**Abstract**: Israel is a multicultural immigration country that, since its creation, has welcomed millions of Jews from all over the world. One of the largest minority groups in Israel is that of immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU), about one million of whom arrived in the 1990s. The present chapter reviews the empirical and theoretical literature on the historical and sociocultural characteristics of FSU immigrants as well as on their integration into Israeli society. Specifically, the chapter describes how first- and 1.5-generation FSU immigrants have been affected by multicultural Israeli society, and how they have, in turn, have affected Israel on the economic, social, and cultural levels. The perspective of acculturation as a two-way process is proposed as a means of analyzing the reciprocal cross-cultural exchange of the FSU immigrants and the majority groups in Israeli society.

Running Head Right-hand: Acculturation as a Two-Way Process

Running Head Left-hand: Evgeny Knaifel

Chapter 24

Acculturation as a Two-Way Process

Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel

Evgeny Knaifel

Introduction

Israel is a multicultural immigration country that, since its creation, has welcomed millions of Jews from all over the world. Most Jewish citizens who live in the country have a personal or familial background of migration (ICBS, 2021). Israel’s population, which also includes Arab Israelis and other ethno-national minorities, thus constitutes a rich and varied cultural, ethnic, national, religious, and lingual tapestry. One of the largest cultural minority groups in the country is that of immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU). Currently, more than 1.2 million Russian-speaking first-, 1.5-, and second-generation immigrants live in Israel (ICBS, 2021). They arrived in the largest wave of migration in the history of the country and increased the Jewish population of Israel by about 16% (Konstantinov, 2015).

The huge scope of their migration, together with their unique cultural capital, provides FSU immigrants with visibility, presence, and a voice, which they have been able to translate into social, cultural and political power that affects Israeli society. In turn, FSU immigrants have also been affected by the Israeli majority society. The present chapter reviews empirical and theoretical literature on the acculturation of FSU immigrants in Israel thirty years after their mass arrival.

The chapter focuses on three issues:

• Processes of integration of FSU immigrants into Israeli society.

• Changes that occurred in this immigrant group in the course of their interaction with Israeli society.

• Changes that occurred in Israeli society in the course of its interaction with FSU immigrants.

Acculturation Processes in Migration

Migration and cross-cultural transitions have, in the past decades, become normative and common life events. Such transitions force immigrants to disconnect from personal, social, emotional, and cognitive sources of support and to adjust to new and unfamiliar social environments.

The term “acculturation” is used to describe changes that immigrants go through in the transition from one country to another and changes that occur in the majority group as a result of its encounter with immigrants (Sam and Berry, 2010). These changes may be expressed on the group level in the physical, biological, political, economic, cultural, and social spheres. On the individual level, they may be expressed in terms of behavior, values, attitudes, skills, and motivations, as well as personal and ethnic identity. Adaptation to the new society is the positive outcome of acculturation. The negative outcome may be social marginalization of immigrants, exclusion, and accompanying acculturative stress and psychological distress (Berry, 1997; Kim, 2001).

Although the original definition of acculturation relates to changes of the original cultural patterns of either or both groups as a result of continuous first-hand contact between them (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits, 1936, p. 149–152), most popular acculturation models focus only on changes within the immigrant groups (Berry, 1997; Kim, 2001; Schwartz, Montgomery, and Briones, 2006).

This one-sidedness has recently been corrected by the cultural fusion theory (Croucher and Kramer, 2017). The authors argue that as the newcomer and dominant cultural groups interact together in an open system, it is impossible for the dominant culture not to be affected to some extent by the introduction of new cultural practices, beliefs, norms, and so forth.

This chapter embraces this integrative perspective to address changes in the group of FSU immigrants and in the Israeli majority society in the course of the cross-cultural encounter between them.

Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) in Israel—Historical Background

Three major waves of immigration arrived in Israel from Russia, the Soviet Union (USSR), and the former Soviet Union (FSU). In the period prior to the establishment of the State of Israel (1881–1948), 120,000 immigrants arrived from these countries and constituted about a fifth of all immigrants to the land of Israel (Sikron, 2012). Some of them were pioneers with socialist-liberal beliefs inspired by the Zionist ideology; they became the founding fathers of the Jewish state. Others fled the rising waves of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe.

In the first two decades following the establishment of the State of Israel (1948–1969), only 20,000 immigrants arrived from the USSR, as the Soviet regime did not allow Jews to leave (Gitelman, 2001). This changed dramatically in the 1970s, when 163,000 Jews were allowed to immigrate from the USSR to Israel and an additional 65,000 to the United States (Sikron, 2012). Many of these immigrants were motivated by an ethno-national reawakening and reconnection to their culture, tradition, and religion. Only 40% came from large cities in the European part of the USSR, such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kiev. Most came from the Soviet “periphery,” including Georgia, Central Asia, and West Ukraine, where the connection to the Jewish tradition and Zionism prevailed in spite of the regime’s efforts to extinguish it (Gitelman, 2001). It is likely that this background contributed to the relatively smooth integration of these immigrants into the country (Remennick, 2015a).

The third wave of immigration began in 1989 and continues to this day. By 2015, over one million immigrants from the FSU had settled in Israel (Sheps, 2016). This is the largest ethnic group that has ever immigrated to Israel (Sikron, 2012). Considering the size of the local Israeli population—9,289,800, at the time of writing, 6,873,900 of them Jewish (ICBS, 2021)— this is an exceptional number of immigrants in comparison to other countries of origin.

Unlike in the previous waves of immigration, few of these immigrants were motivated by Zionism or the sense of affiliation with Jewishness. Most of them were pushed out by the political, economic, and physical insecurity that pervaded their homelands at the end of the Soviet era (Remennick, 2015a; Smooha, 2008). This wave began at the end of the 1980s, following political changes in the USSR that eventually resulted in the collapse of the Soviet regime. Democratization processes in the USSR (“glasnost” and “perestroika”) brought about economic deterioration and a rise in anti-Semitism, which motivated Jews to seek a safer and better future for their children outside their homelands (Al-Haj, 2019). Restrictions on immigration to the United States, due to pressure from the Israeli government, directed an increasing stream of immigrants to Israel (Smooha, 2008). The peak of this wave of immigration took place in the years 1990 and 1991, when, within one and a half years, 320,000 immigrants arrived in Israel. Altogether, 1.6 million Soviet Jews and their family members emigrated from the FSU between 1989 and 2006. About one million (979,000) arrived in Israel, 325,000 in the United States, 219,000 in Germany, and the rest in other countries (Tolts, 2009).

Demographic and Cultural Background of Immigrants from the FSU in Israel

Several characteristics make immigrants from the FSU in Israel a unique group. Especially noticeable is their human capital: in the early 1990s, this was a relatively highly educated group, with 58% of immigrants holding academic education, compared to only 25% in the Israeli local population at that time (Remennick, 2013). The wave of immigration brought to the country thousands of physicians, engineers, architects, teachers, actors, writers, journalists, scientists, and more.

In terms of family structure, FSU immigrants (especially those from the European parts of the FSU) predominantly live in small family units. Most of these families have one or two children (average 1.7), while local Jewish families in Israel are much larger (average 2.9) (Tolts, 2009). A high rate of single-parent families also typifies this group: 14% of FSU-immigrant children under the age of 17 were living in single-parent families, typically headed by women, compared to only 8% of their peers in the local population (Sheps, 2016). In the 1990s, 20% of immigrant families from the FSU lived in multigenerational households (children, parents, and grandparents), with elderly parents having a high degree of involvement in the lives of their children and grandchildren (Lowenstein, 2002).

In terms of culture, many Jews who immigrated from the FSU regarded themselves as belonging to the “intelligentsia”—the social class of educated people in academic, intellectual, and cultural professions, who were adept in Russian culture and who led the shaping of this culture (Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport, 2012). This cultural identity and the affiliation with the cultural elite in their homeland are the main components of the cultural capital of FSU immigrants. It is shared by immigrants who came from different former republics of the USSR, young and old, men and women, and those who immigrated to Germany, the United States, and Israel (Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport, 2012).

Two additional factors molded their worldviews after emigration: generations-long socialization within the Soviet regime and cultural collectivism (Mirsky, 2001). This background produces ambivalence toward the establishment: fear and suspicion on the one hand, and dependence and an external focus of control, on the other hand. This ambivalence reflects their experience in a totalitarian socialist society that attempted to create unity and equality among people through mechanisms of oppression and force.

Despite shared features, FSU immigrants are far from a uniform group and there are differences among them in terms of ethnicity and culture. Three differentiating factors may affect these immigrants’ adjustment to Israeli society.

More than 30% of FSU immigrants are not recognized as Jews under Jewish law and jurisprudence (Halacha), which guides the recognition of nationality in Israel (Al-Haj, 2019). By the halachic definition, to be a Jew, one must be born to a Jewish mother or have undergone an Orthodox conversion. These immigrants were allowed to come to Israel based on the “Law of Return,” passed soon after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1950. According to this law, only halachic Jews as well as their children and immediate family members are entitled to immigrate to Israel. In 1970, the law was expanded to include the grandchildren of Jews. Among these immigrants, there are indeed many non-Jews with little independent motivation to adapt to Israeli society or sense of belonging to its people and culture. However, there are also many among them who, back in the FSU, where nationality was defined by the father, were raised as Jews, considered Jews by their environment, and discriminated against because of that. The fact that they are not recognized as Jews in the Jewish state is highly frustrating and insulting to them (Cohen and Susser, 2009; Lerner, 2015).

Another difference within the group of FSU immigrants is between Jews of European (Ashkenazi) origin and non-European Jews (Sephardi). The former, who came from Slavic and Baltic lands, such as Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, make up about 85% of all FSU immigrants. They are the bearers of Russian-European culture and are, generally speaking, rather removed from their Jewish roots. The small group of Sephardi Jews who came from Central Asia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the North Caucasus have a deeper attachment to their Jewish identity (Remennick, 2015a). It would be plausible to assume that the acculturation patterns of these two ethno-cultural groups would differ.

A very important factor that differentiates between FSU immigrants is the time of their arrival in Israel. Those who immigrated at the beginning of the 1990s (1989–1995) differ culturally and socioeconomically from those who came in the late 1990s and beginning of the 2000s. With time, the rate of immigrants with academic education dropped, as did the rate of those coming from the central cities, such as Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kiev, while the percentages of non-Jews and those hailing from the periphery rose (Sikron, 2012). The incidence of familial and social problems prior to immigration also rose among the later FSU immigrants because of the economic crisis and chaotic reality that prevailed in the post-Soviet era in the 1990s. The present chapter focuses mostly on immigrants who arrived in Israel in the beginning of the 1990s and fit the more “classic” profile of Jews from the FSU.

The Integration of FSU Immigrants in Israeli Society

In the first decades of its existence, Israel practiced a “melting pot” policy toward new immigrants. On the official and nonofficial levels, new arrivals were pressured to promptly adopt Israeli values, modes of behavior and thought, and “become Israeli.” Over time, this policy changed, and by the 1990s the country adopted a multicultural approach, with the state becoming less involved in the process of absorption and promoting the legitimization of cultural variety (Smooha, 2008).

These changes affected the integration of immigrants from the FSU. On the occupational level, FSU immigrants adjusted quickly because of their education and commitment to work-centric values. However, due to language barriers, the lack of social connections, and the competitive structure of the Israeli labor market, as well as its small size, many of them were forced to accept employment outside of their profession and work long hours in menial odd jobs, often without minimal social benefits (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2011). Only one-third of FSU immigrants with an academic education continued working in their original professions, while others suffered a decline in their occupational status (Remennick, 2013).

Even at present, thirty years after the peak of the wave of immigration from the FSU, the average income of immigrant families is 30% lower than that of native Israeli families (Kushnirovich, 2018). Two major factors that contribute to the intensification of economic difficulties for all immigrants in Israel are the high cost of living and the lack of public housing. Immigrants who succeeded in acquiring an apartment or obtaining public housing typically report better integration and a higher economic status than those forced to continue renting housing in the free market (Konstantinov, 2015).

On the cultural level, most FSU immigrants have preserved the culture of their country of origin while gradually adopting cultural characteristics from their present social environment. Attachment to their culture of origin is expressed, first and foremost, in the preservation of their language: Russian is the main language used in FSU-immigrant families and they continue to consume Russian language media (Ellis and Lemesh, 2011). Second, they remain loyal to the high value of education that characterized their home culture and have established special kindergartens and schools for their children. Political parties funded by FSU immigrants and addressing this constituency, such as “Israel be-Aliya”[[1]](#endnote-1) in the past and “Israel Beiteinu”[[2]](#endnote-2) in the present, have become part of political life in Israel (Al-Haj, 2019). And to maintain their consumption patterns, FSU immigrants have established shopping and food networks in Israel unique to their community (Bernstein, 2010).

Generally, in the first years following immigration, FSU immigrants conserve their culture of origin, but with time, they gradually adopt the Israeli culture, language, and traditions and become integrated intp the occupational, social, cultural, and political spheres (Al-Haj, 2019; Amit, 2012; Smooha, 2008).

This integration processes—the preservation of the culture of origin while gradually acquiring the new culture in parallel—is reflected in the cultural identity of FSU immigrants in Israel. By the end of the 1990s, most FSU immigrants defined their main identity as “Russian” (47%) or “Jewish” (45%), and only 8% defined themselves as primarily “Israeli” (Lissitsa and Peres, 2000). In 2010, however, 42% considered themselves primarily “Jewish,” 38% primarily “Israeli,” and only 20% primarily “Russian” (Konstantinov, 2015). Jewish identity was stronger among the older immigrants, and Israeli identity was stronger among the younger immigrants. Interestingly, 41.5% of non-Jewish immigrants chose to define themselves as primarily “Israelis” and 12.8% as Jewish (Leshem, 2008).

Looking at the adaptation processes of FSU immigrants through the lenses of Berry’s (1997) acculturation model, it was found that they opt for the integration strategy (involvement in the host culture while preserving their culture of origin) while rejecting strategies of assimilation (total assimilation in the new culture) or marginalization (rejecting both cultures) (Lissitsa and Bokek-Cohen, 2012). It was also found that the integration strategy was especially prevalent among young immigrants, women, immigrants with an academic education, and those who have been in the country longer. Men, older immigrants, and those with lower incomes chose the strategy of segregation (clinging to the culture of origin and rejecting the new culture).These choices differ from those of Soviet immigrants of the 1970s, who typically preferred “assimilation”—rejection of the old culture and adoption of the new one (Remennick, 2015a).

In recent years, many studies have focused on the 1.5 generation of FSU immigrants—those who came in the 1990s as children or adolescents (ages 5–15) and are now in their 30s and 40s. These studies indicate that the 1.5 generation of FSU immigrants in Israel feel “integrated but distinct” (Remennick and Prashizky, 2019). The process of their adaptation is fragmented: in some areas, they act according to local norms and show good adjustment skills as well as educational, occupational, and social mobility. In other spheres, however, they hold on to “Russian” models of behavior and norms. The focus on the 1.5 generation helps explore areas where intergenerational changes occurred or did not occur among FSU immigrants during their prolonged interaction with local Israeli society.

Acculturation as a Two-Way Process

This chapter adopts the two-way model of acculturation that postulates a reciprocal process of change between the minority group and the majority society. In this particular case, the changes described will be those that took place among FSU immigrants during their encounter with Israeli society and those that took place in the majority Israeli culture in the course of its encounter with FSU immigrants.

The Impact of Israeli Society on FSU Immigrants

Cultural changes in the FSU-immigrant community are particularly noticeable among 1.5- generation immigrants, who, unlike their parents, have spent most of their lives in Israel. These changes relate to parenting practices, attitudes toward Jewish traditions and religion, and attitudes toward the culture of Mizrahi[[3]](#endnote-3) Israelis.

Parenting Practices

Studies of parents in immigrant families from the FSU in Israel reveal their adherence to educational values and models from their homeland (Shor, 1999; Slonim-Nevo, Shraga and Mirsky, 1999; Yakhnich, 2016). Scholars suggest that even after the collapse of the Soviet regime, the relationships between parents and children in FSU families in many ways reflected the relationship between state and citizens in totalitarian-collectivist societies: cohesion, closeness, and mutual assistance on one hand, and an authoritarian parenting style, with a high level of control and low level of child autonomy on the other hand (Mirsky, 2001; Slonim-Nevo et al., 1999). These attitudes were expressed in the over-involvement of parents in their children’s life, disapproval of the expression of negative emotions, expectations for high accomplishments and conformity, and sometimes physical punishment (Shor, 1999). Authoritarian-authoritative parenting styles and rigid parenting practices, with an emphasis on high academic achievements were also found among post-Soviet immigrants in recent studies (Yakhnich, 2016).

By contrast, in the past fifty years, Israeli society has given preference to the values of individualism, self-actualization, and autonomy of the child over obedience and conformity. The shift from its initially collectivist values occurred in Israel during the 1960s and 1970s, in large part due to the influence of social movements and changes that took place at that time in the United States (Roer-Strier and Rivlis, 1998). Scholars suggest that the relationships between parents and children in Israel are typified by a permissive parenting style: low level of control and high level of child autonomy, with minimal supervision of the child’s behavior (Roer-Strier and Rivlis, 1998; Slone, Shechner, and Farah, 2012).

The gap between the authoritarian parenting style of FSU immigrants and the liberal-permissive one in most of Israeli society created difficulties in parent-child relationships in immigrant families (Dwairy and Dor, 2009). Yet, over time, immigrants have adopted new elements from their host society while preserving elements of parenting from their homeland.

Studies on 1.5-generation FSU immigrants illustrate this process. Parents from the 1.5-generation were shown to have adopted an integrative parenting style that combines high involvement in their children’s academic work but at the same time encourages and supports their independence (Remennick, 2015b). This despite their own parents’ continued adherence to the authoritarian-authoritative style. The fact that such changes occurred within the same family supports the proposition that the behavior of the 1.5 generation has been affected by cultural factors outside the family. Other studies also support the notion that 1.5-generation immigrants from the FSU tend to adopt more liberal and permissive parenting practices commonly adopted in Israel (Shein, 2016). It appears that, having lived in the Israeli society from childhood, 1.5-generation immigrants from the FSU have internalized local norms through their contacts with major socialization agents, such as native-born friends, the educational system, and the Israeli army (IDF).

Attitudes Toward Jewish Traditions and Religion

The Soviet regime practically succeeded in abolishing religion, producing a secular-atheist society (Gitelman, 2001). FSU immigrants who arrived in Israel in the 1990s were indeed secular, and very few felt any affinity with religion. In a 1993 survey, a very low level of religious observance was found among FSU immigrants: 76% of respondents defined themselves as “secular,” observing no religious rituals in their daily lives, 16% defined themselves as “traditional,” observing some Jewish commandments, and 8% defined themselves as “religious,” observing all or most Jewish commandments and rituals (Leshem, 2001). In contrast, most Jewish Israelis at that time reported a close affinity with Jewish tradition or religion, and only 21% reported being “secular” (Leshem, 2001).

More recent studies shed light on how life in an ethno-religious society such as Israel’s may affect religious beliefs and practices of FSU immigrants. In a survey conducted twenty-five years after their immigration (Sheps, 2016), most FSU immigrants reported that they were “secular” (67%), 25% reported being “traditional,” and 8% “religious.” In the general population, the incidence of “secular” was lower (40%), “traditional” was similar (24%), and “religious” much higher (36%). Although most FSU immigrants are still secular, there has been a decline in this category (from 76% to 67%) and a noticeable increase in those who define themselves as “traditional” (from 16% to 25%).

In a study that explored in detail the variety of FSU’s immigrants’ perceptions of Jewish tradition and religion, more than half (55%) reported that they maintained a secular lifestyle but also had some affiliation with Jewish traditions, such as lighting Hanukkah candles and participating in the traditional Passover meal (Remennick and Prashizky, 2012). Most emphasized their interest in the spiritual content rather than the ritual aspects of Jewish traditions. Similar results were obtained in surveys of first-generation (Sikron, 2012) and 1.5-generation FSU immigrants in Israel (Remennick and Prashizky, 2019).

In fact, the distribution of FSU immigrants on the religious–secular continuum has begun to resemble the typical Israeli distribution in the age of “post-secularism”(Ben-Porat, 2013). Only a small minority consistently define themselves as secular (or atheists); nevertheless, many in this group participate in the Jewish traditions commonly observed in Israel out of respect. The rest define themselves as “spiritual” and practice Jewish traditions more actively; for example, they may study Kabbalah or join New Age movements (Remennick and Prashizky, 2012).

These changes can hardly be attributed to an increase in religiosity among FSU immigrants and should rather be interpreted as an attempt to adjust to and be part of Jewish-Israeli society. Acquaintance with Jewish traditions and observance of some common rituals play a major role in the structuring of Jewish-Israeli identity. It appears that many FSU immigrants have integrated these aspects into their identity in order to belong to the Israeli collective (Lerner, 2015).

Attitudes Toward Mizrahi Culture

When they arrived in Israel in the 1990s, many FSU immigrants held orientalist[[4]](#endnote-4) attitudes toward Jews from Arab countries whom they met in Israel (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, 2004; Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport, 2012; Shumsky, 2004). This position was supported by the patronizing Western-European model that developed in Russian imperialist culture, especially toward peoples of the Caucasus and Middle Asia (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, 2004). In the eyes of the Jewish-Russian “intelligentsia,” the culture of Jews from Mediterranean and Islamic countries appeared inferior and primitive compared to Russian-European culture (Shumsky, 2004). FSU immigrants held on to their orientalist perspective in the hope of finding their place and gaining upward social mobility in the splintered and multicultural Israeli society (Lerner, Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder, 2007). Mutual hostility and conflictual relationships between them and Mizrahi Jews, often covered in the media in the 1990s, fed this attitude.

However, in the past two decades, FSU immigrants have begun cultivating an affinity with Mizrahi culture. This trend is especially visible in the 1.5-generation, who have discarded their parents’ hostility and fear and opened themselves to close interactions with Mizrahi Jews. This transition is expressed, among other things, in an increased rate of marriages between FSU immigrants of the 1.5 generation and Mizrahi Israelis (Lomsky-Feder and Leibovitz, 2010), as well as in cultural collaborations between FSU-immigrant and Mizrahi intellectuals and artists (Prashizky, 2019). Another manifestation of FSU immigrants’ rapprochement with Mizrahi culture is manifested in their adoption of Mizrahi cultural components. For example, 1.5-generation FSU immigrants celebrate “Russian Mimouna”—a term derived from the traditional holiday celebrated by Northwest African Jews—that features a combination of Russian and Moroccan food and music (Prashizky, 2019).

Researchers suggest that this transition was brought on by the fact that many young FSU immigrants grew up in geographical and social proximity to Mizrahi Israelis, especially in peripheral areas, and developed an identification with them and their culture (Idzinski, 2014). Other scholars submit that this affinity is also an expression of solidarity and of the awareness that FSU immigrants and Mizrahi Israelis both suffer discrimination and exclusion (Prashizky and Remennick, 2016). Moreover, they suggest that many 1.5-generation activists see the Mizrahi protests of the 1970s[[5]](#endnote-5) as a model for the “Russian Ethnic” protest that started rising recently against religious marriage and burial procedures as well as the generally racist and sexist attitudes toward women of Russian origin in Israeli society (Lemish, 2000; Prashizky and Remennick, 2016).

The Impact of FSU Immigrants on Israeli Society

The impact of FSU immigrants on Israeli society is apparent on the political, economic, social, and cultural levels. The phenomena underscored here are their impact on the economy, the secularization of public spaces, and the introduction of new commemoration days and holidays.

Market Economy

The educational capital of FSU immigrants significantly affected the market economy in Israel. In Soviet society, where economic capital was ideologically “cancelled,” education provided social status, prestige, and access to symbolic and cultural assets, while higher education institutions became the arena where Jews could prove their skills and talents (Lerner et al., 2007).

In Israel, FSU immigrants were highly motivated to succeed in the competitive local labor market (Remennick, 2013). At the same time, the state had a substantial interest in integrating high-quality and educated manpower that could strengthen its economy. This was especially crucial as, from the mid-1980s, the Israeli economy was in deep crisis with high inflation rates: in 1985, the monthly inflation rate was 27.49% (Ben-Bassat, 2002). The economic crisis was resolved by government intervention and, by the end of 1990, the inflation rate dropped to 10%; by 2000, it was close to 0%. However, some economists claim that FSU immigrants contributed to this transition from crisis to growth (Ben-Bassat, 2002; Eckstein and Weiss, 1998).

The Israeli economy grew by 20% in a short time (Bar, 2012), in large part thanks to the human and professional capital of FSU immigrants. This trend is especially visible in the high-tech industry, medicine, and science. For example, one-third of those employed in Israeli high-tech are FSU immigrants (Cohen-Goldner, 2006), and this industry is the main growth engine of the Israeli economy (Bar, 2012).

Another professional field where the influence of FSU immigrants is noticeable is that of medicine and the paramedical professions. In the 1990s, 14,000 physicians came to Israel from the FSU, doubling the number of physicians in the country (Nirel, 1999). About 8,000 immigrant physicians were integrated into their profession in Israel. The cost of training a physician is about $50,000, therefore, this saved the Israeli economy about $4 billion (Bar, 2012). It can be argued that the present crisis in the Israeli health system has to do with the exit of this generation of FSU physicians from the labor force as they have reached retirement age.

The influence of FSU immigrants is also felt in the field of science. Between 1989 and 1991, 6,000 scientists from the FSU immigrated to Israel, while, at this time, local scientists numbered 8,000 (Geva-May, 2000). The contribution of FSU-immigrant scientists to Israeli academia was found to be larger than that of any other ethnic group (Davidovitch, Soen, and Sinuany-Stern, 2010).

Secularization in Public Spaces

Israel was established as a Jewish and democratic state. Due to political agreements made at the time, the religious establishment was given considerable power over the everyday life of Israelis, in parallel with the state’s democratic-liberal structure. This is reflected in the designation of Shabbat (Saturday) as a day of rest, including a mandatory closure of stores and public services, the mandatory observance of Jewish dietary rules (kashrut) in the public space, and the Orthodox monopoly over burials, marriages and divorce (Ben-Porat, 2013; Cohen and Susser, 2009).

Yet in the past two decades, secularization processes have taken place in the public domain in Israel that have undermined the status quo[[6]](#endnote-6) observed until the 1990s. Today, dozens of shopping centers remain open on Shabbat; hundreds of stores sell non-kosher foods; thousands of couples get married outside the Orthodox rabbinical establishment; Gay Pride parades take place in major cities; and civil graveyards make alternative burials possible. All these constitute major changes to daily life in the country.

Ben-Porat (2013) claims that in addition to universal trends in Western societies of greater adherence to democratic-liberal values and secularization encouraged by human rights movements, FSU immigrants have made a contribution to this process in Israel. Due to their large numbers and the high rate of non-Jews among them, as well as their culture consumption and leisure habits, they have challenged the religious conservatism, changed the power relations in the society, and contributed to the development of cultural pluralism in central public spaces.

One conspicuous example is the food stores that FSU immigrants opened during the 1990s. These stores sell non-kosher products that are standard in Russian cuisine. In a study of food consumption habits of FSU immigrants in Israel and Germany, it was argued that the foods offered in these stores reflect not only FSU immigrants’ culinary habits but also a challenge to the collective Jewish (kosher) identity (Bernstein, 2010). The “Russian” stores, in turn, also affect the food preferences of the local population. The transformation of the largest non-kosher supermarket chain in Israel, “Tiv Ta’am,” illustrates this process. From a single store opened in Tel Aviv in 1989 to cater to the needs of the Russian-speaking community, it grew into a nationwide supermarket chain, becoming well known and prestigious among secular Israelis as well (Ben-Porat, 2013). It provided public legitimization to the consumption of non-kosher foods and the opening of additional stores and chains on Shabbat (Bernstein, 2010).

Other secularization processes have taken place due to the lack of any alternative. For example, civil marriages outside Israel are the only path for FSU immigrants who are not recognized as Jews by the rabbinical establishment to get legally married (Prashizky and Remennick, 2016). At the same time, more and more Israeli-born secular couples who may get married in Israel opt not to do so as a protest against the religious ritual or in search of a meaningful alternative. These trends of marriage secularization have forced the state to grant some acknowledgment to civil marriages. Some scholars suggest that the inspiration for resisting religious coercion and struggling for freedom of expression and basic civil rights should, to a large degree, be attributed to FSU immigrants (Ben-Porat, 2013; Cohen and Susser, 2009).

In fact, the social dispute around FSU immigrants rekindled old secular ideological battles that had previously been silenced for political reasons. These could no longer be suppressed as they had to do with the everyday survival needs of the immigrant population. For example, immigrants’ economic inability to purchase a car reawakened the dispute around public transportation on Shabbat and led to local initiatives that started operating public buses on Friday evening and Saturday. It appears that the cultural and contextual background of FSU immigrants has challenged the status quo arrangements and the monopoly of the Orthodox religious establishment in Israel. This has encouraged not only secularization processes in modern Israel but also cultural pluralism vis-à-vis various social minorities such as, for example, the LGBTQ community.

New Commemoration Days and Holidays

The Holocaust is an essential part of collective traumatic memory in Israel. It is inseparable from the narrative of Jewish history and provides practical and moral legitimization to the existence of Israel as the National Home of the Jewish people (Zerubavel, 1995). Israeli society perceives the Holocaust as an unparalleled event of anti-Semitism, persecution, victimization, suffering, and genocide of the Jews and rejects any attempt to render it a universal symbol (Levy and Sznaider, 2005).

By contrast, the Holocaust holds a different place in collective Soviet memory, with an emphasis on heroism, resistance, and the victory over the Nazis in what was termed in the USSR “The Big Patriotic War.” About 700,000 Jewish soldiers fought in the ranks of the Red Army or the Partisans during WWII, half of whom were killed (Prashizky and Remennick, 2018). Many Jews served in commanding positions in the Red Army, and thousands were decorated for bravery. Yet, despite this involvement of Jewish soldiers, the 9th of May—Victory Day, a major holiday in the FSU celebrating Nazi Germany’s signing of the capitulation agreement—was not a holiday in Israel. Scholars suggest that one of the reasons for this may have been Zionism’s exclusivist claim to Jewish soldiers’ heroism (Roberman, 2007).

FSU immigrants led a transformation in Israel regarding the public commemoration of the Holocaust toward an emphasis on the heroic involvement of Soviet Jews in the victory over Nazi Germany and, through it, in the establishment of the State of Israel three years after the end of WWII. Jewish Veterans of WWII who had immigrated to Israel initiated this process. They refused to adopt the hegemonic Israeli memory of the Holocaust and the passive identity of its victims. Instead, they focused the discourse on the strength and heroism of Jewish soldiers and demanded recognition and inclusion through the establishment of museums and monuments (Roberman, 2007). They started to hold parades on the 9th of May in central Israeli cities.

The grandchildren of these veterans, 1.5-generation FSU immigrants, took up this struggle in the years 2012–2016 (Prashizky and Remennick, 2018). They demanded that the 9th of May become a public Israeli commemoration day to remind the nation of the importance of the victory over Nazi Germany in the Israeli context. Through social networks, these young immigrants disseminated family narratives that commemorated the heroism of their relatives and put before the Israeli public a different narrative of Jews’ conduct during the Holocaust. Finally, in 2017, the Israeli Parliament (Knesset) recognized the 9th of May as a national commemoration day.

Like the 9th of May, other holiday days that were popular in the Russian-Soviet culture are becoming more familiar and widely celebrated in Israel, such as New Year’s Eve (Novy God) on December 31 and International Women’s Day on March 8.

Final Thoughts

The present chapter reviews empirical and theoretical literature on the sociocultural adjustment of FSU immigrants in Israel and describes how these immigrants have been affected by Israeli society, and how they, in turn, have affected Israel.

Although acculturation is in its essence a two-way process (Redfield et al., 1936), most acculturation research explores changes in the immigrant or minority groups and not in the majority society (Berry, 1997; Kim, 2001). This chapter is in line with the growing academic and public discourse on the two-way effects of cultural encounters (Croucher and Kramer, 2017).

Indeed, thirty years after the big immigration wave of the 1990s, it is hard to say who had a bigger influence on whom: the Israeli society on the immigrants, or the immigrants on Israeli society. The impact appears to be reciprocal and demonstrates the cultural fusion model (Croucher and Kramer, 2017).

However, it is important to note that although most FSU immigrants have adapted well in Israel, there are several risk groups, such as single mothers, the elderly, and youths (Konstantinov, 2015). Economic difficulties, lack of housing, and risk behaviors may push less resilient immigrants to the margins of society and cause mental health problems (Mirsky, 2009**).** Therefore, cultural-lingual access and instrumental and emotional support are crucial for these immigrants. Israeli society also needs to solve the burning issues that occupy FSU immigrants, such as civil marriage and burial, pensions for the elderly, as well as racist attitudes toward Russian women. The absence of proper solutions may, in the future, lead to social protests on the part of FSU immigrants, led by second-generation immigrants, born and raised in Israel and aware of their civil rights. The buds of this protest can be already observed among the 1.5 generation (Prashizky and Remennick, 2016). Yet, if supported, the continued positive adjustment of FSU immigrants may serve to consolidate the pluralism, multiculturalism, and cohesion of contemporary Israeli society.

Notes

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1. “Israel be-Alia” (Israel in Immigration) was established before the 1996 elections by Nathan (Anatoly) Sharansky, a former political prisoner in the USSR. The party gained seven Knesset seats (out of 120) but later lost its power and dissolved into the Likud (right-wing) party. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Israel Beitenu” (Israel Our Home) was founded in 1999 by an FSU immigrant, Avigdor Liberman, and has been on the Israeli political map ever since with four to eight seats in the Knesset and senior government positions. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Mizrahi Jews/Mizrachim (also Sephardi), constitute one of the largest Jewish ethnic minorities among Israeli Jews. They are descended from Jewish communities in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia and tend to be more traditional in their religious views and conservative in their political preferences. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Orientalism: since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978, much academic discourse has begun to use the term “Orientalism” to refer to a general patronizing Western attitude toward Asian and North African societies. Said, E. (1978). Orientalism. New York: Vintage Books. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The “Black Panthers” were the leading protest group of second-generation Mizrachi immigrants in Israel. Established in 1971 to protest two decades of exclusion and discrimination of the Mizrachim in the country, they succeeded in raising widespread awareness of poverty and social injustice. Their leaders eventually joined political parties and were elected to the Israeli Parliament (Knesset). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The “status quo” in Israel refers to a political understanding between secular and religious political parties not to alter the communal arrangement in relation to religious matters in a predominantly secular population. The status quo was established before the creation of the state and relates to religious legislation, education, marriage and burials, kosher regulations, and Shabbat. It was part of all coalition agreements between the ruling and religious parties until the 1990s. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)