

**SOVIET JEWRY ARCHIVES  
IN THE COLLECTION OF  
THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO**

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**Description:** In 1996, the Human Rights Initiative (HRI) at the University of Colorado at Boulder commenced a research initiative to document the plight of Soviet Jews during the Cold War. The HRI began this endeavor after discovering an alarming paucity of archival data on the American and international advocacy movement on behalf of Soviet Jewry. The archival project was driven by a compelling set of obligations: to secure a definitive body of knowledge to avert revisionist histories; to provide a stable set of research data to policymakers; to inform Jews of the former Soviet republics of the particularities of the movement that arose on their behalf; and to provide sufficient data for successful modeling for current and future international human rights efforts. As a result, the Soviet Jewry archives currently comprises the largest such collection in existence. Nevertheless, aside from what this research collection says about the condition of Soviet Jews during the Cold War years, there is still much to be done. This presentation will therefore focus on the contours of this research project, the nature of the research archives, what remains to be done to compile an adequate documentary record, and where matters now stand with this endeavor.

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<p><b>Bruce Montgomery</b> is Associate Professor and founder and director of the Human Rights Initiative at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He founded HRI in 1992 to document the international human rights movement and humanitarian affairs. The Initiative has consequently produced the most comprehensive human rights archives in the world, including the archives of Amnesty International USA, Human Rights Watch, Physicians for Human Rights, the Iraqi Secret Police Files, and other major human rights organizations.</p>
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This paper will discuss the International Soviet Jewry Archives Project currently located at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In so doing, I will discuss the project's mission, why it was started, the contours of the project, the Soviet Jewry movement's origins and its historical importance, what remains to be done to preserve the movement's legacy, and where matters now stand with respect to this endeavor.

**Mission of the International Soviet Jewry Archival Project**

The International Soviet Jewry Archival Project at the University of Colorado at Boulder commenced in 1996 as part of the Human Rights Initiative, which aims to document the international human rights movement and humanitarian affairs. By way of background, the Human Rights Initiative, which began in 1991, now comprises the world's largest collection of human rights primary source materials, including the archives of the U.S. arm of Amnesty International (AIUSA); Human Rights Watch and its major divisions covering Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Eurasia; the Fund for Free Expression; the Physicians for Human Rights; the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, the Guatemala Commission for Human Rights; as well as the archives of other nongovernmental

organizations. In 1997, the Initiative launched a the El Salvador archives project that obtained copies of thousands of testimonies and case files from three leading Salvadoran human rights organizations concerning violations of human rights and humanitarian law during that country's twelve-year civil conflict. In addition, in 1998 the Initiative negotiated the acquisition of approximately 18 tons of Iraqi Secret Police Files captured by Kurdish rebels shortly after the 1991 Gulf War. Together, these materials comprise about 8,500 linear feet of material, much of it considered sensitive and under access restrictions.

Within the context of this greater human rights project, the International Soviet Jewry Archival Project was launched to document the international movement on behalf of Soviet Jewish emigration, religious and cultural rights during the Cold War years. From the start, the project's primary mission has been to preserve and promote the advocacy movement's heritage to researchers, policy makers, and a broad international public. To this end, the project intended to produce videotaped interviews with leading Soviet Jewry advocates, refuseniks, government officials, and others, in addition to developing a historically significant archive of primary source materials.

The Soviet Jewry project commenced after discovering an alarming paucity of archival data on the American and the International advocacy movement on behalf of Soviet Jews. We believed at the conception of this endeavor—and still believe—that this project is urgent. Political and social conditions related to Soviet Jews continue to rapidly change in the West and in the former Soviet Republics. With time, those from whom we must still collect evidence will be more difficult to locate; evidence is disappearing along with the memories of survivors and victims of former Soviet repression. These archives must be pursued before materials are lost or destroyed.

The project has thus been driven by a compelling set of obligations: to secure a definitive body of knowledge to avert revisionist histories; to provide a stable set of research data to scholars, policy makers, and others; to inform Jews of the former Soviet Republics of the particularities of the movement that arose on their behalf; and to provide sufficient data for successful modeling for current and future international human rights endeavors.

The project has therefore been aimed at documenting the activities of individuals and organizations centrally involved in facilitating the emigration of Soviet Jews who suffered from repressive Soviet religious and ethnic policies. The project has attempted to explore issues surrounding freedom of movement, emigration, cultural and religious rights, speech and association, and other fundamental human freedoms. In addition, the project has focused on Soviet practices of social repression: arbitrary arrests, interrogations, job dismissals, conscription, the diploma tax, KGB harassment, forced psychiatric hospitalization, labor camps, internal exile, and other forms and strategies of repression.

A primary focus also has been on the advocacy movement's methods developed directly to counter the Soviet state, including primarily public and private advocacy in the United States, Israel, and the former USSR. The American component has been deemed

especially critical to an understanding of the movement's profound international repercussions. Advocates used a variety of means to press for democratic Soviet emigration legislation, democratic rule of law, release of political prisoners, removal of obstacles to emigration rights and religious and cultural freedom within the former Soviet Union. The Soviet Jewry project has further attempted to document the advocacy movement's specific protest activities, monitoring activities within the former Soviet Union, collaboration with international human rights organizations and the American labor movement, lobbying of U.S. and foreign government officials, tracking of U.S.-Soviet relations, and other strategies. The sole intent of the project has been to amass as much as possible all available relevant evidence. In this endeavor as in other archiving initiatives, we have it a point to leave the interpretation of the historical record to others.

To facilitate support and to enhance its visibility, we assembled an international advisory board behind this endeavor. The board consists of leading members of the Soviet Jewry movement, including some who are prominent in philanthropy. The board members also serve to inform project staff of the primarily issues that need to be documented; to establish contacts on behalf of the project, including former refuseniks and leaders in the advocacy movement, government officials, and others; and to assist in raising the necessary funds.

### **What Has Been Accomplished/Why the Project Is Important**

Since the commencement of this endeavor in 1996, the project has successfully developed a large and historically significant of archives on the Soviet Jewry advocacy movement, but by no means is it complete or even adequate at this point. At present, the collections include the archives of the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, Bay Area Council for Soviet Jews, Houston Action for Soviet Jews, Chicago Action for Soviet Jews, Colorado Committee of Concern for Soviet Jewry, Seattle Action for Soviet Jews, the South Florida Committee for Soviet Jews, the Womens 35's, which was based in London, and the records and papers of other groups and founding and leading officials in the advocacy movement. In addition, the archives of Amnesty International and Helsinki Watch have materials that directly relate to Soviet repression of Jewish social, cultural, and religious life. Together, these archives comprise almost 2,000 linear feet of case files of political prisoners, refuseniks, and others; strategy documents; executive board minutes; political action files; correspondence; photographs, audio and video tapes; protest materials; and a broad range of other materials. Aside from these collections, only a few other collections on the subject may be found at other institutions. These include the fragmentary records of the National Conference for Soviet Jewry, which are at the American Jewish Historical Society; the records of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry at Columbia University, and the papers of Louis Rosenblum, one of the founding members of the Union of Councils grass roots movement, at Case Western Reserve University.

Taken together, these sources indicate little of the scope and gravity of the international advocacy movement, which encompassed an extraordinary array of Jewish and non-Jewish organizations, as well as support from American, Israeli, and European

governments. The confluence of nongovernmental organizations and governments behind this movement marked an extraordinary occurrence, making the paucity of archival evidence on this movement especially disconcerting. When considered within its historical context, the scarcity of materials on the international dimensions of the Soviet Jewry movement is even more disappointing.

### **Origins and Historical Importance of the International Soviet Jewry Movement**

The advocacy movement's origins stemmed from more than a century of virulent pogroms and massacres under Tsarist Russia and continuing severe persecution under the new Soviet state. The 1917 Revolution devastated the social and religious society developed over the centuries in the territorial ghettos of the Tsar's Pale of Russia. Soviet authorities replaced communal governing bodies with Jewish Party Commissariats; prohibited religious education; and Judaism came under intensive repression as the authorities imposed a militant atheism on the population. Under the new Soviet order, the authorities requisitioned synagogues, outlawed Hebrew as a reactionary and counter-revolutionary language; and arrested and sent Rabbis and other religious officials to prison camps. Stalin's anti-Jewish reign of terror from 1948 to his death in 1953 marked the high point of obliteration. The purges wrought near total destruction on Soviet Jewish culture and institutions, and involved the arrest and execution of prominent Jewish intellectuals, and the deportation of thousands of others to prison camps. Emerging from these events, Soviet Jewry faced Khrushchev's drive against religion from 1957 to 1959 when the number of synagogues dwindled to less than 70. By the mid 1960s, official Judaism had been all but eradicated, at least in the central Soviet republics.

The Cold War and the absence of any systematic information obscured the plight of Soviet Jewry as reports of these events remained largely fragmentary and unconfirmed. Nevertheless, beginning in the 1960s, the rise of human rights as a legitimate, albeit still obscure, international concern cast increasing attention on the Soviet Jewish condition. As a result, the symptoms of discrimination against the Jewish minority population concerning religious and cultural development and expression, education, and social organization became the focus of several reports and declarations. In 1964, the International Commission of Jurists issued a comprehensive analysis condemning the use of Jews as scapegoats. The Council of Europe advocated that Western governments express increased concern regarding the persecution of Soviet Jews. The British House of Commons assumed the lead when the overwhelming majority of members signed a motion denouncing Soviet treatment of Jews. In 1970s, members of the four leading parties in Sweden reproved the growth of anti-Semitism in the USSR and called for the right of family reunification. Nonetheless, the United States became the key arena for the movement on behalf of Soviet Jews. In the 1960s, various U.S. Jewish grassroots organizations formed to campaign openly for the right of emigration and cultural and religious freedom for Soviet Jews. Several of these groups affiliated in 1970 to establish the Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry with a major lobbying presence in Washington. At the same time, in the early 1960s, twenty-four leading Jewish organizations combined to establish the "Committee of 24" to explore ways to alleviate the plight of their co-religionists in the Soviet Union. The National Conference for Soviet Jewry also formed to

coordinate the activities of the U.S. Jewish establishment on a nationwide scale. In essence, the U.S. Jewish community organized a vast, albeit bitterly fragmented, mobilization effort to bring international political pressure on the Soviet Union. The campaign soon achieved a vital breakthrough as the persecution of Soviet Jews became recognized as a key world problem, constantly raised with Soviet leaders in diplomatic negotiations in Moscow and abroad. The issue entered American-Soviet relations and became a driving force behind passage of the Jackson-Vanick Amendment, which made granting of Most Favored Trading status to the USSR provisional on a non-discriminatory bias concerning race, religion, and national origin. Soviet Jewish emigration waxed and waned according to the state of Cold War relations between East and West.

During this period, the Union of Councils focused their attention on and gleaned most of their inside information from Soviet Jewish dissidents, many of whom came into the open in 1968 in defiance of arrest, imprisonment, and other punitive measures. At the same time, the National Conference on Soviet Jewry and a network of Jewish establishment organizations aligned themselves closely with Israeli interests, which preferred quiet diplomacy with American and Soviet officials instead of the open protestations of the Union of Councils grassroots movement. An ensuing and bitter split divided the movement over strategy, tactics, and philosophy as each side accused the other of endangering the interests of Soviet Jewry. The advocacy movement therefore became defined largely by the triangular concerns and differences among advocates in the United States, Israel, and the Soviet Union.

The advocacy movement represented a unique aspect of the multifaceted nature of the international human rights movement. It constituted primarily a mass movement on behalf of coreligionists. The movement's ability to leverage wide-ranging international support in the end made it enormously successful. The Soviet government increasingly permitted Jewish emigration to the West and Israel out of obvious self-interest for trade and economic development. The increasing exodus of Soviet Jews, however, was accomplished not without substantial difficulties stemming from Cold War tensions throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, both the advocacy movement's appeal and success stemmed largely from its strong intersecting interests with U.S. foreign policy in viewing the totalitarian nature of Soviet bloc regimes as antithetical to the fundamental principals of democratic pluralism, universal suffrage, open elections, freedom of speech, independent media, and the right to form political parties.

### **What Remains to be Done**

Given the origins, history, and international dimensions of the advocacy movement, much remains to be done to produce an adequate documentary record. More intensive collecting efforts need to be directed not only at nongovernmental organizations and other entities in the U.S. and abroad, but also their past leaders, former refuseniks and others who suffered under Soviet repressive policies. Interviews with these individuals as well as government officials who were involved at the policy level should also be conducted. The materials must be adequately catalogued onto national and international

academic databases and promoted on websites. Closer collaborative relationships with groups still involved in Jewish issues in the former Soviet republics and with other research institutions that hold materials on Soviet Jewry, however few, also need to be pursued not only in the United States but in other countries as well. Indeed, the International Soviet Jewry Archival Project has attempted to accomplish these goals, which raises the question of where matters now stand with this endeavor.

### **Current Status of the International Soviet Jewry Archival Project**

At present, the Soviet Jewry project has been suspended due to exigencies that have directly affected the Human Rights Initiative at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In late 1999, the University of Colorado terminated the Human Rights Initiative and for the past two years I have been in search of a new institutional home for this project. To facilitate this search, I established an adhoc committee of donors consisting of representatives from each of the major affiliated organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, the Iraqi Secret Police Files Project, and the International Soviet Jewry Archives Project. Together, we have sought a research institution with the right mix of interest, ambition, and resources to accommodate both the current and future development of the Human Rights Initiative and the Soviet Jewry project. As matters now stand, we believe we have found that institution and negotiations are now proceeding apace for the relocation of this endeavor. With a bit of luck, we hope to conclude these discussions within the next three to six months and begin the process of relocating the Human Rights Initiative and the Soviet Jewry Archives Project to a new institutional home. Once this has been accomplished, we will again commence the Soviet Jewry Project with the aim of continuing to develop both the archives component and pursuing videotape interviews.