JDC's Impact in the Former Soviet Union

11 countries. 11 time zones. Over 83,000 Jews impacted.

The Largest Jewish Humanitarian Relief Effort Since World War II

2020
Right now, tens of thousands of the world’s most vulnerable Jews — many of them elderly Holocaust survivors — face cruel hunger, debilitating medical issues, and freezing winters alone.

Across the former Soviet Union, from Western Ukraine to the Russian Far East, there is a quiet crisis hidden in plain sight.
Elderly Jews in this region have seen — and endured — it all. Victims of both circumstance and oppression, they have faced the unimaginable: Many are Holocaust survivors; all of them lived through the worst days of the Soviet regime. Though many were well-educated and trained as doctors, engineers, and musicians, today they eke out lives in unthinkable poverty.

Now, with pensions as low as $2 a day, little (if any) family to rely on, and no personal savings or government safety net, these Jews are all alone. They are often forced to make the grim choice between heat and food. Most times, they give up meals or medicine just to get through the brutal winter. Many are bedridden and have no family.

They are the poorest Jews in the world — and their lives are on the line.

Without JDC's aid, they simply would not survive.
Many American Jews are just a few generations removed from the “Old Country.” Think of your great-grandparents. For them, Kyiv, Kishinev, and Minsk weren’t mythical names from family folklore; they were home. Today, those cities and towns — and scores of others like them — are home to tens of thousands of Jews in desperate need.

For the Jews of Eastern Europe, the story didn’t end with the Holocaust. Several decades later, the story didn’t end for Soviet Jews with the Freedom March in Washington D.C., when thousands of Jews marched in solidarity for the rights of their brothers and sisters. Through Communist oppression and the turmoil of the post-Soviet 1990s, the region’s Jewish communities have always been there, holding onto Jewish identity for decades against all odds.

Today, we have an opportunity to answer the call and do our part in helping those who need us most. JDC’s Jewish humanitarian relief effort lets those Jews — who could so easily be our own family, who might as well be us but for a few accidents of fate — know we see and value them, and we will continue to be there for them. No matter what.
We’re the global Jewish 9-1-1.

JDC has a long, boots-on-the-ground tradition of helping Jews in crisis or need. For over 100 years, we’ve partnered with Jews around the world to bring lifesaving relief to our community’s neediest members.

We know how to work in the former Soviet Union, bringing vital aid to communities, despite extreme conditions, isolation by distance, and/or political conflict. No other organization in the world has the know-how, the experience, the history, or infrastructure across the globe to get the job done like JDC. We are the only organization entrusted with reparations funding to care for Holocaust survivors in post-Soviet states, and we are fiercely committed to lifting the lives of the world’s poorest Jews.
**Food**

We deliver food packages, provide hot lunches at our centers, and distribute food cards that allow individuals to buy groceries at local supermarkets.

**Medical Support**

The elderly receive medicines, medical equipment loans, and medical consultations, either by covering the costs at clinics or with the assistance of volunteer doctors.

**Winter Relief**

In the coldest months, we provide financial assistance in order to pay for utility bills as well as winter clothing, blankets, and fuel.

**SOS Emergency Fund**

JDC provides one-time emergency grants to elderly facing unexpected medical needs and other urgent, unexpected expenses.

**Jewish Holiday Packages**

On holidays like Passover and Rosh Hashanah, we deliver special packages to help needy Jews celebrate.
Liudmila lives just a 10-minute walk from the nearest supermarket, but she’s entirely dependent on her JDC care team for food, medicine, personal hygiene, and more. Disabled all her life, Liudmila hasn’t been outside in nine years.

“JDC is the sunshine in my window,” she said. “Since I have a cataract, my homecare worker reads to me. She bathes me, she cooks for me, she does laundry for me, she cleans. She is my eyes, my legs, and my ears.”

Ludmila — a retired librarian and the daughter of two World War II veterans —has only $40 a month to cover essentials like food and medicine.

“We Belarusians have lived through so many terrifying tragedies — Chernobyl, the war, the Holocaust,” she said. “It’s necessary to support those who are in need, and there are plenty of us. Without JDC support ... I can’t even imagine how I’d make it through.”

Across 11 time zones and 11 countries, JDC provides more than 18 million hours of home care each year and operates 64 Hesed social welfare centers. But that scale isn’t what Ludmila thinks about each day.

For her, JDC is closer to home, more intimate: a hot meal delivered, a comforting conversation, a dignified life.

“This organization has helped me since 1998, and I’ve never encountered anything other than utter kindness and understanding. They know the needs of a person,” she said. “It’s not only the aid they provide — they just get it.”

“JDC is the sunshine in my window.”
Our work today is part of a continuum of care and connection that stretches back to 1914.

Following World War I, JDC helped support 58,000 Jewish children orphaned by war, disease, and pogroms in Central and Eastern Europe, and in 1919, we established the Palestine Orphan Committee to care for over 4,000 local orphans.

In 1921, as civil war and a prolonged famine brought new hardships to the war-devastated regions of the former Russian empire, JDC intensified its partnership with the American Relief Administration, becoming the largest donor to its food programs and helping nearly two million Jews to survive in Ukraine alone.

Following the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939, JDC opened shelters and soup kitchens that by 1941 were helping keep 630,000 Jews alive across Poland, including those trapped inside the Warsaw Ghetto.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust: JDC shipped in some 227 million pounds of scarce supplies to meet the immediate needs of tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors, many of whom were hovering near death.

We also ran Displaced Persons (DP) camps, flying in squads of doctors and nurses and coordinating counseling, job training, and educational programs.

Through it all, we continued to nourish both body and soul — providing traditional Jewish items, and organizing Jewish holiday celebrations. Even during Soviet times, we found ways to stay connected with the Jews throughout this region.

In more recent decades, we expanded our efforts to reach at-risk Jewish children and families. Responding to Argentina’s 2001-02 economic crisis, JDC helped create and fund a network of 75 community social assistance centers that were assisting over 36,000 Jews suddenly plunged into poverty. We pioneered the use of supermarket debit cards to provide food aid efficiently and with dignity — a model soon adopted in the former Soviet Union.

For more than 100 years, we’ve built on our proud tradition of helping the most vulnerable and innovating to provide the best possible care.
The next generation is stepping up.

Three decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, JDC is empowering thousands of young Jews to volunteer by giving back to their communities and committing to take care of the most vulnerable. In 44 cities, from Lviv to Khabarovsk, they visit elderly Jews on holidays, deliver food and medicine, complete household repairs, collect oral histories, and more. Simply put, these teens and young professionals ensure that the world's poorest Jews never feel alone.

Catalyzed by JCCs, summer camps, leadership training seminars, family retreats, and more, these young people are proof that the spark of Jewishness was not extinguished in Eastern and Central Europe, even after a tragic history. Jewish life is re-emerging, not just with an eye toward the future, but with care, love, and attention for those who lived through such dark times and who need us now more than ever.
Masha is playing the long game.

"Today, we’re taking care of the older generation, and tomorrow, someone younger will be taking care of us," the volunteer from Minsk, Belarus, said. "If, when I’m a grandmother, volunteers come to visit me, that means I did something right in my time and set an example."

A graduate of Active Jewish Teens (AJT), the JDC youth program in the former Soviet Union in partnership with BBYO, Masha is one of more than 6,000 people who participate annually in JDC volunteering efforts. Collectively, these initiatives reached 32,000 vulnerable people last year.

Almost 600 miles southeast in Kharkiv, Ukraine, Ilya doesn’t need to look to the future to fuel his passion for volunteering. His family is proof enough.

With his grandmother and great-grandmother receiving holiday food packages and other services from JDC and his mother educating the next generation at Kharkiv’s Jewish preschool, he knows both sides of the story.

"I was born Jewish, but when I volunteer in the community, that’s when I feel like I’m actively choosing a Jewish life," said Ilya, an AJT graduate and a counselor for his teen club. "And it’s more than that. I know everything I’m doing now is just the beginning, and there’s so much more ahead."
You can get involved.

Now that you know the story, you can make a life-saving difference for tens of thousands of elderly Jewish people in need.

We need your help.
Here's how you can join the relief effort:

Donate
Give generously and save Jewish lives.

Join our mailing list
Stay up-to-date with time-sensitive updates and stories from the field.

Host or attend an event
To address this crisis, the story of those often forgotten must be told, so the Jewish community can mobilize like we have so many times before.
Let our people LIVE.

The world’s poorest Jews are counting on you. Make a generous donation today. Together, we can end the suffering of our Jewish brothers and sisters.

Thank You! Spasibo! Todah!