

**How to Identify Jews  
in Russian-Language Data Sources  
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This document attempts to provide guidance for identifying Jews in Russian-language sources if Jewish is not listed either as religion, pre-revolution, or, in the USSR era, as nationality. In these instances we must scrutinize the text for tell-tale details and consider the historical period. There is no hard-and-fast rule that we can apply, so when in doubt we include everybody who might be Jewish.

Linked is a list of first names with a high probability of not being Jewish (common mostly pre-revolution) and a list of first names that were accepted by Jews post-revolution.

### **Last names**

Last names cannot serve as a dependable indicator. People who had migrated to Central and Eastern Europe from the West, Jews among them, brought with them German-sounding names. Those who had settled or had resided in Poland and Tsarist Russia before last names became the norm took, or were assigned, Slavic-sounding names. Therefore, we examine each record and take into account the first name, patronymic, and other biographical and historical factors.

### **Pre-revolution**

#### **First names / Patronymics.**

First names and patronymics (derived from male first names) of that period prove a reliable indicator of whether a person was Jewish. The majority of the Jewish population, isolated in shtetls, used a cluster of traditionally Jewish-only first names, like Khaim, Khaya, Shmul, Golda, Srul, Gersh, Brakha. The minority permitted to reside in large cities, for the most part, kept their names intact.

However, in cities name changes by Jews, even if AKA, whether deliberate to ease business interaction or to fit in at an educational institution, or accidental in response to mispronunciation, were not unheard of, for ex. Eli would become known as Elisej, Khaim as Khariton. We must also remember that Old Testament names, like Abram, Venyamin, Yakov, were common with Gentiles.

#### **Religious Traditions.**

These details present in most records assist in making the inclusion decision:

--A Jew cannot attend a church or hold any position within the church, for ex. Priest, Archpriest, deacon, etc.

--A Jew is not christened.

--A Jew does not have godparents.

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--A Jew is not buried in a church cemetery, a monastery cemetery, or in a cemetery named after a Christian saint, for ex. St. John's. After the revolution, church cemeteries closed or disappeared; most new cemeteries set aside lots where only Jews were buried. Note that in modern times, the threat of vandalism forces some Jews to bury their loved ones in Christian lots and omit any Jewish symbols or text on their stones.

--A Jew does not marry out of faith or give his/her children Gentile names. Instances of conversion to Christianity were few and usually noted in the record. They took place in order to marry a Gentile or to be able to use one's profession or talent, for ex. to sing in the Imperial Opera. For genealogical purposes, we include records of all born Jewish but converted later in life. In the Soviet Union where religion was allowed on paper but outlawed in reality, conversions did not exist.

### Occupation, Social Status, other.

Some occupations or social positions provide a foolproof exclusion test:

Jews could not be:

- judges or other court officials
- policemen
- Tsarist army officers
- could not belong to the class of dvoryanye (aristocracy)

Among other restrictions, Jews:

- were not awarded military medals, for ex. St. George medal.
- could not be peasants as they were not allowed to work on land.
- were not allowed to own land.

### Post-revolution through early 1930s.

The trends of the time make the selection of Jews from the records difficult and may produce a relatively significant portion of false positives and false negatives.

After the revolution, Jews moved en masse from the shtetls to the cities to escape the civil war pogroms, to get secular education, to join the Red Army; those of working age largely became secular. They chose Russian or Russian-sounding names (Yakov or Yan instead of Yankel) for their children and some transformed their own into Russian equivalents, not necessarily similarly sounding, for ex. Khaim to Yefim, Khaya to Klara or Larisa. Middle names disappeared.

Lax controls of this era allowed taking out identifications in the name and patronymic of one's choice. Enough people took advantage of this to make a researcher cognizant of the fact that an Aleksandr Vladimirovich, born pre-revolution or soon after, probably isn't but might be a hidden Aron Volkovich.

Adoption of mainstream names lagged behind in the Gentile community. They rarely changed their names, let alone patronymics, but eventually retreated from naming their children Isaak or Abram.

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Since there is likely no means of proving that Abram is not Jewish but Aleksandr, found on our 'possibly Jewish' list, is, we select both and then analyze against other details provided in the record.

Occupation and geography remain the main criteria for minimizing the number of mis-selected records. We could safely assume that people showing the place of residency as a village are not Jewish. The only exceptions are Crimea, the areas around Stavropol, Dnepropetrovsk, Krivoj Rog, and the Jewish Autonomous District in the Far East where a few Jewish collectives were formed. Neither did Jews live in Cossack settlements ('stanitsa'). Neither were Jews independent farmers ('yedinolichnik', 'kulak').

### 1930s through late 1990s.

Always dreadful, at times horrifying, this period in Soviet history is the easiest to identify Jews. Soviet passports began listing nationality in the early 1930s which solved the problem of the false positives of the preceding years. In the absence of religious affiliation and answering the need to classify Jews as a separate group, the passport declared Jewish a nationality.

One loophole remained: children and grandchildren of mixed marriages. In cases of any mixed marriage, a child picked the nationality of either parent at sixteen. If one side was Jewish it did not expect or wish to win. By and large, had the Soviet passports not supplied the nationality, it would not have taken long for most Soviet Jews to become false negatives for Jewish genealogists.

### Late 1990s to current.

Beginning with the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some of the independent states born at the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most notably Russia and Ukraine, removed the nationality from their passports (note that a passport remains the only valid identification document inside the former Soviet Union). These are the areas where the majority of the Jewish population resides that had not emigrated in the 1970s-1990s. Since for the 80 years of USSR Jewish and non-Jewish first names and patronymics became indistinguishable, genealogists now face insurmountable difficulties when trying to identify Jews through vital statistics records. Few exceptions linger, for. ex. Ivan, Stepan, and Fedor are still a fairly stable indication of a non-Jew, but, then, they are not as prevalent in the modern Russian society as they used to be, either. Jews do not live in villages, so a record of somebody born in a village and remaining there now is a record of a Gentile. The handful of Jews that still live in what used to be shtetls prefer not to be identified. For ex., Berdichev has a population of about 85,000; of the 1,000 Jews only 20% publicly acknowledge their ethnicity.

[Jewish and non-Jewish Names in Russian docs.pdf](#)