



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and bibliography of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <http://www.neh.gov/grants/research/summerstipends> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and bibliography, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Jewish Americans and the Movement to Free Soviet Jews: Cold War Culture, Identity Politics and Social Movement Mobilization

Project Director: Shaul Kelner

Institution: Vanderbilt University

Grant Program: Summer Stipends

**Jewish Americans and the Movement to Free Soviet Jews:
Cold War Culture, Identity Politics and Social Movement Mobilization**

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OVERVIEW: From 1963 to 1991, a grassroots campaign in the US sought emigration rights for persecuted Jews in the Soviet Union. This movement brought hundreds of thousands of demonstrators into American streets and forced the Soviet Jewish issue onto the superpowers' negotiating table. For American Jews, the mobilization engaged them in what was simultaneously a Cold War era confrontation and a 1970s-era ethnic pride movement. Although the movement's ostensible purpose was to aid Soviet Jews, its unintended consequence was to fashion new modes of Jewish American practice that were bound up in the identity politics of the era. Some modes played on traditional religion, transforming Passover seders and bar mitzvah ceremonies into moments of anti-Soviet protest. Others co-opted modern cultural practices like international tourism to create opportunities to express solidarity with Soviet Jews.

Drawing on materials in the American Jewish Historical Society's Archives of the American Soviet Jewry Movement (AASJM), I am writing a book on the cultural dimensions of the Soviet Jewry movement. This is humanistic social science that will make unique contributions to three literatures: 1) *For the sociology of culture and social movements*, it will present a sustained consideration of the contradictions that emerge when social movements try to enlist culture in the service of a cause, treating culture as a means to a political end rather than an end in itself. 2) *For the cultural history of the Cold War*, this study of how Jewish Americans experienced the Cold War in a distinctive way expands our understanding of the diversity of Cold War cultures, tying together the two NEH initiatives, Bridging Cultures and Standing Together: The Humanities and the Experience of War. 3) *For Jewish Studies and the historiography of the Soviet Jewry movement*, the book will break with the prevailing focus on the movement's policy efforts to highlight its cultural work. I seek an NEH Summer Stipend to support research at the AASJM using materials made newly accessible by an NEH Preservation and Access grant.

THE CASE: Denied the right to emigrate, Jews in the USSR could not escape state policies that treated them as second class citizens. A human rights movement on behalf of Soviet Jews emerged throughout the West in the 1960s and gathered strength during the era of détente. Led in the United States by Jewish Americans, the movement succeeded in influencing both US and Soviet policy. Its flagship legislative effort, the 1975 Jackson-Vanik amendment, linked American trade policy to international respect for human rights for the first time in history (Galchinsky, 2007). In securing the release of tens of thousands of Soviet Jews in the 1970s, the movement demonstrated the power of citizens in the West to influence policy behind the Iron Curtain. (For the declassified politburo minutes, see Morozov, 1999.) In helping lay the political, legal and logistical groundwork for a mass emigration when the USSR collapsed, the movement facilitated an exodus of a million and a half people.

For Cold War-era Jewish Americans, the Soviet Jewry movement created distinctive ways to participate in the defining geopolitical conflict of the age. Thousands went as tourists behind the Iron Curtain to make clandestine contact with Soviet Jews, smuggling material support in and information out. Hundreds of thousands experienced Passover seders, bar/bat mitzvahs and other religious rituals that were reconfigured as expressions of resistance to Soviet oppression. The movement's mobilization of culture was extensive, complicated and consequential.

RESEARCH AND CONTRIBUTION: I am writing a book that examines the Soviet Jewry movement's effort to mobilize culture, focusing on two key dimensions, one ancient (religious ritual), and one modern (international tourism). The work's intellectual significance rests in its contribution to three literatures:

1) *Sociology of Culture and Social Movements*: The Civil Rights movement prompted social movement theorists to reject classical understandings of social movements as products of mob psychology. They succeeded so well in reconceptualizing movements as rationally-calculated strategic action (Zald and McCarthy, 1987) that eventually the pendulum swung back. In the 1990s, scholars rediscovered the non-rational dimensions of social movements and tried to make sense of them without

sacrificing the theoretical advances of the prior twenty years. Their work has shown that shared identities, narratives and symbols can serve movement goals by forging solidarity, marking boundaries, and the like (Jasper, 1997; Johnston and Klandermans, 1995; Poletta, 2006; Reger et al., 2008). Culture's "effectiveness," however, is largely treated as emergent or unintended. This leaves unanswered a crucial question about the relationship between strategy and culture: What happens when strategically-minded activists become *aware* that the expressive has instrumental value? What happens when they turn their rationalizing lenses onto culture itself? My research unfolds the problematics, contradictions and unintended consequences that emerge when social movements try to enlist culture. For instance, how did the ASJM's attempt to coopt religious rituals undermine the very efficacy of these rituals by opening activists to the charge of profaning the sacred?

2) *Cultural History of the Cold War in American Life*: This book project ties together the NEH's Bridging Cultures and Standing Together initiatives. Research on American Cold War culture has shown how gender and race shaped particular experiences of the Cold War, primarily during the 1950s and 1960s (May 1988; Dudziak 2000). In showing how there was a unique Jewish American experience of the Cold War informed by the movement to free Soviet Jews, this study will expand our understanding of how different American communities experienced that conflict in diverse ways. In focusing primarily on the years during and after *détente*, it defines the period of Cold War culture more expansively than treatments that end in the 1960s (May 1988; Dudziak 2000; Kuznick and Gilbert 2001; Whitfield 1996). Even this difference in periodization points to the sub-cultural diversity in American Cold War cultures: As many in America were toasting *détente*, ASJM organizations were briefing Jewish American travelers on how to arrange secret meetings with Soviet Jewish dissidents and avoid detection by the KGB.

3) *History of the American Movement to Free Soviet Jews*: Scholarship on the ASJM has primarily focused on efforts to influence policy (Feingold, 2007; Kochavi, 2005; Lazin, 2005; Peretz, 2006). The movement's importance, however, rests not only in what it achieved politically for Soviet Jews, but what it achieved culturally for American Jews. This mass movement created and popularized cultural innovations that helped shape the texture of Jewish-American communal life in the 1970s and 1980s. A small literature on ASJM culture includes journalistic histories (Beckerman, 2010), memoirs, and several articles (Ferziger 2012; Katz 2010; Kelner 2008, 2011; Klein Halevi, 2004). My research will represent the first monographic effort to interpret cultural dimensions of the movement. It is intended not as a last word, but as a first word to open this line of research further.

The research also seeks to inform and educate general audiences. Toward efforts to commemorate the Soviet Jewry movement, I have already presented findings at symposia at Jewish museums in Philadelphia and Tel Aviv. Additionally, into the often polarized conversation about religion and politics, I hope the work contributes an example of religion in the service of human rights.

METHODS AND WORK PLAN: The book project relies primarily on archival research in the records of ASJM organizations and the personal documents of ASJM activists. Most records I am using are housed at the American Jewish Historical Society's Archives of the American Soviet Jewry Movement. Established in 2006, the AASJM centralized 320 linear feet of archives previously scattered around the country. With the support of a grant from NEH's Preservation and Access program, the Society is cataloging the collections and making them accessible through new online finding aids (Grant No. PA-51999-06, \$193,660). I have supplemented the archival research with oral history interviews of ASJM activists.

Organization of the final product. The chapter outline for the book project is as follows:

- 1) "Introduction: Jewish Americans, Identity Politics and Cold War Activism"
- 2) "Freedom Seder and Matzoh of Hope: Ritual in the Streets, Politics in the Home" (based on Kelner 2008, examines how the movement used religious ritual to assert that an authentic Jewish American politics must be religious, and an authentic Jewish American religion must be political.)
- 3) "'Chanukah can be used'" (based on Kelner 2011, examines the contradictions that emerged when movement bureaucracies systematized and rationalized the innovation of religious rituals.)

- 4) “‘The Insiders’ Club’” (examines how the glamour and promise of the jet age led movement organizations to draft international tourism into the service of the cause.)
- 5) “Tinker, Tourist, Soldier, Spy” (based on Kelner 2013, examines how the movement trained average Americans in simple arts of tradecraft, sent them across Cold War frontiers to meet Soviet Jews, and inadvertently spawned a genre of Jewish American travel writing that owed much to John Le Carré.)
- 6) “Conclusion: The Soviet Jewry Movement and the Political Uses of Culture”

Work Plan. I am now in the latter stages of research for the book project. With the support of start-up funds from Vanderbilt University, and working at the AASJM and also at the Yeshiva University Archives (which houses the records of Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry), I have completed archival work and oral history research sufficient to have produced two published pieces on ritual (Kelner 2008, 2011) and one conference paper on tourism (Kelner, 2013). I will be receiving \$1,500 from the Jewish Archives of the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland to complete research there with the records of the Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism (est. 1963), the first Soviet Jewry movement organization in the US.

I am requesting an NEH Summer Stipend to spend July and August 2015 at the AASJM in New York City, to access materials that are now accessible by virtue of the NEH-funded cataloging project. The movement was split into two rival factions, represented by a centralized National Conference on Soviet Jewry and a decentralized Union of Councils for Soviet Jews. I have worked extensively with the NCSJ records, which were accessible at the AASJM when I began this research. Materials from the UCSJ [*I-410], its local affiliates [*I-487, I-500, I-505, *I-507, I-530] and its volunteer and professional leaders [P-871, P-897, P-906], previously housed in other repositories, are now cataloged and fully accessible. I have made initial forays into some of these files and will spend the summer working with UCSJ materials related especially to its mobilizations of bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, and to the travel program which it ran parallel to that of the NCSJ. This will allow me to complete my research for chapters 2, 3 and 4, so that I might tell a story of the movement that is more representative of its diversity and breadth.

I will use the time at the archives to immerse myself full-time in the primary source documents, reading, copying, note-taking, and memoing. I will write the book chapters after I finish my two months of work in the archives. I will spend AY 2015-16 on leave, devoting the year to writing the chapters and completing the book project. I am applying for grants and fellowships to support my writing during the leave. My leave is guaranteed by the university and is not contingent upon securing additional funding.

COMPETENCIES, SKILLS AND ACCESS: I am a sociologist of culture whose work includes both ethnography and historical sociology. This work extends a line of inquiry into political mobilizations of tourism that I began in my first book, *Tours That Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage and Israeli Birthright Tourism* (NYU Press, 2010). In that book, I focused on the use of modern mass tourism to build diasporic connections to a symbolic homeland. Here, I examine its use to shape Cold War identities, and expand my focus beyond tourism to address political mobilizations of religious ritual.

Language skills. Although they worked to aid Soviet Jews, the American organizations I am studying kept records in English. I pay special attention to the small amounts of Russian and Hebrew that appears in the collections. My Hebrew is fluent and I have elementary Russian reading skills. These have proven sufficient to date.

Access: The materials I will use are readily available to scholars. I have been given permission by AJHS archivists in the past to digitally photograph materials for use away from the archives.

FINAL PRODUCT AND DISSEMINATION: I intend to publish this book with an academic press to speak to audiences in the sociology of culture and social movements, Jewish studies, American Studies, and cultural history. My contract for *Tours that Bind* gives NYU Press right of first refusal on this book. I have also spoken with editors from Brandeis University Press and from the Jewish Cultures of the World series at Rutgers University Press, and have received expressions of interest from them.

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