

# The Russians Came

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April 27, 2013

**W**HEN THE HUGE immigration wave from the Soviet Union arrived in 1990, we were glad.

First of all, because we believe that all immigration is a good thing for the country. This, I believe, is generally the case.

Second, because we were convinced that this specific group of immigrants would push our country in the right direction.

These people, we told ourselves, have been educated for 70 years in an internationalist spirit. They have just overthrown a cruel dictatorial system, so they must be avid democrats. Many of them are not Jews, but only relatives (sometimes remote) of Jews. So here we have hundreds of thousands of secular, internationalist and non-nationalist new citizens, just what we need. They would add a positive element to the demographic cocktail that is Israel.

Moreover, since the pre-state Jewish community in the country (the so-called “yishuv”) was largely shaped by immigrants from Czarist and early revolutionary Russia, the new immigrants would surely mingle easily with the general population.

Or so we thought.

THE PRESENT situation is the very opposite.

The immigrants from the former Soviet Union—all bundled together as “the Russians” in common parlance—have not mingled at all. They are a separate community, living in a self-made ghetto.

They continue to speak Russian. They read their own Russian newspapers, all of them rabidly nationalist and racist. They vote for their own party, led by the Moldavian-born Evet (now Avigdor) Lieberman. They have practically no contact with other Israelis.

In their first two years in the country, they mainly voted for Yitzhak Rabin of the Labor party, but not because he promised peace, but because he was a general and was presented to them as an outstanding military man. From then on they have consistently voted for the extreme Right.

The very large majority of them hate Arabs, reject peace, support the settlers and vote for right-wing governments.

Since they now constitute almost 20% of the Israeli population, this is a major component of Israel’s move to the right.

WHY FOR heaven’s sake?

There are several theories, probably all of them right.

One I heard from a high-ranking Russian official: *“During the Soviet era, the Jews were just Soviet citizens like everybody else. When the Union broke up, everybody retreated into his own nation. The Jews were left in a void. So they went to Israel and became more Israeli than all the other Israelis. Even the non-Jews among them became Israeli super-patriots.”*

Another theory goes like this: *“When communism collapsed in Russia, there was nothing but nationalism (or religion) to take its place. The population was imbued with totalitarian attitudes, a disdain for democracy and liberalism, a longing for strong leaders. There was also the widespread racism of the ‘white’ population of the Northern Soviet Union towards the ‘dark’ peoples of the South. When the Russian Jews (and non-Jews) came to Israel, they brought these attitudes with them. They just substituted the Arabs for the despised Armenians, Chechens and all the others. These attitudes are nourished daily by the Russian newspapers and TV stations in Israel.”*

I noticed these attitudes when I visited the Soviet Union for the first time in 1990, during the era of Mikhail Gorbachev’s Glasnost. I could not visit it before, because my name was regularly struck from every one of the lists of people invited to see the glories of the Soviet fatherland. I don’t know why.<sup>1</sup>

I went to Russia to write a book about the end of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe (it was published in Hebrew under the title “Lenin Does Not Live Here Anymore”). Rachel and I liked Moscow very much, but it took only a few days for us to be amazed at the rampant racism we saw everywhere around us. Dark-skinned citizens were treated with undisguised contempt. When we went to the market and joked with the vendors, all people from the South with whom we established immediate rapport, our young, nice, serious-faced Russian translator distanced himself quite openly.

<sup>1</sup>Curiously enough, I was also struck from the lists of dignitaries invited to the US embassy parties on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and some years I had great difficulties in obtaining an American visa. Perhaps because I demonstrated against the Vietnam War. I must be one of the few people in the world who can pride themselves on having been simultaneously on the black list of both the CIA and the KGB.

MY FRIENDS and I have been meeting every Friday for some 50 years. When the Russians started to arrive, our “table” was in Tel Aviv’s Café Kassit, the mythological meeting place of writers, artists and such.

One day we noticed that a group of young Russian immigrants had established a “table” of their own. Full of sympathy—as well as curiosity—we joined them from time to time.

At the beginning it worked. Some friendships were struck up. But then something curious happened. They distanced themselves from us, making it clear that for them we were only some uncultured Middle Eastern barbarians, unworthy of association with people brought up on Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. Soon enough they disappeared from our view.

I was reminded of this last Friday when an unusually heated discussion broke out at our table. We had a guest, a young “Russian” female scientist, who accused the Left of indifference and a patronizing attitude towards the Russian community which had caused it to turn to the right. A leading female peace activist reacted furiously, arguing that the Russians had already come to the country with a near-fascist attitude.

I agreed with both of them.

ISRAEL’S ATTITUDE towards new immigrants has always been a bit on the strange side.

Leaders like David Ben-Gurion treated Zionist immigration as if it was merely a transportation problem. They went to extraordinary lengths to bring Jews from all over the world to Israel, but once they were here, they were left to fend for themselves. Sure, material assistance was given, housing was provided, but next to nothing was done to integrate them into society.

This was true of the mass immigration of German Jews in the 1930s, the Oriental Jews in the 1950s, and the Russians in the 1990s. When the Russian Jews showed a marked preference for the USA, our government pressured the American administration to shut the gates in their face, so they were practically forced to come here. When they did come, they were left to congregate in ghettos, instead of being induced to spread and settle among us.

The Israeli Left was no exception. When some feeble efforts to draw them to the peace camp were unsuccessful,

they were left well alone. The organization to which I belong, Gush Shalom, once distributed 100,000 copies of our flagship publication (“Truth against Truth”, the history of the conflict) in Russian, but when we received only one sole answer, we were discouraged. Obviously, the Russians did not give a damn for the history of this country, about which they do not have the slightest idea.

TO UNDERSTAND the importance of this problem one must visualize the composition of Israeli society as it is (I have written about this in the past). It consists of five main sectors, of almost equal size, as follows:

1. Jews of European origin, called Ashkenazim, to which most of the cultural, economic, political and military elite belongs. The Left is almost completely concentrated here.
2. Jews of Oriental origin, often called (mistakenly) Sephardim, from Arab and other Muslim countries. They are the base of Likud.
3. Religious Jews, which include the ultra-Orthodox Haredim, both Ashkenazi and Oriental, as well as the National-Religious Zionists, which include the leadership of the settlers.
4. Arab-Palestinian citizens, mostly located in three large geographical blocs.
5. The “Russians”

Some of these sectors overlap to some minor extent, but the picture is clear. The Arabs and many of the Ashkenazim belong to the peace camp, all the others are solidly right-wing.

Because of this, it is absolutely imperative to win over at least sections of the Oriental Jews, the religious and—yes—the “Russians”, to create a majority for peace. To my mind, that is the most important task of the peace camp at this moment.

AT THE end of the furious debate at our table, I tried to calm down the two sides:

*“No need to fight about sharing the blame. There is quite enough for everybody.”*