Empires do not necessarily impose uniformity of form and practice in all their realms, though they often do. The Tsarist Russian Empire did not treat all peoples and territories the same. Jews who lived beyond the Pale of Settlement — in Central Asia and the Caucasus — were regarded differently from their co-religionists in the Pale. The tsars treated Finland and Poland differently from Belorussia and Ukraine, and handled the Caucasus in yet another way. The Soviet Union never called itself an empire — although it was labeled as such by others — but it operated as one: the Soviet Bloc was an empire in function, if not in name. Formal and informal instruments of Soviet control existed over its client states. The degree varied with time and place, but over the nearly half-century of socialism in Eastern Europe, one could observe relatively uniform patterns of politics, economics, and culture. Soviet precedents were usually followed in the “satellite” countries of Eastern Europe, but this was not as much the case in regard to “Jewish policies.”

When the Soviet Bloc collapsed in 1989–91, 1.5 million Jews were able to reassess their Jewish identities and recreate Jewish public life. In a recent book (Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine: An Uncertain Ethnicity), I analyze how Jews in post-Communist Russia and Ukraine think, feel, and act about being Jewish. At the Frankel Institute, I turned from private beliefs to public expressions of Jewishness in post-Communist states, focusing mainly on Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and Hungary. This loosely comparative study of Jewish public institutions aims to determine the relative influence of the Communist period on their functioning, their respective pre-Communist traditions, external influences, demographics, and the attitudes of their constituents. Examination of the Communist period reveals a surprising degree of diversity among Soviet Bloc countries in the organization of Jewish public life. That, in
turn, speaks to two larger issues: the policies of the Soviet Bloc in regard to religion and ethnicity, and the influence of the Communist experience on post-Communist Jewry.

**Jewish Public Life under Communism**

Even in Stalinist times, the Bloc countries did not attempt to replicate completely Soviet policies regarding nationality (ethnicity) and religion. All Soviet citizens were classified and registered by *natsional’nost’*(ethnicity), Jews among them. Determined strictly by parentage, nationality was separate from religion, residence, language, or preference. Religion was not officially registered at all. After World War II, the Soviets abolished all public Jewish institutions — theaters, newspapers, journals, schools — except for synagogues, whose number and functioning were severely restricted. Yet individuals who had two Jewish parents had to register as Jews, whereas those with parents of different nationalities could choose one or the other. Thus, Jews were culturally Russianized but officially and socially regarded as Jews, and that was to their disadvantage. State policies and societal anti-Semitism resulted in mass emigration (1971–2009). Today there are four times as many Russian-speaking Jews outside the former USSR as there are within it.

In contrast to Soviet practice, nowhere in the Bloc was there a system of official *natsional’nost’*. In Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania, Jews were considered a religious group and their public institutions were religious ones.

In Hungary, Jews were never considered a separate ethnic group or “nationality.” After the Holocaust, when Jews had been singled out from Magyars, it would have been well-nigh impossible to suddenly classify Hungarian Jews as an ethnic or national group, which they vigorously denied. Few used a Jewish language. Their affiliations and identities had been mostly religious, even if, in many cases, nominal. Zionism had been weaker in Hungary than in most other Eastern and Central European states.

In Romania, the state flirted with the notion of a Jewish ethnic group in the first years after the war, but aside from Yiddish theater in Bucharest, all public manifestations of Jewishness were religious, again unlike the classificatory system of the Soviet Union. The Federation of Jewish Communities was controlled by Chief Rabbi Moses David Rosen, who was politically well-connected at home and abroad. The Federation sponsored extensive welfare and educational networks whose ex-
tent and longevity were unparalleled anywhere in the Bloc and completely unknown in the Soviet Union.

In Poland and Bulgaria, the state recognized both religious and secular organizations of Jews, but did not officially register their ethnicity. In Poland, however, the anti-Semitic events of 1968 that resulted in mass emigration of Jews revealed that confidential records of individual Jews’ ethnicity existed.

**Post-Communist Developments**

There are some post-Communist countries where the number of Jews is too small, and the population too elderly, to sustain Jewish public life except on a very modest scale. Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic are most likely to have viable Jewish communities in the next two decades. In none will the intensive, nearly self-contained Jewish life that existed before World War II revive. Jewish languages are no longer used, religious commitment is rare, and Jews everywhere are acculturated to the majority cultures. Moreover, outside of Russia and Ukraine, as urban, highly educated people, the vast majority of Jews in states that are in the European Union see themselves as “globalized, transnational Europeans,” and are seen as such by others. For them, neither national nor religious affiliation is compelling. Jewishness is part of their lives, but rarely dominates it. For a minority of activists, being Jewish is a nearly full-time “occupation,” but for most it is an identity to be invoked, even celebrated, only on occasion. There is no significant emigration to Israel, though there is much interaction with that country.

Nevertheless, several new features of public Jewish life have emerged in the “post-imperial” period since 1989. Much has changed. First, in contrast to the Communist era, there are intensive relations and exchanges with Israel: tourism, study, trade, and Zionist youth and cultural activity. Similarly, public Jewish organizations have been accepted into international Jewish bodies and are active in diaspora affairs. Second, Chabad has established strong, if sometimes controversial, presences in all the states, even where Chabad had never before existed. Third, although most religious institutions are officially Orthodox, non-Orthodox alternatives have appeared, which are especially appealing to those who consider themselves Jews but are not considered so by halakha. Finally, a wide range of Jewish organizations has developed, as have Jewish schools, journals, newspapers, social clubs, and welfare institutions. Jewish public life — visible, unimpeded — attracts a much larger and diverse constituency than it did under Communism.

The main issues the organized communities face are restoration of public and private Jewish property, developing attractive and meaningful non-religious forms of Jewishness, determining criteria for inclusion in formal Jewish communities and organizations, and dealing with anti-Semitism. Of course, each country’s circumstances differ; my project attempts to describe and analyze both the situation and prospects for several of them. In general, the dissolution of Communism and the Soviet Bloc has opened up new opportunities for Jewish identity, expression, and organization. In the past 25 years, much has changed for the better as a result of efforts by diaspora and Israeli Jews, and, of course, by local Jews, to reconstruct Jewish communal life in the formerly socialist countries. But their Jewish populations may be in terminal decline and the degree to which younger generations will commit to public life in the former Soviet Bloc is uncertain. Secular Jewishness dominates in the former Soviet Bloc, but its ability to command loyalty and survive across generations is questionable.