

The Mountain Jews in Post-Soviet Caucasus: Reconstructing Ethnic Identification and Political Orientation

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Abstract

Even though the ethnic factor played a significant role in Soviet and post-Soviet politics in the Caucasus and contributed to the rapid transformation of the ethnic organizations into political movements and parties, one ethnic group, the Mountain Jews, stands out as an exception. Unlike other ethnic groups, no community of Mountain Jews in the Caucasus has ever mobilized politically to get official acknowledgment on the basis of its ethnic and religious identity. Why? The answer to this question lies in explanation of certain aspects of ethnic identification and political orientation of the Mountain Jews discussed in this paper.

The paper concludes that the political culture and historical experience of Mountain Jews delegitimizes the very idea of ethnic mobilization in regional politics regardless of their official status within political regime. The Mountain Jews have never relinquished their national identity and ethno-cultural affiliation with their brethren beyond the Caucasian mountains. Nor have they ever abandoned the Jewish faith.

Keywords: Post-Soviet Caucasus; Ethnic identification; Political orientation; Constitutional provisions

Introduction

Multi-ethnic regions offer social scientists unique opportunities to investigate the interplay of global and local processes and, in particular, to follow the evolution of complicated collective identities. While possessing rich and diverse natural and cultural heritages, multi-ethnic regions frequently become propitious grounds for conflicts, with repercussions far beyond their borders. But an ethnic mosaic with a “world as exhibit” view tends to freeze ethnicity into categories while ignoring what is really significant, namely, a history of institutionalization that gives rise to organizational expression and systems of political patronage. In the Soviet Union the culturally disparate communities of Jews, who were scattered across the vast territory of the former Russian Empire, posed a dilemma for the policy makers. Initially, the ultimate goal in dealing with the Jews was “the extinction of the Jews and Judaism as an independent entity” [1]. Given that goal, the question was how to achieve it. Should the Jews be treated as a singular group and be ascribed nationality status with the aim of bringing them - as national group-into rapprochement and fusion with the other Soviet peoples? Or should the Jews be denied a collective identity with the claim that they did not constitute a nation, which they would never reach the developmental stage of nationhood and that immediate steps should therefore be taken to assimilate them into the surrounding peoples? [2]. The Soviet era left the Jews with a varied legacy, but what they have had in common since 1990 is the ability to choose whether and how to identify as Jews and to reconstruct public Jewish life. The major issues to be resolved are the nature of Jewish identity and its meaning; how to relate to their neighbors, world Jewry and the State of Israel; how to deal with the communist past and those who shaped public Jewish life in that period; and the seemingly perennial issue of anti-Semitism. Since 1989 it has become possible to recreate Jewish public life everywhere in the region and for individuals to claim or reclaim Jewishness and practice Judaism. As has often been remarked of Jews elsewhere, Jewish identity in post-Soviet era has become a matter of choice, as has communal reconstruction [3]. On both the individual and communal levels some have chosen to ignore the new opportunities. Others have sought merely to commemorate a Jewish past, while still others have been trying to revive and fill with

meaning their personal and collective Jewishness. Apart from the material and logistical challenges involved, there is the problem of determining what a meaningful Jewishness can be in the highly specific context of post-soviet Caucasus.

According to the Soviet economic paradigm, it was not possible to unite backward regions with other backward regions [4]. In practical terms for the North Caucasus, this meant that high mountain areas could not constitute separate territorial units and should be integrated with more developed areas on the plains. The re-planning of settlement during creation of the krais and autonomous republics witnessed the side-by-side juxtaposition of villages populated by Caucasians and by Russians [4]. Among the numerous consequences of Gorbachev’s reforms and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 has been the rise of ethnic nationalism [5]. Ethnic minorities, particularly in remote rural areas of the Caucasus, were mainly ignored by the central authorities, because the lack of communication between the central and local entities was believed to secure stability and ensure that the incumbent political elites could stay in power. Whereas constitutional provisions have been crafted in a way as to display certain principles of equality and promotion of ethnic diversity, little has been done to enforce it. Institutional weaknesses, economic stagnation and pervasive corruption were to blame for neglecting minorities. The first decade after the break-up of the Soviet Union was dramatic, as the ability of the Russian state to collect taxes was reduced so much that “between 1989 and 1997, state revenues fell by nearly 45 per cent” [6]. As a direct consequence for the North Caucasus, there was a disruption in major social services such as education and culture, but there were also cuts in security, law enforcement and public health

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budgets. Overall, “Yeltsin’s choice to privilege economic restructuring over democratic state restructuring weakened the state, weakened democracy and weakened the economy” [7], threatening the transition towards democracy in itself and jeopardizing human security. Despite the outflow of migrants, the percentage of Russia’s total population in the North Caucasian republics is increasing, while the ratio that these republics contribute to the GDP is contracting. With industrial production declining more drastically than in Russia as a whole, the North Caucasian republics’ contribution to Russian industry has now fallen to 0.35% in 2012. As the official Russian statistics shows, six ethnic republics contained 5.1% of Russia’s population and accounted only for 1.3% of its GDP in 2012. The growing ineffectiveness of the republics’ economies is clearly reflected in the failure to provide for social needs from the republican budgets. Subventions from the federal government exceeded 75% of the 2012 budgets of North Caucasian republics. The long-term practice of subsidization has bred a welfare mentality among the regional elites but, at the same time, federal subsidies have provided them a powerful instrument for strengthening their personal power through the reallocation of the funds from Moscow, aggravating further the problem of corruption and inter-clan competition.

This process has been accompanied by the resurrection of clan and other primordial social networks, which under Soviet regime had been held at bay. Soviet nationality policy in general, not only towards the Jews, is a unique case study. As Rogers Brubaker put it, “the Soviet state not only passively tolerated but actively institutionalized the existence of multiple nations and nationalities as constitutive elements of the state and its citizenry. It codified nationhood and nationality as fundamental social categories sharply distinct from statehood and citizenship” [8]. An ethnic group is a “social group whose members share a sense of common origins, claim a common and distinctive history, destiny possess one or more distinctive characteristics, and feel a sense of collective uniqueness and solidarity” [9]. The “distinctive characteristic” or the “epitome of peoplehood” [10] is usually language, kinship patterns, or religion. In the Jewish case, religion has been one of the most distinctive characteristics [3]. However, certainly in the modern period one may be a non-believer and a Jew, though it is problematic that one can be an active practitioner of a religion other than Judaism and still be considered by other Jews as a Jew [3,5]. Therefore, one must distinguish between Judaism and Jewish ethnicity, or, simply, Jewishness. For the individual, Jewishness is the sense, the belief that one is Jewish. In many of the successor states of the former Soviet Union, including Russia, Jews are seen as a nationality, and under certain conditions as holding real or imputed political opinions. Due to an extreme level of religious intolerance during the Soviet era, many Jews do not practice, or even know much about, Judaism [11]. There is little question that the revival of Jewish religious and cultural practices has rekindled a backlash against Jews as they once again became a more visible and active minority [12]. As Brodsky notes, with the victory of the pro-Yeltsin forces over the conservative opposition, the situation seemed to have improved for Jews. Yeltsin showed greater interest in cooperating with the Jewish community, which supported him almost unanimously during the conflict. The State Commission on Nationalities set up a joint committee with the main Russian Jewish organization, Vaad, to discuss representation of the Jewish community in the new Russian parliament. Previously, the government appeared to prefer to appease the Russian nationalist right, and was unwilling to be seen as too closely identified with Russian Jews [13]. The almost unanimous support Jewish religious and political leaders offered for main reform and democratization measures since the Gorbachev era, their strong support for Boris Yeltsin during his stand-off with the Russian Parliament in 1993, means that right-wing, nationalist,

and fascist groups might impute to all Jews a strong pro-democracy political opinion. However, while some prominent political activists and religious Jews are humiliated or physically attacked, Jews who do not participate in any groups or activities related to their nationality, and who have no particular knowledge about Judaism or about Jewish cultural tradition or political orientation, also feel threatened. Therefore, while prominent Jewish activists may be somewhat more at risk than Jews who are not widely known, any Jew, because of his or her nationality and imputed or real political opinion, shares a certain level of risk. Unlike other non-Jewish ethnic groups, no community of Mountain Jews in the Caucasus has ever mobilized politically to get official acknowledgment on the basis of its ethnic and religious identity. Why? The answer to this question lies in explanation of certain aspects of ethnic identification and political orientation of Mountain Jews in the North Caucasus.

History and Origin

The Mountain Jews represent a unique sub-ethnic group in the North Caucasus. They use the so-called Jewish-Tat language, based on a Middle Persian dialect that includes a vast body of lexical borrowings from the Aramaic and Hebrew together with elements of the contemporary Russian and Azeri languages [14]. The Mountain Jews have preserved almost no written records of their arrival and settlement in the North Caucasus. The Jewish presence in the North Caucasus, however, is indicated not only by remains of abandoned cemeteries with Jewish gravestones, and, in many mountain villages, epigraphic inscriptions, and fragments of Jewish sacred books, prayer books, and other temporal evidence [14]. Culturally, the Mountain Jews belong to the Iranian Jewry with which they had been maintaining close ties even before the Eastern Caucasus became part of Russia in the early 19 century. These ties are linguistically confirmed by their knowledge of the Zeboni imrani, the language common to all Iranian Jews who spoke different dialects within their ethnic groups. In the 18 -19 centuries a great number of Iranian Jews, mainly from Gilyan, moved to the Eastern Caucasus where they joined different ethnic groups of Mountain Jews. Many of these Mountain Jews, who sometimes call themselves Tats, insist that they are descendants of Israel’s Lost Tribes who began their wanderings after the destruction of Jerusalem’s first temple in 722 B.C. From generation to generation, the Mountain Jews have passed on the tale of their lineage from the Israelite captives of the Assyrian-Babylonian conquest of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. The original places of their settlement are designated as Babylonia ancient Media and Iran up to the eastern Caucasus [14]. Other stories say that the Mountain Jews migrated north from Persia around 300 years ago, at the invitation of a local khan, and were separated from their kin in Iran as the borders of empires shifted [15,16]. However, a different theory suggests that the Mountain Jews are what remain of the mighty Khazar nation, an indigenous Caucasian people who converted en masse to Judaism in the eighth century, in a vain attempt to resist Orthodox Christian Russians and Islamic Arabs [15]. “According to Kings II, when ancient Israel was destroyed, some citizens headed, in the eighth century B.C.E., to the conquering land of Assyria and beyond to Media on the Caspian’s southern shores. A hundred or so years later, descendants of these exiles, along with other monotheists, were joined by Jews of the Babylonian diaspora. They lay the foundations for Persian Jewish society, some of whom apparently headed north to the Caucasus, with those in the areas that would become Azerbaijan and Dagestan eventually acquiring the identification of Mountain Jews” [17]. The Talmud also mentions the existence of a Jewish community in Derbent, and some prominent Talmudic sages are known to have either come from or established Yeshivot in Derbent and other cities

in the North Caucasus [18]. It is possible that the Mountain Jews are descendants of Persian-Jewish soldiers who were stationed in the Caucasus by the Sasanian kings in the 5 or 6 century to protect the area from the onslaughts of the Huns and other nomadic invaders from the east.

The available historical evidence indicates that the influx of Jews from Iran into the North Caucasus took place under the Achaemenid dynasty (7 century – 4 century B.C.) and Sasanid Persia (3 century B.C. – 6 century A.D.) [19]. The migration of the Jewish tribes into the highlands of the North Caucasus increased dramatically during Arab and Turkish conquests of the Caucasus and the spread of Islam. In the North Caucasus, where religious tolerance and cultural diversity co-existed for centuries, the Mountain Jews found propitious conditions for their new homeland. As Bloody points out, a literate, monotheistic people, well versed in trade and finances, who existed as a distinct community and actively supported the mountain peoples and the Khazars in their wars with the Persian (and later Arab) conquerors, the Mountain Jews became active in the economic and cultural development of the region. In Bloody's view, Judaism evidently became the state religion in the 8 century, the formative period of feudalism in the North Caucasus. Indeed, the acceptance of Judaism as the official religion in pagan Khazaria can be explained by the presence of such an active Jewish population and by the desire of the Khazar aristocracy to show, by their acceptance of Judaism, their independence from both the Muslim Arab caliphate and of Christian Byzantium [20]. However, after the destruction of the Khazar Khanate to the Arabs and the Russians by the end of the 10 century, some Khazars migrated to the Volga and the Crimea, and many Khazar Jews flee to the intractable areas of mountainous Dagestan. When the Arab caliphate fell to new conquerors such as the Persian shahs and Turkish sultans, the Mountain Jews found themselves under the control of local rulers with the legal status of dependent peasants. In 1813, after the inclusion of Azerbaijan and Dagestan into the Russian Empire, the Mountain Jews accepted Russian sovereignty [21]. While the Jewish occupational structure in Tsarist Russia continued to be much more traditional, some modernization did take place. Still, most of the Mountain Jews were small traders or poor craftsmen, often working as tailors, and some went into manufacturing and became important entrepreneurs in certain sectors of the regional economy. The processes of urbanization of the Jewish population had begun before the 1917 Revolution, and accelerated in the late 1920s during the industrialization of the Soviet Union [22]. In 1926, 2,144,000 Jews lived in the towns, 87% of all Soviet Jews [22]. It is difficult to estimate the level of urbanization of Mountain Jews, but most sources indicate that they were mainly concentrated in Baku and Krasnaya Sloboda (Azerbaijan) and Makhachkala, Buinaksk, and Derbent in Dagestan. The development of capitalism in Russia and the drawing of the North Caucasus into the mainstream of trade and financial relations contributed to the intensive socio-economic stratification of Mountain Jewish society [21]. According to Professor Mordechai Altschuler [23], the culture and language of the Mountain Jews began to crystallize in the early 15th century. While physically isolated from the European Jewish centers until the end of the 19th century, the Mountain Jewish community maintained close ties with the Land of Israel for hundreds of years, and with the Zionist Movement from its inception. Their representatives participated in the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897. They were also among the immigrants of the first three waves of *aliya* and among the founders of the pre-state *Hashomer* organization as well as the settlements of Beyer Yayaqov, Mahanayim and Yesod Hamayla, facts that are unknown to most scholars [23].

Describing the Russian imperial bureaucracy attitudes towards Mountain Jews, Norkina emphasizes that a characteristic feature of imperial legislation directed towards Jews was that it was not always able to take into account the local context of the territory where Jews lived [16]. As Norkina puts it, the Jewish question in the Russian Empire was regulated by numerous laws that were introduced in the form of explanations and decisions taken by the Imperial Senate, provisions by the Committee of Ministers and different ministerial circulars. In discussing the application of a general law that limited Jewish rights in the Russian Empire, government officials were primarily guided by information provided by regional officials. In the 1880s and 1890s several laws were issued in the Russian Empire further restricting the rights of Jews in the Cossack regions. Consequently, the Don, Kuban and Terek regions were "closed" to permanent Jewish residence [24]. The restrictive religious policies of the Russian Empire coupled with traditional anti-Semitic attitudes of the Russian paramilitary units known as Cossacks, further alienated the Mountain Jews, and they found themselves particularly impoverished during the years of the civil war [24]. In 1914 the Cossacks numbered over 4.5 million people scattered from the River Don in the west to the River Usury in the Far East. From the late eighteenth century the Russian Empire succeeded in harnessing the Cossacks' military skills for its own ends, enlisting them to serve either as soldiers or as a form of paramilitary police. By the early twentieth century the Cossacks were the most feared defenders of the tsarist regime and widely loathed, particularly by the revolutionary movement and the Jews [25].

Among other millions of Jews who had been settled down within the borders of the Russian Empire, the Mountain Jews remained within the limits of Soviet Russia and their status was to a large extent defined by the nationalities policies of the Soviet regime. The Soviet authorities regarded integration and assimilation as the only solution of the lingering Jewish problem [26]. This solution was already sharpened during the bitter discussion at the early 1900s between the Bolsheviks (headed by Lenin) and the Bund (led by Kremer). Invoking Marx, Kautsky, and Bauer, Lenin stated that there was no basis for a separate Jewish nation and national Jewish culture—the slogan of the rabbis and the bourgeoisie—this was the slogan of our enemies [27]. Lenin was resolutely opposed to anti-Semitism, and put into effect policies which won over those Jews who had formerly opposed the Bolsheviks. "One of the very first measures adopted by the Provisional government was the suppression of the anti-Semitic legislation in force under the old regime: a total of 650 laws limiting the civic rights of the Jewish population were abolished" [28]. The Lenin's government initially granted Jews "and all other national minorities" legal equality and required all governmental organs to combat anti-Semitism [28]. Stalin further solidified official position on the Jewish question in his work "Marxism and the National Question" (1913). Stalin argued unambiguously that a nation was a stable community of men, which came into being by historic process and has developed on a basis of common language, territory, and economic life. Since the Jews lack this common basis they are only a "nation on paper," and the evolution of human society must necessarily lead toward their assimilation within the surrounding nations [29]. After Lenin's death, Stalin asserted that the people in the anti-Soviet opposition (many of whose leaders were Jews) were "rootless cosmopolitans," not "native sons of Mother Russia" [28]. Beyond active discrimination, this attitude also underlaid the demand for assimilation as a solution for "the Jewish question," in the Caucasus, as I discuss below.

After the Great October Socialist Revolution and in accordance with Leninist-Stalinist nationalities policy, especially regarding the

nationalities of the Caucasus, a number of policies were undertaken to rekindle Mountain Jewish culture and economic activities. To this end, a special set of measures for economic and cultural transformation was implemented. Within this context, subgroups were designated as working class, collective farmers, and intelligentsia. In the Soviet Union, Mountain Jewish communities were forced to relinquish not the national elements of their identity, but rather its religious aspects, leading to fundamental transformation of Jewish identity. Essentially, it was deconstructed and then reinvented instrumentally in a new form that was devoid of its cultural content. Unlike Russian Jews, who were given group status and a territory in the far east of Siberia in 1928, the Mountain Jewish collective identity was de-emphasized and their opportunities for Jewish national expression through literature and art were further limited. In addition, since the Soviet Union was an atheist state, religious aspects of Judaism were strongly discouraged and Mountain Jews were instead recognized as one of many Soviet nationalities. Even though Mountain Jews were left with a limited knowledge of Jewish religion or culture, they continued to be identified as Jews by nationality through their official documents and they consistently affirmed their own Jewish identity in the national sense, as a minority group with a common ancestry, resulting in an identity with strong national elements, but few cultural or religious ones.

In this regard, I would like to mention that the Nazi policy towards the Mountain Jews in the Caucasus during World War II was characterized by certain leeway in determining actions on the ground due to the fact that because the Nazi authorities were uncertain whether Mountain Jews were actually Jews. As Feferman notes, even before reaching the North Caucasus the Germans had made preliminary attempts to formulate policies toward those religiously Jewish groups whose membership in "Jewry" as defined by Nazi racism was questioned (2007:100). These groups included, among others, the Karaites and the Krymchaks in the Crimea (who had lived in the region at least since the fourteenth century). The Karaites in the Crimea managed to survive, in the first case by appealing directly to the German occupiers, the Krymchaks in the Crimea failed to convince the Germans that they were not Jews and were murdered [30]. The first communities of Mountain Jews captured by the Germans in the Caucasus, at the end of August 1942, were two collective farms in Bogdanovka and Menzhinskoe (Stavropol Krai), in which the Mountain Jews constituted a significant portion of the entire Jewish membership. In the first stages of the occupation of the Caucasus, the Germans also came across rural settlements in which Mountain Jews and Ashkenazi Jews lived together [30]. The Nazis viewed the two ethnic groups as one community since they lived together. The first documented massacre of Mountain Jews took place outside the borders of the North Caucasus, in the Shaumian Kolkhoz in the Crimea, most of whose members were Mountain Jews settled in the Crimea under the aegis of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee [30]. Arad estimates that about 1,000 Mountain Jews perished during the Holocaust. However, as Feferman points out, this estimate does not take into account up to 1,400 Mountain Jews murdered in the village of Ganshtakovka. With this the death total reached between 2,000 and 2,500, some forty to fifty percent of the original number in the region occupied by the Germans (2007). German policy towards the Mountain Jews in larger North Caucasian centers during the intermediate months of the occupation was characterized by edicts such as that mandating forced labor, "measures" that elsewhere often preceded their murder. However, in the North Caucasus these instructions were not rigorously enforced by the Germans, and eventually they were softened or abandoned entirely [30]. It was in this period, which evidently started in November 1942, that a dispute regarding the Jewishness of the Mountain Jews arose. On

the one hand, according to German racial theories the Mountain Jews did not appear to be Jewish because they resembled the local peoples and not the Ashkenazi Jews; on the other hand, their religion closely resembled classical rabbinic Judaism. The German army retreated from the North Caucasus before arriving at a decision regarding treatment of the Mountain Jews [30].

According to Mark Kupovetsky, a specialist on Russian Jewish demography, in nineteenth-century Russia, an estimated 69,400 Jews were baptized as Orthodox Christians, with about 12,000 becoming Catholics, and more than 3,000 Lutherans. From 1900 to 1914 approximately 20,000 Jews converted to Christianity (2010). In 1926 non-Ashkenazi Jews constituted only 2.5% of all Jews in the Soviet Union, including 26,000 Mountain Jews. No data on non-Ashkenazi Jews were published in the 1939 census, but, as Pinkus notes, they accounted for approximately 3%. In 1959 they numbered about 110,000 (4.9%), including 30,000 Mountain Jews, and in 1970 around 140,000 (6.5% of all Soviet Jews). Pinkus explains this increase in numbers in the Jewish population by the fact that non-Ashkenazi Jews suffered fewer losses in the Holocaust and the percentage of those concealing their Jewish nationality was lower than among the Ashkenazi Jews. However, for Mountain Jews, this modern increase (15% in 33 years) can be explained by the losses inflicted in the Holocaust [22,30,31]. Khanin points out that "according to various estimates, between 600 000 and 1.3 million Jews lived in the former Soviet Union in the early 2000s" [32,33]. However, the overall population of Mountain Jews numbered only around 60,000 people. The 2002 census reported only 3,394 persons as "Mountain Jews." In the 1989 Soviet census 11,282 people were counted as "Mountain Jews," while even more of them were recorded separately as "Tats" – 19,420 [34]. The data for the North Caucasus show that between the 1989 and 2002 censuses there was a pronounced decrease of Mountain Jews, including those recorded as "Tats" [34]. In the first five years of this period the share of those recorded as "Tats" in the total of Dagestan Jewry dramatically decreased from 50% in 1989 to 28% in 1994, and in the 1994 micro-census, a slight majority of Jews in this republic (54%) simply called themselves "Jews" [35]. As Kupovetsky points out, the Jewish population is slowly disappearing in Russia, with a demographic expert predicting as much as a 25% drop in the latest census figures, estimating up to 60,000 fewer Jews than were found during the 2002 census. The latest 2010 census recorded only 156 801 Jews, 1585 Tats, and 762 Mountain Jews in the Russian Federation, compared with 875 000 Jews who lived in the country in 1959, when the first census was taken following World War II. According to the Jewish Federations of North America, a group of nearly 55,000 Mountain Jews joined the 15,000-strong community already in Israel. These earlier arrivals came for the most part in the 1970s, and an additional 60,000 immigrated during the 1990s. Other Mountain Jews descended from pioneers who arrived during the early years of Zionism and were part of the state-building effort. As of today, around 80,000 Israelis can trace their origins to the Caucasus region. Until the mid-1990s, Israeli government policy did not recognize the Mountain Jews as a unique target population. The Ministry of Housing was the first government ministry to allocate special resources for programs for the Kavkazi immigrants [36]. By the end of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s more than half of Mountain Jews left for Israel, the United States, Canada, and Germany [31]. They were driven away mainly by instability and lack of security in the North Caucasus. In general, despite waves of mass migration of Jews after the break-up of the Soviet Union, as well as negative demographic trends, the post-Soviet political space still contains the second largest concentration of Russian-speaking Jewry (after Israel) in the world. At present, Mountain Jews are mainly concentrated in the so-called Caucasian

Mineral Waters zone (Pyatigorsk, Essentuki, Mineralnye Vody, and Kislovodsk). There are still around two thousand Mountain Jews living in Dagestan [14]. Mountain Jews continue to live in compact communities in Baku, Cuba, Oguz and several other small settlements in Azerbaijan.

Traditional Ethnic Identification

Igor Semenov suggests that the Mountain Jews can be treated as a homogeneous sub-ethnic group the identification of which is based on the following elements: a common ethnic name—*juhur* (plural: *juhuru*); a common language—*Juhuri*; a common religion Judaism, as well as many common features in religious rites and religious ideas [14]. As Semenov puts it, these identification criteria (the elements of the *edah* of Mountain Jews) helped the Jews scattered across the Caucasus from Shirvan to Kabarda to recognize their kinship in the 19th and 20th centuries. Despite certain cultural distinctions, Jewish ethnic groups were always prepared to recognize their kinship; even marriages with members of other Jewish sub-ethnic groups (Georgian, and Central Asian Jews) were rare. The greater part of mixed marriages was with Ashkenazim. In general, the Mountain Jews displayed obvious endogamy [14]. Semenov points out that it was the Russian military administration that coined the term “Mountain Jews” in the 19th century to distinguish between the East Caucasian and European Jews, while the Russian administrators applied the term “mountaineer” to all Caucasian peoples without discrimination and irrespective of the areas of their traditional settlement [14].

The Mountain Jews, while connecting themselves to the world of Caucasian culture, are still aware of their Jewish roots. They accept Caucasian culture, but can never feel that it fully belongs to them; it is rather seen as a culture created by, and for, another ethnic groups. For some Mountain Jews, identity confusion resulted from the conflict between their Caucasian cultural immersion and their Jewish national identity. Nonetheless, such a strong connectedness to the Caucasus culture unites them with other Caucasian ethnic groups in front of non-Caucasian cultures of the Russian Federation. In Semenov’s view, when comparing the Caucasian and Russian cultural traditions, the Mountain Jews invariably prefer the former, referring themselves to the Caucasian world, and the Caucasian peoples among whom they live do the same [14]. The Caucasian peoples place them apart from the Ashkenazim and in all cases prefer Mountain Jews whose mentality is closer to their own and who respect their traditions. They share many customs and, though the Mountain Jews belong to a different confession, the indigenous ethnic groups look at them as one of the Caucasian peoples, speaking about the Ashkenazim as *Russian Jews* and about the Mountain Jews as “*ours*” thus emphasizing that they belong to the Caucasus [14].

In the last decades of the 20th century Mountain Jews were moving out of the Caucasus in great numbers, yet they did not abandon certain traditions and preserved many traits of Caucasian mentality. This happens not only because they have preserved their ethnic self-awareness but also because everywhere everybody, Ashkenazim included, look at them as people from the Caucasus [14]. Historically, close contacts between Mountain Jews and Ashkenazim were established soon after the Caucasian War. The first documentary evidence indicating the existence of Ashkenazi families in the North Caucasus dates back to 1828–1829, when the Black Sea Cossack army and the local police in Ekaterinodar and Yevsk initiated correspondence addressing the eviction of Jews from the North Caucasus. As a result, local police had evicted these people under pretext of the regime’s position on the Judaising sect the Subbotniks [16].

In the 1870s there was a great number of Ashkenazim living in Daghestan: in Temir-Khan-Shura (Buinaksk), Derbent, and later in Petrovsk (Makhachkala), as well as in Vladikavkaz, Grozny, Nalchik, and Baku (Semenov, 2003:172). From the outset, the two sub-ethnic groups had been treating one another with dislike of which philologist I. Anisimov wrote in his time [37]. In Baku, Derbent, and Vladikavkaz the Ashkenazim deemed it necessary to build their own synagogues, though there were synagogues used by the Mountain Jews [37]. Semenov believes that, apart from purely religious differences, the mutual desire to live separately was prompted by the difference in their mentalities and their ideas of what it meant to be a Jew [14]. Mountain Jews often tried to convince local authorities that they had nothing in common, either religiously or in their economic activities, with Ashkenazi Jews [16]. In 1885, when the Terek regional board tried to link the Vladikavkaz rabbi to Ashkenazi Jews, Mountain Jews described the differences between their religious rites, and stressed that within all settlements in the Caucasia and Transcaucasia there was no common synagogue in use. They stressed that such differences, did not permit them to send their children to the rabbinical seminaries of European Jews. Further on in their appeal, they attempted to gain exclusion from the empire’s laws against European Jews. Comparing the status of both Mountain and European Jews in the Terek and Kuban regions of the North Caucasus in light of the regime’s legislation, Norkina identifies both similarities and differences in how the local administration considered the taxation and the raising of tribute from the native population, including Mountain Jews [16]. As Norkina points out, Mountain Jews paid the same amount of tribute as the native population. The Russian authorities therefore classified several communities of Mountain Jews in the same way as other conquered subjects of the Caucasus. For this reason, as Norkina puts it, Mountain Jews had the same rights as their neighbours, were permitted ownership of land, paid taxes and held the same duties [16]. Moreover, referring to the newspaper “Caucasus”, Anisimov indicates that one privilege Mountain Jews had over European Jews was the right to trade in alcohol [37]. Under the Soviet rule this division continued to grow as all Soviet Jews suffered implicit administrative, political, and societal anti-Semitism for decades and the rich political tradition of the Ashkenazim Jewry had been almost lost. In the post-Soviet period, a Jewish institutional infrastructure began to develop, leading to the political advancement of Jewish communal elite [38,39]. However, the political institutionalization of the Jewish movement has become somewhat controversial and there is still some unfinished business as to its ultimate character [31].

Tatization of Mountain Jews in the Soviet Union

Igor Semenov points out that since 1930s the Soviet authorities were imposing the “Tat” ethnonym on the Mountain Jews of the North Caucasus. However, it was not until the late 1970s when Mountain Jews began to describe themselves as Tats, not as a Mountain Jew or simply a Jew (Semenov, 2003). The word “Tat” is a blanket Turkic term applied to subjugated settled peoples, mainly Iranians, and carries not so much an ethnic as a social meaning (Miller V. 1963:196). In particular, this word was applied the Iranians of the Eastern Caucasus whose ancestors had been moved away from Iran in the 6th century and later. They used to live in compact groups between the Apsheron peninsular in the south and Derbent in the north. Early in the 20th century there were several hundreds of thousands of them [40]. However, these ethnic groups based their self-identity mainly on their religious confessions—either *Muslim* or *Christian*, and never called themselves Tats because the term sounded derogative to them and described their language as *Parsi*, *Porsi* or *Forsi* [40]. The term “the Tat language” was first used in the 19th century by scholars Boris Dorn, Nikolai Berezin, and Vsevolod Miller [14].

In the early 20th century, those who lived in Tat villages were Christians and called themselves “*Ermenis*” (Armenians). It was late in the 19th century that the Turkization of the Tats started [41]. In the 1920s, Miller formulated an idea of a single Tat ethnos divided by three religions: Islam, Judaism and Christianity [40]. In Semenov’s view, this theory was absolutely unfounded and was very much in line with the atheism of the Soviet authorities; the fact that neither the Mountain Jews, nor the Muslim Tats, nor the Christian Tats ever called themselves Tats was ignored by the scholars of the time [14]. Even though Miller was aware of the physical and anthropological features that contradicted his theory about the ethnic kinship of the Mountain Jews and the Tats of the Caucasus, he continued to insist on its validity. Admittedly, under political pressure, philologist Anisimov also accepted the Miller’s view on the single religiously divided Tat ethnos, because this much questionable theory was rapidly adopted by Soviet activists and Communists party functionaries from among the Mountain Jews. On their initiative a congress of Mountain Jews held in Moscow in 1927 adopted a declaration that registered the term “Tat” as one of their self-names [37]. With the beginning of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union and with an active anti-Israeli campaign in the Soviet press in the early 1970s, the Tat nationality was actively imposed on the Mountain Jews of the North Caucasus [14]. In the context even a formal acceptance or rejection of the myth was a sort of a loyalty test [42]. Semenov believes that four factors coincided negatively to further dilute the identity of the Mountain Jews in time: a possibility (mainly theoretical) of emigration; Israel’s victories in the wars of 1967 and 1973 and the anti-Israeli campaign in the Soviet press that went together with them; stepped up campaign to impose the Tat ethnonym on the Mountain Jews; changing Soviet passports in the late 1970s [14].

Drawing on historical evidence, however, Mikhail Chlenov indicates that the fairly successful process of Tatization of the Mountain Jews was rooted in the sad experience of the World War II, when Nazis exterminated nearly all Mountain Jews in the Northern Caucasus (the villages of Bogdanovka and Menzhinskoe); only those who lived in Nalchik avoided death because the local people presented them as Tats [42]. As Semenov argues, “the process of Tatization was rooted in the abandonment of religion that corroded the Mountain Jews’ traditional identity, and psychological discomfort caused by their association with Ashkenazim. Since in the Russian language the term “Jew” is mainly associated with the Ashkenazim, many Mountain Jews tried to drop their ethnic name even though it was somewhat diluted with the term “mountaineer” [14]. Ibragimov believes that the process of Tatization caused “ethnic re-orientation” or “change of identity.” This is not completely correct: the larger part of Mountain Jews is now living in Israel where the results of Tatization are not obvious. “There is a fairly large group of Mountain Jews from Azerbaijan who has settled in Moscow they, too, remained unaffected by Tatization. There is another larger community (from 10 to 20 thousand) who stayed behind in Azerbaijan” [14]. In March 2001 Moscow hosted an International Symposium “Mountain Jews: Past and Present” attended by academics and members of the largest communities. The latter rejected the term “Tat” as applied to their people while the former refused even to discuss the term as false and unsubstantiated. The same happened at other forums on the history and culture of the Mountain Jews.

Political Orientation in the Post-Soviet Caucasus

Ethnic identity that played an important if not a dominant role in post-Soviet politics, promoted the quick transformation of ethnic cultural organizations into political movements and parties [31]. However, the Jewish community is an exception - no Jewish

community of the former Soviet Union ever formed a “sectarian” political structure in order to get official recognition in government [31]. In Khanin’s view, the realization of ideological, cultural, and social aspirations in the Jewish public square has had a predominantly elitist character [31]. Khanin argues that, in political life, Jewish leaders and activists are guided by a sophisticated combination of pragmatic and idealistic motivations for their activities, and the division of these interests became the basis for ideological, cultural, social, and other cleavages in the community of the Mountain Jews [31]. These cleavages naturally have a predominantly elitist character, and are seen through the confrontation of different political orientations, connected to the above mentioned ruling groups of the Mountain Jewish community, religious leadership, and business elite [31]. In particular, Rabbis and Jewish businessmen provided a place and funds for advancement of the semi-formal power structures to leverage communal interests. For instance, Zaur Gilalov had emerged in recent years as one of the most active donors in the Mountain Jewish community both in Russia and Azerbaijan. Gilalov, who until his assassination on March 5, 2004, was responsible for the construction of two synagogues serving Caucasus Jews, one in Moscow and one in the Israeli town of Tirat Carmel, near Haifa. In 2003, he helped to set up the World Congress of Mountain Jews, an umbrella organization representing an estimated 250,000 Jews living in Russia, Azerbaijan, Israel and North America [43]. These power structures, to some extent, became channels for mutual adaptation and competitive cooperation of various post-Soviet Jewish elites in the North Caucasus.

Khanin believes that many Jewish public figures see national and Jewish politics as mutually exclusive [31]. As a result, leaders of Jewish organizations carefully acknowledge the political neutrality of their institutions. In turn, public figures of Jewish origin, widely represented among city mayors, ministers, legislative deputies at all levels, those in the governing organs of the different parties, as well as among the bureaucratic and business elite, often distance themselves from the organized Jewish movement, and are not particularly interested in Jewish ethnic issues [43]. An opinion poll conducted in Russia at the end of 1997 showed considerable opposition by the local non-Jewish population to an increase of Jewish participation in government [44]. As a result, the use of personal connections by Jewish communal leaders became the basis of their political influence in the North Caucasus and far beyond. However, the political institutionalization of the Mountain Jews in the North Caucasus has never taken any organizational form because, as Khanin points out, the political culture and historical experience of Soviet Jewry delegitimizes the very idea of ethnic mobilization in politics largely because of a traditional emigrationist orientation among Jews [31]. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, Jewish population no longer includes many of the communities that were once implied within it. Nonetheless, Russia still accounts for one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe. In recent years, Russian Jewry has been shrinking, primarily due to emigration and the ageing process. However, despite the fact that some scholars [35,38,39,45] argue that after the exodus of the Jews from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s the history of the Mountain Jews in the region ended, communities of Mountain Jews exist, they continue to live and grow in Baku, Cuba, Oguz and several other settlements in Azerbaijan. There are communities in Moscow, Pyatigorsk, Kislovodsk and Nalchik, as well as in Krasnodar krai [46].

Conclusion

The Mountain Jewish national identity is the result of historical processes resulting from interactions between different ethnic groups

in the multi-century history of the Caucasus. The Soviet redefinition of Mountain Jews as a nationality was not entirely forced on them by the regime; in many cases it was welcomed by Jewish communal leaders and intellectuals who also contributed to its formation, especially in the early years of the Soviet Union. The label of the Tats as a constructed nationality became a pervasive and constant factor in the lives of Mountain Jews after World War II. Although they knew little about Jewish religion and culture, they continued to be identified as Mountain Jews or Tats by nationality through their official documents. Mountain Jews are, of course, Israelis, an integral part of the Jewish people. But at the same time, being a sub-ethnic group, they need to maintain their own identity and to fill the common treasury of their national culture. Thus, the reconstruction of Mountain Jewish identity is meaningful and legitimate process, because there is no monolithic Jewish identity stretching out as an unbroken line from antiquity to present. Every facet of Jewish identity is meaningful within the context of its own time and place. Mountain Jewish identity made sense in the context of the Soviet regime and Communist ideology, though it is not in accordance with that of European and North American Jewish experience, their identity is equally legitimate. The most remarkable aspect of this identity, however, is its persistence and durability regardless of its official status within political regime due to the fact that Mountain Jews had never relinquished their faith and ethno-cultural affiliation with their brethren beyond the Caucasian mountains. For Mountain Jews, self-identification and international recognition has already occurred as they carved out their unique space among the Jewish people around the globe.

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