

History and the Jewish State

By [BRUCE BENNETT](#) | May 9, 2008

TODAY MARKS THE RELEASE OF TWO VERY DIFFERENTLY PITCHED, YET VERY WELL-MADE AND MARVELOUSLY COMPLEMENTARY NEW DOCUMENTARY FILMS ABOUT 20th-century Jewry — [Laura Bialis](#)'s "Refusenik" and [Adam Hootnick](#)'s "Unsettled."



Foundation for Documentary Projects

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IN THE STREETS Activists in Los Angeles march for Soviet Jewry at a 1969 Simchat Torah rally.

[Moscow](#). Even under cover of darkness, the Soviet Jews' religious and political consciousness, though banned, reached its peak in the aftermath of Israel's victory in the Six-Day War.

But as dissidents such as Mr. Sharansky took increasing risks and suffered increasing consequences as a result, the support and participation of a grassroots movement grew in [America](#), and that angle of the story becomes the fascinating center of "Refuseniks." Initially dismissed, not entirely inaccurately, by the [KGB](#) as "a bunch of students and housewives," Jewish-American activists eventually succeeded in forging an American foreign policy that became instrumental in forcing the Soviet Union to free Mr. Sharansky and others from the Russian prisons and mental institutions where they were illegally incarcerated and tortured, and ultimately to resettlement in Israel.

For its part, Mr. Hootnick's "Unsettled," which opens at the Two Boots Pioneer Theater, takes a ruthlessly nonjudgmental yet keenly sympathetic look at both sides of the Israeli government's controversial 2005 expulsion of Jewish settlers in the [Gaza Strip](#). Focusing on six young people very much caught up in the fray, "Unsettled" is unceasingly dramatic and observant at a character level that no amount of proselytizing from right, left, or center could equal.

Particularly effective is the use of two young Gaza lifeguards, Lior and Meir. All of 21 years old and religiously devoted to surfing, getting stoned, and girls — not the Torah — Lior provides a remarkably apolitical face for a conflict that is unblinkingly depicted in all its messy, miserable, and heartbreaking facets. Mr. Hootnick's cameras unflinchingly go for the gut as they document ambivalence, anxiety, rage, and regret on all sides.

The climax of "Unsettled," in which people we've followed throughout the film finally face or facilitate eviction, is profoundly, well, unsettling. A preteenage settler demands to know whether a young IDF soldier is "a robot Jew," as the young soldier struggles to march without expression through a taunting, physically confrontational crowd. In one unforgettable scene, a weeping IDF infantryman and his older commanding officer share a drink at the dinner table of a settler family before beginning the apparently necessary formality of physically carrying three generations of Israelis out the door of their home and onto buses bound for resettlement camps.

Both the breathless, long-view engagement of history of "Refusenik" and the expert, emotionally nuanced, and ideologically impartial documentary journalism of "Unsettled" admirably attest to the fact that contemporary nonfiction filmmaking is often one's best bet for a truly memorable and provocative trip to the local multiplex.

Ms. Bialis's film, opening at Quad Cinema on Friday, is a thorough and engaging nonfiction account of the plight of Soviet Jews systematically oppressed under communism as they had been under the tsars, and denied the right to emigrate to [Israel](#) once the Jewish state was formed in 1948. Using historical footage and contemporary interviews with [Natan Sharansky](#), [Yuli Edelshtein](#), and other prime movers in the multi-decade struggle to free Soviet Jewry, Ms. Bialis first outlines the history of communist oppression and Russian Jewish resistance.

"In the street I found out what nationality I am," one of the dozens of candid voices in the film says about a childhood in the endemically (yet unofficially) anti-Semitic [USSR](#). The film's individual portraits of self-identification and acceptance of a religious tradition that, in the doctrinaire eyes of both [the Kremlin](#) and the most gentile citizens of the Soviet Union, meant that there was "something intrinsically wrong with your soul," are remarkable for their unforced, and sometimes unspoken, intimate heroism.

Stalin's brief diplomatic flirtation with the newly born Jewish state notwithstanding, for the majority of the future refuseniks growing up in the 1950s, "Israel seemed like another planet." But there were clandestine efforts to help make it seem more attainable, including secret instruction in Hebrew, exchanges of pirated, hand-typed copies of [Leon Uris](#)'s banned novel "Exodus" (read overnight in single sittings), and educational support from the Jewish homeland via [Mossad](#) agents headquartered at the Israeli embassy in

