

Jews

Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 233,439 Jews in the Russian Federation. There are two main groups of Jews in Russia: the Ashkenazi (originally Yiddish-speaking or East European; 229,938) and a small community (3,394) of Mountain Jews who live primarily in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria (speaking the Persian-based language Tati). Most Jews today speak Russian as their first language. Jews are scattered across the RF with most living in urban areas, especially Moscow and St. Petersburg. The population has declined by half since 1989, as Russian Jews have taken advantage of naturalization opportunities mainly in Israel but also other countries.

Historical context

The vast majority of Jews came to Russia following the incorporation of Polish and Lithuanian territories into the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century. During the nineteenth century Jews faced repression and were not allowed to integrate into Russian society. The establishment of the Pale of Settlement restricted Jews to the western borders of the empire and in the late nineteenth century there were officially organized pogroms against Jews.

Jews were never formally recognized as a nation because they lacked compact settlement, although Stalin accorded them the status of a nationality (natsional'nost'). In 1928 the Soviet authorities set aside a territory in the Russian Far East for Jews. On 7 May 1934 this became the Jewish AO in Khabarovsk Krai. Only a small percentage of Jews settled in the region. In 1989 Jews numbered only 8,887 of the 214,085 population of the oblast.

After the Second World War, there were successive waves of Jewish emigration, primarily to the USA and Israel. During the years of Gorbachev's stewardship the numbers of emigrants increased dramatically. After Russian independence this movement continued, although it slowed towards the end of the twentieth century.

Current issues

Anti-Semitism is not in evidence at an official level, although it is an important theme in some Russian nationalist organizations. Russian Jews have been exposed to deadly racist attacks in urban areas; Jewish monuments and signs have also been vandalised and desecrated by neo-Nazi groups. On 11 January 2006 a man with neo-Nazi connections stabbed eight people in a Moscow synagogue.

There has been a strong cultural and religious revival among Jews remaining in the RF, and Jews are over-represented in several fields, including law, science and medicine. Several of the RF's most prominent oligarchs are also Jewish, including Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former Yukos oil tycoon imprisoned on tax evasion charges after emerging as a critical voice of the Putin administration. However, drawing attention to the visibility of Russian Jews amongst the wealthiest men in Russia is

seen by some Russian Jews as reinforcing negative stereotypes and fuelling anti-Semitism.

According to some reports, there has been a return movement amongst some Russian Jews who emigrated to Israel in the late Soviet period. This is reportedly motivated by economic opportunities in Russia and the end of officially sanctioned anti-Semitism - a phenomenon underscored by President Putin's visit to Israel in 2005 - the first ever official visit by a Russian or Soviet leader since the establishment of the Jewish state. Other Russian Jews reportedly maintain links in both countries, contributing to brisk levels of trade between Israel and Russia.