments (Settlements as the Palestinians term them) in the Jerusalem area. Here came the first unexpected development for Shamir and his vision. The Soviet Aliyah has shown itself to be extremely reluctant to move to such areas. Yes, a few immigrants did take advantage of generous government inducements to move into Occupied Territories; but the vast majority have chosen to live in existing urban areas or in new towns (Development Towns) next to established urban areas. Consequently, the dream of Shamir that the demographic balance of the Occupied Territories would be changed beyond recognition has not materialised. If this came as a surprise to some in Israel, an examination of the profile of this Aliyah reveals that it lacked in the main any real pioneering spirit (ability and desire to develop the land), and to a large degree its commitment to the Revisionist Zionist ideology of Greater Israel (a Jewish state to the west of the River Jordan) was negligible.

Where the Soviet Jews have proved more useful has been in assuring a clear Jewish majority within Israel proper. It was hoped that the vast majority of the Soviet Union's two and a half million Jews would emigrate to Israel, but poor economic conditions in Israel for the early immigrants (unemployment in Israel was at 11 percent at the start of the 1990s, and even higher among Soviet immigrants), and improving

political and economic conditions in Russia meant that many Jews decided to remain in the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU). Unlike previous Aliyahs who generally cut their ties with their countries of origin, this group has maintained close ties with the motherland. Many immigrants still have family in the FSU and return for holidays, shopping and family events. The ever-growing numbers of flights between Tel Aviv, Russia and the Ukraine is testament to this fact. Within Israel many of these immigrants cling to the culture and language of the motherland. Within many families Russian is spoken both within the home and in what some Israelis term 'the Russian Ghettos'. Hebrew, if spoken at all, is only for official purposes. Despite intensive efforts by the Israeli government, and the huge number of ULPAN intensive language courses available free of charge to immigrants, many remain reluctant to abandon their mother tongue. Indeed, in a revealing admission of this fact all the major Israeli political parties started in the 1999 election campaign to subtitle their election adverts and propaganda in Russian as well as the usual Arabic. This practice has continued to this day, and there are now dedicated Russian language news programmes on Israeli television as well.

The seeming lack of social, linguistic and cultural integration into Israel proper has led to both the Zionist and the Jewish credentials of this Aliyah being questioned by many Israelis. Regarding the first, it is true to say that many immigrants from the FSU are not Zionists. In talking with their political leadership it is clear that, while few would question the commitment to Zionism of leading Soviet immigrant leaders such as Natan Sharansky, a large number of FSU immigrants can clearly be identified as economic immigrants. They came to Israel because it appeared that there was a greater long-term opportunity for wealth. To be fair, it should be remembered that the majority of the original Aliyahs to Palestine (1880–1938)

did not come primarily for Zionist reasons, but rather because of either persecution in their countries of origin or – once the United States closed its door to Jewish immigration – the lack of an alternative third country. Regarding the question of who is a Jew, the arrival of the highly secular Soviet immigrants (over 65 per cent of whom claim to be non believers) has led to a crisis in establishing the criteria for who is a Jew. And, more importantly, who is not. The ultra-orthodox party Shas, which has been involved in a decade-long battle with the political leadership of the Soviet immigrants for control of the Ministry of the Interior (important for the distribution of state funds), claims that many immigrants from this Aliyah are not even Jewish. This is an ongoing debate within Israel with little sign of resolution. In response, leaders such as Sharansky have called for the ultra-orthodox to do national service in the Israeli army. Currently, the ultra-orthodox are exempt from military service, of three years for men and two years for women. Indeed, military service has become one of the major areas where the Soviet Aliyah has successfully assimilated into Israeli society.

Among the most emotive images of the current Palestinian Intifada were the television pictures of the lynching of two Israeli soldiers in Ramallah. Their mutilated bodies were hurled out of a third floor

window of Ramallah's police station, and subsequently tied to a car and driven around the town's square. For Israel's Soviet immigrants the images were all the more shocking given the fact that the two murdered soldiers were recent immigrants to Israel from Russia, and served as a painful reminder of the sacrifices its members have made since their arrival in Israel. Many young immigrants went straight into combat units in the Israeli army and served in Lebanon, at the same time as a growing number of middle class Israeli families were increasingly finding ways of keeping their sons out of such units. In an area, and in a conflict, where symbols are of great importance the lynching in Ramallah marked a key point in the assimilation of the Soviet immigrants into Israel. It brought comparisons with the changes in how new and veteran Israelis viewed one another following the high casualty rates among Israel's Oriental Jews in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Despite the tragic events in Ramallah and in other places, research indicates that the issue of military service has generally been viewed as a 'pull factor' in attracting young immigrants from the FSU to Israel. Many reservists revealed that their treatment in the Israeli Defence Forces was much more humane than in Russia, where military service was until recently set at five years. For much of the 1990s Russian forces were involved in a brutal

war in Chechnya where many of the reservists were sent. In perhaps the ultimate case of 'out of the frying pan and into the fire' many of these reservists who found their way to Israel appeared to prefer the war against Hezbollah or serving in the West Bank to life in the motherland. Many of these young immigrants left their families behind in Russia (some followed to Israel later but anecdotal evidence suggests that many of this group had no family living in Israel).

Like immigrant groups before them, the Soviets have had to suffer their fair share of jibes from veteran Israelis. Off the cuff comments from two serving Israeli Ministers in the Rabin administration illustrate the crux of the problem. Ora Namir labelled the Aliyah as one third prostitutes, one third social needs and one third single mother families. While Moshe Shahal characterised the group as the Aliyah of the Mafioso. To a certain extent, each Aliyah that arrived in Israel since the 1950s has faced similar comments. The Orientals were attacked for being slow and backward – but the immigrants from the FSU have faced much harsher attacks. Evidence, however, suggests that there is some truth in the thinking behind the charges that the ministers made. The vast majority of Israel's thriving prostitution and pornography sector is run by the Soviet Mafia using girls that have entered Israel under the guise of making Aliyah – the major client base includes Arabs who cross from as far away as Amman in Jordan to have sex in the brothels of Tel Aviv and other Israel cities. Organised crime syndicates are big in Israel – the vast majority of them can be traced back either to the Soviet Union or to immigrants from the FSU either based in Israel or overseas. These groups tend to use Israel's extremely liberal currency controls to launder money from criminal activities in the Soviet Union. There are also a number of drug cartels that use Israel either as a place for selling drugs, or as a halfway house for the export of drugs to Europe. Initially, Israeli police were slow to mount credible investigations into such activities, but recent political pressure following high profile shootings and bombings in Tel Aviv involving rival gangs have led to a more robust response from the Israeli police often working on conjunction with their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts.



Minister Natan Sharansky in conversation with then PM Benjamin Netanyahu. Photograph Ohayon Avi, by courtesy of the Government Press Office, Israel.

Interestingly, leading female members of the Soviet Aliyah commented that they found Israel society to be more backward in terms of asserting the rights of women in the workplace and at home than in the FSU. Israeli society, they argued, continued to be male dominated in terms both of its political leadership, and its military and economic elites. There are also a growing number of



New Soviet immigrants in the Absorption Room at Ben Gurion Airport. Photograph Alpert Nathan, by courtesy of the Government Press Office, Israel.

cases of attacks on women in the home by their partners. To some degree, the status of women in Israel can be explained by the conservative nature of Judaism that encourages women to stay at home and look after the family. Despite the efforts of many feminists during the 1990s the attitude of many Israelis remains that the Arab-Israeli conflict needs to be resolved before such issues as women's rights can be addressed.

In looking at the arrival of the immigrants from the FSU it is clear that their assimilation into Israeli society is both incomplete, and not wholly successful. The outbreak of the

Palestinian Intifada in October 2000 and the resulting violence has come to dominate Israeli society, with Israeli society pulling together into a wartime style coalition in which ethnic differences – while not totally cast aside – appear to playing a less significant role. Changes in Israel's electoral system that gave the FSU immigrants a realistic opportunity to form their own political party

during the 1990s have been reversed. In the Israeli elections of 2003, Israelis voted once more only for a party rather than the two ballot system of separate prime ministerial and parliamentary elections. This resulted in a major erosion of support for the Immigrants Party led by Sharansky (an additional reason was the party's apparent failure to deliver economically to its immigrant constituency while it served in various government coalitions between 1996 and 2003). Consequently, Sharansky joined forces with the ruling Likud block led by Ariel Sharon, and the final merger between the two parties is likely to take place before the next election. Many Israelis, however, are calling for some of the negative issues arising from the FSU such as organised crime to be addressed now, through the tightening of currency regulations and a more rigorous investigation into the origins and background of some of the immigrants who apply to come to Israel. For demographic

reasons Israel still hopes and needs to attract some of the Jews who remain in countries of the FSU. The omens, however, are not good. Under Russia's more liberal religious rules Jewish culture is starting to flourish in parts of the country; and with the Middle East situation showing little sign of any improvement in the short to medium term (along with the related economic recession in Israel) the number of new immigrants from the FSU is starting to dry up. Indeed, emigration is becoming an increasing problem for Israeli authorities as a growing number of immigrants, homesick and suffering from the constant threat of violence

and economic hardship, move back to their countries of origin. Projected changes in the length of military service in Russia (a shortening from five to three years), and the seeming Russian victory in Chechnya may also mean that Israel will no longer prove so attractive to young Russian Jews trying to avoid military service in their motherland.

The next few years are likely to be extremely important ones for the prospects of the Soviet immigrants in Israel, and for the shaping of Israeli society. It will be at least another decade before we can see and fully understand the effect of this group on Israeli society and in helping to shape Israeli self-identity. In this time the sons and daughters of the original FSU immigrants who were born in Israel will have grown up and started to establish themselves. Just as the second generation of Oriental Jews had a profound influence on Israel, the same is likely to be true of the similar generation of FSU immigrants. It will be fascinating to watch how their developing beliefs and values sets will come to influence Israeli positions towards the Palestinians and the wider Arab world, as well as internal Israeli issues such as religious-secular issues and debates over the question of who is a Jew.

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