

To understand the Jews in the modern West, you must understand their history in Russia

Solzhenitsyn's last book is a history of the Jews in Russia. Although the first chapter goes back into the mists of history, the first appearance of Jews in Russia during the first millennium A.D., his focus is on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This is a long book, and an extremely well researched one. Solzhenitsyn made extensive use of original Jewish sources and invested a great deal of time in the book. Nonetheless, he was constrained by his time and place. To give one example, he believes that Russian Jews originated from the Khazar peoples of the Caucasus region. His thesis is that they adopted the Jewish religion about the same time that Prince of Kyiv adopted Christianity. Genealogical research, not available in Solzhenitsyn's time, tends to support the Middle Eastern origins of the Ashkenazi Jews of Russia.

It is great that this book is finally available in English. This review was written of the original Russian and the French version, which has been out for years. Russian, French or English, it is a rather dense and difficult book in any case..

Many other books cover the same topic, albeit from different angles. Touching on Russian Jewry, I have reviewed and recommend [[ASIN:B005646E32 The Jewish Century]], [[ASIN:0245527850 Revolutionary Jews from Marx to Trotsky]], [[ASIN:B004E0Z3VI The Invention of the Jewish Gaucho]], [[ASIN:0759672229 The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth-Century Intellectual and Political Movements]], [[ASIN:1410792617 Separation and Its Discontents: Toward an Evolutionary Theory of Anti-Semitism]], [[ASIN:0595228380 A People That Shall Dwell Alone: Judaism as a Group Evolutionary Strategy, with Diaspora Peoples]].

Summing up Solzhenitsyn's theme, the Jews were a very separate people through the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, living among the Russian people but not being of them. They distinguished themselves in their speech, dress, habits and occupations. The Romanoff czars attempted to better integrate them into Russian life, often with perverse and comical outcomes. The Jews are clever people and did not want to be manipulated.

The Russians tried to get them to stop making alcohol. It made the ordinary Russians drunk, and put them in debt to the Jews. This attempt was made on many separate occasions, and it generally failed.

The Russians attempted to bring Jews into the Army. They were extremely clever at finding mechanisms to avoid military service – except when it suited them. Once the Jews were admitted to universities, giving them a path to officer positions in the Army, things change.

The Russians attempted to make farmers out of the Jews, giving them incentives to settle "New Russia," southern Ukraine in the Crimea and Odessa regions. They gave the Jews land and attempted to set them up with farming implements. Generally, however, it was a major failure. The Jews accepted the largesse but did not become farmers. They retained their traditional way of life, as merchants, landlords and distillers.

The Russians tried to keep them out of Moscow, defining a "Pale of Settlement" that kept them mostly west of the Dnieper and in Poland. Russians were inconsistent in enforcing the restrictions, and Jews clever in circumventing them, all the while loudly complaining about persecution.

Jewish culture had long celebrated the intellect, through intense discussion of the holy documents, a requirement for literacy and a vast number of oral traditions. Russian efforts to integrate the Jews into Russian society had the effect of focusing this intellect on themes of interest to the whole society. Sometimes the results were salubrious. For one example, an entire generation of Jewish children became enchanted with Pushkin, Turgenev and the other classic Russian writers.

At other times the restless Jewish intellect sought problems to solve. As Solzhenitsyn, Wistrich and Slezkine write, each generation became passionately absorbed with a new set of issues. Socialism, anarchy, Zionism, and Communism each had its turn. Jews, bright as they were, turned up at the forefront of each. So it has been also in the United States. The NAACP, American Civil Liberties Union, gay rights, feminism, transgender rights, militant atheism – the "war on Christmas", literary deconstructionism and many other movements have been led by Jews. Inasmuch as two centuries ago half of all Jewry, the smarter half at that, lived in the Russian Empire, what Solzhenitsyn has to say is very relevant today.