Introduction
Indispensable Yet Suspect: Jews in Soviet Moldavia, 1944–1953

At the end of World War II, the Soviet Union had one of the largest remaining Jewish communities. Only a fraction of Jews survived in the areas previously under Axis control, which became sites of mass executions between 1941 and 1944. A significantly larger number of Jews who managed to stay alive found refuge through evacuation to the country's eastern hinterland, far from the Nazis' murderous rampage. Meanwhile, a contingent, primarily men, escaped the Holocaust by virtue of their service in the Soviet Army at the time. Soviet Moldavia, despite being a territory under Romanian control during the war (a Nazi ally that implemented the Holocaust), had the highest percentage of Jews among the fifteen Soviet republics after the war. Jews made up about 3.3 percent of the population, numbering over 90,000 people.[1] To put it into a comparative light, the once thriving Lithuanian Jewish community, which by 1940 counted 265,000 Jews[2] (compared to 205,000 Jews in Bessarabia),[3] had just 24,000 left alive after the Holocaust. After the war, the city of Chișinău, with its over 42,000 Jews, had the largest Jewish population in the Soviet western borderlands, numerically outmatched only by historically Soviet cities like Moscow, Leningrad, Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, and Tashkent. Traditionally Jewish centers such as Lviv, Chernivtsi, and Vilnius were numerically lagging, having been decimated by the Holocaust.[4]

[1] Unfortunately, the first postwar Soviet census was conducted only in 1959, and throughout this book, I will rely on its data. That census recorded 95,104 Jews in the population of the MSSR. In sheer numbers of Jews, the tiny Moldavian SSR was only outnumbered by the territorially much larger Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian Soviet republics. In the RSFSR, there were 875,000 Jews; in the Ukrainian SSR, 840,000; and in the Belarussian SSR, 150,000. See Viacheslav Konstantinov, *Evreiskoe naselenie byvshego SSSR v XX veke (sotsial'no-demograficheskii analiz)* (Lira, 2007), 34.

[2] Dina Porat, "The Holocaust in Lithuania: Some Unique Aspects," *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementations*, ed. David Cesarani (Routledge, 1994), 160.

[3] Data from the 1930 census, conducted when Bessarabia was part of Romania.

[4] In 1959, in Moscow there were 239,000 Jews, in Leningrad, 162,000; in Kyiv, 153,000; in Odesa, 108,000; in Kharkiv, 81,000; in Tashkent, 50,000; in Minsk, 38,000; in Chernivtsi, 37,000; in Lviv, 24,000; and in Vilnius, 16,000. See Konstantinov, *Evreiskoe naselenie byvshego SSSR*, 38.

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The importance of the Moldavian Jewish community can best be illustrated by a rumor circulated in the American Jewish press at the end of the war stating that Soviet Moldavia stood the best chance of becoming the new fully fledged Jewish Republic inside the Soviet Union.[5] The historical significance of this community also stems from the fact that, among Soviet territories under Axis control, Soviet Moldavia had the highest proportion of direct Holocaust survivors as opposed to Jews who survived through evacuation or military service. This was largely due to the specific policies of Jewish destruction implemented by Romania. More specifically, while Ion Antonescu's regime exterminated Jews from rural areas during the summer of 1941, it chose to deport Bessarabian and Northern Bukovinian urban Jews to its newly conquered "dumping ground" in Transnistria,[6] the territory between the Dniester and Southern Buh rivers. There, imprisoned in makeshift ghettos and camps, they were subjected to killings, starvation, and widespread abuse. However, unlike in territories under German control, by the spring of 1944, when the Soviet army arrived, tens of thousands of Jews were still alive.[7]

Surprisingly, the history of postwar Moldavia's Jews has never been the focus of scholarly attention, either in English or Romanian. This absence is perhaps understandable when considering the complex and dynamic history of the territory that officially became the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) in 1940 – an intricate past that poses significant challenges for historical research.[8] The MSSR was formed from most of Bessarabia, which had been part of interwar Romania, and a portion of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), established in 1924 within the Ukrainian SSR. Additionally, in 1940, the northern and southern parts of Bessarabia, along with the formerly Romanian region of Northern Bukovina, were incorporated into the Ukrainian SSR.

[5] Boris Smolar, "Between You and Me," *The Reform Advocate*, December 1, 1944, 5. The article mentioned the Soviet authorities' discussion of the possibility of establishing a Jewish Republic, but not in Birobidzhan. As the author wrote, "The section of the USSR best fitted, both politically and geographically for the establishment of a Jewish Republic would perhaps be Bessarabia."

[6] Not to be confused with the present-day separatist region in the Republic of Moldova. While it included that area, wartime Transnistria extended far beyond it, encompassing parts of the Ukrainian regions of Vinnytsia, Mykolaiv, and Odesa.

[7] The Ion Antonescu regime implemented a Holocaust with a unique "template." While the regime enacted antisemitic legislation and killed about 280,000–380,000 Jews, half of the Jews under its control managed to survive the Holocaust. See Tuvia Friling et al., eds. *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania (ICHR): Final Report* (Polirom, 2005), 115 and 179.

[8] For more on this topic, see Diana Dumitru and Petru Negură "Moldova: A Borderland's Fluid History," in *Euxeinos: Governance and Culture in the Black Sea Region* nos.15–16 (2014): 3–8.

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The outcome of this intricate Stalinist political engineering was that the postwar Moldavian SSR encompassed both historically Romanian territories (Bessarabia) and, in its eastern parts, areas that had long been part of the Soviet Union (formerly the MASSR). The Bessarabians' familiarity with interwar Romanian spaces and society, including those that became part of the neighboring Ukrainian SSR, influenced their postwar choices, such as relocating to places like Chernivtsi. Given these complex historical entanglements with Ukraine, it is only natural that this book's narrative extends beyond the strict borders of the MSSR, frequently reaching into neighboring Ukraine. Moscow is another key geographical focus, given the centrality of its policies for the entire Soviet Union, including the MSSR.

This book examines the postwar history of Jews in Soviet Moldavia, focusing on the late Stalinist period, through an account based on archival documents and extensive oral history. Specifically, I draw upon previously unexamined investigations and trial materials of Jewish individuals located in the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova; various official reports and correspondence addressed by the republic's residents to the Moldavian authorities, kept in the archives of the former Central Committee of the Moldavian Communist Party (AOSPRM); memos on policies and bureaucratic correspondence between Moscow and Chișinău from the Russian State Archive of Social-Political History (RGASPI); Soviet prosecutor's office files from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF); postwar trial materials originating from the former KGB[9] archives of the Moldavian SSR and the Ukrainian SSR, as well as socialist Romania, now in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Archives; as well as other official documents from the former Communist Party Archive in Ukraine. Additionally, the content heavily relies on crucial oral histories collected by Centropa with Jews who mostly spent their immediate postwar life in Soviet Moldavia. Most interviewed were young at the end of the war, so their experiences illustrate well the trajectories of this given age cohort inside the Soviet state. Interviews conducted by the USC Shoah Foundation (better known as Steven Spielberg's archive), Fortunoff Video Archive for

[9] The Soviet state security agency underwent several name changes during the period covered in this book. Initially part of the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs), it was separated in 1941 as the NKGB (People's Commissariat for State Security), only to be reintegrated into the NKVD later that year. In 1943, it was reestablished as the NKGB and renamed the MGB (Ministry of State Security) in 1946. Following Stalin's death in 1953, it was merged with the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs), before being reorganized as the KGB (Committee for State Security) in 1954. Unlike the NKVD/MVD, which handled general law enforcement and internal affairs, the NKGB/MGB focused exclusively on state security, intelligence, and political repression.

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Holocaust Testimonies, and collections of testimonies from Yad Vashem Archives were also useful, particularly for documenting the departure of Moldavian Jews to Western countries in the postwar era. Memoirs, interviews, and official newspapers also serve as important sources.

Throughout this book, I refer to three categories of Jews as "survivors": those who survived the Holocaust in areas under Romanian control, those who were evacuated to the Soviet interior, and those who were drafted into the Soviet Army. I will do my best to clarify which group I am referring to in various contexts.

On the Use of Soviet Postwar Trial Materials

The narrative articulated in this book relies on a multitude of sources, each with its own strengths, shortcomings, and blind spots. To navigate these complexities, I cross-check different groups of sources, carefully analyze their content and language to identify voices that may surface unnoticed and distinguish broader trends – those appearing across multiple accounts – from singular or occasional experiences, ensuring the latter do not distort the larger picture. These principles have guided the research presented in this book. I am particularly mindful of scholars' skepticism regarding two key groups of sources used in this study: oral histories and Soviet postwar trial materials. While criticism of oral history has softened over the past few decades, scholars continue to emphasize that biographical narratives are shaped by their historical moment, social context, and dominant cultural discourses. Drawing on analytical frameworks developed by other scholars has been essential in working with these sources.[10]

Yet the other group of documents – the Stalinist postwar investigation and trial materials – is still treated with mistrust among the wider scholarly community. I have analyzed and discussed elsewhere, occasionally at length, the credibility of this type of source, arguing that if analyzed with care the postwar trial materials can provide us with important information.[11] This position has both its supporters and staunch critics among the

[10] The refashioning of one's life story to fit a new context is brilliantly illustrated in Marianne Camp, "Three Lives of Saodat: Communist, Uzbek, Survivor," *The Oral History Review* 28, no. 2 (2001): 21–58. Among other inspirational works are Sharon Kangisser Cohen, *Testimony and Time: Holocaust Survivors Remember* (Yad Vashem, 2014); Anna Shternshis, *When Sonia Met Boris: An Oral History of Jewish Life under Stalin* (Oxford University Press, 2017), especially Appendix 1 "Methodology"; Zoë Vania Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

[11] Diana Dumitru, "An Analysis of Soviet Postwar Investigation and Trial Documents and Their Relevance for Holocaust Studies," *The Holocaust in the East: Local Perpetrators and Soviet Responses*,

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scholars who have actually worked with this body of documentation.[12] The scholars who defend the use of Soviet postwar trial material point especially to these trials' clear break with the practices of the Great Terror of 1936–38.[13] Given that I have already discussed elsewhere the factors that indicate that at least part of the factual material of the postwar trials (such as its occasional confirmation by oral history or by the post-Stalinist review of cases) was credible, I will refrain from repeating them here. Instead, I will share only the observations regarding the content of the dossiers that I used specifically for this book. Below I point toward those additional reasons that gave me confidence that I can treat this material not (only) as a fabrication of Stalinist secret police but also as a source of actual information.

Throughout the 1940s, in their everyday work, the political police were not allowed – as was the case in the 1930s – to put together wild fantasies of accusations and indiscriminately detain any potential suspect. There was a demand for credible and provable content in the administered cases. A message circulated on October 9, 1945, by the chief of the political police of the MSSR, Iosif Mordovets, warned all operational personnel, especially those from various districts and regions, not to allow "a single case of unfounded and rushed arrests." The document requested officers to be especially careful not to allow unfounded arrests of educated individuals, including those from rural areas. It instructed that all the arrests of "religious figures, specialists, intellectuals (teachers, agronomists, doctors and others)" were to be carried out only with the sanction of the People's Commissariat for State Security (NKGB) of the MSSR and only after

ed. Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander Martin (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 142–57; Diana Dumitru, "Challenging Stalinist Justice: A Review of Holocaust Crimes after 1953," in *Romania and the Holocaust: Events. Context. Aftermath*, ed. Simon Geissbühler (ibidem-Verlag, 2016), 171–90; Diana Dumitru, "The Gordian Knot of Justice: Prosecuting Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Stalinist Courts for 'Collaboration' with the Enemy," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2021), 733–34.

[12] Among the most critical voices are those of David Brandenberger. See David Brandenberger, "Rol' nasilia i fal'sifikatsii pri podgotovke protokolov doprosov epokhi stalinizma," *Noveishaia istoriia Rossii* 13, no. 2 (2023): 376–99.

[13] Lynne Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 7; Heather J. Coleman, Alan Barenberg, Wendy Z. Goldman, Tanja Penter, and Lynne Viola, "A Roundtable on Lynne Viola's *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine*," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 61, no. 2 (2019): 325; Alexander Prusin, "The 'Second Wave' of Soviet Justice: The 1960s War Crimes Trials," in *Rethinking Holocaust Justice: Essays across Disciplines*, ed. Norman J. W. Goda (Berghahn Books, 2018), 129–57; Tanja Penter, "Collaboration on Trial: New Source Material on Soviet Postwar Trials against Collaborators," *Slavic Review* 64, no. 4 (2005): 782–90; Seth Bernstein and Irina Makhalova, "Aggregate Treason: A Quantitative Analysis of Collaborator Trials in Soviet Ukraine and Crimea," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 46, no. 1 (2019): 30–54.

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"presenting in each separate case exhaustive agent data obtained during the development, as well as materials from covert investigations."[14]

In the case of Yiddish language writers, which I closely analyze in Chapter 6, some details in the dossier suggest a relatively professional handling of the cases by Stalin's political police, even if still ultimately subsumed to the regime's ideological agenda, particularly in its ongoing fight against "Jewish nationalism." I have no doubt that any fair and liberal justice system would not find the defendant guilty of anything. However, determining guilt and delivering a fair sentence are not the objectives of a historian. While a legal case might be dismissed as irrelevant, the material obtained during the preliminary investigation holds significant historical relevance. Some of the allegations included are confirmed by irrefutable evidence. For example, the information provided by a defendant about a colleague's published piece, under the evocative title "Gorky Died on Time," in Bucharest in the late 1930s, allegedly critical of the Stalinist show trials, turned out to be true. After receiving a request from Chișinău (via Moscow), the Romanian secret police obliged and sent a copy of the newspaper with the mentioned article.[15] The article indeed cited the shock experienced by leftists in Romania (and elsewhere) at the news that the leading revolutionaries like Zinoviev and Kamenev were shot "after a superficial trial, after a diabolic procedure."[16] In a similar manner, the interrogation materials unearthed the fact that one of the defendants, Gerts Gaisiner, wrote the poem "Elegy," which in an allegoric way, was also critical of Stalinist show trials. The interrogator of the case went to the trouble of finding a copy of the mentioned volume published in interwar Bucharest, obtained a Russian translation from Yiddish, and asked the defendant to explain the meaning of the following lines: "Human, who are you, can you say? A leader or one who leads astray? [*Chelovek, kto ty,*

[14] Arhiva Națională a Republicii Moldova (National Archive of the Republic of Moldova, hereafter ANRM), F. R-3437 [ANA, NKGB-MGB-KGB al RSSM, 1944–1989], inv. 1, d. 3, f. 95.

[15] During his 1949 interrogation, writer Yakov Yakir mentioned Manuil Sheinbaum, who allegedly published a 1937 article condemning the show trials of leading Soviet communists. Yakir stated that Sheinbaum was seen in Sochi in 1947 and, by then, was a Communist Party member holding a leading literary position. (ANRM, F. R-3401 ["Colecția documentelor persoanelor supuse represiilor politice în perioada regimului sovietic totalitar"], inv. 1, d. 08959, vol. I, f. 249). The MGB of Krasnodar Krai arrested Sheinbaum in Sochi in 1950. At the time, he was a Communist Party member and worked for *Krasnaia Zvezda*. On February 3, 1951, he was sentenced to ten years in prison. (ANRM, F. R-3401, inv. 1, d. 08959, vol. II, f. 63, 74). In November 1954, during the review of the case Mordovets ordered, among other investigative measures to find the article "Gorky Died on Time" published in the newspaper *Șantier* (ANRM, F. R-3401, inv. 1, d. 08959, vol. II, f. 87), which the investigators did.

[16] ANRM, F. R-3401, inv. 1, d. 08959, vol. II, f. 159.

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skazhi? Vozhd' ili svodiashchii s puti?]."[17] Gaisiner's insistence, until the end of the investigation, that he meant only "a person" is further proof that the proceedings of the 1949 investigations, unlike those of the 1930s, were not merely torture sessions where defendants had no choice but to admit to whatever the interrogator dictated.

Surprisingly, two of the defendants explicitly stated in their letters of complaint, written after Stalin's death, that they were not subjected to physical abuse. However, they admitted to psychological manipulation, threats, and exhausting interrogation methods.[18] One of those defendants, Moisei Altman, even viewed one of his interrogators, a certain captain Platonov, as an "honest person, who has not lost their conscience."[19] Incidentally, the same Platonov was addressing the defendant during interrogations by his first name and patronymic; a rare pleasantry to transpire in the Stalinist interrogation files.[20]

A lucky triangulation with an outside source additionally suggests that at least some stories captured by interrogations were true. In this case, Mania Yakir, the wife of the writer Yakov Yakir, when interrogated as a witness in her husband's case, told her interrogator that in a desperate attempt to understand the reasons and the course of investigation of her husband, she approached an acquaintance named Shapiro, who she knew to be working in the Moldavian Ministry of State Security (MGB). Shapiro told her that the case was "serious."[21] Among the documents that became available to scholars only in the summer of 2023 in Chișinău, I found an interesting document, dated July 14, 1949, less than three months after Mania's testimony. This was the order for arrest for twenty days, followed by dismissal, of a lieutenant David Shapiro, who held the position of the translator in the Moldavian MGB Investigation Department. As the order specified, Shapiro's guilt was that "being aware of some data about the arrested by the MGB of the MSSR 'Ya.[kir],' [he] entered into personal relations with the relatives of the latter and told them the facts known to him on the case."[22]

[17] Ibid., vol. IV, f. 262. The interrogation from March 16, 1949.
[18] ANRM, F. R-3401, inv. 1, d. 08959, vol. III, f. 230. Also, ibid., vol. II, f. 216–23.
[19] Ibid., vol. II, f. 238–45. This evaluation of Platonov, an employee of the Chernivtsi political police branch, was allegedly found by Altman's daughter, Ida Moiseevna Gritsenko (née Altman), in her father's written notes. In 1989, she mentioned it in a letter she sent to the KGB, requesting additional details of her father's case and demanding the return of confiscated literary materials.
[20] Ibid., vol. III, f. 219.
[21] Ibid., vol. III, f. 21–22. Mania Yakir's interrogation minutes from April 22, 1949.
[22] ANRM, F. R-3437, inv. 1, d. 12, f. 138.

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At the same time, the materials from the dossiers of the Bessarabian Jews arrested as Zionists are trickier, hence my reservations in using them.[23] Specifically, the reported physical abuse of the defendants (revealed after Stalin's death) and the investigators' attempts to tie some of them to British espionage were red flags for me. In this case, a group of young Bessarabian Jews were accused of belonging to Zionist organizations in the interwar era and attempting to illegally immigrate in 1946 with the help of "Gordonia," a Zionist organization active in Bucharest.[24] According to the materials of the investigation, the Bessarabian Zelik Veitsman (residing in Romania in 1946) oversaw illegal operations, while his "boss" Boris Kaminker, another Jewish Bessarabian located in Romania, paid with "Gordonia's" money for the expenditures related to illegal Soviet border crossing and later sent the escapees to Austria, then Italy, from there to Cyprus, and ultimately Palestine.[25]

The interwar membership in Zionist organizations was the one clause that I assessed as credible, given both the Zionist organizations' unhindered activity in interwar Romania and the abundance of specific details – such as those about Zionist summer camps – that were impossible for the Soviet Gentile interrogators to know but were provided by the defendants. Surprisingly, other information collected during the interrogation was confirmed by an affidavit from Yad Vashem's archive. The first fact discovered was that Boris Kaminker existed in real life. Known in Israel under the name Baruch Kamin, a Bessarabian Jew who made *Aliyah* in 1939 and was later a member of Knesset, in 1969 he gave to the Yad Vashem a testimony that proudly described his life. Among the listed activities from the 1940s, we can gauge a trajectory that is very close to the one described in the interrogations from the postwar trial files. More specifically, Kamin shared that earlier in his life he was an active member of "Gordonia," that he received military training by the British army

[23] On February 1, 1950, the final accusation against seven men and three women was submitted to the Special Council at the USSR Ministry of State Security. They were charged with belonging to an illegal Zionist organization and agitation, while the men also faced espionage charges. All received ten-year prison sentences and were released only in 1955. ANRM, F. R-3401, inv. 1, d. 4538, vol. V, f. 58.

[24] A significant body of literature explores the Bricha, a clandestine Zionist movement that facilitated the illegal immigration of Jews from Europe to Palestine immediately after the war. See Yehuda Bauer, *Flight and Rescue: Brichah* (Random House, 1970); Zorach Warhaftig, *Uprooted: Jewish Refugees and Displaced Persons after Liberation* (Herzl Press, 1979); Anne Dublin, *The Bricha: The Jewish Underground Railroad* (Second Story Press, 2018); Magdalena Emczyszyn, "Nielegalna emigracja Żydów z Polski 1944–1947 – kontekst międzynarodowy," *Dzieje Najnowsze* 50, no. 1 (2018): 95–121.

[25] ANRM, F. R-3401, inv. 1, d. 4536, vol. I. f. 32.

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together with a group of thirty to forty people starting in 1943, being paradropped in Romania in August 1944. He spoke about his postwar life under a false identity in Bucharest. During this phase, he was involved in the underground activities of Jewish youth in Romania and in helping Jewish individuals reach Eretz Israel.[26] The only part where discrepancies appeared is related to the Soviets' British spy allegations. But such suspicions are not too surprising, given the Cold War era and its accompanying fear of real and alleged spies.

Historiographical Dialogues

This book explores the postwar lives of Jews in Soviet Moldavia, challenging the tendency to generalize the experience of Jews in Moscow to the Soviet periphery. Without a deeper understanding of Jewish life beyond the imperial center, our comprehension of Jewish experiences under late Stalinism remains both limited and skewed. More broadly, this study engages two major fields – Soviet Jewish history and the aftermath of the Holocaust – while also intersecting with other scholarly domains.

In general, the study of Soviet Jews has been a thriving area of research over the past two decades. The body of scholarship published in this field reveals an amazing story of a vibrant and ever-transforming community, which redefined its Jewishness to fit a complex Soviet reality.[27]

[26] Yad Vashem Archives, Fund O.3 "Testimonies Department of Yad Vashem Archive," no. 4020, Baruch Kaminer (1969), pp. 1–41.

[27] Some of the major recent works include Oleg Budnitskii, David Engel, Gennady Estraikh, and Anna Shternshis, *Jews in the Soviet Union: A History: War, Conquest, and Catastrophe, 1939–1945,* vol. 3 (NYU Press, 2022); Andrew Sloin, *The Jewish Revolution in Belorussia: Economy, Race, and Bolshevik Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Shternshis, *When Sonia Met Boris*; Zvi Gitelman, ed., *The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel, and Germany* (Rutgers University Press, 2016); Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2016); Kiril Feferman, *The Holocaust in the Crimea and the North Caucasus* (Yad Vashem, 2016); Anika Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Harriet Murav and Gennady Estraikh, eds., *Soviet Jews in World War II: Fighting, Witnessing, Remembering* (Academic Studies Press, 2014); Leonid Smilovitsky, *Jewish Life in Belarus: The Final Decade of the Stalin Regime (1944–53)* (CEU Press, 2014); Jeffrey Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl: Small-Town Jewish Life in the Soviet Ukraine* (Indiana University Press, 2013); Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Indiana University Press, 2013); Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (Rutgers University Press, 2013); Rina Lapidus, *Jewish Women Writers in the Soviet Union* (Routledge, 2012); Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine: An Uncertain Ethnicity* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *The Jewish Movement in the Soviet Union* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Mordechai Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union, 1941–1964* (Brandeis University Press, 2012); Harriet Murav, *Music from a Speeding Train: Jewish Literature in Post-Revolution Russia* (Stanford University Press, 2011); David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes:*

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Predominantly, however, these studies focus on the events that happened before and during the Holocaust. The immediate postwar decade instead is a domain where historiography shows both less interest and less diversity in its choice of topics and approaches. Stalin's persecution of Jews is the subject that looms largest, with the destruction of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in 1949 and the "Doctors' Plot" of 1952–53 as defining issues. Gennady Kostyrchenko, Shimon Redlich, Joshua Rubenstein, and Vladimir Naumov have probed these brutal crimes while trying to understand the mechanisms behind them.[28] They stress Stalin's predominant role in the growth of antisemitism and point out that, in the context of an early phase of the Cold War, the "Doctors' Plot" stemmed from Stalin's desire to purge what he saw as potentially disloyal elements in case a war broke out with the United States. In addition to its deadly character, this period is also viewed as a time of "excluding Jews from the state machinery," when "managerial staff, from ministerial rank and down, and the artistic and humanities intelligentsia (journalists, university professors, and others) suffered the most."[29] An official antisemitic policy against Soviet Jews is believed to have originated as early as the late 1930s and only increased its intensity from 1942–43.[30]

Yet, as the late historian David Shneer astutely pointed out, tragic history employs a narrative strategy that positions the ending before the narrative unfolds and, in its most extreme form, prioritizes death over life. He also warns that this mode of narration often imposes outcomes on the events the historians study, restricting other modes of history

Photography, War, and the Holocaust (Rutgers University Press, 2011); Zvi Gitelman and Yaacov Ro'i, eds., *Revolution, Repression, and Revival: The Soviet Jewish Experience* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Arkady Zeltser, *Evrei sovetskoi provintsii: Vitebsk i mestechki, 1917–1941* (ROSSPEN, 2006); Jonathan Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924–1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

[28] Shimon Redlich, *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: A Documented Study of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR* (Harwood Academic, 1995); Gennadii Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina: Vlast' i antisemitizm* (Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2001); Gennadii Kostyrchenko, *Stalin protiv "kosmopolitov." Vlast' i evreiskaia intelligentsiia v SSSR* (Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2009); Gennadii Kostyrchenko, *V plenu u krasnogo faraona: Politicheskie presledovaniia evreev v SSSR v poslednee stalinskoe desiatiletie. Dokumental'noe issledovanie* (Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1994); Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Post-War Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (Yale University Press, 2001); Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot against the Jewish Doctors, 1948–1953* (HarperCollins, 2003); Arno Lustiger, *Stalin and the Jews: The Red Book: The Tragedy of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and the Soviet Jews* (Enigma, 2003).

[29] Gennadii Kostyrchenko, "The Genesis of Establishment Anti-Semitism in the USSR: The Black Years, 1948–1953," in Gitelman and Ro'i, eds., *Revolution, Repression, and Revival*, 187.

[30] *Gosudarstvennyi antisemitizm v SSSR, 1938–1953. Documenty*, ed. Gennadii Kostyrchenko (Materik, 2005), 5.

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telling.[31] Exceptions to the aforementioned tendency to view the history of postwar Soviet Jews exclusively through the lens of repression include the works of Jeffrey Veidlinger, Arkadi Zeltser, and Anna Shternshis.[32] These authors shifted the center of scholarly attention from Stalin to the Jews themselves and delved into their emotions, actions, and the lives they lived within the complex context of late Stalinism. For example, Zeltser documented the postwar efforts of Jewish survivors to commemorate their loved ones killed in the Holocaust, while Shternshis skillfully interweaves the stories of Jewish urbanites to depict the complexities of Jewish existence under Stalin's regime. Her book is based on an extensive collection of oral histories (which do not cover Moldavia) that illuminate personal experiences often overshadowed by larger political narratives. Through vivid storytelling, Shternshis examines themes such as love, family, the workplace, and the quest for normalcy in an oppressive state. When discussing the late Stalinist period, Shternshis challenges the prevailing perception of this era as a continuous stretch of "black years." She discovered that Jews perceived the immediate post–World War II era as marked by extreme poverty but also unprecedented opportunities. It was only after 1948 that they recall experiencing significant discrimination and challenges. Intriguingly, she noticed that the materials she analyzed do not seem to provide factual data about such discrimination but are just evidence of the "perception of discrimination" in the postwar years. Instead, she only finds verifiable cases of discrimination associated with the Jews' (in)ability to choose some professions much later, in the 1970s and 1980s. Additionally, Shternshis notes that there was a widespread recognition among Jews of a relatively friendly environment in regions such as Central Asia, the Urals, and the Northern Caucasus, even during 1948–53. These findings remained mostly tentative, as they require further research beyond the documentation that forms the bulk of Shternshis' work. My book builds on and responds to Shternshis' approach by taking on these tasks, delving into the experiences of Jews beyond the Soviet state's central regions.

Efforts to move away from the Soviet center when researching Jewish matters in the postwar decade were undertaken (in Russian) by Elena Genina, who focused on southwestern Siberia, and Anna Kimerling, who

[31] David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918–1930* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2–3.

[32] Jeffrey Veidlinger, "Soviet Jewry as a Diaspora Nationality: The 'Black Years' Reconsidered," *East European Jewish Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2003): 4–29; Arkadi Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory: Holocaust Memory in the Soviet Union* (Yad Vashem, 2018); Shternshis, *When Sonia Met Boris*.

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studied two Ural regions during late Stalinism.[33] However, both scholars still concentrate exclusively on the issue of state repression against Jews. They also both deal with historically Soviet territories, unlike the case of Soviet Moldavia.

The only existing book that would be directly comparable to this book is Leonid Smilovitsky's *Jewish Life in Belarus: The Final Decade of the Stalin Regime (1944–1953)*.[34] Smilovitsky's study offers an analysis of Jewish life in Soviet Belorussia during the first decade after World War II, covering both its historically Soviet territories and the formerly Polish lands annexed in 1939. The author primarily documents a continuous suppression of Jewish religious and cultural practices, as well as the persecution of Jewish communal leaders and activists. However, in discussing the contributions of Jews to the postwar economy and culture in Soviet Belarus, Smilovitsky's primary sources reveal that Jews experienced social mobility and came to occupy a notable and disproportionately large number of key managerial roles within the republic's economic, educational, scientific, and cultural institutions between 1945 and 1950. This point is not at the center of Smilovitsky's analysis, yet in crucial ways, it signals trends differing from those purportedly identified by scholars researching the central regions of the Soviet Union (such as the professional exclusion of Jews from important segments). My own findings line up with Smilovitsky's data. In this book, I take this matter further by probing into the Jewish experiences at the western borderland of the Soviet state and disentangling the complex issues of official antisemitism, nationalities policies, indigenization, and postwar reconstruction.

Mirroring the above-mentioned tendency in the scholarship on the history of Soviet Jews after World War II, Anna Cichopek-Gajraj noted a similar trend in the field of post-Holocaust studies, which prioritizes the subjects of violence against Jews and emigration as dominant topics. She proposed to go "beyond violence" and uncover the heterogeneity of Jewish existence and interactions with non-Jews in the postwar period.[35] Her admirably documented book ended up revealing how difficult it was for

[33] Specifically, Genina focused on the persecutions at the Kuznetsk Metallurgical Plant. Elena Genina, "*Delo" KMK (1949–1952)* (Krasnoiarskii pisatel', 2008); Elena Genina, *Kampaniia po bor'be s kosmopolitizmom (konets 1940-kh – nachalo 1950-h gg.)* (Klaretanium, 2003); Anna Kimerling, *Terror na izlete. "Delo vrachei" v ural'skoi provintsii* (Permskii gosudarstvennyi institut iskusstva i kul'tury, 2011).

[34] Smilovitsky, *Jewish Life in Belarus*.

[35] Anna Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence: Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia, 1944–1948* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

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Jews in Poland and Slovakia to find safety, support, or solidarity after the Holocaust. In addition to pogroms and physical violence, as well as the systematic denial of assistance in returning their property, impediments were created by political and ethnic "verification" processes, and laws and rules were implemented to keep Jews segregated from broader society. Among other studies that tried to break the mold of "beyond violence" is a recently edited volume by Anna Wylegała, Sabine Rutar, and Małgorzata Łukianow.[36] Multidisciplinary in scope and geographically diverse, this volume was centered around the concept of the absence of (not only Jewish) neighbors as the result of murder or (post)war displacement. To a significant extent, my book is driven by a similar intent to move beyond violence (in its Stalinist form). A crucial element of my book is its addressing of issues directly relevant to the field of postwar Holocaust studies, such as postwar justice in Europe[37] and the Soviet Union,[38] as well

[36] Anna Wyłegala, Sabine Rutar, and Małgorzata Łukianow, eds., *No Neighbors' Lands in Postwar Europe. Vanishing Others* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

[37] A short list of relevant literature includes: Eric Le Bourhis, Irina Tcherneva, and Vanessa Voisin, eds., *Seeking Accountability for Nazi and War Crimes in East and Central Europe: A People's Justice?* (Boydell & Brewer, 2022); Devin O. Pendas, *Democracy, Nazi Trials, and Transitional Justice in Germany, 1945–1950* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Andrew Kornbluth, *The August Trials: The Holocaust and Postwar Justice in Poland* (Harvard University Press, 2021); Gabriel N. Finder and Alexander V. Prusin, *Justice behind the Iron Curtain: Nazis on Trial in Communist Poland* (University of Toronto Press, 2018); István Deák, *Europe on Trial: The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution during World War II* (Westview Press, 2015).

[38] David M. Crowe, ed., *Stalin's Soviet Justice: "Show" Trials, War Crimes Trials, and Nuremberg* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Bernstein and Makhalova, "Aggregate Treason"; Alana Holland, "Soviet Holocaust Retribution in Lithuania, 1944–64," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 46, no. 1 (2019): 3–29; Franziska Exeler, "The Ambivalent State: Determining Guilt in the Post–World War II Soviet Union," *Slavic Review* 75, no. 3 (2016): 606–29; Claire P. Kaiser, "Betraying Their Motherland: Soviet Military Tribunal of Izmenniki Rodiny in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, 1951–1953," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 41, no. 1 (2014): 57–83; Juliette Cadiot and Tanja Penter, "Law and Justice in Wartime and Postwar Stalinism," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 61, no. 2 (2013): 161–71; Oleksandr Melnyk, "Stalinist Justice as a Site of Memory: Anti-Jewish Violence in Kyiv's Podil District in September 1941 through the Prism of Soviet Investigative Documents," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 61, no. 2 (2013): 223–48; Lev Simkin, "Death Sentence despite the Law: A Secret 1962 Crimes-against-Humanity Trial in Kiev," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 27, no. 2 (2013): 299–312; Leonid Rein, *The Kings and the Pawns: Collaboration in Byelorussia during World War II* (Berghahn Books, 2011); Anatoly Podolsky, "Collaboration in Ukraine during the Holocaust: Aspects of Historiography and Research," in *Collaboration with the Nazis: Public Discourse after the Holocaust,* ed. Roni Stauber (Routledge, 2011), 44–52; Yitzhak Arad, "Popular Collaboration in the Baltic States: Between Evasion and Facing a Burdensome Past," in *Collaboration with the Nazis*, 53–68; Martin Dean, "Crime and Comprehension, Punishment and Legal Attitudes: German and Local Perpetrators of the Holocaust in Domachevo, Belarus, in the Records of Soviet, Polish, German, and British War Crimes Investigations," in *Holocaust and Justice: Representation and Historiography of the Holocaust in Post-War Trials*, ed. David Bankier and Dan Michman (Berghahn Books, 2010), 265–80; Tanja Penter, "Local Collaborators on Trial: Soviet War Crimes Trials under Stalin (1943–1953)," *Cahiers du*

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as the return of Jewish property.[39] The dynamics uncovered in this book offer a useful comparative frame for broader post-Holocaust studies. Another important point that deserves attention is the fact that, compared to other East European countries, there was much less physical violence against Jews inside the Soviet Union in the immediate aftermath of the war.[40] For example, unlike in Poland or Slovakia, there were no pogroms in Soviet Moldavia, despite the significant presence of Jews.

This book fits into another scholarly avenue, proposing a revised post–Cold War perspective on the broader history of Jews under communism. A relevant example is a volume edited by Kateřina Čapková and Kamil Kijek, which, similar to my book, seeks to widen the research lenses beyond the framework of repression and explore how Jews creatively developed and expressed their identities and pursued their own ideals and goals under restrictive political regimes.[41] It is no coincidence that I authored a chapter in this volume, where I chose to focus on Moscow's evolving views of Soviet Jewry in the postwar era. Though the main materials from the mentioned chapter and the current book are largely different, my published text in Čapková and Kijek's volume contains some of the ideas that I develop more fully below. The most prominent of these is the argument that Jewish individuals and groups were active and vigorous interlocutors for the Soviet government after 1945.

In Search of Jewish Agency under Stalinism

This book studies Jews not merely as objects of Stalin's repressive policies but primarily as individuals who were making history themselves, capable of exercising agency even if constrained by the historical, political, and social structures in place. I understand agency as defined by William H. Sewell: a person's ability to form intentions, make choices, and take

monde russe 49, no. 2 (2008): 341–64; Penter, "Collaboration on Trial"; Jeffrey Jones, "'Every Family Has Its Freak': Perceptions of Collaboration in Occupied Soviet Russia, 1943–1948," *Slavic Review* 64, no. 4 (2005): 747–70; Alexander Prusin, "'Fascist Criminals to the Gallows!': The Holocaust and Soviet War Crimes Trials, December 1945–February 1946," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 1–30.

[39] There is an extensive body of literature on this topic. In *No Neighbors' Lands,* an entire section (Part 3) is dedicated to the issue of the restitution of Jewish property in various European countries.

[40] Except for the pogrom in Kyiv in September 1945 (discussed in Chapter 5) and a few disturbances in Siberia, there were no pogroms inside the Soviet Union in the postwar years.

[41] Kateřina Čapková and Kamil Kijek, eds., *Jewish Life Under Communism: New Perspectives* (Rutgers University Press, 2022).

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considered actions.[42] Importantly, agency and coercion can coexist, as Holocaust (and other) scholars know only too well. Among the constrained choices that individuals have and make or do not make, the decisions and actions of those individuals are still interpreted as manifestations of agency.[43] In the stories told in this book, there were many ways such agency was expressed. One relevant example discussed at length is testifying in court, where an individual could have acted differently. This is especially important given that many of those who testified have been victimized earlier by others and were made objects of someone else's agency.

The results of this line of inquiry challenge the long-established view of Jewish history under Stalinism as one of the darkest chapters of the worldwide Jewish experience. By changing the existing research lens (e.g., "what was done to the Jews by the Stalinist regime") to one that acknowledges the agency of Jews, this book reveals a novel picture that does not neatly fit the "black years" narrative entrenched in the minds of the scholarly community and the wider public. Focusing simultaneously on developments around Jewish life starting with 1944 in both Soviet Moldavia and the center (Moscow), this book reveals how local expediencies and central policies collided, amalgamated, and rearranged the center's rules and priorities.

As the book shows, Jews achieved extraordinary success across a wide range of professions in postwar Soviet Moldavia; vigorously supported the regime's efforts toward postwar justice, particularly in prosecuting Holocaust-related crimes; and they acted decisively against antisemitic manifestations in their diverse forms. However, when making life-changing decisions in the aftermath of the Holocaust, some of Moldavia's Jews struggled to balance conflicting political loyalties and a complex array of other interests, including economic ones. Throughout the book, rich and fascinating details come to light about Jews building new homes, families, and destinies from the ashes of World War II and the Holocaust. At the same time, this study reveals the broader transformation of traditional Jewish communities, discussed in the context of massive postwar relocations and interactions between the Jewish and Gentile populations from both new and historically Soviet lands.

[42] William H. Sewell Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992): 1–29.

[43] Thomas Kühne and Mary Jane Reid, eds., *Agency and the Holocaust: Essays in Honor of Debórah Dwork* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 3. Another relevant study is Marion A. Kaplan's, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

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For those less familiar with the history of this territory, it is important to highlight that after it regained control of this area in 1944, Moscow continued the sweeping disruptions it set in motion during 1940–41, which were similar to the policies it implemented across the Soviet Union during the interwar period.[44] During the first decade of the Soviet state's existence, a portion of its Jews experienced the destruction of their livelihood and lifestyle while another portion benefited from significant upward mobility. Bessarabian Jews experienced a similar fate when they came into the vortex of transformations occurring within the newly formed MSSR. Comparatively highly educated, with a better command of Russian, more urban, and politically trustworthy (given that ethnic Moldavians were perceived by the Soviet regime as being more loyal to the Romanian authorities), some Bessarabian Jews and those who arrived from other Soviet territories in the second half of the 1940s quickly advanced to prominent positions, becoming a noticeable presence in the republic. The documented extraordinary upward social mobility that Jews enjoyed in Moldavia during this period challenges the arguments put forward by scholars like Kostyrchenko. Jews became a noteworthy presence among the leading communist cadres in the republic, managing personnel in Moldavia's ministries and institutions, in the republic's intelligentsia, and among doctors, lawyers, and many other important professions. The postwar Stalinist era is the only period in Moldavia's history when the share of enrolled Jewish students was above 15 percent.[45] While my book challenges the widely assumed decline in Jewish presence in professional and educational spheres, it also emphasizes that 1949 marked the beginning of a new era, when many Jews grew increasingly concerned about Moscow's repression of cultural and national expression.

In addition to this, the book discusses the difficult circumstances that had to be navigated by Jews in this western borderland (probably very similar to the situation in the Baltic states and former Polish territories annexed by the Soviet Union), resulting from the hostility of the local non-Jews toward the newly found upward social mobility of the Jewish community and the entrenched nature of centuries-old local antisemitism. A separate source of volatility in the region was the awareness that some of the local Gentiles were directly involved in the Holocaust in the summer

[44] Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Hoover Institution Press, 2000), ch. 5.

[45] From 1954, the share of Jewish students in the republic followed an uninterrupted downward trend, declining consistently each year until it reached 2.2 percent by 1989.

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of 1941 and the Jewish corresponding desire for the perpetrators' harsh and swift punishment. Despite significant anti-Jewish sentiments among the wider population of Soviet Moldavia, some of which were likely quietly shared by local officials, the state's commitment to preventing physical abuse of Jews and harshly punishing Holocaust perpetrators served as a deterrent against potential acts of violence.

Finally, this book explores Jewish perspectives on Soviet society during late Stalinism and the multiple factors that shaped these assessments. It also traces the responses of the Jewish population to the establishment of the state of Israel and the Soviet state's subsequent attempt to nip in the bud any potential Jewish nationalism loyal to Israel. This dimension helps to explain the post-1949 change of Jewish perceptions of their social standing, entering a period of intense uncertainty and questioning of their relations with the Soviet regime. While not denying the existence of antisemitism and its importance, this book challenges the consensus view of a single, exclusionary antisemitic policy in the Soviet Union's postwar era. Moreover, it demonstrates that the attested postwar tensions between Jews and non-Jews were frequently subsets of other wider and more complex dynamics ongoing in Soviet Moldavia. On a broader canvas, this book reveals how the Soviet state dealt with a tangled web of postwar issues.

Chapter Outline

This book is organized into an introduction, six main chapters, and a concluding Epilogue. Chapter 1, "The Return," testifies to both violent ruptures and deep and meaningful continuities of Jewish life in newly created Soviet Moldavia. Upon returning home, Jews had to rebuild their lives. Haunted by the trauma of the Holocaust or drawn to Soviet urbanization, many abandoned their prewar homes. A significant number of Jews from Soviet Moldavia relocated to Chernivtsi, now part of the Ukrainian SSR. With much of Northern Bukovina's population having left for Romania in the aftermath of war, the largely intact city – spared major wartime destruction – became a magnet for newcomers seeking vacant apartments. Among them were Bessarabian Jews, Jews from Soviet Ukraine, and others from across the Soviet Union. This wave of migration transformed formerly German-speaking Chernivtsi, including its Jewish community, into a vibrant center of Yiddish culture and one of the post-Holocaust Jewish hubs.[46]

[46] There were over 50 percent of Jews among its inhabitants in June 1944.

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One dominant aspect of postwar life in Soviet Moldavia was extraordinary hardship, plagued by endemic poverty and a lack of basic amenities. For example, in 1945, about 76 percent of housing in Chişinău was in ruins, and all administrative buildings, electrical stations, aqueducts, transportation systems, and other communal services were completely destroyed. Once established in a new or old home, Jews worked hard to bring their lives back to a semblance of normality. Many of the Holocaust survivors were young, as it was more difficult for the elderly to survive the deportations and camps. These survivors (in nonconsecutive order) finished school, enrolled at universities, got jobs, married, and raised children. While from the outside, their lives looked very similar to those of their Gentile peers, they were severely damaged/traumatized by the loss of family members. Suggestive of this state of affairs, a young survivor, upon receiving a marriage proposal, had literally not one single family member to consult with about this important decision; she instead approached a friend's aunt for advice. Many kept traditional Jewish elements of everyday life, while they assembled new elements of Sovietness, creating a fresh tapestry of the life of local Jews.

Chapter 2, "Jewish Social Mobility in the Newly Sovietizing Periphery," highlights the pragmatic nature of the Soviet regime's promotion of Jews visible during certain periods of its history. The Soviet state's perceived vulnerability in a hostile environment on its western border, combined with an acute lack of national cadres, consistently placed Jews on a path of upward mobility in the MSSR. Nevertheless, the intention of the Soviet state had always been to prioritize the advancement of the local national group over Jews and other minorities, this process beginning as soon as sufficient numbers of the "indigenous group" had been trained and otherwise prepared. In Moldavia, this meant promoting ethnic Moldavians at the expense of Jews (and other ethnic minorities). These results contest the established belief of a monolithic, exclusive anti-Jewish agenda during the Soviet Union's postwar period and might even encourage specialists to take another closer look at the policies of the center. As the book shows, when training and promoting professional elites, the official Soviet policies encouraged simultaneously meritocracy, the promotion of national cadres, and a concern for spotless social backgrounds. Yet frequently the abovementioned principles clashed, caused ethnic antagonism, and forced officials to make difficult choices. Inside Moldavia, the large-scale promotion of Jews to numerous important positions created jealousy and criticism from many quarters, while some Jews themselves were not able to discern

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(or willing to acknowledge) the impressive postwar upward mobility experienced in this Republic. Ultimately, whatever solutions would have been found by the authorities for the multitude of issues afflicting the cadres' policies in Moldavia, it was by default impossible to make all competitors equally happy.

Chapter 3, "'Life in Romania Was Better than in the Soviet Union': How Bessarabian Jews Tried (and Frequently Failed) to Become Dutiful Soviet Citizens," discusses the conundrum Jews faced in the postwar era in Moldavia (and, by extension, the entire population from the wider western Soviet borderlands). For the residents of the MSSR, the proximity of Romania, of which Bessarabia was a part during the interwar period, was a constant reminder of the existing political and economic alternative to the Soviet regime. Some Bessarabian Jews (and Gentiles as well) chose to relocate there before the Soviet border shut in the aftermath of the war. Yet many others, deprived of this possibility, frequently confined themselves to mental trips to Romania. These trips were mostly to a past that no longer existed after World War II, but the memories incessantly served as a comparative framework to their lived reality. Importantly, as this book details, when comparing a (relatively) prosperous past in Romania and a hardship-filled Soviet present, Jews, more than other ethnic groups, found themselves conflicted by the complex and multilayered realities of the Romanian and Soviet states. Profoundly scarred by the antisemitism of interwar Romania and physically decimated by Antonescu's genocidal policies during World War II, Bessarabian Jews recognized that Soviet evacuation (and, in some cases, even the dreaded Stalinist deportations of 1941) had spared many from the Holocaust. By war's end, the Soviet Army had also liberated those Jewish survivors who remained in Transnistria's camps and ghettos. Many Jews were appreciative of their professional advancement in Soviet society and the high social status they achieved. Despite all this, Jewish professionals could not help but notice the striking difference in the material circumstances before the war in Romania and after the war in Soviet Moldavia. At the same time, for other Jews, especially younger ones, who spent important formative years in Soviet educational and professional institutions, the adaptation to the Stalinist regime seemed to come with less internal and external friction.

Chapter 4, "Seeking Revenge and Justice after the Holocaust," demonstrates that in the immediate postwar years, the issue of revenge was high on the agenda of many Jews. While there are indications that, among that group, there was a preference for swift and merciless (and preferably

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deadly) punishment for Holocaust perpetrators, only a small portion (usually armed Jewish soldiers) were willing to take justice into their own hands. Many more Holocaust survivors sought justice in a traditional way – in court. These individuals alerted the authorities to crimes and identified the perpetrators. They participated in face-to-face confrontations in the courtroom and incriminated defendants beyond a shadow of a doubt. Other Jews, who returned from Soviet evacuation or the Soviet Army service (and therefore were not direct eyewitnesses of the massacres and abuses) embarked on their own investigations, trying both to learn about the fate of their families and to make sure that their killers were punished. Some Jews were prepared to go a long distance – in the most literal sense of the word – to find a killer who had escaped justice, and they would not reconcile themselves to the authorities' failed attempts to locate fugitive perpetrators. Of course, there were Holocaust survivors enveloped in fear and/or motivated by other considerations that prevented them from voluntarily disclosing any information about the perpetrators. Yet even those Jews, when pressed by security personnel into testifying against former abusers, felt positive post-factum about aiding in the punishment of the latter. During this period, thousands of local perpetrators were rounded up and tried in Moldavia alone, alongside many more thousands in other Soviet territories. In this colossal exercise of postwar justice, Jewish assistance was crucial in bringing retribution to those local Gentiles who spilled the blood of Jews and aided the Romanian authorities in their heinous crimes.

Chapter 5, "Fighting Antisemitism in Its Manifold Forms," illustrates that, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, combating antisemitism remained a political priority for Soviet Jews, who expected the state to adopt a zero-tolerance stance toward postwar anti-Jewish sentiment. When state policy did not prioritize quelling antisemitism, harsh accusations were directed at Gentile individuals and groups, including the Communist Party leadership. Documents from the era indicate that the authorities were determined to prevent the resurgence of popular antisemitism after the war and were prepared to punish transgressors. Notably, the regime was particularly sensitive to accusations of antisemitism within the Party and committed to defending its reputation. However, Soviet officials perceived the postwar situation of Jews and the extent of antisemitism as far less dramatic than Jews themselves did. Although willing to admit that Nazi antisemitic propaganda had affected the local population and stirred up antisemitism inside Soviet society, the bureaucrats felt that Jews were exaggerating the gravity of the situation under the influence of the tragedy they suffered

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during the war. These two diverging outlooks on postwar society created hard feelings on both sides. At the same time, the high visibility of Jews within postwar officialdom in Soviet Moldavia generated fresh resentment among members of other ethnic groups. Conversely, the drive to promote ethnic Moldavians upset some Jews, who saw this policy as potentially disadvantageous to them and who suspected that some local officials were all too ready to hide their antisemitic inclinations behind the rhetoric of indigenization.

Chapter 6, "From Starry Skies to the Abyss: Jewish National Dreams after 1948," traces the impact of the creation of the State of Israel on the Jews of the USSR, including Soviet Moldavia. Troubled by the witnessed outpouring of Soviet Jews' affection toward the Zionist state, the Stalinist regime sought to repress what it considered the most dangerous manifestations of Jewish national identity. Alleged Zionists, active Yiddish professionals, as well as leading Jewish figures with extensive international ties bore the brunt of this campaign. Although this attack did not match the intensity of the Stalinist purges of 1936–38, during which Jews were killed in far greater numbers, its psychological impact left a deeper imprint on the Jews of the Soviet state. The closure of Yiddish cultural institutions and publication venues overlapped with intense rumors about secret orders to remove Jews from important positions. Although the arrests and trials of purported Jewish nationalists were kept secret, this information was not entirely sealed, as family members, colleagues, and other close contacts were aware of the arrests, even if not necessarily the trials' outcomes. All this led to the impression that the Soviet state had embarked on an all-out attack on Jews and Jewishness.

In the MSSR, within less than a decade of the republic's creation, Yiddish professionals experienced dramatic ups and downs that made them question the future the Soviet state envisaged for its Jewish communities. In 1940, when they faced the choice between remaining in Romania or crossing into Soviet Moldavia before the Stalinist takeover, the prospect of building Yiddish culture tipped the balance in favor of the latter. This precarious decision initially seemed justified, as Soviet authorities granted them positions and recognition. Yet, by 1949, some found themselves under arrest, accused of Jewish nationalism. The personal toll of repression, compounded by the systematic dismantling of Yiddish-language and cultural institutions, led Yiddish professionals to fear the very extinction of Jewish identity. The fresh memory of the Holocaust provided a haunting lens through which they interpreted their unfolding persecution.

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While other Jews (especially those who were born and grew up in the Soviet Union) were less dramatic in their assessment of the broader fate of the Jewish people in the USSR after 1949, the regime's offensive on Jewish cultural institutions still disturbed them. By the early 1950s, Jews often struggled with and frequently succumbed to distressing rumors about official anti-Jewish policies, losing confidence in the regime's fair treatment of Jews, and questioning their standing in Soviet society.

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