

## Jews

### Profile

Population estimates for the number of Jews in Belarus vary. By the 1990s 99 per cent of Jews were Russian-speakers. According to the 1999 Belarusian census the figure was as low as 28,000; the National Council for Soviet Jewry's estimate is higher at between 50,000 and 80,000. Jews in Belarus are predominantly urban, concentrated in Minsk, Gomel, Mogilev and Vitebsk.

### Historical context

Jewish communities were first established in Belarus in the fourteenth century. They later formed a large community in Belarus which was part of the Pale Settlement between 1815 and 1917; by the end of the nineteenth century they comprised pluralities in the cities of Minsk, Vitebsk, Mogilev and Gomel. But pogroms in 1897 and 1905, Soviet purges in the 1930s, Nazi genocide, war and emigration have depleted the population. Estimates suggest that 90 per cent of Belarus's Jewry was annihilated during the Second World War. In the late 1980s the population was further reduced by a new wave of emigration.

### Current issues

Since the 1990s there has been a revival of the Jewish culture and religion. There are reportedly over 26 Jewish communities in Belarus, five national organizations, and 15 local cultural groups. The key umbrella organization is the Belarus Union of Jewish Organizations and Communities (ABJOC).

There are reportedly three Jewish day schools in Minsk, and one apiece in Gomel, Mogilev and Pinsk. None of these are state-run, however, being funded by the Israeli Education Ministry. In 2002 the authorities refused a request to establish a Jewish secondary school in Minsk.

Although there is reportedly no official anti-Semitism in post-Soviet Belarus, the government has been slow to return property confiscated by its Soviet predecessor to its rightful owners in the Jewish community. This has had a knock-on effect in creating difficulties for Jewish groups to secure venues for religious ceremonies. According to Jewish and other media sources in the country obstructions put in the way of Jewish groups seeking to rent government-owned venues for celebrations such as the Passover have at times bordered on anti-Semitism. In June 2006, for example, the prosecutor's office in Mogilev reportedly cited an anti-Semitic tract, published under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church, in an official warning given to a Jewish music group for conducting Purim celebrations in a government-owned building. There were also allegations that state-run printing houses have been used to print anti-Semitic hate literature distributed by Eastern Orthodox book chains.

There were also numerous reports in 2006 of increased levels of neo-Nazi activity in Belarus, aimed primarily at opposition groups but also with implications for the country's Jewish community. Acts of vandalism aimed at Holocaust and other Jewish-related monuments increased in 2005.