



## RUSSIAN JEWISH FIGURES / 1

These biographies give a glimpse into the enormous role Jews have played in the flourishing of Russian culture, particularly in the 20th century as restrictions on Jewish residency eased. We look here at the Jewish poet whose words were recited with awe by many Russians, as well as a sometimes-scandalous ballerina, a physicist whose genius intimidated even his most senior colleagues, and the chess player considered to be better than Bobby Fischer. While many Jews in Russia suffered from the country's bloody politics, Jews were also key political actors themselves. Featured here are Leon Trotsky, who helped bring about Communist rule in Russia, and Natan Sharansky, who helped end it.

**LEON TROTSKY (1879-1940)**

The Communist revolutionary and Soviet leader who became known as Leon Trotsky was born as Lev Davidovich Bronstein. His family members were landowners and successful farmers in what is now Bereslavka, Ukraine. Although Trotsky as a child received a Jewish religious education, in later life he was an atheist, ambivalent about his Jewishness. Instead, Trotsky's commitment was to socialist revolution. As a teenager, he joined an underground cell opposed to Tsarist rule in Russia. Arrested in 1898 and exiled to Siberia, he escaped in 1902 and fled to London. He took the name Trotsky (apparently borrowing it from one of his jailers). For most of the next 15 years, he wandered through Europe, writing for socialist newspapers and developing his theory of permanent revolution – which called for the international working class to rise up and take power throughout Europe and the world.

In February 1917, the Tsarist monarchy, weakened by Russia's involvement in World War I, collapsed. In the period of uncertainty that followed, Trotsky returned to Russia and joined the Bolshevik Party. He played a pivotal role in helping the Bolsheviks (later renamed the Communists) seize control and establish a one-party state. A talented and ruthless leader and organizer during the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, he subsequently negotiated the Russian withdrawal from World War I and reorganized the communist Red Army into a powerful fighting force. Under Trotsky's military leadership, the Communists by 1922 had triumphed in the Civil War, incorporated large areas of the former Russian Empire into the Soviet Union, and through the Red Terror – which Trotsky enthusiastically supported and practiced – smashed any challengers to their authoritarian rule.

Trotsky was by this point the second most powerful man in the Soviet Union and heir apparent to the ailing Communist leader Vladimir Lenin. However, Trotsky – while a titan in revolutionary situations – was inept in day-to-day politics. Intellectually brilliant, his arrogance alienated many of his colleagues and he was outmanoeuvred by Joseph Stalin in their battle for control of the Party and the country. The animosity between Stalin and Trotsky was ideological as well as personal. Trotsky believed that the success of the Russian Revolution depended on spreading the revolution around the world while Stalin argued that the immediate focus should be on domestic concerns and building "Socialism in One Country": the Soviet Union.



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In 1929, Stalin expelled Trotsky from the Soviet Union. Moving from country to country, Trotsky inspired anti-Stalinist radicals around the world with his calls for communism and revolution. Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, Stalin had Trotsky's real or rumored supporters purged and executed. Trotsky himself survived two assassination attempts but was killed in Mexico in 1940 by an ice-axe wielded by one of Stalin's agents.

### IDA RUBINSTEIN (1883-1960)

Ida Rubinstein was a dancer, actress, art patron, and turn-of-the-20th century "It Girl." She grew up in Saint Petersburg in one of Russia's wealthiest families, owners of banks, sugar mills, and breweries. Highly educated and multi-lingual, she also studied music, dance, and theater. As a young woman, she traveled to Paris where she scandalized her conservative, upper-class family by appearing on stage in "indecent" garb. A brother-in-law had her committed to a mental asylum before her Russian relatives had her released and sent home to Saint Petersburg.

By 1906 however, she was independently rich and ready to resume her artistic career. Having inherited a fortune from her deceased parents, she began to commission, underwrite, and star in often-lavish theatrical productions. In 1908, she became notorious for appearing in a dance performance of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, wearing only a bra and a string of beads. In 1911, she joined the celebrated Ballet Russes and moved back to Paris. A limited ballerina but a celebrated beauty with powerful stage and sexual presence, she appeared mainly in mime roles. Her celebrity was further increased by appearing in an early silent film, by posing nude for famous painters, and for her off-stage love affairs with both sexes. For French audiences, her dark, exotic looks "embodied the erotic temptation of the East."

Rubinstein continued to dance and act until she was 45, starring in and producing numerous performances, and forming her own ballet troupe. While many critics dismissed her as a rich dilettante, she was widely recognized as a key patron of the arts in France. Born Jewish, she grew up Russian Orthodox and converted to Catholicism in 1936. When the Nazis invaded France, she fled to England. Ida Rubinstein spent much of the post-war years in Venice, living in seclusion. By 1960, when she died, this "idol of the fin de siècle" had been largely forgotten.

### BORIS PASTERNAK (1890-1960)

Boris Pasternak, the poet and novelist, was born in Moscow into a wealthy, cultured, and assimilated family. His father was a prominent painter, his mother a concert pianist. Boris trained to be a musician before giving it up to study philosophy in Russian and German universities.

But it was as a poet that Pasternak came to fame. His innovative lyrical poetry, part of a golden age of arts in Russia after the 1917 Communist Revolution, were and remain beloved. Pasternak took a generally positive response to the revolution. He refused to follow his family who fled to England, and by the early 1930s, he was lauded by the official Writers Union as the nation's premier poet due to his stripped-down historical poetry, his love poetry, and for his occasional paens to Stalin.



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Nonetheless, Pasternak was uneasy about the Socialist Realism style demanded of Soviet artists from 1932 and by the murderous silencing of many writers. In 1934, he used his enormous popularity (including with Stalin himself) to advocate on behalf of the recently arrested writer Osip Mandelstam. Pasternak's autobiography *Safe Conduct* was suppressed by authorities because it advocated that writers focus on art rather than politics. In 1937, he fell further from official favor when he declined to sign a writers' petition in favor of Stalin's show trials. While Pasternak avoided the outright persecution suffered by many Soviet artists, he withdrew from writing poetry, concentrating instead on producing much-admired translations of Shakespeare, Goethe, and others.

He also spent decades laboring on *Doctor Zhivago*, a novel about the life (and great love affair) of a poet-physician set against the backdrop of Russia's tumultuous early 20th century. In 1955, the Soviet authorities refused to publish it, describing it as libeling the Communist revolution. However, the novel was smuggled to the West where many critics greeted it as a landmark work of fiction. It also became a key episode in the cultural Cold War. The CIA tried to have it secretly circulated in the USSR and in 1958, Pasternak was announced as the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. The KGB responded by threatening Pasternak with exile or arrest and to send his mistress Olga Ivinskaya (the inspiration for the character of Lara in the book) to the gulag if he accepted the prize. Pasternak consequently declined the Nobel and died of lung cancer two years later. His work was generally banned and pilloried by Soviet authorities until 1988, when Mikhail Gorbachev finally approved the publication of *Doctor Zhivago*.

### LEV LANDAU (1908-1968)

The Nobel Prize-winning physicist Lev Davidovich Landau was born in Baku in what is today Azerbaijan. His father was an engineer, his mother a medical doctor. A prodigy in math and science and something of an "enfant terrible," Landau graduated from his Jewish high school at age 13, and attended the renowned center of Soviet physics, Leningrad State University, in 1924. Here, he was captured by the "ecstatic beauty" of quantum mechanics. By age 18 he was already publishing research. A government fellowship allowed him to spend almost two years studying in the west, where he struck up a close relationship with the great Danish physicist Niels Bohr.

In 1931, Landau returned to the Soviet Union and began producing original work on a wide spectrum of theoretical physics at an astonishing rate. However, his provocative behavior – he mercilessly criticized colleagues, had an iconoclastic sense of humor, and was an advocate of "free love" – drew official suspicion, as did his politics. In 1937, Landau was one of the scientists at the Ukrainian Physics and Technology Institute that came under investigation during Stalin's Great Purge. Landau moved to Moscow but in 1938 was arrested for possession of a pamphlet that accused Stalin of betraying socialism – Landau was a staunch believer in Communist principles and revolution – and claimed Stalin had inundated the country with "torrents of filth and blood." He spent a year in prison under interrogation, signed a coerced confession, and believed himself close to death. He was released in 1939 following pleas by Bohr and leading Soviet physicist Pyotr Kapitsa.

Fearing re-arrest, Landau reluctantly agreed to help the Soviet nuclear weapons program. When Stalin died in 1953 and the threat of persecution receded, Landau withdrew from classified work. By this point, he was a hero



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of Soviet society, one of the its most lionized scientists, and an influential and demanding figure in scientific thought and education. He received numerous Soviet and international honors, and in 1962 was awarded the Nobel Prize in physics for his pioneering theories on the super-fluidity of condensed matter, especially liquid helium. However, in that year he was severely injured in a car crash. Pronounced clinically dead, he eventually recovered his speech but never again worked. He died from his injuries and subsequent complications in 1968.

### **NATAN SHARANSKY (1948-)**

Natan Sharansky, human rights activist and symbol of the struggle of Soviet Jewry for freedom, was born in Stalino (Donetsk) in eastern Ukraine. His father was a journalist for a Communist Party newspaper and his family members were, in Sharansky's words, "absolutely assimilated Jews" except for their awareness and fear of Soviet anti-Semitism.

Gifted in chess and mathematics, Sharansky moved to Moscow in 1967, where he was educated at one of the USSR's most prestigious universities, the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology. The Six Day War of that year transformed Sharansky into a Zionist, and by 1973 he was taking part in demonstrations outside the Moscow Choral Synagogue against Soviet discrimination and demanding Jews be allowed to emigrate to Israel. In these demonstrations, he met his wife, Avital. The day after their marriage, Avital flew to Israel, one of a small number of Jews that the Soviets allowed to emigrate. However, Sharansky was forced to remain in the Soviet Union and increasingly came under official suspicion.

That suspicion grew as Sharansky became known as a leading Jewish "refusenik" and a key member of the broader dissident movement in the USSR. He was the English translator and spokesman for his "rabbi," the scientist and human rights activist Andrei Sakharov, and was a founding member of Helsinki Watch, which reported on Soviet violations of international human rights treaties. In 1976, Sharansky was accused of high treason and of spying for the US. The charges rested on the false evidence of Sharansky's roommate, who was a KGB informer. Sharansky endured 18 months of KGB interrogation before being convicted in a 1977 "show trial" and sentenced to 13 years of imprisonment.

His years in Russian prisons, including in one of the last Soviet labor camps, or gulags, included extensive periods in solitary confinement and special punishment cells. Only after a long hunger strike did authorities agree that he could receive a Book of Psalms, a gift from his wife. From these psalms, he began to learn Hebrew and deepened his connection with Judaism. Playing chess in his head was another key survival technique. Most importantly, Sharansky maintained his "inner freedom" by refusing to cooperate in any way with his jailers or the KGB.

Sharansky's wife led an international campaign on his behalf and his imprisonment became a key symbol of the persecution of Soviet Jewry. In 1985, in the largest-ever gathering of US Jews, 250,000 people came together in Washington to call for his release. The next year, he was freed by Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev as part of a "spy" swap. Sharansky flew immediately to Israel where he was greeted with a hero's welcome. His release helped pave the way for the mass migration of Soviet Jews and was a step toward the collapse of the



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Soviet Union. In recent years, Natan Sharansky has served as an Israeli politician and cabinet minister, chaired the Jewish Agency, and authored *Fear No Evil*, an acclaimed book about his struggle for freedom.

### **GARRY KASPAROV (1963-)**

Arguably the greatest chess player ever, Garry Kasparov was born in Baku, Soviet Azerbaijan as Garik Kimovich Weinstein. His father was a Russian Jew, his mother Armenian. Fearing anti-Semitism, he adopted his mother's surname when he was young. He would later move to Moscow following attacks on the Armenian minority in Azerbaijan.

A champion from childhood, at age 15 Kasparov became the youngest player ever to qualify for the Soviet Chess Championship. At 19, he was rated second in the world. No player, apart from Bobby Fischer, had risen so quickly. In the 1984 World Championship, Kasparov fought an epic contest against his Soviet rival, Anatoly Karpov. The first to win six games would be champion. After a series of draws, the contest still had not been concluded after 53 games, with Kasparov leading and one victory away from the title. The International Chess Federation (FIDE), citing fears for the players' health, then made the unprecedented decision to abandon the match. Kasparov was furious, and his relations with chess authorities would remain turbulent from then on. However, in 1985 he beat Karpov in a rematch and became, at age 22, the youngest ever world-champion. The Kasparov-Karpov duels created enormous interest and intrigue, including Kasparov accusing one of his assistants of selling his strategy to the Karpov team.

Once world champion, Kasparov feuded with the FIDE and eventually created a rival chess organization. He later regretted this splitting of the chess scene, which meant that there were two parallel world champions for much of his career. Nonetheless, Kasparov was generally considered the world's best player from 1985 until his retirement in 2005. Renowned for his aggressive, dynamic style, he brought chess to wider audiences through sometimes unorthodox means. He played 30 opponents simultaneously during a visit to Israel, winning every match. He also competed in famous chess battles against IBM supercomputer Deep Blue. His loss in one of these series was seen as a major breakthrough for Artificial Intelligence.

Kasparov is also a prominent human rights activist and a fierce critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Arrested and physically attacked on several occasions for demanding "authentic democracy" in Russia, he stood against Putin in the 2007 presidential elections before withdrawing, claiming the race was rigged. Citing potential threats to his life, Kasparov has in recent years spent little time in Russia and is now based in Croatia.