The Transformation of the Jewish Shtetl in the USSR in the 1930s

Elina Chkolnikova

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the traditional Jewish shtetl’s economy and culture were undermined by emerging capitalism and rapid social change in post-reform Russia. World War I and the abolition of the Pale of Settlement, followed by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, the civil war, and pogroms precipitated this process by destroying many shtetls and ruining their economic foundation. However, the final blow to the shtetls was the ensuing system of war communism, with its prohibition on free trade and the virtual abolition of money. Thousands of Jewish merchants and artisans were left destitute.

The brief restoration of private enterprise known as the New Economic Policy (NEP; 1922–28) changed the situation in the shtetls for the better, but could not create the basis for complete recovery of the shtetl economy. The private sector was suffocating under the pressure of ever-increasing taxes and could not compete with the state sector of the economy. Many shtetl Jews were ‘declassed’ and became destitute.\(^1\) This ‘shtetl problem’ was a real one for the Bolsheviks.

At first, the Bolsheviks viewed the shtetl as the epitome of backwardness and as a nest of bourgeoisie and clergymen; that is, as unfit for the new Soviet system. However, during the NEP, in the framework of the general policy of reconciliation with the ‘petty bourgeoisie element’, they began to see the shtetl in a different light. In the early 1920s the shtetl became an object of attention for the Evsektiia—the Jewish Section of the party. Officials of the local Jewish sections were sent the shtetls to conduct ‘Jewish work’, and by 1925, although the religious and Zionist influence was still strong there, the political authority of the communists had been established.\(^2\)

Mobilization and Urban Migration

Immediately after the revolution and during the civil war, much of the urban population of Russia left the cities for the countryside in order to survive shortages of food and fuel. However, the good harvest of 1922 and the introduction of the NEP in the early 1920s reversed this trend and revived the rural–urban migration that had been underway for decades before 1917. This migration continued through the 1920s and 1930s, with its pace increasing and subsiding in waves. Urban migration reached its peak in the early 1930s, when industrial unemployment was eliminated and the collectivization effort gathered force.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Jewish population participated in the mobilization of the Soviet people. However, Jewish patterns of migration differed from those of the general population, affected by both the peculiarity of the Jewish situation and by general economic trends. In contrast to the general population, which was overwhelmingly rural, Russian Jews were residents of the towns and shtetls of the Pale of Settlement. Approximately half of the

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\(^1\) *Declasse* is a Soviet term for people who had lost their previous occupations and had not found new ones, and so did not belong to any particular class. Most of these people were unemployed, or worked odd jobs, struggling to make a living. Some of them were also disenfranchised. Many shtetl Jews were ‘declassed’ in the 1920s, which created a ‘shtetl problem’ for Soviet authorities.

Jewish population in the Pale of Settlement resided in such villages. For the most part, Jewish migration in Russia after the revolution involved movement from shtetls to larger Soviet cities. This migration trend increased after 1924, when limitations on immigration to the United States were established and Jewish emigration abroad subsided.

By 1926, the territory of the former Pale of Settlement had lost many of its Jews to migration. At that time, 24 per cent of Soviet Jews lived in the Russian Soviet Republic, while before the Revolution only 5.5 per cent of Russian Jews had lived there. Also, about two-thirds of all Soviet Jews lived in large towns and one-third in shtetls. By 1939, more than 80 per cent of Soviet Jews lived in towns, and especially in larger cities outside the former Pale.

In the 1920s, Jewish migrants to the cities faced the same high levels of unemployment as non-Jewish migrants. The pre-war industrial capacity of the country had not yet been restored and there was not enough work even for the reduced labor force. Soviet economic policy in the late 1920s—the beginning of collectivization and industrialization—led to a steep decline in social services and living standards. Food rationing was introduced into the cities in 1928–29, and soon rationing was extended to other commodities such as textiles and clothing. This gave rise to speculation, a flourishing black-market, and rapid price increases. The most precipitous peace-time decline in living standards reached its worst level in 1933.

In the late 1920s and the 1930s, with the employment situation improving, many shtetl Jews migrated to construction sites and cities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Since the migration from shtetl to city was mostly a town-to-town movement, it was not greatly affected by the collectivization of agriculture then underway. However, those shtetls that had turned to agriculture suffered greatly from the large out-migration.

In 1933–37 conditions were improving, with rationing ending in 1935. During this period Jewish migration from shtetls subsided. Among the reasons were the improvement of local opportunities for education and employment for shtetl youth, and the improvement of living standards in the shtetl. The shtetl became a better place to live, attracting many peasants from the countryside. At the same time, the increasing difficulties of settling in a city, combined with a passport system that was designed to prevent mobility, meant that fewer Jews were leaving the shtetl.

Thus, by the middle of the 1930s the situation of the Jewish shtetls had stabilized, mass migration had subsided, and unemployment had disappeared. Major changes had occurred in the numbers and social composition of the shtetl population by this time. These changes will be analyzed here with data from several shtetls in the Kiev and Vinnitsa provinces of Ukraine and in Belarus. The analysis will reveal the patterns of Jewish and non-Jewish migration in the shtetls of different Soviet regions during the period of industrialization and collectivization.

3 *Sbornik Materialov ob ekonomicheskom polozenii evreev v Rossii, Sever* (St. Petersburg), 1 (1904), xxxix.
5 Jacob Lestschinsky, *Dos Sovietishe idntum. Zain fargangenheit un kegnvart istikait* (New York, 1941), 75.
6 In 1926 there were 2,672,000 Jews in the USSR; see L. Zinger, *Dos banaite folk* (Moscow, 1941), 35.
7 In the late 1920s the ‘shtetl’ as an administrative-territorial unit was abolished and the former shtetls were categorized as towns, villages, or workers’ settlements, according to their economic role. See Zinger, *Dos banaite folk*, 113.
8 Ibid., 39.
9 The general unemployment reached 1.24 million in January 1924. It fell to 950,000 in 1925, but began rising again to reach 1.6 million in 1929. This was a very high figure since only a minority of the population were ‘workers and employees’. See Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR, 1917–1991*, 3rd ed. (London, 1992), 113.
10 Ibid., 210.
Table 1

Jewish and Non-Jewish Population of the Shtetls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shtetls</th>
<th>1897</th>
<th>1926</th>
<th>1935*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>total population</td>
<td>Jewish population</td>
<td>total population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 shtetls of the</td>
<td>88 131</td>
<td>47 538</td>
<td>105 950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiev province</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 shtetls of the</td>
<td>62 576</td>
<td>41 255</td>
<td>61 099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 shtetls of the</td>
<td>83 622</td>
<td>49 329</td>
<td>119 633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinnitsa province</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data on Vinnitsa province are for 1934

In comparing the changes in the size of the shtetls in different regions, as well as the changes in their Jewish and non-Jewish populations, we can see from Table I that the general population of the Ukrainian shtetls grew considerably between 1897 and 1926, while their Jewish population decreased slightly. At the same time, both the general and the Jewish population in Belarusian shtetls decreased. This change reflects the influx of non-Jews to shtetls in Ukraine and the Jewish emigration out of them at the same time. Belarusian shtetls were losing both Jewish and non-Jewish residents during that period.

However, between 1926 and 1935, trends in shtetl migration changed. In Ukraine, both the non-Jewish and the Jewish populations of the shtetls were decreasing rapidly, especially in

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11In the present work, unless otherwise noted, all the data for 1926–35 was derived from archival materials in the State Archives of the Russian Federation (GARF), Fund 9498, file 491, pp. 32–55 and file 455, pp. 1–57. The authors combined the data for larger towns and shtetls, which required the additional calculations presented in this article.
the province of Kiev, where decreases were at the levels of 52.2 per cent and 56.9 per cent respectively. The great mobility of the population in the 1930s in Kiev province can be seen in the following numbers: while the Jewish population of the shtetls decreased by 39 per cent in 1926–35, it decreased by 18.3 per cent in 1933–35 alone. This outflow might be explained by the proximity to Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, a city that could absorb many migrants. Jewish migrants clearly preferred Kiev and Russian cities to middle-sized local towns. For example, the Jewish population of Zhitomir fell slightly and that of Uman fell almost by half between 1926 and 1935. The non-Jewish population also preferred to avoid towns, moving either to villages or to cities. Thus, the non-Jewish population of Uman also decreased by 20 per cent, while in Zhitomir it grew by only 9.6 per cent.

By comparison, the shtetl Jewish population in Vinnitsa province did not fall as sharply. The out-migration of non-Jews was at a higher level there than that of Jews: the general population decreased by 32 per cent and the Jewish population by 21 per cent. This difference is explained by the fact that Vinnitsa province was more agriculturally developed than other provinces, and therefore more non-Jews from the shtetl were former peasants who were returning to their villages. The Jewish population of the province migrated to Russian cities as well as to the middle-sized towns of Vinnitsa and Berdichev, where the Jewish population grew by 24 per cent. But the non-Jewish population there avoided the middle-sized towns: in Berdichev the population increased by only 8.5 per cent, while in Vinnitsa it decreased by one quarter.

The most significant difference between the patterns of Jewish and non-Jewish migration is illustrated by Belarusian shtetls, where the non-Jewish population increased by 16.4 per cent, while the Jewish population decreased by 21.4 per cent. Thus, Jews were moving out of Belarusian shtetls while non-Jews were coming in. Obviously, the situation in agriculture was worse in Belarus than in Ukrainian provinces, and this encouraged more peasants from nearby villages to move to the shtetls and local towns. Jewish migration peaked earlier there than in Kiev province: the Jewish population decreased by 33 per cent between 1926 and 1935, but by only 2.7 per cent in 1933–35. Migration subsided there in the 1930s. Belarusian Jews also preferred Minsk and larger Russian towns to middle-sized local towns. The Jewish population of the middle-sized town of Bobruisk in Belarus decreased by 11.6 per cent, while its non-Jewish population grew by 8.5 per cent.

Migration trends were influenced by many factors, including the process of industrialization in shtetls and nearby large towns, the situation in agriculture, and the development of infrastructure (especially the construction of railways). As we have seen, the middle-sized towns were not particularly attractive to the Jewish inhabitants of the shtetls under investigation; but the existence of a large city in the vicinity had a great impact on shtetl migration patterns.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Size of Jewish Communities in the Shtetls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiev province</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In terms of absolute numbers, the population size of particular shtetls varied greatly in 1934–35, ranging from about 900 to 14,000. The size of Jewish communities in these shtetls ranged from 400 to about 6,000. As we see in Table 1(a), these numbers are considerably smaller than those of previous decades. Whereas in 1897 the average Jewish community had about 3,600 members, by 1926 the number was 3,020, and by 1935 it had fallen to about 1,948.

It is clear from this table that Jewish migration had the greatest effect on the shtetls of Kiev province and the least on those of Belarus. Although the shtetl Jewish communities in Kiev province had been the largest before the revolution, their sizes had decreased most dramatically by the 1930s. In comparison, Belarus had had the least populous shtetl Jewish communities before the 1930s. Between 1897 and 1926, the Jewish population of Belarusian shtetls decreased by 33.5 per cent, while decreases in Kiev and Vinnitsa provinces were more modest (18 and 13.6 per cent respectively). In the 1930s, however, Belarusian shtetl Jewish communities were larger on average than those of Kiev province. In all, the Jewish population of shtetls in the 1930s was about 46 per cent smaller than it had been before the revolution.

### Table 3

**Percentage of Jews among the General Population of the Shtetls**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1897</th>
<th>1926</th>
<th>1935</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kiev province</td>
<td>53.9%</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
<td>50.6%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinnitsa province</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All shtetls of these areas</td>
<td>59.6%</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the 1920s and 1930s, the percentage of Jews among the general population of the shtetls was constantly decreasing, as Table 1(b) demonstrates. The percentage was considerably higher in Belarusian shtetls than in Ukrainian ones and continued to be so during the period under discussion. Only in the shtetls of Vinnitsa province and in three shtetls of Kiev province did the percentage of Jews increase in 1926–35. Thus, if before the revolution Jews constituted more than half of the population of the shtetls, by the mid-1930s they were a minority. But in each region under consideration there remained shtetls with a Jewish majority of as much as 70–90 per cent, including Shpola, Talnoe, and Pliskov in Kiev province, Derazhnia, Tomashpol’, and Medzhibozh (92.6 per cent!) in Vinnitsa province, and Schedrin and Narovle in Belarus.

Social Composition of the Jewish Population of the Shtetl in the 1930s

The decades-long migration out of the shtetls had major demographic consequences for the Jewish population—for example, the age structure of the shtetl Jewish population changed significantly. Between 1926 and 1935, the share of youth in the Jewish population of the shtetls decreased considerably. According to the 1926 census, people younger than age twenty-five comprised 51.9 per cent of the Jewish population of Ukraine and 55 per cent of that in Belarus. From Table 2 we see that in 1934 and 1935 the same age group comprised only about 40 per cent of shtetl Jews in Ukraine and 45.8 per cent of shtetl Jews in Belarus. The proportion of people older than age fifty grew during this period from 14.9 per cent in Ukraine and 16.2 per cent in Belarus to about 20 per cent and 23.2 per cent respectively. The proportion of those in the middle age group also grew considerably.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>age groups</th>
<th>8 shtetls in the Vinnitsa province*</th>
<th>9 shtetls in the Kiev province</th>
<th>14 shtetls in Belarus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>less than 13</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13–23</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24–49</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 demonstrates that by 1934–35, people in the middle age group (age 24–49) constituted the largest age group, or about one-third of all shtetl Jews. The 13–23 age group was the smallest. Children and people over age fifty constituted groups of approximately equal size—about one-quarter of all shtetl Jews. The older age group was proportionately much smaller and the middle age group much larger in the shtetls of Vinnitsa province than in other areas. This would seem to indicate that emigration from Vinnitsa province was slower in the 1920s. The situation in Kiev province and Belarus was different. The middle-aged Jews who stayed there in the 1920s moved into the older age group in the 1930s, and members of the younger age group, who left during the 1920s, did not refill the ranks of the middle-age group in the 1930s.

These changes in the Jewish shtetl’s age composition meant that in the 1930s the share of able-bodied Jews among all shtetl Jews remained smaller than the proportion of able-bodied people among the non-Jewish population, as had been the case earlier. For example, according to the 1923 census of the town population of the USSR, the able-bodied Jewish population in Ukrainian shtetls comprised only 31.5 per cent, as compared to 42.4 per cent among the non-Jewish population. 

Patterns of migration and their impact are also reflected in the gender composition of the Jewish population. By the middle of the 1930s, the proportion of Jewish women in the shtetl was higher than that of men. The greatest difference was in the shtetls of Kiev province, where men constituted 45 per cent of the Jewish population and women 55 per cent. In Vinnitsa province and Belarus, the gap was smaller: men constituted 46.1 per cent and 48 per cent of the Jewish population respectively. This was another consequence of the larger emigration from the shtetls of Kiev province than from those of other provinces. However, these gender proportions remained virtually unchanged in the decade following 1926. This finding reflects a change in the pattern of Jewish migration. Before the middle of the 1920s, more men than women were leaving the shtetls in search of employment. In the late 1920s and the 1930s, however, men and women participated in emigration equally; entire families were leaving the shtetl.

The Jewish Lyshentsy

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12 Evreiskoe Naselenie SSSR (Moscow, 1927), 12.
In the 1920s, the percentage of lyshentsy (disenfranchised persons) among Jews was considerable and much higher than the percentage in the general population. As merchants, middlemen, or artisans, most Russian Jews fell into occupational groups that were deprived of constitutional rights. As a result of new decrees in 1930 and 1931, the numbers of disenfranchised Jews fell sharply, approaching the general level of disenfranchisement. Only in 1936 did the Stalin Constitution fully eliminate the category of lyshentsy.

In 1934 and 1935, there were still some disenfranchised Jews in the shtetls. In the shtetls of Belarus they comprised an average of 3.9 per cent of the Jewish population, and the figure for Kiev province was 4.9 per cent. In Vinnitsa province the numbers varied: in seven shtetls some 2–8 per cent of Jews were disenfranchised, while in the four other shtetls studied the number was 11–17 per cent. In comparison with the shtetls, larger towns and cities had considerably greater numbers of disenfranchised Jews. The cities provided such people more opportunities for concealing their lyshentsy status and thus for finding a job.

### The Occupational Structure of the Jewish Population of the Shtetls

#### Table 5


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shtetls</th>
<th>Workers</th>
<th>Clerks</th>
<th>Artisans</th>
<th>Dopomogts</th>
<th>Peasants</th>
<th>Free professions</th>
<th>Merchants</th>
<th>without stable occupation</th>
<th>Pensioners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 shtetls in</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Non-existent</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Kiev</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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13 The Soviet Constitution adopted in 1922 provided full citizens’ rights only to the newly privileged classes: workers, peasants, and the Soviet intelligentsia. Others were denied these rights and were considered lyshentsy. Among them were members of clergy, former landowners, employers who used other people’s labour, usurers, merchants, middlemen, and people with no definite occupation. Children of such people were also disenfranchised if they continued to live with their parents or were financially dependent on them. Disenfranchisement also meant exclusion from trade unions and clubs, as well as from job placement, food rations, and medical care. See Salo Baron, *The Russian Jews under Tsars and Soviets*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1987), 190.

14 J. Kantor, *Natsional’noe stroitel’stvo sredi evreev* (Moscow, 1934), 38–40.
As Table 5 demonstrates, by the middle of the 1930s, approximately half of the able-bodied Jews in the shtetls were employees of state and cooperative enterprises. The numbers differed in the various provinces depending on levels of economic development. In the more industrialized Kiev province the proportion was highest—about 56 per cent—while in the agricultural Vinnitsa province it was lowest—45.9 per cent.

Within this category, the proportion of Jewish white-collar workers was almost twice that of Jewish blue-collar workers. In most of the shtetls discussed in the Kiev province, and especially in Belarus, white-collar employees comprised more than 40 per cent of working Jews. However, in Vinnitsa province the gap was much smaller, with Jewish white-collar workers comprising just more than one-quarter of working shtetl Jews.

The prevalence of white-collar workers among shtetl Jews in the 1930s reflected the general expansion of Soviet governmental bureaucracy as well as Jews’ active participation in it. By the mid-1930s, approximately one-third of all Soviet Jews were white-collar workers, compared to only 5.4 per cent of non-Jews. At the same time, the percentage of white-collar employees in the shtetls was even higher than the percentage among all Soviet Jews.

In general, blue-collar workers represented the third largest social group in the Jewish shtetl population in the 1930s. Interestingly, the proportion of workers among shtetl Jews did not particularly change after 1913. Before the Bolshevik revolution, the number of Jewish factory workers was very small: in 1897 in the Pale of Settlement it was only 46,300. By 1926 their number in the USSR increased by 25 per cent, but decreased in the 1930s. Between 1926 and 1935 the proportion remained at 17.1 per cent in Vinnitsa province and decreased from 18 per cent to 14 per cent in Belarus. In the industrializing shtetls of Kiev province it increased from 16.5 per cent to 19.6 per cent.

Craftsmen comprised the second largest social group in the shtetl. Before the Bolshevik revolution, 27 per cent of all Russian Jews and more than one-third of all shtetl Jews belonged to this category. Their number was constantly decreasing in the 1920s as many were leaving their professions. However, in the mid-1930s the share of artisans among shtetl Jews was still considerably higher than that among all Soviet Jews (only 16.6 per cent) and among non-Jews (only 3 per cent). In Belarusian shtetls, artisans represented the largest social group—almost one-

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15 Lestschinsky, 169–70.
16 Baron, 234.
third of all working Jews—but in Kiev and Vinnitsa provinces their share was smaller (only about one-quarter).

Peasants represented the fourth largest social group in the Jewish population of the shtetl in 1935, constituting about 10 per cent of all shtetl Jews. Proportions were higher in the shtetls of the agricultural Vinnitsa province and in Belarus, and smaller in the more urbanized Kiev province. In the 1930s the number of Jewish peasants was considerably higher than it had been before the revolution, but smaller than it had been in the 1920s. Thus, in the 1930s Jewish peasantry was in decline.

As the data in Table 5 indicate, the smallest social categories in the shtetl were members of the free professions, private merchants, and people without known occupations. The remaining private merchants were holdovers from the occupational group that had been the most important before the revolution. In the 1930s this official category included those Jews who still held legal trading licenses and who managed to conduct their business despite high taxes and strong ideological and social pressure.

**Dopomoga and other Social Groups**

Dopomoga was a hasidic organization created with American aid in the 1920s to help traditional Jews make a living as artisans while adapting their religious way of life to the new circumstances. By the 1930s, Dopomoga had lost its importance and continued to operate mainly in larger cities. In 1934 in Vinnitsa province, it operated only in the shtetls of Derazhnia and Dunaevtsy, where its workshops produced knitted goods and employed more than sixty Jewish artisans. In the larger shtetl of Slavuta, a wood-working shop employed twenty-nine Jews. Dopomoga also conducted charity activities in Slavuta; for example, it maintained thirty children from poor families in public kindergartens, provided free lunches to twenty poor people, and granted pensions to eighteen. By the 1930s, such activities were supplementary to the work of the social security offices of the local soviets.

The last group in our table, ‘people with no known occupation’ or ‘declassed’, was considerable in the 1920s but negligible in the 1930s. This unemployed group was largely made up of so-called *dollarniki*: Jews who were receiving money from their relatives abroad (mainly in America). By the middle of the 1930s, the social structure of the Jewish shtetl population had stabilized. Most shtetl Jews belonged to one of the key social groups constituting Soviet society, and had found new professions or managed to adapt old ones. The growth of social groups such as white-collar workers, labourers, and peasants, and the virtual disappearance of previously significant groups such as private merchants and the unemployed, distinguished the Jewish shtetl of the 1930s considerably from the shtetl of previous decades. This transformation was a part of the general process of the social restructuring of Soviet society.

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17 The Vinnitsa province represented an exception, with 11.5 per cent of shtetl Jews in this category, but this was a temporary effect of the situation in the shtetl of Litin: in 1934 Litin’s kolkhoz was dissolved, and 35.1 per cent of the Jews had no ‘definite occupation’. Also, the agricultural character of Vinnitsa province meant that there were fewer workshops and state enterprises to absorb declassed Jews than there were in other provinces.
Jewish Peasants and Jewish Kolkhozes

Statistical data often fail to reflect a real picture. In the Soviet Union in the 1930s, borders between social groups were often blurred. Let us now look beyond the statistics to consider the real situation of various social groups among shtetl Jews in the 1930s.

After the Bolshevik revolution, the civil war and pogroms brought numerous economic hardships, forcing shtetl Jews to look for alternative sources of income. Some decided to work the land and participated in the re-allocation of former private, church, and state lands among local peasants. In contrast to non-Jewish peasants, Jews, who lacked experience and knowledge about agriculture, preferred to work with other Jews. By 1928, the majority of Jewish peasants had formed kolkhozes and collective groups of other types. It is important to note that these Jewish kolkhozes often also had non-Jewish members.

Jewish kolkhozes were as affected as others by the general difficulties of that period, including lack of financing, shortages of tools and buildings, poverty, crop failures, and the requirements of the state’s cumbersome agricultural policy. But there were also some specific factors influencing the development of Jewish kolkhozes. First, their social composition was unsatisfactory from the Soviet point of view. More than half of Jewish kolkhoz members in the 1930s were former merchants and declassed poor; most were former lyshentsy. For example, in 1934 in Vinnitsa province, 47.4 per cent of Jewish peasants in the shtetl had formerly been merchants; 28.5 per cent had been artisans, 13.5 per cent had been ‘people without a known occupation’, and 6.7 per cent had been employed as workers, clerks, or servants. Only 3.9 per cent had been peasants before joining a kolkhoz. As a result, Jewish kolkhoz members lacked experience, enthusiasm, and motivation for working the land. Many viewed their situation as temporary—as a means to weather harsh economic conditions and gain Soviet citizenship rights through productive labour.

By the mid-1930s, the number of Jewish kolkhozes had fallen sharply, and those that remained had fewer members. The main reason for this decrease was the Jewish peasants’ flight to cities or shtetls, as better jobs were becoming increasingly available there. Many Jewish peasants had few incentives to remain in a kolkhoz. The transformation of Jewish kolkhozes into multi-ethnic ones made them less attractive to religious Jews, as it became more difficult for them to continue their traditional way of life. Also, as the category of disenfranchised people was abolished, former lyshentsy fled ‘productive labor’ in kolkhozes for city jobs.

The collectivization of agriculture in 1928–32, which was accompanied by a new wave of de-kulakization and attacks on religion, was another factor undermining the Jewish kolkhozes. The mostly ‘bourgeois and clerical’ members of the Jewish kolkhozes were purged; at the same time, pressure to accept new, poorer members mounted. The famine of 1931–32 in Ukraine further weakened the Jewish kolkhozes and agriculture as a whole. This decline occurred mainly in the 1930s: in 1930–35 alone, the number of Jews in kolkhozes on land near shtetls fell by 70 per cent. Belarusian Jewish kolkhozes declined the most rapidly, with membership falling by 83 per cent.

This chapter does not include the subject of special Jewish agricultural settlement in southern Ukraine and Crimea.

GARF, F. 9498, O. 1, D. 524, p. 5.
In some provinces and shtetls, however, an opposite tendency emerged. In Ukraine in 1931–35, the number of Jewish members in thirty-seven Jewish kolkhozes increased by 41 per cent; in Belarus in eleven such kolkhozes, it increased by 80 per cent. These numbers included Jews who were working in multi-ethnic and non-Jewish kolkhozes. The number of Jews in this category grew in the 1930s, as many Jewish kolkhozes were merged with local Ukrainian or Belarusian ones. The mergers also explain in part the decline in the total number of Jewish kolkhozes. In Ukraine in 1930, there were seventy-nine Jewish kolkhozes with a total membership of 128,000; in 1935 there were only thirty-one, with a membership of just 3,700. In Belarus in 1930, twenty-two Jewish kolkhozes had a combined membership of 4,600; by 1935 only seven of these remained, with a total of 794 members. Thus, in only five years more than half of the ‘national’ Jewish kolkhozes had ceased to exist.

Despite the sharp decline in their numbers, many Jewish kolkhozes still remained in the 1930s. These were generally small, with as few as 50–80 members, but some had as many as 125–500 members. These Jewish kolkhozes maintained close ties with local shtetls and were an integral part of the shtetl economy. Even in the mid-1930s, many members of Jewish kolkhozes continued to live in the shtetls, walking several miles each day to work. This factor underscores the poverty of the Jewish kolkhozes, which were often unable even to provide housing for their members. But it also shows the centrality of the shtetl rather than the kolkhoz in the lives of Jewish peasants, and suggests that they perceived their work on the land as temporary.

Kolkhozes often operated two or three subsidiary enterprises such as forges, wheel shops, oil presses, flour mills, starch factories, or sawmills. These enterprises served both the kolkhoz and the local shtetl, providing additional income to the kolkhoz. Some kolkhozes, designated ‘promkolkhozes’ (industrial kolkhozes), were centred around enterprises of this type. For example, in 1935 in the Jewish ‘industrial kolkhoz’ in Letichev, fifty-four families were employed in agriculture, and twelve families in a seltzer-water enterprise, a bakery, a peeling mill, and an oil-press. The managers showed little interest in the agricultural part of the kolkhoz and had recently given away 125 hectares of its land.

**Shtetl Industry and Jewish Workers**

In the 1930s, a shtetl’s industry usually consisted of several small state enterprises that served local needs and used local raw materials. They belonged to two types: those manufacturing consumer goods and those processing agricultural produce. Not every shtetl had such enterprises, but some had several on their territory or nearby. Some of these enterprises had been established before the revolution and had been nationalized afterward. Under Soviet rule, many new ones were built. In order to relieve the high unemployment levels, a decree in 1928 called for the building of new state enterprises in towns and shtetls with a concentrated Jewish population.

In the shtetls of our study, there were twenty-four enterprises that manufactured consumer goods. Among them were furniture, paper, and linen and textile factories, wood-working plants, timber mills, foundries, porcelain factories, machine shops, and metal-working...

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20 GARF, F. 9498, O. 1, D. 524, p. 5.
21 GARF, F. 9498, O. 1, D. 524, p. 3.
22 Lestschinsky, 248.
shops. Some of the enterprises of this type were in fact industrial complexes combining several different shops. For example, the shtetl of Ovruch in Kiev province had two such complexes in 1935, one of which employed 46 of the 205 Jewish workers of Ovruch as shoemakers, tailors, hat-makers, and tinsmiths. The other Ovruch enterprise employed eighteen Jews in the manufacture of bricks, axle lubricant, and tar.

Twenty-five enterprises in the shtetls under investigation were devoted to processing agricultural produce. Among them were breweries, flour mills, and bakeries, as well as factories processing fruits and vegetables, butter and cheese, meat, candy, and sugar. Flour mills and bakeries existed in almost every shtetl. Ukrainian shtetls had many sugar factories; four of the thirteen studied in Vinnitsa province had that feature.

As was characteristic of many Soviet small towns, shtetls were not highly industrially developed in the 1930s. Altogether, enterprises of both types employed only about one-third of the Jewish workers from shtetls in the 1930s. Construction workers and unskilled labourers, who comprised about 15 per cent of all Jewish workers of the shtetl, represented the third large category of Jewish workers. In Belarus, one-third of Jewish workers in shtetls fit into this category.

The remaining Jewish workers, who comprised almost half of all Jewish workers of the shtetl, did not form a clearly defined group. Most were scattered throughout small kolkhozes or local enterprises such as print shops, electric stations, and quarries, and were employed in temporary jobs as unskilled labourers. A few worked for enterprises atypical in most shtetls: for example, 102 Jews worked at the railroad station in Kazatin.

The majority of the Jewish workers of the shtetl (about two-thirds) were involved in temporary, seasonal, and unskilled work, and were scattered among non-Jewish workers. The shtetls with large factories employing a substantial group of Jews (such as the textile factory in Dunaevtsy, where 195 of the 329 local Jewish workers worked) were an exception. Moreover, the larger factories were usually at some distance from the shtetl, and were not at the centre of shtetl life. As a rule, non-Jews formed the majority of workers at such factories and determined the atmosphere. Thus it would be inaccurate to speak of the emergence of a Jewish working class with a distinct outlook, capable of influencing the social structure and mentality of the shtetl Jewish population. Jewish workers did not determine the social character of the shtetl in the 1930s.

**Jewish Artisans in the Shtetl**

As a class, artisans did not fit into the new Soviet society. In the shtetl, however, they were considerably more important as a group than the workers. In the 1920s, therefore, the authorities devoted much attention to winning over Jewish artisans. According to Bolshevik ideology, artisans would come to socialism through the cooperatives, and would eventually join the proletariat. A wide network of producing, trading, and consumers’ cooperatives was founded in the 1920s; artisans created cooperatives themselves in some cases, and were forced into them in others. The cooperatives were financed and supplied by state organizations.

In the middle of the 1920s, at the height of the NEP, artisans preferred to remain independent, but in 1930–31 there was a mass influx of artisans into cooperatives. For example,
by 1931, a total of 48.8 per cent of Jewish craftsmen in the shtetls of Vinnitsa province and about 70 per cent in Kiev province and Belarus belonged to cooperatives. Individual artisans were pushed to join cooperatives by rising tax pressures and the deficit and high cost of raw materials. Since industrialization was not yet in full swing, the state continued to support cooperatives, allocating to them the scarce raw materials and orders on which they depended. Members of cooperatives had a more or less stable income.

By the mid-1930s, however, raw materials and orders began to be diverted to the new industrial enterprises. In addition, lack of initiative, the drawbacks of the organizational structure, and fixed salaries led to stagnation in many cooperatives. In 1934–35, only one-third of Jewish artisans’ workshops in the shtetls under our consideration received the raw materials they needed. Even in the best cooperatives, the income of artisans was much lower than that of factory workers. On average, members of cooperatives earned no more than 150 rubles a month, and, as was true for industrial workers, many shtetl artisans had to keep their own vegetable gardens and livestock. Competition from industry made many artisans’ skills obsolete. The products of workshops were often more expensive and of lower quality than industrial goods. For example, in Shpola, for the cost of labour in the tailors’ workshop, one could buy a finished factory-made suit.

For artisans, working independently had many advantages over belonging to a cooperative. An individual artisan had the flexibility to buy raw materials for himself and sell his products on the local market for commercial prices. He could get away with paying lower taxes and could earn a higher income by tying prices to demand for his products. Artisans in cooperatives were aware of the advantages of working independently, and often did so under the cover of a cooperative. Many members of tailors’ and shoemakers’ cooperatives worked at home for individual clients who brought their own materials. In order to attract clients to their homes, such artisans intentionally compromised their workshops by producing work of poor quality. For example, in Dubrovno in 1936 the members of the only tailors’ cooperative in the shtetl postponed the sewing of a winter coat by several months, and when they finally made it, it was several sizes smaller than had been ordered.

As a result of these factors, there was a mass outflow of artisans from cooperatives in 1934–35. Some returned to working independently, while others found jobs at a local factory or left the shtetl for the city. Cooperatives were dwindling in size or dissolving in all of the shtetls studied. In those of Vinnitsa province, the percentage of artisans in cooperatives fell to 41.2 per cent, and in Kiev province and Belarus it fell to 62.1 per cent and 68 per cent respectively.

Nevertheless, the authorities continued to pressure individual artisans to form cooperatives—more for ideological reasons than in the hope of improving productivity. Therefore, a parallel process of formation of cooperatives continued even into the 1930s. Some of the workshops stabilized or grew in the 1930s as non-Jewish artisans replaced Jewish ones. The non-Jewish newcomers were mainly peasants from surrounding villages. Thus, while the number of Jews in a wood-working shop in Hlusk decreased by 75 per cent, the absolute number of its members increased.

Table 6 describes the professional composition of artisans in the Jewish shtetl. We should mention here that there were several workshops in each of the shtetls investigated. The smaller shtetls usually had three to six artisans’ workshops, while larger ones boasted seven to nine. Sometimes there were several workshops of the same type in one shtetl.
Table 4

Occupational Composition of Jewish Shtetl Artisans Belonging to Cooperatives in 1935

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of cooperatives</th>
<th>10 shtetls in the Vinnitsa province*</th>
<th>11 shtetls in the Kiev province</th>
<th>15 shtetls in Belarus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tailors’</td>
<td>** 7 41.6 4 38.7 15 28.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanning and shoe making</td>
<td>** 5 21.0 1 13.1 14 28.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food processing</td>
<td>** 6 41.6 7 24.4 8 9.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-faceted</td>
<td>** 4 29.9 9 51.6 3 20.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood-working</td>
<td>** 7 14.3 6 29.3 4 35.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile and knitting</td>
<td>** 3 49.7 _ _ 2 28.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tar</td>
<td>** 1 7.8 _ _ _</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

23 *Oktiabr*, 8 Apr. 1936.
As we can see, the traditional Jewish occupations continued to persist among shtetl artisans through the 1930s. Artisans—both independent and in cooperatives—involved in tailoring, leather and shoemaking, and food processing still comprised the majority of all Jewish workers in that field in the shtetl. At the same time, only a few people worked in some of the older occupations such as waste collection. Blacksmiths’ and metalworking shops were also becoming obsolete, as much of their work began to be done at machine tractor stations and kolkhoz stations. Drivers (izvozchiki) faced strong competition from buses, especially in the larger shtetls.

**The Shtetl Market**
After rationing was abolished in 1935, new bakeries, food stores, and department stores were opened, often in the stores and houses around the marketplace that had once been privately owned by the wealthiest shtetl residents. The larger shtetls, especially those that were administrative centres of their regions, were commercial centres for local kolkhozes and smaller shtetls. However, in the 1930s retail trade was still underdeveloped. The lack of trained personnel, the absence of competition, and policies that ignored demand in determining supply led to long lines, speculation, and empty shelves. Larger industrial towns were given priority in the supply of factory-made goods. Villages and shtetls experienced shortages of essential commodities such as tea, tobacco, kerosene, salt, and winter clothing. These conditions gave rise in the 1930s to an active black market; the traditional marketplace of the shtetl was replaced by a market of speculators, artisans, and peasants who used it to survive shortages of food and goods. The black market existed in the 1930s in many small towns and villages throughout the country, but in the shtetls the role of the black marketeer was left mainly to Jews.

In the 1930s many Jewish kolkhoz members, artisans, and white-collar employees were engaged in clandestine trade under the cover and protection of their official occupations. For example, in Kamenets in 1934, local kolkhoz members took two days out of their six-day work week to go to the local Torgsin (a store where anyone with hard currency and valuables could purchase unobtainable goods such as food and clothing). Their main source of income was the foreign currency received from relatives abroad. Members of many Jewish kolkhozes traded foodstuffs on the market and travelled to larger towns to buy consumer goods that were unavailable in local shops.

Speculation took place in the cooperatives and unofficial private enterprises of the shtetl as well. White-collar workers were often former private merchants and disenfranchised people who worked as salesclerks or managers. As the Jewish press noted, they were still the ‘owners’ of the stores. A store manager first supplied himself, his family, and his friends with any deficit goods that arrived in his shop, and then sold what remained to ordinary customers.

Naturally, the reliance on family connections and machinations over state and cooperative property that was perceived as ‘no one’s’ were not specifically Jewish characteristics. But in the shtetl a peculiar situation existed. Many former Jewish merchants and middlemen were not ‘re-educated’ to become productive Soviet citizens. While they officially became artisans, white-collar workers, or members of kolkhozes, many continued in their former occupations. This was their way of making a living and adapting to the new circumstances. Their activities filled the vacuum in the supply of goods.

**Economic Typology of Shtetls**

25 Nove, 255.
26 In the Soviet economy of the late 1920s and 1930s a job was important for the social status it could provide, as well as for access to certain privileges and opportunities. A job in a factory or in an administrative office provided access to ‘closed shops’ and better rations. There were fewer such jobs available to shtetl Jews. Also, wages in the shtetl were usually lower than in the cities. While the wages of urban workers were rising, living standards in the shtetl were improving very slowly. At the same time, state and cooperative trade and social services were much worse than in larger towns. See Nove, 251.
By the 1930s, the shtetl had ceased to exist as a specific economic phenomena, and was adapting to the new Soviet economic system. Looking at the social composition of the Jewish populations, we can distinguish three different economic types of shtetl: agricultural, industrial, and traditional.

In agricultural shtetls, many Jews were employed in local kolkhozes. For example, in 1935, kolkhoz members comprised 65.2 per cent of able-bodied Jewish population of the shtetl of Schedrin. White-collar workers comprised only 11.6 per cent, artisans 9 per cent, and workers only 4.6 per cent of the population there. There were few shtetls of this type: of 40 shtetls studied, only two or three could be classified as ‘agricultural’.

In industrial shtetls, the percentage of Jewish blue- and white-collar workers was very high: 55–70 per cent. In Kazatin in 1934, for example, Jewish blue-collar workers comprised 48.7 per cent of the able-bodied Jewish population, white-collar workers comprised 21.1 per cent, and artisans 17 per cent. Shtetls with higher proportions of white-collar workers should also be considered industrial, as there had to have been enterprises and institutions to employ such workers. In Shpola in 1935, white-collar workers constituted 57.5 per cent of the able-bodied Jewish population, while blue-collar workers constituted only 29 per cent, artisans 12.5 per cent, and peasants 12.1 per cent. This social composition was characteristic for town populations as well; thus, shtetls were beginning to resemble towns in terms of their economic role as manufacturers of industrial goods and consumers of agricultural products. Most of the shtetls studied were of the industrial type.

Shtetls of the traditional type resembled their pre-revolutionary form in their social composition. There were no industrial enterprises, and artisans and white-collar employees represented the main social groups. For instance, in Pliskov in 1935, artisans comprised 48.2 per cent of able-bodied Jewish population, white-collar workers 25.4 per cent, peasants 11.5 per cent; there were no blue-collar workers. The white-collar workers in such shtetls were employed in state and cooperative trade institutions as well as in artisans’ cooperatives. The ‘traditional’ shtetls made up one-quarter of all the shtetls investigated. These were in transition in the 1930s: they had not yet entered the Soviet economy, in which artisans as a category were expected to disappear.

Culture of the Jewish Shtetl in the USSR in the 1930s

During the First World War, the civil war, and the pogroms of 1918–21, hundreds of shtetls were destroyed and their inhabitants killed or exiled. Little rebuilding took place in the 1920s, as the destitution and mass exoduses continued. However, the situation improved in the 1930s, as houses and stores were rebuilt, and new houses, squares, streets, and entire suburbs were constructed. Wells were drilled and marshes drained; trees were planted and parks opened. New hotels, bath houses, post offices, hospitals, canteens, clubs, and local soviets were constructed. Roads were paved and bus transportation was established. Electricity came to the shtetls, though many houses remained oil-lit.

The state initiated and financed the reconstruction of the shtetl. Soviet rule was erasing local peculiarities and historical heritage everywhere, but this was especially the case in the

27 Oktiabr, 14 Sept. 1937.
shtetls. In the 1930s, shtetls increasingly resembled other small Soviet towns or villages. Marketplaces were turned into parks or boulevards with the requisite statue of Lenin. Main streets were given new names: instead of Bath and Synagogue Streets, every shtetl now had its own Proletarian, Soviet, and Lenin streets.

The End of Isolation

Until the late nineteenth century, the shtetl had been culturally isolated. Only the abolition of the Pale of Settlement and the disintegration of the traditional world within and outside opened the shtetl to the world in the 1920s. By the 1930s, the Soviet Union had isolated itself from the rest of the world. Within the country, however, the shtetl was open to outside influences. In its striving to mobilize and educate its citizens into a new culture and ideology, the totalitarian system did not leave even the smallest corner of the country isolated. Radios and newspapers, the main Soviet sources of information, served as transmitters of the new ideology, enlightening shtetl Jews about the world outside. Many Jews, especially the youth, saw these features of the media as symbols of progress.

Radio was something new for both Jews and non-Jews in the shtetl; few shtetls—not to mention households—owned radios. Radio programs were usually broadcast on loudspeakers in the main streets. The acquisition of a radio was a great event. In Kulbak’s *Zelmenyaner*, a Jewish family sat ‘bunched round the radio box. Eyes popping like a bird’s, they heard—in amazement—a speech about “bread futures” in the USSR.*

In addition to the general Soviet papers, Jewish newspapers also began to appear. Until the late 1930s, these provided an important source of information about Jewish life in the Soviet Union and even abroad—in Palestine, Germany, Poland, and the United States. The articles on Jews abroad were mostly disapproving, focusing on the supposed oppression of the Jewish workers, but some contained descriptions of traditional Jewish life. For example, in 1935–36, one could learn from *Oktiabr* the dates of Jewish holidays, or read about traditional Jewish life in L’viv. But beginning in 1937, less and less such information could be found as the facts and details of Jewish life abroad were replaced with a stream of entirely negative propaganda.

Marriage and Intermarriage

In the 1930s, Jewish newcomers to the city encountered enormous pressure to acculturate, and this often led to intermarriage and even assimilation. In the shtetl itself, the propaganda of

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internationalism and increasing contacts with non-Jews also provided greater opportunities for acculturation, though at a much slower pace.

One of the indicators of acculturation in the 1930s is the modification of the role of the Jewish family. In the 1930s, fewer intermarriages and a larger number of traditional Jewish weddings took place in the shtetl compared to the city. Traditional weddings could be performed secretly without difficulty. A newspaper story from 1936 tells of how Komsomol member Nokhim Levin had a quiet khuppa.\(^{30}\) Young shtetl Jews got married under the watchful eyes of their parents, while in the city young people were often alone and independent. Also, in the shtetl more young Jews had received a traditional education and chose to have a traditional wedding in addition to the Soviet secular registration.

However, even in the shtetl, intermarriages between Jews and non-Jews grew more commonplace in the 1920s and 1930s, and the traditional wedding ceremony was becoming a thing of the past. Most Jewish parents yielded to new circumstances and accepted their children’s secular weddings, even though their rejection of intermarriage remained strong. Thus for example, when a Jewish girl married a Ukrainian in 1937, her traditional parents did not accept the match. But when their second daughter married a Jewish communist in a secular wedding, the parents reasoned: he is a communist, but from a respected family, so one could still have hope.\(^{31}\) By the late 1930s, however, some traditional parents were more ready to accept an interfaith marriage. When one of the daughters of the Zelmenyaner family married a Belarusian man, her father observed shivah; but eventually made peace with the young couple. This could hardly have happened a decade earlier.\(^{32}\)

**Jewish Religion and Traditions in the Shtetl**

In the 1920s, religious life for shtetl Jews was rapidly disintegrating. Even as traditional Jews were forced to give up many features of their religion, they tried to hold on to those aspects of their observance that could be preserved. In 1924 in the shtetl of Lepel, Jewish carpenters constructing a synagogue worked on the Sabbath. There were no objections; everyone understood that times had changed. But one would hear curses and shouts of ‘goy!’ if one strolled along Lepel streets without a hat or was breaking the law against carrying on the Sabbath.\(^{33}\)

In the 1930s, it was becoming increasingly difficult to observe religious traditions under the disapproving gaze of the authorities. At the same time, the authority of the Jewish religion was declining in the shtetl as the best rabbis had left or had been arrested. The leaders of the Jewish community who remained were regularly summoned to the security organs and ordered to ‘voluntarily-compulsorily’ renounce their positions and publicly deny religion.

Yet even in that decade, the shtetl afforded greater opportunity for religious observance than did the city. Jewish artisans’ cooperatives and kolkhozes were able to fit religious

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 21 Mar. 1936.


\(^{32}\) Kulbak, 172–73.

observance into their schedules. For example, in a shoemakers’ cooperative in Streshiv, both Saturday and Sunday were turned into days of rest in 1938.\(^{34}\) In Uzda in 1936, several members of the kolkhoz Internatsional baked matzah for Passover.\(^ {35}\) In the 1930s, some religious Jews still lived in almost every shtetl despite increasing challenges to their religious practice. Some Jews refused to move out of their shtetl to settle on the land or to work in industry because of their attachment to a local synagogue.\(^ {36}\) Even in the late 1930s some shtetl Jews skipped work on holidays and went to a synagogue or a beit midrash instead.

Religious Jews in the shtetl were too few and too poor to be able to support communal functionaries, even had they been allowed to do so openly. But some rabbis, shoh[.]ets, and mohels continued their activities, with support from other Jews in the shtetl and abroad. Officially, these people were workers in kolkhozes or cooperatives. For example, in 1937 three rabbis and a shoh[.]et settled in Schedrin. In this small shtetl, Jews constituted more than 90 per cent of the population; there, many elements of Jewish communal life, such as mutual aid and the production of matzah and kosher meat, were preserved.\(^ {37}\)

In the 1920s and 1930s, a new way of life was imposed on the shtetl by the special efforts and propaganda of the new regime. Many Jews, especially young people, accepted the Soviet culture and way of life, while others wished to remain loyal to older Jewish values and traditions. But many Jews also wanted to combine both attitudes. They were open to innovation, but did not want to renounce the heritage that the new Soviet Jewish culture could not replace.

By the 1930s, only those customs that could be practiced in the privacy of one’s home remained; for example, hanging of mezuza, lighting of candles, washing of hands, and reciting blessings at family meals. Even these traditions had to be adapted to the new Soviet reality. Many Jewish artisans and workers kept pigs and ate pork, but tried to preserve some Jewish customs at home and thus cooked this pork in a ‘kosher way’. On the Sabbath they cooked cholent with pork, and some Jews even used pork fat for kneydlek on Passover.\(^ {38}\) Also, many Jews kept their beards, but shortened them because they wanted to participate in Bolshevik rituals such as parades.\(^ {39}\)

Another important institution of Jewish life—circumcision—also continued until the Second World War. Newspaper articles warning of ‘wild traditions that are killing children’, with their attempts to scare people by relating horrible consequences of the operation, are evidence of the persistence of this practice.\(^ {40}\)

The Synagogue and Anti-Religious Propaganda

By the end of the 1920s, the authorities had expropriated most beit-midrashim and synagogue buildings, and the process continued in the 1930s. However, if the expropriations of the 1920s were part of an active attack on still-strong Judaism, by the 1930s they had only symbolic

\(^{34}\) Oktiabr, 27 Oct. 1938.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 21 Mar. 1936.

\(^{36}\) Tribuna evreiskoi sovetskoi obschestvennosti, 10 Apr. 1931.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 27 Sept. 1937.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 21 Mar. 1937.

\(^{39}\) Kulbak, in Howe and Greenberg (eds.), Ashes Out of Hope, 170–71.

\(^{40}\) See for example Oktiabr, 10 Oct. 1937.
meaning. The battle had been won, and those synagogues that remained had lost their importance for shtetl Jews. Many abstained from attending synagogue out of fear of being called reactionaries or ‘enemies of the people’. Synagogues thus stood empty, and religious services were conducted in private homes.

Anti-religious propaganda was most intense during Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover. At those times, members of the Komsomol, local atheists’ clubs, Jewish schools, and local soviets organized anti-religious lectures and had private talks with ‘backward’ persons. Among the speakers at one such anti-religious literary evening in Dubrovno in 1936 were the prominent Jewish writers Moshe Kulbak, A. Platner, and L. Katzovich. The evening ended with a performance of Sholem Aleichem’s Agents.⁴¹

Soviet Jewish Culture in the Shtetl

Until the late 1930s, the new Soviet Jewish culture, supported by the regime, had a visible presence in the shtetls. In clubs and palaces of culture, literary evenings were organized in honour of Sholem Aleichem, Izi Kharik, Perets Markish, and Dovid Bergelson. Local drama circles staged plays by Jewish writers, and professional Jewish theatres from the cities toured the countryside.

Radio broadcasting in Yiddish was another expression of Soviet Jewish culture in the shtetl. However, most of the Yiddish broadcasts consisted of readings of works by Russian or Ukrainian writers in Yiddish translation; on rare occasions works by Sholem Aleichem or Y. L. Peretz were aired. The authorities monitored Yiddish programming closely: one such program was suspended because it used the expression militer dinst (military service), which the radio authorities associated with the term dinst moid (servant girl), and took as an insult to the Red Army.⁴²

The small number of Yiddish books in libraries and village reading-rooms in the shtetl testifies to the lack of interest in Yiddish in the 1930s. Librarians generally did not know Yiddish and did not attach any importance to books in that language.⁴³ In any case, shtetl Jews either preferred to read in Russian, or refused to read Yiddish books found in libraries. The latter books were mostly biased, with ‘approved content’, and were written in modernized Yiddish orthography, which many older Jews did not accept.

Soviet Jewish culture also encroached upon traditional Jewish music. In 1938, the touring company of the Moscow Philharmonic Society organized twenty-five concerts in various shtetls. Jewish music ensembles such as Yidvokal of the State Choir of Ukraine or the Moscow Jewish Vocal Quartet performed not only Jewish songs, but also Russian, Ukrainian, and Georgian selections. Jewish singers performed ‘folk songs that were born in the shtetls of the former Pale, and . . . new songs [based on] the poems of Jewish proletarian poets.’⁴⁴ Some of these grew popular; among them were such songs as ‘Jankoe’, about a Jewish agricultural settlement in Crimea, or Jewish chastushki—humorous ditties modelled after those popular among Russian

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⁴¹ Ibid., 21 Mar. 1936.
⁴² Ibid., 16 Sept. 1937.
⁴³ Ibid., 17 July, 1936; 21 July, 1936.
peasants. Interestingly, the authorities’ efforts to stamp out the old Jewish folk songs and liturgical melodies testify to their continued popularity.

Jewish cultural events were often timed to coincide with the anniversaries of political events and were united by a common theme: they all endeavoured to illustrate the hard life of the poor Russian Jews under the tsars and the happiness the Bolsheviks had brought them by liberating them from the yoke of religion and from oppression by the Russian and Jewish bourgeoisie.

Soviet Jewish culture was thus to a large extent a tool used by the regime to promote its ideology. In this sense it was not a real culture, and it is difficult to assess its true popularity. In the 1930s, Jews were not free to choose whether or not to support it, but were obliged to participate in it. Yet many expressions of Soviet Jewish culture were important for most older and middle-aged Jews in the shtetl, as such cultural endeavours used their language and referred to people like themselves.

The New Generation in the Shtetl

In the late nineteenth century, the world of the shtetl was considered narrow and lacking in prospects for social advancement. A new ideal emerged: the ‘good Jew’ was one who studied languages and sciences, worked productively, and participated in society. In the 1920s and the 1930s, this ideal was promoted by the Soviet regime—which also provided new opportunities to achieve it. Most Jewish children in their early teens left the shtetl to continue their education at factory schools, military academies, or universities in the city. The Jewish family of the shtetl became scattered as its younger members took advantage of great opportunities for mobility and dispersed throughout the country.

The relationship between Jewish children and parents also changed in the 1930s. As before, parents were proud of well-educated children, but were no longer the primary authority in their children’s lives. Children studying in Soviet schools often considered their parents backward, and tried to educate them in the new ideology.

Traditional Jewish Education in the 1930s

The system of traditional Jewish education remained intact until the 1920s. After attacks on heder in the early 1920s, a network of underground schools was established, but it was destroyed during the anti-religious campaign of the late 1920s. By that time the Soviet school had firmly established itself, and all children of school age were required to attend.

Despite the danger of teaching religion to children in the home, in the 1930s some children still received traditional educations and observed certain Jewish rituals. In the shtetls of Turov and El’sk, for instance, when a minyan was short one or two men, the schoolboys were
invited.\(^{45}\) In Schedrin, the children and grandchildren of rabbis did not go to school; they learned to say the Kaddish and other rituals at home.\(^{46}\) These examples indicate that the religious communities of the shtetls had not died by the end of the 1930s, and that there was some continuation and transfer of tradition to the new generation. However, traditional religious life was bound to come to an end, as only a few young people were familiar with the practises, and there was no possibility of training new rabbis and religious leaders.

**Jewish Schools in the Shtetl**

With the introduction of compulsory elementary education in the second half of the 1920s, many Jewish children who had had no schooling, or who had attended clandestine heders or Zionist schools, were now enrolled in Soviet schools. The Jewish school began to play an important role in the life of the shtetl. Like other Soviet national schools, they were national in form but not in content. Educational programs were designed to promote the rapid acculturation of Jewish children into the dominant Soviet culture. The schools had a strong influence on Jewish children, who generally had little knowledge of the Jewish culture in which their parents had been raised. Thus by the end of the 1930s, the Soviet Yiddish school had produced a new generation of Soviet Jews. Having fulfilled its purpose, the Jewish school began to decline in the second half of that decade. Financial support decreased and there was a shortage of teachers and textbooks. The best teachers and pupils were transferred to non-Jewish schools. By the middle of the 1930s, Soviet Jewish schools were having difficulty enrolling new pupils. Often Jewish schools were merged with non-Jewish ones, and were no longer formally Jewish.

Several factors led to the decline of the Soviet Jewish school in the 1930s. On the one hand, Jewish parents tended to send their children to Russian or Ukrainian schools rather than to Jewish ones. Traditional Jewish parents preferred non-Jewish schools, with their general anti-religious education, to Jewish schools that inculcated a negative attitude toward their religious rules and rites. More acculturated parents noted that Russian schools provided children with a better education and greater prospects for career success. Unlike the Jewish school, the Russian school provided pupils with a thorough knowledge of the Russian language. This was important, as Russian had become a symbol of progress and a means of social advancement, while Yiddish was associated with backwardness and provinciality. In the 1930s Yiddish was still spoken by the majority of shtetl Jews, but it had become a language of home and private life.

A higher percentage of Jewish children in the shtetls went to Jewish schools than did Jewish children in cities and towns. By 1935, in the ten shtetls of Kiev province studied here, 63.5 per cent of the Jewish children of school age were enrolled in Jewish schools; in the fifteen shtetls of Belarus the number was 65.9 per cent; and in the thirteen of Vinnitsa province the number was 74.5 per cent. However, these numbers do not reflect any special preference for Soviet Jewish schools in the shtetl; Russian schools could accept only a limited number of students, and Jewish parents were often pressured or forced to send their children to the Jewish school. Also, more children in the shtetl spoke Yiddish and more parents in that environment wanted their children to receive their education in Yiddish.

\(^{45}\) Oktiabr, 12 Sept. 1937.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 27 Sept. 1937.
Extra-Curricular Education

Soviet schools endeavoured not just to provide children with a basic education, but also to teach them and their parents new norms of conduct. The Jewish school in the shtetl became a kind of a community centre through which adults were introduced to the new culture and ideology. Parents participated in many school activities, and were invited to school lectures, talks, and social evenings. The children’s communist organizations—the Pioneers and the Komsomol (Communist Union of Youth)—organized such activities as ‘voluntary’ Saturday work, trash collection campaigns, or archery and photography clubs.

Both the schools and the Pioneer and Komsomol organizations reached into people’s private lives. The Pioneers created ‘red corners’ at home, hanging newspaper clippings and portraits of party leaders. Children were told at school to ‘enlighten their parents’ by asking them to subscribe to newspapers, buy a radio set, read books, throw away mezuzot, and stop observing traditions. Children were also supposed to insist on keeping the house clean, on airing the rooms, and washing hands before meals.47 These prescriptions were supposed to replace religious customs such as the ritual washing of hands before the Sabbath meal, cleaning the house before the Jewish holidays, and reading religious books.

It is difficult to judge the extent to which children were able to influence their parents. In the 1930s, many children did not belong to the Pioneers. These children were subject to less ideological pressure and had fewer organized extra-curricular activities. However, most children did come under the influence of the ideological machine of the Soviet school in the 1930s. They and their more traditional Jewish parents inhabited different worlds, and the gap between them was wide.

Soviet Culture and Its Institutions in the Shtetl

The new Soviet culture played a great role in the public life of the shtetl. The main Soviet holidays—the November 7th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, and May 1st, the international workers’ day—were considered to be in conflict with Jewish holidays such as Rosh Hashanah and Passover. Anti-religious campaigns included meetings of the ‘toiling people’ who resolved to denounce the holidays of the ‘dark clericals’ and to prepare for proletarian celebrations.

New Year’s day began to be celebrated in the shtetl in the 1930s. For many of the Jews there, this holiday had been unacceptable because of its Christian symbolism. But in 1936, the Jewish schools in Shklov, Kopulye, and Krasnopolye, for example, put up ‘New Year’s trees’ and decorated them.48 The fact that some Jews celebrated this holiday at home meant that they

48 Ibid., 30 Dec. 1936.
had accepted the new way of life and that the gap between their world and the world of non-Jews had narrowed.

In the 1930s, the image of the athlete as a physically well-developed person capable of building socialism and of defending the Fatherland entered Soviet popular culture. In the shtetls, as everywhere, stadiums were constructed and sports clubs were formed. Young Jews also took part. This cult of sport introduced non-Jewish values to the shtetl; it radically distinguished the new shtetl from the old one that had valued the spiritual over the physical.

Soviet culture was spread to the shtetl through an all-pervasive network of cultural institutions such as the ‘palaces’ of socialist culture, the Pioneers, clubs of artisans, workers, and youth, and libraries. These institutions were supposed to organize the leisure time of all Soviet citizens and to help them receive the benefits of culture. They organized activities such as lectures, concerts, hobby workshops, film screenings, and dances. Every gathering place had a ‘Lenin corner’, with newspapers displayed on walls, portraits of party leaders, and party slogans.

Although many shtetl Jews accepted the principles and ideals of the new Soviet culture, they were not attracted to its popular expressions. In many shtetls the clubs were perpetually closed and were used as storehouses for crops in winter.\[^{49}\] The Jewish population was generally older and more ‘backward’ than their counterparts in the cities. The cultural institutions could not replace synagogues and beit midrashim for such traditional Jews. Family life was central for them, while public life was more important for younger Jews.

**The Shtetl Soviet**

The local soviet represented one of the branches of authority in the shtetl. The shtetl soviets emerged in 1917, and beginning in 1925 many of them conducted their affairs in Yiddish. Although they were electoral organs, the shtetl soviets, like all other soviets, possessed no real power. They could only enact decisions made by local and higher party organs and regional executive committees. Despite the fact that many of their members were Jewish, the shtetl Soviets did not act in the interests of the entire local Jewish population, but rather served only the ‘toiling people’ among them. A job in a local soviet was considered a ‘warm’ position, giving one the power to acquire and distribute goods.

By the mid-1930s, most of the former leaders and respected members of the shtetl Jewish community had been arrested or had left the shtetl. Members of the soviet were therefore usually young people from outside the shtetl who enjoyed little prestige among the local population. Jewish members of the Communist Party preferred to live in the cities, and if they remained in the shtetl, they preferred to conduct their work in Russian.\[^{50}\]

**Antisemitism in the Shtetl**

\[^{49}\] Ibid., 2 Jan. 1935.
\[^{50}\] Gitelman, 366–67.
With the end of the isolation of the shtetl, the introduction of the new unified Soviet culture, and the emergence of administrative and economic institutions, contacts between Jews and non-Jews increased. Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians had many opportunities to get to know Jews and to cast aside old superstitions. In the 1920s and 1930s, there were few visible manifestations of antisemitism.

However, antisemitic sentiment had not disappeared but had merely been suppressed; its manifestations were punishable by law. In fact, new sources of antisemitism emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. One of these was the ‘preference’ of the new regime for Jews and their ascendance to places where many felt they ‘did not belong’. Antisemitism was most visible where Jews were newcomers and in the minority—as in shtetl factories and institutions of higher education. For example, in 1931, in a Belarusian pedagogical training college in the shtetl of Rudnia, gentile students beat up several Jewish students. The Jewish students reportedly responded: ‘The Soviet regime gave rights to the Jews, but they should not forget how to use them.’

In the 1920s and 1930s, antisemitism was generally much less visible in the shtetl than it was in the cities. In shtetls, Jews often comprised a majority in clubs, kolkhozes, cooperatives, and offices. They were also highly visible in public life, as they had been in pre-revolutionary days. Moreover, non-Jews had lived side by side there with Jews for generations. However, old superstitions persisted, and despite the suppression of religion, people remembered the religious and cultural differences that had separated them from the Jews. For example, in Rogachev in 1931, a Jewish worker at a sawmill was forced to kiss a wooden crucifix as the Belarusian workers looked on; they had smeared his lips with pork fat and forced him to swallow. Eventually, the culprits were sentenced to two years in prison.

Also during the collectivization, most of the Jewish peasants supported kolkhozes. As a result, non-Jewish peasants associated Jews with repressive authorities. Jewish managers of stores and cooperatives were blamed for the shtetls’ shortages of necessary goods.

Political antisemitism and the purges of the late 1930s removed many Jews from the Soviet and Party organs and other positions of authority. At the same time, every-day antisemitism was suppressed. Soviet citizens read about fascist atrocities and antisemitism abroad in the press, but after the conclusion of the Hitler–Stalin pact in 1939, there was no more news on the subject. As a result, at the beginning of the Second World War, Soviet Jews had only the vaguest idea of the threat of antisemitism.

Conclusion

After the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and the civil war, the traditional Jewish shtetl was doomed to decline. As a specific socio-economic phenomenon, it could not survive the conditions of the Soviet planned economy. The disenfranchisement of many shtetl Jews, religious persecution, and the introduction of the new Soviet culture and ideology meant that by the 1930s the Soviet shtetl barely resembled the traditional Jewish shtetl. In the 1920s it lost its

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51 *Tribuna evreiskoi sovetskoi obschestvennosti*, 1 July 1931, 20.
52 Ibid., 10 Feb. 1931, 22.
traditional socio-economic and cultural functions. In the 1930s, it underwent a transformation and entered the new economy and culture created by the Soviet system.

The shtetl economy stabilized in the 1930s along with the rest of the nation’s economy. The mass migration from the shtetl to the cities, which had characterized the previous decade, subsided. The Jewish population of the shtetl was distributed among the major social categories of the Soviet economy: the categories of disenfranchised people and merchants and middlemen had virtually disappeared. Many Jews joined the newly privileged classes, becoming workers and peasants. However, the majority of working shtetl Jews consisted of clerks (more than one-third) and artisans (more than one-quarter). In the new Soviet economy, the shtetl no longer served its traditional function as mediator between village and city. Instead, it adapted itself to the existing Soviet economic model. In the 1930s, two basic types of shtetl emerged: those centred around a kolkhoz, and those that became towns with small-scale industry.

Soviet culture, which penetrated public and family life, had a strong influence in the Jewish shtetl. Soviet Yiddish culture also was present; it was supposed to demonstrate to Jews the contrast between the old way of life and the new, and to create a new type of Soviet Jew. Yiddish schools played an important part in carrying out these tasks. But by the middle of the 1930s, the Jewish school was in decline, as was Soviet Yiddish culture in general.

The new culture was accepted by young Jews, but was also attractive to some in the older generations. At the same time, Jewish culture and traditions were not forgotten. Many Jews lived a dual life. Despite the destruction of the integrated system of Jewish communal life, fundamental values endured. Many traditions concerning family life were preserved, while traditions that could provoke conflict with the surrounding society were abandoned. A small group of observant Jews could be found in every shtetl in the 1930s, but religious Jewish communities as such no longer existed. The attack on Jewish religion and traditions continued.

Thus, the Jewish shtetl in the 1930s was divided. Soviet culture was not accepted by all Jews and so could not unify them. Nevertheless, the majority of the shtetl Jews kept their language—Yiddish—and their national identification. Soviet culture with its new consciousness prevailed in the public life of the shtetl. But in the private and family life of shtetl Jews, traditional values were preserved up until the beginning of the Second World War.