

Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry Collections



The Soviet Jewry Movement

The Soviet Jewry movement emerged in response to the Soviet Union's Jewish policy which was seen as a violation of basic human and civil rights, including freedom of immigration, freedom of religion, and the freedom to study one's own language, history and culture.

Why were Jews not allowed to leave Russia?

Jews had been persecuted in the Soviet Union through much of the 20th century. Extreme nationalism took place in Russia, following the Leninist principle of all Soviet citizens falling into one general populace with no nationality distinctions. In the 1970s, Moscow had a large Jewish population, yet there was only one synagogue. There was no way to become a rabbi or even eat kosher food, therefore Jews were discouraged from learning and practising their Jewish cultural identity.

After continual denial, Jews wanted to emigrate from Russia. Although they could apply to leave, the majority were refused permission and were often unable to get a job afterwards, even if you were a qualified scientist or librarian. Instead, the government would assign you a job, such as the roles of stoker, shovelling coal, or elevator operator.

The Russian government wanted to discourage large-scale Soviet-Jewish migration by imprisoning leaders of the Jewish movement. These prisoners of conscience became the new focus of the international Soviet-Jewish protest movement.

Who were the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry (the 35s)?

- They were a pressure group established in 1971, known as the 35's, seeking to assist Jews in Russia wishing to leave the country but refused permission. I will refer to them as the 35s for the rest of this training session.
- The pressure group was affectionately known as the 35s due to the average age of the group.
- It was originally formed in response to the arrest of Raiza Palatnik, a 35 year old librarian from Odessa. Raiza had been sent to prison after being convicted of "slandering the Soviet Union" for applying to leave for Israel and had been accused of "keeping and distributing materials slanderous to the State".
- The group was primarily made up of relatively young middle-class Jewish housewives from North West London. They were a unique phenomenon among the Jewish community in Britain and were active at a time when it was unheard of for Jewish women to go out and demonstrate.
- They were in direct contact with refuseniks to give them moral support. Refuseniks was an unofficial term for Soviet Jews denied permission to emigrate. The group worked tirelessly to highlight their position.
- They achieved this through a series of active and unexpected demonstrations, particularly at Soviet cultural events. One such demonstration took place at a performance by the Bolshoi Ballet in London where the women revealed slogan t-shirts beneath their blouses as a mark of protest. In addition to such demonstrations they lobbied government officials and Members of Parliament.
- Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Campaign's focus has shifted to welfare.

What happened to these Refuseniks in the end?

The Jackson-Vanik amendment to the Trade Act of 1974 in United States federal law required the U.S. president to certify to Congress every year that all countries with non-market economies (originally countries of the Communist bloc) permitted freedom of emigration and other human rights. In other words, Russia was required to lift its emigration restrictions if it was to be permitted to trade with the USA.

This led to Russia easing its emigration restrictions, allowing Soviet Jews to leave in larger numbers. In the 1980s, the liberal government of Mikhail Gorbachev allowed unlimited Jewish emigration, and the Soviet Union itself collapsed in 1991.

Among those who left are Avigdor Lieberman, who served as the Defence Minister of Israel from 2016 to 2018, and Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google.

What material do we hold?

[1. MS 254 Papers of the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry](#)

Files of biographical information and case papers for refuseniks; campaign correspondence, including letters to Members of Parliament; master copies of publications produced by the Campaign; newspapers; photographs, banners and other items, including handcuffs, from demonstrations; 1970-93.

[2. MS 434 Papers of Michael Sherbourne](#)

Michael Sherbourne was a human rights activist who played an influential role in the movement to win Jews the right to emigrate from the Soviet Union. After meeting members of the 35s at a conference held by the Chief Rabbi in Britain, Sherbourne began to work closely with the organisation. Sherbourne used his ability to speak Russian to act as a communicator between refuseniks, the Israeli Embassy in London, and Jewish organisations such as the 35s wanting to help them emigrate from Russia. He would ask the Refuseniks when they had applied to leave, when they were refused permission, what difficulties they had faced from the police, and what their current situation was.

Records relating to the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry include correspondence discussing the history of the organisation, newsletters and bulletins, and circulars and calendars.

[3. MS 358 Soviet Jewry papers of Dr Colin Shindler](#)

Dr Colin Shindler was an activist for Soviet Jewry from his student days and the first editor of *Jews in the USSR*, founded in 1971, a weekly compilation of "raw material" on Soviet Jews. He was one of the founder members of the National Council for Soviet Jewry of Great Britain and Ireland, established in 1975.

Records relating to the 35s include guidance for letter writers of the pressure group, circulars, *The year of the child, Soviet style* edited by the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry, 1979, correspondence, press releases, newspaper cuttings, and papers in relation to Ida Nudel, known as the "Guardian Angel" for her efforts to help the "Prisoners of Zion" in the Soviet Union.

Other related collections

[MS 276 Papers of Conscience](#)

Conscience is the Interdenominational Committee for Soviet Jewry. It was set up in 1973 to work for the release of Jews from the Soviet Union. This collection contains the papers of Alan Howard, chairman of Conscience, together with papers for its predecessor, the Greater London Interdenominational Committee for the Release of Soviet Jewry. The collection includes correspondence, with public figures, minutes, reports of visits by members of Conscience to the Soviet Union, and biographies and translations of material relating to refuseniks.

Examples of key sources

- 1. Refusenik case file: Raiza Palatinik, 1971-3 MS 254 A980/2/16/2**
- 2. Documents and drafts prepared by The All-Party Parliamentary Committee for the Release of Soviet Jewry distributed to European Members of Parliament, including methods and suggestions for making telephone calls to the Soviet Union, a summary of the current situation of Soviet Jewry, a briefing on possible ways in which Parliamentarians may assist in the work of Soviet Jewry, 5 August 1974 MS 254 A980 1/2/4**
- 3. Michael Sherbourne on the telephone with his recording equipment, c.1980s-1990s MS434 A4249 7/4**
- 4. Reprint from The Times Appeal to the U.S.S.R. Government for the release of Soviet Jewish Prisoners of Conscience, 25 November 1974 MS 254 A980 1/3/3**
- 5. Copy of *The interview* a play by Alan Sillitoe giving the story of Ida Nudel MS 358 A2091 2/4**

6. Photograph album containing copies of correspondence and publicity material relating to the activities of the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry, 1972-92 MS 254 A980 3/1/1

7. Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry calendar, 1989 MS434 A4249 5/6

8. 35's stickers MS 254 A980 1/3/8