

Antisemitism: Before and After October 7

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The Antisemitic Discourse of a “Friend of the Jewish People”

Why Putin’s Russia Slides Again into
the Trap of Antisemitism

Yaron Gamburg

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INTRODUCTION

In January 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin received a delegation from the European Jewish Congress in the Kremlin. During his meeting with Putin, the EJC’s president, Vyacheslav Kantor, told his interlocutor about the atmosphere of fear among European Jews due to the sharp increase in antisemitism not observed since World War II. Putin was aware of antisemitic sentiments in Europe and, as a solution to the problem, suggested that Jews return to Russia, to which Kantor responded that this was a “fundamentally new idea.”¹ Two years later, Valentina Matvienko, the speaker of the Federation Council (the upper house of

1. “Putin invited European Jews to return to Russia,” *RBC* (January 19, 2016), <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/19/01/2016/569e66669a794733927094ea>

the Russian parliament), emphatically stated that there is no antisemitism in Russia, while in Western countries, the carriers of antisemitism and xenophobia are “raising their heads.”² However, already at the end of 2022, Rabbi of Moscow Pinchas Goldschmidt called on the Jews of Russia to leave the country as soon as possible. Goldschmidt warned that Russian authorities’ search for a “scapegoat” in the context of its military failures in Ukraine would inevitably lead to an increase in antisemitism.

Who was right? Putin’s invitation for Jews to return to Russia was just another anti-Western provocation. Speaker Matvienko’s declaration simply ignored the growing antisemitic sentiment in Russian media and politics. At the same time, Jewish emigration from Russia in 2022 again became massive: more than 43,000 Jews emigrated to Israel, six times more than in the previous year; in 2023, this figure decreased but remained high—33,000 people.³ Does this mean that the rabbi’s prophecy has come true?

The answer to this question may seem paradoxical: Despite the rise of antisemitism in Russia, the sharp surge in non-Jewish and Jewish emigration in 2022–2023 was a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The war with Ukraine exacerbated the authoritarian tendencies of the Putin regime, destabilized the economic situation, and forced the entire male population to face the possibility of being drafted into the Russian army. As a result, between 600,000 and 1,000,000 people left the country, most of them from top-level occupational groups and the IT industry, artists, journalists, and socially active citizens who disagreed with the country’s political course—groups in which the Jews are widely represented. A similar pattern of emigration was observed after the crackdown on the

2. “Matvienko: There is no antisemitism and xenophobia in Russia,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (October 29, 2018), <https://rg.ru/2018/10/29/matvienko-v-rossii-net-antisemitizma-i-ksenofobii.html>

3. Statistics on the arrival of the Russian Jews to Israel appear in the annual reports of Israel’s Ministry of Immigration and integration: “*Misrad ha-Aliya ve ha-Klita*,” <https://www.gov.il/he/collectors/publications?officeId=27db3169-aboe-490c-af70-6do3133cb1f3&skip=0&limit=10&Type=9698793e-48f5-4941-8555-b67ca738db63&keywords=%D7%A0%D7%AA%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%99+%D7%A2%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%99%D7%94>

Russian opposition in 2012 and the occupation of Crimea in 2014, which also led to a spike in Jewish and non-Jewish emigration.

At first glance, the current surge in antisemitism may be reminiscent of the last years of the Soviet Union, when the leaders of the communist and patriotic opposition exploited antisemitic prejudices in their effort to thwart the democratic transformation of the country. During these turbulent times, more than half a million Jews left the Soviet Union. The last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, and after him, the first Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, dismantled the Soviet policy of state antisemitism, which allowed the normalization of Jewish life in Russia. Their successor, Vladimir Putin, continued this policy and did not hide his sympathy for Jews during the first two terms of his presidency. However, the dynamics of recent years are making adjustments to Putin's carefully polished image as a friend of the Jewish people, as Jewish leaders close to the Kremlin called him.⁴ His revanchist views and authoritarian methods led to the revival of the ultra-nationalist and imperial ideology he tried to curb at the beginning of his reign. Official endorsement of this ideology became the main factor in the resumption of antisemitic phenomena within Russia. In Russia's foreign policy, antisemitism constitutes an element of influence operations and disinformation campaigns directed against Western countries. To this must be added the policy of distorting and vulgarizing Holocaust history in pursuit of foreign policy goals. All these trends reinforce the similarities between current forms of antisemitism and the Soviet Union's 'anti-Zionist' campaign.

1. THE WAR IN UKRAINE AS A TRIGGER FOR ANTISEMITISM REVIVAL IN RUSSIA

Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and a series of failures by the Russian army in 2022, antisemitic rhetoric has become an integral part

4. "The President's Personal Jew: How Moshe Kantor is Laundering Vladimir Putin's Reputation," *Republic.ru* (February 10, 2020), <https://republic.ru/posts/95870?ref=en.thebell.io>

of Russian foreign policy, including elements of distortion and banalization of the Holocaust. President Putin defined one of the goals of the “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine as “denazification,” based on false accusations leveled by Russia against Ukraine since 2014. Justifying the war as the need to “denazify” Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov compared President Zelensky to Adolf Hitler, who, according to him, also had “Jewish roots”; he also claimed that the most prominent antisemites in history were Jews. One of the advisors to the head of the Russian Security Council published an article in a popular newspaper in which he called the Chabad movement a sect that preaches the superiority of Jews over other nations. These statements caused an immediate reaction from Jewish organizations and the Israeli government. Putin contacted the Israeli prime minister to disavow Lavrov’s words.⁵ The head of the Security Council, Patrushev, published a condemnation of his advisor’s article.⁶

The difficult situation on the Russian-Ukrainian front led to increased internal political tensions in the country and resulted in a military coup by Yevgeny Prigozhin in the summer of 2023. The political turbulence of the Putin regime, the growth of social discontent among members of the families of the mobilized soldiers, as well as the worsening economic situation in the country increased the aggressiveness of the Russian regime and its authoritarian character, including repression of dissidents and the closure of all independent media. The official Russian position absorbed the most ultra-nationalist and anti-liberal opinions, including the arguments of Holocaust deniers. The Foreign Minister called the West’s policy towards Russia “an attempt at a final solution

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5. “Bennett Says Putin Apologized Over FM Lavrov’s Nazi Comments,” *Haaretz* (May 5, 2022), <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-05-05/ty-article/premium/putin-sends-herzog-independence-day-wishes-amid-spat-over-russias-nazi-comments/00000180-9e4f-dba7-a5e9-de4f43e70000>
 6. “Top Russian security official apologizes after deputy calls Chabad a cult,” *Times of Israel* (October 28, 2022), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/top-russian-security-official-apologizes-after-deputy-calls-chabad-a-cult/>

of the Russian question,” comparing it with Hitler’s policy towards the Jews.⁷ Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zakharova published an article in the official newspaper of the Russian government in which she stated that the Holocaust was an event of “mass extermination of representatives of various ethnic and social groups” and did not concern exclusively the Jewish people.⁸ Despite Israel’s condemnation, this time, no apology came from Moscow.

In addition to antisemitic statements by high-ranking officials, Russian authorities have taken a specifically unfriendly step towards Israel—a lawsuit by the Ministry of Justice to liquidate the Russian branch of the Jewish Agency, an international Zionist organization responsible for the repatriation of Jews to Israel. The activities of the Jewish Agency in Russia began after the collapse of the USSR. It had a symbolic significance after many years of restrictions on the emigration of Jews and their discrimination by the Soviet regime. While the right to emigration was never questioned since 1990, the Russian government began to restrict the work of the Jewish agency at the end of the 2000s. The lawsuit against the Jewish agency has not yet resulted in the court’s ruling but led to a de facto termination of its activity. A formal reason for the lawsuit was the tightening of the government policies towards Russian branches of foreign organizations in the context of the war with Ukraine and confrontation with the West. However, many observers argued that Russian leadership is likely using the lawsuit as leverage on Israel’s position towards the war in Ukraine.⁹ It is worth noting that from the very beginning of the war, Israel has not joined Western sanctions against Russia and

7. “Russia’s Lavrov compares West’s approach to Russia with Hitler’s ‘Final Solution,’” Reuters (January 18, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-likens-us-actions-those-hitler-napoleon-2023-01-18/>

8. “Holocaust for all: Zakharova explained how to speak correctly about the victims of genocide,” *Novaya Gazeta* (July 19, 2023), <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/07/19/kholokost-dlia-vsekh>

9. “Russia moves to shut Jewish Agency in Ukraine rift,” *BBC* (July 21, 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-62254595>

refused to provide weapons to Ukraine. Moreover, the Israeli government's official protests over the status of the Jewish Agency eventually subsided, opting for easing tensions with Russia.

A new escalation of antisemitic rhetoric occurred in the summer of 2023, and Putin himself took the lead. Previously, the Russian President was already known for his dubious remarks on Jewish topics: for example, he sarcastically compared "Russophobic" accusations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election with antisemitism, joked that only Jews in Crimea had no money, and often told Jewish jokes with an antisemitic flavor. However, the war in Ukraine has led to a harsher rhetoric. Speaking at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2023, Putin called President Zelensky "a disgrace to the Jewish people" and doubted his Jewish origin.¹⁰ At the same time, Putin grossly distorted the history of the Holocaust, saying that "one and a half million Jews were destroyed in Ukraine, primarily at the hands of Bandera supporters." Despite the apparent revisionist nature of these statements, no reaction followed from the Israeli leadership, which in turn outraged the Ukrainian leadership. Feeling his impunity, the Russian President returned to the same topic in September at a "Pobeda ('Victory') Committee" meeting dedicated to the patriotic education of Russians, where he again distorted the history of the Holocaust: "And who did the extermination? . . . It was not just the Nazis, it was . . . precisely the Banderaites and others like them who gave direct instructions. The Germans, even the SS troops, did not consider it possible to take part in these mass repressions; they practically handed it all over to the local nationalists and anti-Semites."¹¹ In an interview with the central Russian television

10. "Putin Says Zelensky a 'Disgrace to Jewish People,'" *The Moscow Times* (June 16, 2023), <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/06/16/putin-says-zelensky-a-disgrace-to-jewish-people-a81540>

11. "Even the SS troops didn't consider it possible' Putin says 'local nationalists and anti-Semites' killed 1.5 million Jews in Ukraine during WWII," *Meduza* (September 5, 2023), <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/09/05/even-the-ss-troops-didn-t-consider-it-possible>

channel immediately after the committee meeting, Putin said that "Zelensky, an ethnic Jew, was installed by Western handlers to cover up the glorification of Nazism in Ukraine."

Just days after his statement about Zelensky, Putin publicly used anti-semitic rhetoric, this time against prominent Russians of Jewish descent who do not support the war in Ukraine and emigrate to Israel. At the economic forum in September 2023, the Russian President mocked the Jewish name of Anatoly Chubais, the former deputy prime minister of Russia; he also accused Arkady Volozh, the founder of the Internet company "Yandex," for expressing an anti-Russian position to maintain good relations with Israeli authorities. These remarks have left many wondering about Putin's genuine attitude towards Jews. Unlike his defamation of Zelensky, considered to be an element of anti-Ukrainian propaganda, this time, Putin used antisemitic tropes against Russian citizens who held important positions in his regime.¹² By doing so, he singled out opponents of war who were Jewish, even though this position unites people of many ethnic groups. Moreover, his remarks were perceived as an expression of dissatisfaction with Israel's position on Ukraine despite the Jewish state's enormous efforts to maintain neutrality on this issue.

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Disinformation campaigns to manipulate Western public opinion were integral to the USSR's strategy during the Cold War. This heritage was again in demand in the new round of confrontation between Russia and Ukraine. The history of the Holocaust and antisemitism have proven to be useful tools in Putin's crusade against Ukraine's pro-Western orientation that became an official policy of the Ukrainian government after

12. "Antisemitic Undertones: Putin Mocks Former Senior Russians Who Moved to Israel," *Haaretz* (September 12, 2023), <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-09-12/ty-article/premium/antisemitic-undertones-putin-mocks-former-senior-russians-who-moved-to-israel/0000018a-8a9d-dd09-a3ba-ffbded3e0000>

the Orange Revolution of 2004. In its search for an independent national identity, Ukrainian leadership turned to controversial World War II historical figures known for their antisemitism. For Russia, this became the main reason for accusing the Ukrainian government of Nazism. Since then, the Kremlin used this accusation to discredit Ukraine in the eyes of Western countries and Jewish organizations.

Things got worse after the occupation of Crimea when Russia launched a massive anti-Ukrainian disinformation operation, accusing the government of this country of neo-Nazism and the United States and the European Union of aiding the neo-Nazi regime. Thus, in the last two decades, Russian officials and President Putin himself distorted and manipulated the history of the Holocaust. The manipulative nature of Russian policies on the Holocaust and antisemitism became evident after the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and was regarded as such by the international community. At the same time, the escalation of Russian attempts to discredit Zelensky since the invasion is indicative of the difficulties experienced by the Russian army on the battlefield. The war in Ukraine exacerbated Russia's military needs and had an impact on its foreign relations. Thus, Iran has become one of the leading weapons suppliers for Russia, resulting in the strengthening of the Russia-Iran alliance at the expense of Russia-Israel relations.

2. ESCALATION OF RUSSIA'S ANTISEMITISM AND ANTI-ISRAEL POSITION IN THE WAKE OF OCTOBER 7 MASSACRE

This policy change took a more dramatic turn after the events of October 7, 2023. Russia openly sided with the pro-Iranian terrorist group Hamas in its attack on Israel. Its officials blamed the United States for a new round of violence between Israel and the Gaza Strip. The depth of Russian-Hamas cooperation remains an open question, but there is no doubt about the unequivocal Russian support for Hamas after the October 7 assault. Hamas representatives contacted Russian officials within

an hour of their invasion of Israel to update them on their operation.¹³ According to Hamas, Russian officials expressed their support, and Russia did not deny this report. It is also important to note that Hamas delegations regularly visited Moscow, including in March 2023 and after October 7. Moreover, Russia provided Hamas with a license to manufacture in the Gaza Strip its own modified version of AK-47 and ammunition. On the diplomatic level, Russia has acted against Israeli interests in the UN Security Council, demanding an immediate ceasefire, denying Israel's right to self-defense, and refusing to condemn Hamas. President Putin has repeatedly commented on the Gaza war, comparing the IDF's actions to the Nazi Wehrmacht, thus reviving a central theme of Soviet anti-Israel propaganda. For example, in one of his speeches, Putin compared the actions of the Israeli army in Gaza with the blockade of Leningrad, which is considered in Russia one of Germany's most brutal war crimes.

The harsh rhetoric of the Russian authorities, primarily President Putin himself, concerned not only Israel but also the United States of America, which, in his opinion, deliberately provokes conflicts in different parts of the planet in order to maintain its dominant role. Putin called the United States "the root of evil" and "a spider that is trying to envelop the entire planet, the whole world in its web and wants to achieve our strategic defeat on the battlefield."¹⁴ The image of the Zionist spider, entangling the whole world in its web, was widespread in Soviet and, before that, Nazi propaganda. Putin did not hesitate to use this antisemitic trope in his anti-American rhetoric.

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13. "Senior Hamas Official Ali Baraka: We Have Been Secretly Planning The Invasion For Two Years," Memri-TV (October 8, 2023), <https://www.memri.org/tv/senior-hamas-official-ali-baraka-prisoner-swap-america-planning-invasion-two-years-russia-support>
 14. "Putin Rails Against US in Dagestan Meeting: 'Scum,' 'Root of Evil,'" *Newsweek* (October 30, 2023), <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-rails-against-us-dagestan-meeting-1839353>

Already in the first hours of the Hamas attack, the Russian internet content—telegram channels, social networks, blogs—turned into an endless stream of antisemitic statements of the most vile kind. “Z-Bloggers” (the name given in Russia to the segment of the Internet dedicated to covering the Russian-Ukrainian war), who enjoy open support from the authorities, including the Kremlin, have led this anti-Israeli and antisemitic campaign, unprecedented in its level of verbal hatred and brutality. Here are some examples: a channel associated with the Wagner Group noted about the October 7 tragedy that “it is a pity that too few people died”; the Russian neo-Nazi channel Rosich responded: “It is a pity that we cannot join”; a prominent neo-Nazi supporter, Dmitry Stashin, wrote: “There is no sympathy or mercy for Israelis fleeing enclave cities.”¹⁵ This wave of antisemitism received absolutely no condemnation from the Russian authorities and officials. On the contrary, statements by Putin and other government officials contributed to the resurrection of the anti-human image of Israel familiar from Soviet anti-Zionist propaganda. A similar surge of antisemitism, although of lesser intensity, was observed in 2017, when a Russian military reconnaissance aircraft was shot down by Syrian air defenses in an incident involving the Israeli Air Force. The Russian Ministry of Defense rushed to blame Israel, which led to an anti-Israeli campaign in Russian media and social networks with openly antisemitic content. An anti-Israel campaign stopped after the intervention of President Putin, who at that time was not interested in escalating the conflict with Israel. However, this incident provided a clear indication that hatred of Israel can return to the public space whenever the authorities deem it necessary.

The rise of anti-Israeli sentiment in Russia after the start of the war with Hamas, which followed a series of antisemitic statements by Putin before and after October 7, created all necessary conditions for a surge of antisemitic violence in Russia, resulting in an attempt to foster an

15. Arkady Mil-Man, “From Russia—with hate?,” *INSS* (October 16, 2023), https://www.inss.org.il/social_media/from-russia-with-hate/

anti-Jewish pogrom, for the first time since the civil war of 1917–1922. At the end of October 2023, in the North Caucasus republics of Russia, rumors spread about the alleged arrival of Jewish refugees from Israel. This information circulated on telegram channels and social networks and was accompanied by calls to prevent the undesired arrival of the Jews. Following the calls to take revenge on the Jews, antisemitic crowds surrounded the hotels in Khasavyurt and demanded to be allowed inside to make sure that there were no Jews there; their demand was granted. In Cherkessk, residents demanded that Jews be expelled from the republic; in Nalchik, a crowd set fire to the building of a Jewish cultural center under construction. The events reached their climax in Makhachkala, where a crowd of thousands broke into the local airport to seize Jews and Israeli citizens arriving on a flight from Tel Aviv. The events unfolded over several hours with no preventative action from the authorities, while police were not able to keep the protesters from completely seizing the airport.

Despite the incident's severity, the government's reaction was remarkably lenient. The Russian President did not condemn its participants, who got off with symbolic punishments for their actions; instead, he expressed understanding for the participants' anger and, in emotionally charged words, spoke of his profound solidarity with the plight of the Gaza population. Moreover, Putin hastened to accuse Western and Ukrainian intelligence services of trying to provoke a pogrom and thus destabilize multiethnic peace in Russian society. Speaking at the special meeting of the Russian Security Council following the accident, Putin asserted that "the duty of any real man" is to join the Russian army fighting in Donbas because it is where "the fate of Russia, of the whole world and of the future of the Palestinian people is being decided."¹⁶

One of the reasons for the government's lack of resolve in dealing with antisemitic unrest in the North Caucasus is the region's traditionally

16. "The future of Palestine is being decided in Ukraine," *RIA Novosti* (October 30, 2023), <https://ria.ru/20231030/palestina-1906305434.html>

strong support of Putin's regime. In exchange for the region's loyalty, the Kremlin tolerates many aspects of the Islamist radicalization that is gaining ground in the region. Another reason for the authorities' hesitant response was that they were caught by surprise. The anti-Israel and anti-semitic character of the North Caucasus unrest was entirely consistent with the messages that the Russian leadership and state media had been broadcasting about Israel and Jews. The violent events in Mahachkala and other cities, far from contradicting these signals, were an exaggerated result of the Kremlin propaganda machine. It can be estimated that the magnitude of the riots was influenced by anti-Israeli and antisemitic propaganda coming from outside Russia. Since Russian authorities were not interested in uncontrolled violence, they reduced the intensity of their anti-Israeli and antisemitic rhetoric. From the Kremlin's standpoint, similar events expose the regime's weakness, undermining its stability. The legitimacy of Putin's rule depends on this stability, or at least its appearance, which explains his desire to prevent the recurrence of antisemitic incidents, at least for the time being.

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The events of October 7 were a boon for the Russian leadership, not only diverting global attention from the war in Ukraine but also providing a new theme for Russia's influence operations in countries it views as its enemies. According to French authorities, Russian security services stood behind a whole series of provocations and sabotage, including some of antisemitic nature, aimed to destabilize the political situation in the country.¹⁷ Stars of David were painted on the walls of buildings in Paris, and pro-Kremlin social media accounts spread information to incite ethnic hatred. Graffiti of red handprints appeared on the building of the Paris Holocaust Memorial. The Kremlin bot network, dubbed

17. "France blames Russia's FSB for anti-Semitic Star of David graffiti campaign," France 24 (February 23, 2024), <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20240223-france-blames-russia-s-fsb-for-anti-semitic-star-of-david-graffiti-across-paris>



Antisemitic provocation at the Holocaust Museum in Paris. According to French authorities, Russian security services stand behind the provocation. Credit: Yonathan Arfi/via X (formerly Twitter).

“Doppelganger,” spread this information and provoked anti-government sentiments. Shortly before the snap parliamentary elections, Kremlin-related accounts deliberately posted inciting videos about the war in Gaza to further incite political polarization in France. The choice of France as a target for Russian influence operations was not accidental, considering President Macron’s readiness to deploy NATO soldiers to Ukraine.

After October 7, Russian influence operations also intensified in the United States, especially against the backdrop of anti-Israeli protests at American universities.¹⁸ “Doppelganger” bot network and pro-Kremlin

18. “Campus Protests Give Russia, China and Iran Fuel to Exploit U.S. Divide,” *The New York Times* (May 2, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/02/business/media/campus-protests-russia-china-iran-us.html>

TV and telegram channels incited hatred against law enforcement for allegedly excessive use of force against pro-Palestinian demonstrators. They also accused the American government of its hypocritical policies on civil freedoms. Using new themes and narratives, the goal and strategy of Russian influence operations in the United States and Europe remained unchanged since Russian interference in the 2016 American election campaign: increasing the polarization of public opinion, stoking an atmosphere of tension and fear, discrediting democracy and liberalism, and undermining stability and order. The Kremlin's current strategy of influence operations against the West is reminiscent of the post-WWII Soviet policy of discrediting countries and institutions in Western Europe and the United States. In this context, we may recall KGB's Operation Zarathustra, the purpose of which was to present West Germany as a country in which Nazi-style antisemitism was being revived; the KGB operation to discredit Pope Pius XII as an ally of Hitler; Operation Pandora, which used antisemitic disinformation to increase racial tensions in the United States; and Operation SIG to incite antisemitism and anti-Americanism in Arab countries.

3. PUTIN'S JEWISH DILEMMA—BETWEEN PERSONAL HISTORY AND KGB'S LEGACY

The rejection of Communist ideology in the late 1980s and the collapse of the USSR led to the abolition of the Soviet policy of state antisemitism. Neither Gorbachev nor Yeltsin were known for their Judeophile views, but their choice in favor of a democracy deprived antisemitism of political legitimacy. This did not mean that antisemitism disappeared from the public realm. Already under Mikhail Gorbachev, opponents of his policies in the Politburo and the KGB began to use antisemitism for political purposes, patronizing antisemitic organizations, notably the "Pamyat ('memory') Society." During Yeltsin's reign, the anti-government opposition, antisemitic media, and circles within the Russian Orthodox Church contributed to the widespread dissemination of

antisemitic prejudices and myths. However, the lack of support from the state did not allow these sentiments to develop into a wave of physical violence.

Unlike his predecessors, President Putin's attitude towards the Western model of democracy from the very beginning of his reign was, at best, ambivalent and could not be the source of his views on antisemitism and the Jewish community. For Putin, his acquaintance with Jews began in his communal apartment, where supportive Jewish neighbors surrounded him; at school, where his Jewish teachers of German gave him the knowledge of the language that helped him get a KGB assignment in East Germany; his judo coach, also a Jew, who rescued him from the influence of the street punks; and his many Jewish friends, thanks to whom he climbed the career ladder and improved his economic situation. Putin's biography predetermined his sympathy for Jews and his negative perception of antisemitism on a personal level. Nathan Sharan-sky says that after his first meeting with Putin in 1998, where he raised Israel's concern about antisemitism in Russia, he realized that his interlocutor was "a different type of person."¹⁹ Abbas Gallyamov, Putin's speechwriter from 2008 to 2010, notes Putin's neutrality in everything that concerns the national origin of the people around him and, accordingly, his lack of personal antisemitism. However, according to Gallyamov, an antisemitic vision of the world still characterizes representatives of the Russian special services, the successors to the Soviet KGB, and allows to define this type of antisemitism as "occupational" or job-related.²⁰

Among KGB agents, there was a strong influence of conspiracy theories, which traditionally contained an antisemitic element and belief in "powerful Jews" who supposedly rule the Western world. According to Rabbi Mikhail Korits, one of the first to work in the USSR during

19. "Interview with Nathan Scharansky," by Dmitri Gordon, *Gordon.com.ua* (May 29, 2009), <https://www.gordon.com.ua/tv/natan-part3/>

20. Interview of Abbas Gallyamov by the author of the article.

Gorbachev's perestroika, "KGB officers were generally confident that Jews ruled the world and that during that transitional period, it would be nice to have good relations with Jews. Moreover, this idea of theirs played a positive role in the fate of the country's Jewish community."²¹ According to the famous Russian opposition political scientist Alexander Belkovsky, Putin, like most members of the KGB, believes that "Jews rule the world. Moreover, the Jews could control the Anglo-Saxons. Only with the help of the Jews can one cope with the damned America and its satellite Great Britain. That is why Jews are still important."²² The mythologized attitude towards Jews on the part of Putin and his KGB comrades is associated with their perception that the KGB was defeated in its confrontation with the Jewish world during the Cold War. In retrospect, many of them consider the Jewish policies of the KGB and the USSR as a strategic mistake.

It is essential to remember that despite his personal sympathy for Jews, the KGB's legacy looms over Putin's worldview and mentality. Before assuming the presidency, Putin ordered the installation of a memorial plaque in honor of Yuri Andropov, the KGB Chairman between 1967 and 1982. Andropov is known for his crackdown on dissent in the USSR and the systematic use of anti-Zionism and antisemitism in the confrontation with the United States. In 1972, Andropov's KGB, with the assistance of the intelligence services of satellite countries, initiated Operation SIG (Zionist States) to proliferate antisemitic literature in Arab countries, primarily the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion." By manipulating anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiment, Andropov intended to instill Nazi-style antisemitic hatred throughout the Arab-Muslim world and direct it against Israel and its principal ally, American

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21. Alexander Fishman, Diana Rossokhovatskaya, "Jewish life born in the USSR," L'Haim (August 21, 2016), <https://lechaim.ru/academy/evrejskaya-zhizn-v-sssr/>
 22. Alexander Belkovsky, "Putin and the Jews," *Echo* (September 16, 2023), <https://echofm.online/programs/vremya-belkovskogo/vremya-belkovskogo-putin-i-evrei>.

Zionism. Ion Mihai Pacepa, the former head of the Romanian intelligence services, who took part in these operations and later asked for political asylum in the United States, described it this way: "According to Andropov, the Islamic world was a waiting petri dish in which we could nurture a virulent strain of America-hatred, grown from the bacterium of Marxist-Leninist thought. Islamic antisemitism ran deep. The Muslims had a taste for nationalism, jingoism, and victimology. Their illiterate, oppressed mobs could be whipped up to a fever pitch. Terrorism and violence against Israel and its master, American Zionism, would flow naturally from the Muslims' religious fervor. . . . We had only to keep repeating our themes — that the United States and Israel were 'fascist, imperial-Zionist countries' bankrolled by rich Jews."²³

However, in the first years of his rule, it seemed that Putin relinquished the antisemitic elements of Andropov's heritage and, instead, expanded his two predecessors' favorable policies towards Jews and Israel. The revival of the Jewish community life continued unhindered, spearheaded by the Chabad movement, whose leader, Berl Lazar, aptly forged close relations with President Putin. Former Soviet Jews who immigrated to Israel or other countries in the 1990s felt comfortable returning to Russia, attracted by business opportunities in the growing Russian economy. Putin was the first acting Russian head of state to visit Israel and encouraged strengthening the bilateral relations, hoping to benefit from Israel's technological prowess. The level of antisemitism gradually decreased, even though it was primarily the result of the formation of an authoritarian regime in the country rather than consistent government policies.

Paradoxically, it was during these years, favorable for Russian Jews, that the Russian authorities, first and foremost Putin himself, created a distorted version of Holocaust history as an instrument of advancing

23. Ion Mihai Pacepa, "What does Moscow have to do with the recent war in Lebanon?," *National Review* (August 24, 2006), <https://www.nationalreview.com/2006/08/russian-footprints-ion-mihai-pacepa/>

Russia's foreign agenda. It is important to note that while expressing concern about Holocaust history in the foreign policy context, the Russian authorities refused to make International Holocaust Remembrance Day an official date or to support the initiatives of Jewish organizations to commemorate Holocaust victims in Russia. This manipulative treatment of Holocaust memory recalls the Machiavellian approach of Joseph Stalin, who exploited the tragedy of the Jewish people in his propagandistic campaign outside the country while ignoring the plight of Soviet Jews and silencing serious attention to the Holocaust within the USSR. Unfortunately, contemporary Russia's distortions of the Holocaust history did not receive proper reactions from Western countries, Israel, and international Jewish organizations. They went unchallenged for many years—until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

This policy eventually received an appropriate official response in January 2024, with the publication of the US State Department report entitled “More than a Century of Antisemitism: How Successive Kremlin Occupants Used Antisemitism to Spread Disinformation and Propaganda.” Indicating the continuity of Russian policies on antisemitism, the report describes its contemporary expressions and objectives: “Leaders of Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and now today’s Russian Federation, along with their state-run or state-controlled media and security services, have successively exploited antisemitism for over a century. . . . Mimicking disinformation tactics of the past, Putin’s Kremlin repeats cynical lies, manipulating the history of the Holocaust and the Second World War, obscenely exploiting the suffering and sacrifice of all those who lived through the Shoah and World War Two, and falsely accusing Jews, and supporters of Ukraine in general, of neo-Nazism.”²⁴

Jewish community life in Russia, once celebrated as one of the achievements of Putin’s reign, is also undergoing an unpleasant transformation.

24. “More Than a Century of Antisemitism: How Successive Occupants of the Kremlin Have Used Antisemitism to Spread Disinformation and Propaganda,” US State Department, Global Engagement Center (January 2024).

The Kremlin’s decision twenty years ago to nominate the Chabad movement leader, Rabbi Berl Lazar, as an official representative of Judaism in Russia was driven by Putin’s confrontation with Jewish oligarchs and caused division in the Jewish community. Since then, Lazar has been one of the vocal Putin supporters, actively promoting his image as a friend of Jewish people and arguing that the majority of Russian Jews voted for Putin. Personal loyalty to the President certainly paid off for the Chabad movement, which expanded its presence in Russia. However, Chabad’s preference for Putin hardly reflected the opinion of a great number of Russian Jews. While Chabad representatives stayed mute on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, tens of thousands of Russian Jews voted with their feet and left the country. Recent antisemitic rhetoric coming from the Russian President also has remained without any public reaction from the leaders of Chabad, which casts doubt on the movement’s ability to counter antisemitism.



Putin meets with Rabbi Berl Lazar in the Kremlin. Credit: Kremlin.

CONCLUSION

In the decade leading up to the war in Ukraine, Russian public opinion polls consistently showed a decline in negative attitudes toward Jews. According to Lev Gudkov, a leading expert on Russian public opinion, “The bulk of the Russian population treats Jews favorably and respectfully since they are perceived as a high-status social group.” At the same time, “ideological antisemitism of various kinds is inherent only in individual nationalist parties and movements that influence a very narrow layer of radically minded fellow citizens.” However, the same surveys showed that antisemitic prejudices are being reproduced in almost the same form as 30 years ago. This assessment led the experts to call this phenomenon latent, or dormant, antisemitism, which “does not pose an immediate public threat in case there is no special propaganda campaign.”²⁵

In 2020, Gudkov believed that the likelihood of a return to the policy of state-sponsored antisemitism was low and that a key to a successful fight against antisemitism was to “overcome the Soviet past.” However, what has happened in Russia since then has been the opposite. The Soviet past is back—in the form of the physical elimination of opposition leaders, the suppression of dissent, the policy of self-isolation from Western countries, and, of course, in the form of the central role assumed by the security agencies in controlling society. The legacy of Stalin and Andropov has been rehabilitated, and their methods of disinformation are in demand in both domestic and foreign policy. Under Putin’s rule, antisemitism became, at first, one of the tools of Russia’s influence operations against Ukraine and the West; today, it is gaining public legitimacy within the country.

25. Lev Gudkov, “Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia in Modern Russia,” Institute for Euro-Asian Jewish studies (2020), <https://institute.eajc.org/%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BC-%D0%B8-%D0%BA%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%84%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B2-%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD/>



Airport in Makhachkala, Dagestan. A protester holding a sign "We are against Jewish refugees." Credit: Ramazan Rashidov/ITAR-TASS/IMAGO.

Manifestations of antisemitism in Russia continue to multiply. The criminal prosecution of Evgeniya Berkovich, a theater director and poet who opposed the war in Ukraine, was accompanied by antisemitic allegations; the famous film actress Tatyana Talyzina bluntly discussed the Jewish roots of her colleagues on a popular YouTube show, reproaching them for their lack of patriotism. Violence against the Jewish population cannot be ruled out either: In the latest terrorist attack in Dagestan in June 2024, carried out by local radical Islamists, the synagogue was one of their targets.

Throughout Russian history, the main reason behind the escalation of antisemitism was the personal attitude of the head of state. To date, Putin continues to demonstrate a tolerant approach towards Russian Jews and its official leader, the head of the Chabad movement. Many of Putin's inner circle are of Jewish origin and are not interested in any further advance of anti-Jewish hatred in the country. At the same time, Russia's relations with Israel have suffered significant yet reparable damage. That being the case, one can assume that President Putin would prefer to avoid crossing the red line of officially endorsing antisemitism.

However, what will happen if a new means of antisemitic diversion is deemed necessary in defending the regime's interests? What will happen in case of a power succession? Given the volatile and uncertain state of current affairs in Russia, it is hard to predict the policies of Putin's heir or heiress (he has two daughters); in fact, it is hard to predict his own. Dormant antisemitism may wake up quickly again—since too many people in Russia are not afraid to awaken it.

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