

On a Trend in Religious Policy of the Late Soviet Period – The Transfer of Synagogues to the Jewish Community

Abstract

This article examines a lesser-explored direction of religious policy during the late Soviet period: the transfer of synagogues to the Jewish community and the registration of religious associations in Georgia. Based on archival documents from the Central Archive of Recent History of Georgia that remain practically unutilized in Georgian historiography, the research reconstructs decision-making processes, state-community dynamics, and shifts in the legal status of places of worship.

The paper analyzes the bureaucratic mechanisms of property transfer, procedural registration, and the specific role of the Council for Religious Affairs, while highlighting the impact of the Great Aliyah and mass Jewish emigration on the remaining community's institutional life. Archival materials reveal that despite severe demographic pressure, the community actively strived to retain historic synagogues, restore their legal status, and sustain religious practices. By analyzing previously unpublished sources, this study offers a fresh perspective on late Soviet religious policy and fills a significant gap in historiography, demonstrating that these administrative procedures were crucial mechanisms for preserving Jewish religious identity and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Late Soviet period; Religious policy; Transfer of synagogues; Jewish community; Registration of religious associations; Archival sources.

Introduction

The religious policy of the Soviet Union was never homogeneous. Although the cornerstone of the state ideology was atheism and the idea of the complete disappearance of religion, the actual approaches constantly fluctuated between Stalin and Gorbachev, ranging from brutal repressions, strict control, and the instrumentalization of religious organizations for political purposes to cooperation with individual religious institutions. The main executor of this policy was the Council for Religious Affairs of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which was established in 1964 and played a significant role in implementing the religious policy of the USSR.¹

Archival sources also confirm that beyond the general, unified policy, driven by specific historical contexts, the state often resorted to individual tactics.

In this article, I review one of the trends characteristic of the 1970s and 1980s, which acquired an even broader scale following the intensification of Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of "Perestroika". To a certain extent, Gorbachev's policy created a new agenda in the Soviet Union. Although the Soviet Union still maintained the principles of a secular and atheist state, the relative softening of the regime gave religious groups the opportunity to act more actively. In archival materials, the growing demands of representatives of various confessions regarding the registration of religious organizations and the return of places of worship are clearly highlighted. Interestingly, in Georgia, representatives of the Jewish community were

¹ The Council for Religious Affairs was established in 1964 as a result of the merger of the Council for Religious Cults (1944) and the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (1943). The Council's functions included: preparing draft laws related to religious matters and submitting them to the Council of Ministers; examining issues regarding the construction, opening, and closure of places of worship; acting as an intermediary between religious associations and the state; as well as creating and maintaining an information bank on religious associations. See: Otto Luchterhandt, "The Council for Religious Affairs," in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 53.

particularly active in this process, and a large number of their applications are preserved in the archives.

Despite the fact that regime control was somewhat softened, the Jewish community focused not on building new synagogues, but on preserving already existing spaces of worship, legalizing them, and restoring their original function. This process proved particularly difficult for the Jewish community, as the Great Aliyah began in the 1970s, within the framework of which thousands of Jews left Georgia.² This process was accompanied by a decrease in the number of believers, which created significant restrictions both in the process of registering religious societies and in returning places of worship.

The purpose of this article is to show how the transformation of Soviet religious policy in the era of late "Thaw" and "Perestroika" was reflected in the processes of returning places of worship and the official registration of religious societies. The paper analyzes the complex bureaucratic process of returning places of worship and registering religious associations within the Jewish community. Based on archival materials, the article demonstrates the historical and political circumstances in which the religious societies of Georgian Jews attempted to restore places of worship and obtain official status. The scale and importance of the struggle waged by the Jewish community to preserve places of worship become even more evident when viewed from a long-term perspective. Today, a total of **69 synagogues** are located and documented across 34 municipalities in Georgia. Unfortunately, a large portion of these synagogues no longer exists. Currently, 29 synagogue buildings remain on the territory of Georgia; some of them house public institutions and residential houses, while 17 buildings have maintained their original function to this day.³ These statistics clearly show why it is important to study the historical processes that determined the fate of the Jewish religious heritage in Georgia.

² Great Aliyah – the mass outflow of Jews from the USSR, as a result of which 40,000 Jews returned to Israel. Source: Georgian Encyclopedia, <https://www.georgianencyclopedia.ge/ka/form/4180>

³ Manana Kutateladze, *Synagogues in Georgia*, Intelekti Publishing, 2023.

This article discusses the issue of returning places of worship to the Jewish community in the late Soviet period—a little-studied stage in Georgian historiography that offers a new perspective on the foundations of post-Soviet religious policy. To provide the necessary historical context, the study also reviews the demographic situation of the Jewish community in Georgia. Based on a qualitative methodology, the research relies on the systematic study and content analysis of unique, detailed records preserved in archival sources, which were selected according to predefined criteria and examined in compliance with content research principles.

Soviet Religious Policy: Mechanisms of Total Control and Accounting Bureaucracy

Khrushchev's religious policy paid particular attention to the closure of places of worship; as a result of the strict anti-religious policy, 32% of places of worship in the Jewish religious community were closed,⁴ which happened several years before the start of mass emigration. This policy was carried out by the Council for Religious Affairs. The Soviet state apparatus put religious associations in strict, total administrative shackles.⁵ In the article "The Council for Religious Affairs" by Otto Luchterhandt, the author emphasizes the real functions of the Council: the Council for Religious Affairs sought to gather information from clergy and other active members of the church in order to have a complete picture of ongoing events in the

⁴ John Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and the Successor States, 1953–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 55.

⁵ One of the peculiarities of the Khrushchev era lay in the fact that, parallel to the "thaw" in many spheres of public life, pressure on religious organizations intensified and the closure of places of worship increased compared to the years 1943–1948.

church, especially regarding those religious institutions that were particularly problematic for ideological and political reasons.⁶

One of the main instruments of control was the detailed inventory of places of worship and their property. The 1979 registration cards of Jewish synagogues and places of worship testify that the government recorded the characteristics of the building in detail: what structure a particular synagogue was, what the exact area was, whether it was located in a rural or urban area, how many clergy served it; moreover, the scale of state control penetrated even into inner-community and ritual daily life. From the archival files of the Sachkhere district, it becomes clear that the Council for Religious Affairs checked through special questionnaires and reports:

- What the attendance of believers was during holidays;
- Whether communities had clergy invited from other districts;
- Whether matzo was baked and whether any kind of monetary income was recorded during holiday days.⁷

In archival documents, we discover unprecedentedly detailed questionnaires existing in the Oni district regarding all employees and support personnel of the synagogue; starting from clergy, technical workers, and choir members, to members of the executive body. The state collected information about their nationality, social status, education, average salary, length of service, pension amount, language proficiency, permanent and temporary residence, marital status, CPSU/Komsomol membership, and, most importantly, criminal history (indicating the exact article, date, and location).⁸

⁶ Luchterhandt, Otto. The Council for Religious Affairs. p.64

⁷ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #362, p. 11.

⁸ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #361, pp. 1–9, 11.

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Figure 1. Data Base - Central Archive of Recent History of Georgia, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #282, p. 23

In the specified document, information is collected about 10 people who are involved in various ways in the religious life of the Jewish community of Oni. All of them were born in the Oni district in the interval of 1910–1935; here we also find the autobiographies of the clergy, which are unique handwritten documents.⁹

Parallel to these bureaucratic shackles, the community also faced legal barriers. In the archival documents, you will find a very interesting entry where Ginzburg, the Chairman of the Board of the Tbilisi European Synagogue, writes to the Head of Religious Cults in Georgia under the Council for Religious Affairs:

*"The Board of the Society of Russian Jews of the City of Tbilisi informs you that, according to the resolution of the All-Union Trade Union Council of May 1974, all personnel working in a religious society must be union members. All churches except Jewish ones and the mosque are cited in the resolution. We request you to petition the Committee of the Trade Union Council of Georgia for our society to be included as well."*¹⁰

⁹ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #285, pp. 29, 42.

¹⁰ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #283, p. 7.

Against the background of administrative persecution, the community was also facing serious challenges in terms of security, as evidenced by acts of infringement on cultural heritage. Although Article 12 of the 1918 decree prohibited religious associations from having legal entity status and they did not have the right to own any property¹¹ (all property was transferred to the state and remained in places of worship for formal use), on December 26, 1983, the Gori Synagogue was burglarized. In an emergency notice sent to the Council for Religious Affairs, Kanchaveli, the Acting Chairman of the Gori Executive Committee, confirmed that criminal case #113129 had been opened:

"Five pieces of antique Jewish prayer "Sefer Torah,"¹² written approximately 2–3 centuries ago in the native language of the Jews on white calfskin, have been stolen"¹³

Regarding this incident, on May 14, 1984, the Deputy Plenipotentiary of the Council for Religious Affairs addressed the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Gori Soviet of People's Deputies, Z. Namicheishvili, with an official letter. The letter emphasized that according to the regulations approved by the resolution of March 16, 1977, on Religious Associations in the Georgian SSR, local government bodies are charged with the responsibility of exercising supervision and providing assistance regarding the security of cultic buildings and property preserved in them. Proceeding from this, the Deputy Plenipotentiary urged the local authorities:

"... We ask you to provide assistance to the executive body of the Georgian Jews' synagogue in Gori to organize telephone communication and alarm systems in the

¹¹ The Church and State Under Communism: A Special Study. Part I: The U.S.S.R. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), 11.

¹² "Sefer Torah" (Heb. סֵפֶר תּוֹרָה – "Book of the Torah", found in archival documents in the distorted form "Sephethora") represents the most sacred cult object in Judaism. It is a scroll of the Torah (Five Books of Moses) handwritten according to strict rules on specially prepared parchment (traditionally calfskin), which is kept in the synagogue and used during worship services. See: "Sefer Torah," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 18, ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), pp. 241–243.

¹³ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #282, pp. 66–67.

synagogue, so that in the future there will be no theft and misappropriation of state-owned property preserved there, as occurred in December of last year."¹⁴

Demographic Crisis and the Impact of Emigration to Israel (Aliyah) on the Everyday Life of the Jewish Community

Zvi Gitelman notes that starting from March 1971, more than 100,000 Soviet citizens emigrated to Israel, despite the calculations of the Soviet authorities being different. The majority of emigrants were classified as Jews in the USSR, although their ethnic and religious identity was not homogeneous. The author considers that, despite these differences, they should primarily be regarded as Jewish immigration. Furthermore, the age structure of the emigrants was younger and more closely resembled the general age distribution of Russians residing in various republics of the Soviet Union than that of Soviet Jews.¹⁵ The dynamics of the Jewish population residing in Georgia were growing until the late 1960s (Table 1). The highest number of Jews in Georgia (55,400) was recorded in 1970, when they constituted 1.2 percent of the total population. However, by that time, the mass repatriation of Jews to Israel had already begun (Gachechiladze, 2012). This process came to be known as the Great Aliyah of Georgian Jews, which literally means the "act of ascending (to Jerusalem)."¹⁶ In a letter dated November 13, 1969, the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations, acting on the instructions of his Prime Minister, Golda Meir, addressed the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The author conveyed to the addressee an appeal written on August 6, 1969, by 18 Jewish families residing in Georgia and requested that the UN use its authority to alleviate the condition of Soviet Jews and guarantee the right of these families to depart for

¹⁴ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #282, p. 78.

¹⁵ Zvi Gitelman, "Soviet Political Culture: Insights from Jewish Emigres," *Soviet Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4 (1977), pp. 544–545

¹⁶ Gachechiladze, Revaz (2012). "Great Aliyah" [Didi Alia]. In: Encyclopedia "Georgia", vol. 2. Tbilisi: Georgian Encyclopedia Publishing House (in Georgian)

their historical homeland. In addition, the author of the letter requested that the said appeal be circulated as an official document of the UN General Assembly.¹⁷

According to the Soviet censuses of 1979, a large number of Jews left Georgia and emigrated, primarily to Israel. We only know the total number of individuals who emigrated from Georgia with Israeli visas during this period, which comprised Jews and their non-Jewish family members. As a result, according to the 1979 Soviet census data, the number of Jews in Georgia halved, reaching 28,298.¹⁸ The dramatic change in the demographic picture is also well reflected in an archival record, where Maisuradze, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Gori City Council, points out in an official letter sent in 1980 to the Council for Religious Affairs that by this period 248 families—totaling 923 individuals—had already moved to live in Israel, due to which "the number of believers in the place of worship has decreased, and the conduct of prayers is being hindered."¹⁹

Census year	All Jews of Georgia	Among them the Georgian Jews	Jews residing in Tbilisi	The ratio of Jews residing in Tbilisi in the total of the Jews of Georgia (percent)
1926	30,6	21,0	9,0	29,4
1939	42,3	27,0	13,9	32,9
1959	51,6	40,0	17,9	34,7
1970	55,4	45,0	19,6	35,4
1979	28,3	18,0	14,9	52,7
1989	24,8	19,0	13,5	54,4
2002	3,7	...	...	...
2014	1,4	...	...	...

Table 1: Dynamics of Jewish Population of Georgia according to the Population Censuses of 1926–2014 (thousands)

¹⁷ Letter dated 10 November 1969 from the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General -<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/843658?v=pdf>

¹⁸ Altshuler, Mordechai, *Soviet Jewry since the Second World War: Population and Social Structure*, New York: Greenwood, 1987, p. 62.

¹⁹ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #282, pp. 51–53.

The situation was particularly severe in the small town If in previous years the celebration of holidays in the Jewish community was controlled with exceptional strictness, according to a document dated April 22, 1980, preserved in the archives, only 23 Jewish families remained in the Sachkhere district, comprising a total population of 102 individuals. The Chairman of the Executive Committee emphasizes that the celebration of holidays bears an insignificant character, and on April 1 of the current year, the Jewish holiday of "Passover" was conducted on a very small scale. In the same document, it is highlighted that the small remaining local community does not even have a clergy member, as a result of which the Sachkhere place of worship is practically non-functional.²⁰



Figure 2. Sachkhere Synagogue, Central Archive of Recent History of Georgia, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #361, p. 7

Large-scale emigration affected the process of registration and governance of religious societies. In a letter sent to the plenipotentiary of the Council for Religious Affairs, it is indicated that due to the outflow of the Jewish population, "persons serving on the auditing commission and the executive body are no longer present locally."²¹

²⁰ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #361, pp. 1–9.

²¹ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #284, pp. 1–4.

In archival documents, we also find a letter sent to the Plenipotentiary for Religious Affairs regarding two active synagogues in Sachkhere. The Chairman of the District Executive Committee, Sh. Chikhoria, reviews the situation on the ground and notes that out of 20 believers in the second *"dvattsatka"* (twenty-member council), only one remained in the district. Even this individual had sent their passport to the relevant authorities to obtain permission for departure to Israel and was awaiting final confirmation.

The author of the letter explicitly points out that eight "Sefer Torahs" and other material valuables were kept in Synagogue #2. According to his report, those leaving for emigration were attempting to take these sacred items abroad, which demanded an "extreme exertion of force and attention" from the local authorities.

The Executive Committee had already sent a letter on November 4, 1974; however, this time it was repeatedly appealing to Plenipotentiary Onoprishvili. Since the performance of religious rituals in Synagogue #2 had practically ceased, the local authorities requested permission to transfer the "Sefer Torahs" and other valuables preserved there to Synagogue #1, whose "dvattsatka" was still functioning.²²

These circumstances clearly demonstrate that large-scale emigrational processes, along with the repressiveness directed against the Jewish community remaining in Georgia, led to the institutional and structural collapse of the Jewish community in the regions.

The Process of Registering Religious Organizations and Transferring Places of Worship

During the Soviet totalitarian regime, religious groups in Georgia lost their property. The Soviet authorities confiscated both religious and non-religious property from them. Those who

²² Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #361, pp. 21–22.

survived Soviet repressions lost religious property: religious buildings, relics, icons, cemeteries, schools, lands, etc.

From the second half of the 1970s, a quite interesting trend regarding the registration of religious societies and the transfer of places of worship to groups of believers emerges in archival sources. A detailed analysis of this process highlights the complex bureaucratic and legal path through which the Jewish community had to go in order to register a religious association, renew executive bodies, or regain places of worship. According to Soviet legislation, the legal existence of a religious society was directly dependent on the decision of the general assembly of believers and its subsequent official approval.

Several bodies were involved in the process of opening, transferring places of worship, and registering a religious society. In individual cases, applications from the population were addressed to the Plenipotentiary of the Council for Religious Affairs; we also find applications where the population appealed to representatives of the District Executive Committee. The District Executive Committee provided information to the Plenipotentiary of the Council for Religious Affairs, who considered the said issue based on the recommendation of the Council for Religious Affairs and, in accordance with legislation, provided the representation of a specific region with information regarding procedures. In the event of a positive decision by the Council for Religious Affairs, it was necessary for the registration of a religious society to conduct elections to elect the chairpersons and members of the executive body and the auditing commission. The number was predefined: 3 believers were selected in both bodies for the management of the society.

A vivid example of this process is the case of the Sachkhere Synagogue (located at 167 Sabcho St.). Although the community obtained official registration as early as the resolution of July 23, 1946, in December 1985 they still had to undergo bureaucratic procedures anew.

A. Mosiashvili, Chairman of the Sachkhere Commission for Assisting Compliance with Legislation on Religious Cults, addressed N. Tsiklauri, Plenipotentiary of the Republic, in a letter dated December 10, 1985:

*"Proceeding from the resolution of November 25, 1985, of the general assembly of believers of the Jewish place of worship, please register the Chairman of the Executive Body of the religious society, Tetrushvili Yeli Khaim, and members: Iakob Isak Kikozashvili and Misha Davit Leluchashvili; the Chairman of the Auditing Commission—Moshe Elo Kikozashvili, and members: Davit Gabo Kikozashvili and Khaim Ilo Tetrushvili."*²³

Confirmation of registration was accompanied by a special, mandatory condition: members of the executive body and the auditing commission officially confirmed with their signature that they had "familiarized themselves with the legislation on religious cults," which in reality was a legal leverage for restricting their rights. Many applications of similar content can be found in archival documents, including from the Executive Committee of the Chiatura District Council, which sent assembly minutes and an application to the Plenipotentiary of the Council for Religious Affairs, requesting re-registration of the auditing commission based on the assembly minutes.²⁴ As one of the preconditions for approval of an organization's registration, it was also considered that the majority of members of the religious society were pensioners, "therefore, sufficient grounds exist for the registration of the religious association."²⁵

Based on archival materials, it is possible to reconstruct the socio-demographic profile of observant Jews of that period, where several noteworthy directions emerged:

In the lists of "dvattsatkas" (founding believers) preserved in the Sachkhere, Oni, and Gori files, the overwhelming majority of signers were men. In archival records, it is specifically

²³ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #361, pp. 1–9.

²⁴ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #361, pp. 1–9.

²⁵ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #654, p. 3.

emphasized that this situation differed sharply from the auditing commissions of the Orthodox Church, where women dominated. Low female participation is also confirmed in the ritual sphere.²⁶ Population applications mostly take the form of petitions. Importantly, attached to the document is the list of people signing the application. To a certain extent, it is apparent that during the Gorbachev period, the population had less fear of identifying themselves as representatives of a religious society.

Signatories of official applications for the registration of a religious organization were mostly pensioners and members of the working class. Even on holidays, the involvement of youth and children was nearly zero. In this regard, a republican document dated October 26, 1983, is unique, describing in detail believer attendance across 8 different synagogues in the country: only a single instance of child attendance (just 1 child) across all of Georgia was recorded, in the Tbilisi synagogue, while the number of young people everywhere was minimal.²⁷

An inventory act of property dated December 25, 1979, provides important information on the material-technical condition and accounting of sacred relics of the Gori Synagogue. The document was drawn up by inspectors of the Gori Finance Department (O. Khviadashvili, Sh. Sadaghashvili) in the presence of O. Tsorduashvili, Chairman of the "dvattsatka" of the Jewish place of worship.

According to the act, the total value of the synagogue's property amounted to 2,675 rubles and included 6 pieces of "Sefer Torah" written on sheepskin, 55 ritual books in ancient Hebrew, accoutrements of Sefer Torahs (bronze and silver "crowns" / crowns), 7-branched bronze candlesticks, and a cast-iron apparatus intended for baking matzo.

²⁶ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #282, p. 62.

²⁷ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #476, pp. 1–8.

It is notable that at the end of the document, the inspectors separately indicated the weak security system of the synagogue: it was noted that the place of worship lacked 24-hour security, alarm systems, and telecommunication facilities.²⁸

Despite large-scale emigration, remaining believers still managed to maintain religious practice. According to 1980 data, in Gori, during the holiday of "Passover," believers brought their own flour to the synagogue to bake matzo, and up to 1,600 kilograms of matzo was baked that year.²⁹

Conclusion

The study of the religious policy of the late Soviet period—specifically the transfer and re-registration of synagogues—reveals the true nature of that system. On the one hand, Perestroika and the slight softening of the regime allowed believers to press more boldly for the return or legalization of confiscated houses of worship. On the other hand, archival records show that the bureaucratic apparatus kept total control over every individual and every step.

Analyzing this historical experience is crucial for understanding the religious policy and minority history of post-Soviet Georgia. For the Jewish community, this process was especially dramatic due to the mass emigration (the Great Aliyah) that started in the 1970s. As populations left the regions and communities structurally collapsed, serious legal hurdles emerged: files from Sachkhere, Oni, and Gori indicate that whenever the "dvattsatkas" (twenty-member councils) dissolved or the number of believers dropped, authorities quickly moved to close synagogues, merge them, or confiscate the Torah scrolls inside.

Archival sources also paint a clear picture of the observant Jews of that era: rituals and community management rested almost entirely on older men, with very little participation

²⁸ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #282, pp. 49–50.

²⁹ Central Archive of Recent History, Fund 1880, Inventory 1, File #282, p. 63.

from youth or women. Yet, despite this deep demographic crisis and security threats like synagogue break-ins, the small remaining group managed to organize, practice their faith, and protect their sacred property.

Ultimately, the late Soviet struggle to preserve and transfer synagogues was much more than a religious necessity—it was a fight for communal self-preservation and cultural survival. The bureaucratic and demographic shifts of that period sealed the fate of Jewish heritage in Georgia, leaving us with a reality where only 17 out of 29 historical synagogues have kept their original function to this day.

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