When the Soviet Union broke apart in 1991, the Russian Federation and the newly independent republics of the Baltics, the Caucasus and Central Asia engaged in redefining their national identity in a challenging regional and global context. The stances and policies towards the minorities living in these countries became part of the striving towards national independence and identity formation. Despite vastly different post-Soviet nation-building trajectories, the development and implementation of state policies towards minorities had similar relevance and importance across the region. Thirty years after the end of the USSR what is the situation of minorities and minority issues in the countries that emerged from that multi-ethnic state? How have the former republics – including Russia dealt with their minorities and minority affairs? To what protection and rights are minority communities entitled to?
Studies of the dissolution of the USSR and of nation-building in the independent post-Soviet states have flourished over the past decades. However, despite the relevance of the theme, there is a dearth of specialist publications which address the many issues related to minority communities in the post-Soviet space. This volume attempts to fill this gap by providing a collection of essays covering some of the most relevant aspects of the contemporary status and situation of minorities in the area.

The cover illustration by Daniele Brigadoi Cologna is a watercolor rendering of the Chinese character chū 出 "to exit, to grow out of" in small seal script.

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MINORITIES IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE THIRTY YEARS AFTER THE DISSOLUTION OF THE USSR

EDITED BY
PAOLA BOCALE, DANIELE BRIGADOI COLOGNA, LINO PANZERI

Ledizioni

Minorities in the Post-Soviet Space Thirty Years After the Dissolution of the USSR

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Aspects of the Development of Yiddish as the Language of the National Minorities in the Republic of Belarus

Veronika Rabzevich, Inna Petrashevich

The Republic of Belarus is a multinational state where representatives of different ethnicities and national communities live together with the Belarusians. Since ancient times, the people of Belarus have represented a confessional community of various ethnic associations.

At the end of the XXth century, the Republic of Belarus was inhabited by Belarusians, Russians, Poles, Ukrainian Jews, Tatars, Karaites and Gypsies. Belarus is a common home for representatives of more than 130 nationalities living on its territory. The main ethnic group are the Belarusians, who make up 81.2% of the population, at the second place we find the Russians (11.4%), followed by the Poles (3.9%), the Ukrainians (2.4%), the Armenians (0.1%), the Jews, the Tatars, the Gypsies, the Azerbaijanis, and the Germans.

Christians, mainly Orthodox, Catholics and Greek Catholics, have traditionally been numerically predominant in Belarus. Other represented religions include Judaism (Jews and Karaites) and Islam (Tatars).

Each of the national groups (minorities) has a rich history, distinctive features and cultural traditions, and ties with the historical homeland. In describing the situation of the national minorities in the Republic of Belarus at present, it is necessary to note its stability and uniqueness, expressed by the absence of serious

ethnic and confessional clashes and conflicts.

The history of the Western Belarusian lands is inextricably linked with the history of the Jews. The exact date of their appearance in the region is unknown, but given the fact that these areas have always been at the crossroads of trade routes, and that the Jews were actively involved in trade, we can assume they arrived in the X–XIII centuries. N. Sonnenberg[1] believes that the Jews came to the Slavic lands from two sides (the south-east and the west), and subsequently remained during the governance of the Russian rulers. Political factors played a decisive role in the emergence of the Jewish community in the region. At the end of the XIII-beginning of the XIV century there was an intensive immigration of Jews to Belarusian lands from Western and Central Europe out of fear of persecution and of the plague.

This process was facilitated by the tolerant policy pursued by Grand Duke Vytautas. In 1388, he gave the Jews the first "Forgiven testimony" known in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, at a place called "Berestye". The document granted the Jews broad autonomy in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, turning them into a separate class of free people under the jurisdiction of the Grand Duke and his special representatives at the place of residence (Abramova 1997; Zonenberg' 1907; Rozenblat 1993). "The Forgiven testimony" guaranteed Jewish believers protection by the prince and the voivodes, personal and property security, freedom of religion, inviolability of cemeteries, establishment of houses of worship, and so on (Bjadulja 1918; Špilevskij 1858/2016).

Since that time, the official history of Jewish presence in Belarus began, filled, from one side, with periods of tolerance and flourishing of Jewish communities, but, from another, with the outbreaks of anti-Semitism.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Jews made up a significant part of the population of the West Belarusian region, living side by side with the Belarusians. In the cities of Western Belarus, the Jewish population was a significant and often dominant demographic group. In 56 cities in Western Belarus (within the borders of the modern Republic of Belarus), Jews accounted for more than 75% of the total number of local residents in seven cities, and for 60-75% in nineteen other. The total number of people belonging to the Jewish religion was 283300 people, or 8.8% of the total number of the residents of Western Belarus (Eberkhardt 1997).

The centuries-old coexistence of the Jews and the Belarusians

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1   Personal communication.

created mutual tolerance. On Saturdays and Jewish holidays, as well as on Christian holidays, life literally stopped. Domestic and economic relations were very close. In everyday life, the Jews spoke Yiddish, but they prayed in Hebrew.

The generation of the Jews of the interwar period knew the Belarusian language well. Without such knowledge, it would have been impossible to trade with peasants at fairs, and at other venues. In the years 1921-1939, the Jews spoke Yiddish, Belarusian and Polish (Bykhovcev 2009). The Belarusians, for their part, often perfectly understood and spoke Yiddish.

Belarusian–Jewish bilingualism formed in places where Jews and Belarusians lived together. As a result of close language contact, words and expressions borrowed from Hebrew, mainly from the Bible, appeared in the Belarusian language: "Amin" (Hebrew "authentic, true and strong"), "Satan" (Hebrew "enemy"), "cheruvim" (the highest angelic rank accepted by the church), "Shamash" (guardian of synagogue property, chief) and others. The Belarusian language was infused with borrowings from Yiddish, and some of them lost their ethnographic colouring in the process of use: "gallah" (a priest), "hipesh" (a deception), "hines" (a robbery with the help of a beautiful woman), "hipesnik" (a thief working with a woman), "malakholny" (a stupid, blessed), "khevra" (a thieves' hat), "eld" (someone belonging to the thieves' world), "gesheft" (percent), "geld" (money), "ahaham" (a bribe), "shaher-maher" (a deception), "balabos" (an owner), "hala" (a twisted bun), "gugel" (a cake), "hertz" (a deception)), "chametz" (bread), "kosher" (cleaning), "pais" (a long hair), "havrus" (an union), "tsymus" (a boiled carrot or parsnip), "laserdak" (a long-haired jacket).

In Belarus, Yiddish also had the status of an official language in the court and the main bodies of local administration. The interwar coat of arms of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic bears the inscription "Proletarians of all countries, unite!". It is written in all four official languages of the Republic: Belarusian, Russian, Polish and Yiddish "Prolètarier fun ale lèndèr, farèjnikt zikh!"

Before World War II, Yiddish was the mother tongue of eleven million Jews, most of whom lived in Europe. Six million perished during the Holocaust. Many survivors emigrated after the war to Israel, where their official language became Hebrew.

Now Yiddish is considered an endangered language, no more than 600 thousand people speak it all over the world. About half million native speakers live in Israel and the USA. In Russia, according to the 2010 census, only about 500 people speak Yiddish

fluently – it is 1% of the Russian Jews. In the Republic of Belarus, according to the 1999 census, only 1979 people speak Yiddish at home (7.19% of the total number of the Jews living in the Republic of Belarus).

A sign of the complete revival of Yiddish at the turn of the XX-XXI centuries is the genuine interest in it from a younger generation of the Jews, including secular people. The Internet plays an invaluable role in uniting the Jewish youth around the world through Yiddish. To check this, simply enter a Yiddish keyword in any search engine. In accordance with the trend of our times, at the beginning of 2004 the Google search engine received a Yiddish version.

In April 2008, at the initiative of the Public Jewish Charity Organization "Hased–Rahamim" (Minsk), the development of the new programme "Mir Harn Yiddish" ("Let's listen to Yiddish") began. The aim of the initiative was to continue the revival of Ashkenazi culture, which was widely represented in the Republic of Belarus in the pre-war period (before the outbreak of World War II). At that time, teaching of all academic subjects in Jewish secondary schools was conducted in Yiddish.

The programme was implemented under the guidance of M. J. Ackerman, a volunteer who speaks Yiddish perfectly. The first lesson included the study of the work of Sholom Aleichem, a classic of Jewish literature. It was planned to hold monthly classes "Pace harn yiddish".

In September 2007, the Minsk Public Association of Jewish Culture "Izi Harik" (MOOK) started a club for the study of Yiddish. A didactic textbook for the beginners consisted of twenty lessons, developed by Svetlana Trifsik. Currently, the club is not working.

Pinsk is home to "Bais-Aharon", the only Jewish college in the whole Republic of Belarus. General education subjects, Hebrew and Jewish traditions are taught here. But children don't study Yiddish.

Schools with Jewish classes exist in the Republic of Belarus, including, for example, Minsk school No. 132 named after Chaim Nachman Bialik. In 1996, classes were opened there to study the culture, the history, and the traditions of Jewish people, and Hebrew. But not Yiddish.

Conclusions

Yiddish is disappearing today not only from Minsk and the Republic of Belarus, but also from the world as a whole. Some Jewish people still remember Yiddish, which they learned in childhood, in their parents' house. But they are critically too few, at least in the Republic of Belarus, to ensure the revival and further development of the language.

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