

Exclusive: Interview with a Soviet spokesman on anti-Semitism

By Tabitha Petran
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MOSCOW

A SOVIET SPOKESMAN told this correspondent that the tragic fate of the Jewish writers in the latter years of the Stalin regime was not the result of an isolated anti-Semitic drive, but rather a part of an anti-intellectual campaign which brought a similar fate to many nationalities — Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Byelo-Russian and Armenian.

The spokesman was L. F. Ilyichev, press chief of the Soviet Foreign Ministry. Asked about the article in *Folkshtimme*, a Yiddish-language Communist publication in Poland, which last April reported the death and disappearance of many leading Soviet Jewish writers and artists, and the dissolution of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, Ilyichev characterized the article as "slanderous and anti-Soviet." He said it was his personal opinion that the authors of the article "had picked up facts and distorted them according to a certain tendency." It was, he said, "an intermixture of certain real facts and certain fantasies. The authors used the real facts to make the fantasies look true."

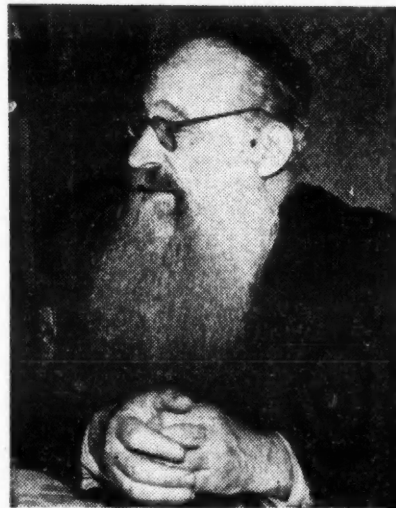
CONSTITUTION QUOTED: The "true facts," he said, "concern those Jewish writers who were charged and condemned unjustifiably. But the conclusions this article draws as to the persecution of the Jewish people and their culture is a slanderous one. Any objective-minded person can see that it is impossible to speak of discrimination in the U.S.S.R. According to our Constitution, any national dis-

crimination is criminal, and it is condemned by public opinion. There are many different nationalities, including Jewish, represented in Soviet art, literature, science, and we are all proud of them."

Ilyichev said that the "good names" of the Jewish writers unjustly condemned have been restored and that their works are now being widely republished throughout the U.S.S.R. He then noted the fate of writers of many nationalities.

Chief Rabbi Solomon Schliiffer of Moscow emphasized the same point in an earlier interview with the *GUARDIAN*. He said: "Together with Jewish leaders, Russian professional and cultural leaders were also arrested. Therefore, we didn't regard the arrest of Jewish leaders as having an anti-Semitic character." He added: "All the Jewish people are building the Soviet state. There is no Jewish question in any part of Soviet life. During [Security Chief] Beria's regime there were isolated manifestations of anti-Semitism in different places. But even under Beria there was never any state anti-Semitic doctrine."

"MISTAKES CORRECTED": Ilyichev said that case reviews were still going on



RABBI SOLOMON SCHLIFFER
He gave his views too

and that people were still being rehabilitated. He declared: "We have corrected our mistakes toward the Jewish people as well as our mistakes toward other nationalities. Discrimination is not a problem here. We have many difficult problems to solve but not this one."

He explained that the Soviet government's policy was to issue no statements on any of the Soviet victims of past mis-

carriages of justice. Statements were made only in the case of the leaders of the Polish Communist Party, who were victims of the 1938 purges, and of the early Hungarian CP leader Bela Kun. The reason, he said, was that these cases involved political parties and foreign ones at that.

(The Soviet Government apparently considers the whole question of the secret Khrushchev report—whose existence it will neither affirm or deny—and of the victims of the purges as an internal matter.)

On Aug. 11 the N. Y. Times reported that for the first time a public confirmation of the Khrushchev report appeared in Pravda. Ed.

Ilyichev said firmly that there are not now, and never have been in the USSR, any quotas or discrimination directed against the Jews or any nationality. Admission to higher educational institutions is decided by competitive exams (industrial workers and men released from the armed forces get some preference). There are so many more applicants than there are places open, he said, that some who are not admitted might complain of discrimination. But he knew of no such complaints, he said, and if there were any, they had no basis. Applicants must state their nationality, he said, but in a multi-national state like the U.S.S.R., where all

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AN EDITORIAL STATEMENT

Anti-Semitism and the Soviet Union

HUMANELY-CONCERNED AMERICANS will not agree with Soviet Foreign Ministry press chief I. F. Ilyichev that the question of anti-Semitism in the U.S.S.R. is an internal matter; as they would not contend that anti-Negro practices in the United States are an internal concern only of this country. Or that the Rosenberg Case was a private American matter.

Nor can these same Americans—among whom are those of the highest good will toward the Soviet Union—be fully reassured by the lack of candor evidenced by Soviet officials seeking to maintain the position that anti-Semitic occurrences in their country are matters of internal concern only. All injustice is a matter of

universal concern.

Humanely-concerned Americans—with whom the people of the GUARDIAN associate themselves—stand together in abhorrence of anti-Semitism and all other forms of discrimination, of registration of peoples by race, color, nationality or other group differentiation; of quota systems however rationalized and wherever existing.

We learn with relief and all possible satisfaction that amends are being made where possible and that restoration of suppressed culture is taking place; yet we cannot regard executions of Jewish leadership and resulting terrorization as in any way different from legal lynch-

ings with which Americans are all too familiar.

That they have occurred in a socialist society, even despite a tradition of law making such acts criminal and punishable, compels the conclusion that even such a society cannot in 38 years wipe out centuries-old prejudice, nor make a whole people proof against the corruption of power or the power of corrupt forces to regenerate and exploit it.

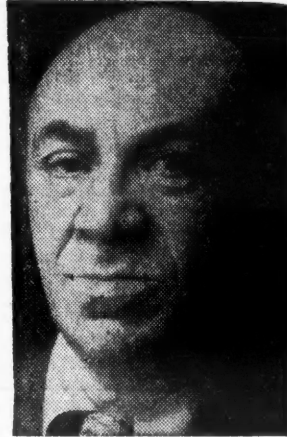
All humanely-concerned Americans await full reassurance; and many look to the Soviet Union to set a needed world example in the complete elimination of even the semblance of barriers between peoples making up a nation.

—THE EDITOR



Revival

The publishing house Soviet Writer has announced that a six-volume edition of the work of Peretz Markish (l.), one of the executed Jewish writers, will be published in Russian and Yiddish in 1957. Next year there will appear also the selected works of Itzik Feffer, the celebrated Yiddish writer (c.), who toured the U.S. during the war with Solomon Mikhoels, the Soviet Yiddish actor (r.). They too have been reported to be victims of the purge. From Moscow comes word that Jewish songs are once again being heard on the radio, records are on sale in the shops, and Jewish ballets performed.



cialists were given other posts in industry, agriculture and other branches. Never at any time during the Soviet power were there any quotas for Jews or persons of some other nationality, and there are not now."

DISPLACED PERSONS: Ilyichev also revealed that the Soviet government is discussing the resettling in their old homelands of the national groups uprooted or dispersed during and after the war. These include the Crimean Tartars who were held guilty as a national group of the treachery committed by some of them during the war.

"As you can judge from certain material," he said in an apparent reference to the secret Khrushchev report (see GUARDIAN, Aug. 6), "some wrong steps were taken towards these people. These nationalities were not denied the right to work; they have been working in both industry and agriculture. Therefore the question is not such a pressing one. It is a difficult question because other peoples are now living in their old places and the question arises as to what to do with them. Some nationalities held a wrong position during the war. We can't look abstractly at the situation that existed then: it was a question of the life or death of the Soviet Union. That's why it's not possible immediately to take certain actions on this question."

Soviet spokesman

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nationalities are equal, this is not discrimination.

WHAT KHRUSHCHEV SAID: Asked about a N. Y. Times report of June 10 that Soviet CP First Secy. Nikita Khrushchev had told a French Socialist delegation that the U.S.S.R. restricts the number of Jews in professional positions, Ilyichev said: "This dispatch for the most part does not correspond with reality." What Khrushchev said, he explained, was that after the Revolution some of the U.S.S.R.'s national republics did not have their own national trained core of key people, that these cadres at the time were largely Russian. But now the Revolution was almost 40 years old, new national cadres had been created and the people of these Republics were demanding a place for them.

"It is quite understandable," Ilyichev said, "that any people should want to create their own cadres and prefer their leading ones to be of their own nationality. But this doesn't mean that able Jewish people are not and will not be promoted. There are hundreds of thousands of them holding positions in our public life. In the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidjan, created by the Soviet government in response to the requests of representatives of the Jewish people, all leading positions could have been occupied by Jews, but they did not want to hold all such positions, and some are held by Russians since there are also Russians living there. Many Jewish people did not want to go to Birobidjan and remained in Russia, the Ukraine, etc., where they are represented in the leading cadres."

POLICY VIOLATIONS: Ilyichev conceded that there had been violations of official policy against discrimination in the past. He said that "perhaps at certain offices and enterprises certain directors had followed a policy contrary to our government policy." He said the government had been making a great effort to move people into productive enterprise and from the cities into agriculture. In this process "certain cases may have occurred when people were moved according to nationality, that is, heads of offices may have violated government policy. Later some directors were removed because of mistakes. It would be difficult to say they were removed for anti-Semitism, but these things are interconnected. Cases of discrimination would be a matter for the trade unions. Such cases would be

investigated and condemned by them."

He was asked to explain how his statement could be reconciled with that of CP Central Committee Secy. Ekaterina Furtsseva's to the GUARDIAN. She had said that in the past in departments where there was a heavy concentration of Jews, steps were taken to transfer them to equally good positions in other enterprises. Ilyichev secured from Mme. Furtsseva this explanation:

In her interview with the GUARDIAN,

she meant that "if at some time there had taken place changes in office personnel, these changes were dictated by the economic needs of the country and under no circumstances were aimed at any discrimination of persons of any nationality. If a chief of an office or department found that in his office there existed over-saturation of a certain group of specialists, then proceeding from the economic needs of the country and with no reference to nationality, some of the spe-

A PICTURE OF WHAT HAPPENED

A reporter draws some conclusions

MOSCOW. IN A TWO-MONTH VISIT in the U.S.S.R. this reporter has spoken with many people on "the Jewish question"—both Jews and non-Jews. On the basis of these talks certain conclusions can be drawn: As Jewish cultural leaders were among the victims of the purges, so were the cultural leaders of many nationalities. As Jewish cultural institutions were closed down, so too, in the drive against "cosmopolitanism" [a catch-all phrase of the later Stalin era to describe persons influenced by "bourgeois, decadent, rootless" culture—Ed.], were many others, including Moscow's Institute of Oriental Studies, one of the oldest institutes in the country.

In my talks I got this picture of what transpired:

Before the war anti-Semitism was virtually non-existent; countenancing it was unthinkable. During the war Hitler's propaganda had its effect: it made Jews feel themselves as Jews and others conscious of the fact that they were Jews. In this country, where pogroms are centuries old, it evoked a response among some, especially in rural areas. Many countryfolk moved into the cities after the war, in some cases bringing the poison with them. But the government took measures to eradicate it. People were arrested and punished for anti-Semitic acts and utterances. The government campaign apparently was successful.

SPY HYSTERIA: A few years later, however, there developed in the U.S.S.R., with the intensified resistance to the Cold War, a spy hysteria. Unprincipled persons connected with some government offices (Beria's group is often mentioned) took advantage of the tense situation. They worked up a "spy scare,"

using the term "Zionist" to put the spy label on many prominent Jews and even non-Jews. The treason trials in several Eastern European countries (now conceded to be frame-ups) added fuel to the flame. The "doctors' case" early in 1953 was the culmination.

The underhanded nature of this deliberately-provoked "anti-Zionist" spy scare is evident in the fact that its promoters never dared to come out openly with anti-Semitic slogans. But the spy scare, coupled with the dismantling of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, produced widespread fear among the Jewish community. During this period, there were grave injustices.

RABBI COMMENTS: After the elimination of Beria and, perhaps equally important, the thorough-going reorganization of the Security Administration, all of this died down. The hysteria came to an end. Some Jews still feel uneasy about the future, though I found the Jews in general divided on this question. A story circulated in Moscow's foreign colony is that Jews are afraid to apply for admission to the new school being opened for the training of rabbis. Moscow's chief Rabbi Solomon Schliffer said such stories "are just made up," and that he had received letters from all over the country proposing candidates. He said Jewish Bibles, prayer books and religious calendars are being published; that his congregation is increasing; that special Jewish food can be bought easily, as well as Jewish religious objects; that the state bread factory sells matzoth very cheaply; that state shops will soon sell kosher meat at state prices; and that the state organization will soon open a Jewish cafeteria in Moscow.

Had there been a drive against Jewish culture? The poet Alexei Surkov, who

is secretary of the Soviet Writers Union, said that there had been no such drive although "the false case drawn up by Beria against the Anti-Fascist Jewish Committee had an especially painful effect because such wonderful people were lost." He attributed the disappearance of Jewish publications largely to two factors:

1. The strong tendency toward assimilation after the Revolution, especially among the younger generation. This, he said, reached the point where it was "a rare case" when the youth spoke the language of their fathers.
2. The devastation during the war of western Russia and the Ukraine, where large centers of Jewish population were located. Minsk, for example, where 35% of the population had been Jewish, and where there had been Jewish schools, press and cultural activities, was totally destroyed. When it was restored after the war, its population had almost completely changed. The same was true of other centers of Jewish life.

NO EXCITEMENT: Millions of Jews were killed by Hitler's legions despite efforts to evacuate them. Many were saved and sent with other evacuees beyond the Urals. Some decided to stay on there after the war. (You can meet them in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and presumably other Asian Republics, living and working as do citizens of all other nationalities, without a trace of discrimination.) Of course others came back, but the war had destroyed most of the old Jewish centers.

Surely national hostilities have not been entirely eliminated; this includes not only anti-Semitism but hostility between Armenians and Georgians and other peoples in the Caucasus and Caspian regions.

—Tabitha Petran