

# SOVIET JEWS - MYTH AND REALITY

Stephen Shenfield looks at the situation of Jews in the Soviet Union

People ask me whether my interest in researching Soviet affairs has anything to do with my family background. It is true, there is a family connection. I first heard Russian spoken as a child: my grandmother would recite vast reams of Pushkin and other classical poets to me. I didn't understand, of course, but the language has always felt familiar as a result. In 1924 she brought my father to England from Kharkov, where he was born in 1919. From her I learned something (too little, and it's now too late) of those terrible times of civil war, famine and banditry (her husband and brother-in-law were shot down in the street by armed men for no known reason). And I treasure the tattered Russian reader with which my father started school just before he left.

When my grandmother died, among her papers we discovered letters from relatives in Moscow of whose existence she had never informed us. We have made contact with a number of them — a varied bunch — and some are now in New York, others still in Moscow or Kharkov.

But in answer to people's question about family motives, I reply that my conscious motives are intellectual and political. When I first started on Soviet Studies, I was concerned mainly with sorting out my confused political views by undertaking a serious comparison of different social and economic systems. More recently, my main motive has been the promotion of East-West understanding for the sake of peace and disarmament.

All the same, my encounter with the USSR has forced me — a person at an advanced stage in the process of assimilation and not especially interested in "Jewish problems" — to reflect on the meaning of "Jewish identity". For here a person of Jewish origin is fairly free to choose whether or not s/he wants to be considered a Jew. Over there "Jew" is a nationality alongside "Russian", "Ukrainian", "Uzbek" etc, as distinct from the Soviet *citizenship* they all share. It's entered on your internal passport and everyone is highly aware of it, though to the outsider the strong consciousness of nationality on the part of most Soviet people seems quite disproportionate to the real differences between one nationality and another. I have always been much more struck by what they all have in common as Soviet people.

A foreign Jew in the USSR is, I think, perceived as a little less alien than a foreign non-Jew (this refers to Ashkenazim). You are somehow

attached to a category which is "ours" ("our Jews"). There may be a flicker of (distasteful) recognition in the eyes of the soldier who inspects your passport at customs as he mutters to his colleague (there are a pair of them sitting there): "Zhid!" (Yid). In other cases, I hasten to add, the recognition is of a more friendly kind.

At first, looking at your face and before noticing your clothes, a Soviet person may even mistake you for "one of ours" (bloody cheek!). It happened that the Russian teacher from the USSR at our university first met me at a gathering being held for some Soviet visitors. 'Are you from Voronezh?' he asked me. "No," I replied, "are you from Birmingham?"

Ignoring anti-semitism is much more difficult in the USSR. Minimising your awareness is the best you can do. Any Soviet Jewish loyalist will assure you that the problem has been exaggerated. And this is so, though not to the degree claimed. But it is bad enough to make you feel morally obliged (or is it just a matter of dignity?) to affirm that you are a Jew, where you might not do so here.

In trying to explain the position of Soviet Jews, you are up against two myths: the myth of Soviet propaganda, according to which anti-semitism does not and cannot exist in the USSR and is anyway not of great significance; and the myth of crude Zionist and anti-Soviet propaganda, according to which anti-semitism permeates the whole State and society, something like Nazi Germany before they got round to the final solution. The reality is vastly more complex and fluid.

Last summer, on a language course in Moscow, I met an Australian Jew who had grown up in Minsk. An ex-Communist, he now explores the USSR, and especially the area he came from, with as much objectivity as he can muster. He was in fact the first person I have met who has a strong Jewish identity that is Yiddish-based and anti-Zionist. He was familiar with the situation of Jews in many different places.

The picture I got from him was one of astonishing local variation. The Jews in town X were under severe pressure, while in town Y they were doing very well for themselves (perhaps too well for their own good, he thought) and occupied quite a few important posts. The situation varies from one scientific institute, for example, to another: in one the director is an anti-semite and has squeezed all Jews out; in another the director actually likes

working with Jews. On the whole I have the impression that discrimination in employment and higher education is now very bad — but at the same time Jews are occasionally appointed to responsible positions.

My main point is not that things are not quite as bad for Soviet Jews as they are painted. They are in truth bad enough. What is more important is that there are forces at work within the Soviet system tending to make things *worse* and forces tending to make things *better*. If this dynamism is not understood, this leads both to defeatism about the chances of improvement and to complacency about the dangers of deterioration.

Of the underlying factors which to some extent protect Soviet Jews, I would single out three:

(a) the desire of many Soviet managers and officials to make full use of the abilities of Jews in the economy and other fields;

(b) the human decency of very many Soviet people (I won't venture a proportion), which they are able to express by means of the internationalist component of the official ideology;

(c) the fear on the part of some not-so-decent officials of the influence of foreign Jews on Western policy (exaggerated in their own minds).

Opposition to wasteful discrimination on national grounds is typical of reformist officials concerned about raising economic efficiency. Their position is now strengthened by the accession to power of Gorbachev. The cutting-off of emigration also helps Jews who want to stay, as the "security" rationale of discrimination is thereby somewhat weakened.

Antisemitism is most closely associated with the more virulent varieties of Russian nationalism. Although Russian nationalism is a strong undercurrent in Soviet life, its full expression is hampered by the fact that the official ideology remains at least semi-internationalist. National prejudices can therefore be attacked from within the official ideology.

Back in Khrushchev's time, Yevgenii Yevtushenko did exactly this in his poem *Babi Yar*. A poet who does the same more recently is Novella Matveeva:

*You posed me the tricky question:*

*How do I relate to the nations?*

*Seriously.*

*Zealously and troubled, I reply:*

*I relate to the International.*

Strana priboya, 1983

Similarly, Nazi-type ideas which exist in the USSR about secret Jewish control

of the Western world have been attacked within the context of the anti-Zionist campaign by means of Marxist analysis; the absurdity of the concept of "Jewish capital"; the dominant weight of non-Jewish capitalists in the USA etc. Anti-semitic stereotypes are also combatted by articles about "good Jews" such as the Israeli Communist lawyer Felicia Langer, who defends Palestinians.

In their efforts to moderate Western policy towards the USSR, Soviet propagandists try to cultivate Jewish as well as non-Jewish Westerners, including some influential Jewish figures. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintains some contacts with Israelis, sending out signals that if Israeli policy changed the USSR would want to restore normal relations with Israel. Soviet antisemitism is of course a great embarrassment in this work, and something of an embarrassment even in dealing with non-Jewish foreigners.

The historical evidence also suggests that improvements in the situation of Soviet Jews are at least conceivable. Soviet Jewish loyalists are proud of the role played by Jews in the Revolution and in the Soviet State in its early period as well as in the War. (This has its shameful side: Jews used to be prominent in the security police.) Anti-semitism is not one of the evils *inherent* in the Soviet system as such (there are many other evils which are).

How are we to interpret the current "anti-Zionist campaign" in the USSR, in which quite a few Jews take part? Zionists see it as a transparently camouflaged anti-semitic campaign. The official Soviet line is that Soviet anti-Zionism is in no way anti-semitic. My own research brings me to the conclusion that both these claims are half-truths.

First, horrifying anti-semitic material is published in the USSR in the guise either of attacks on "Zionism" (where the context often makes it impossible to read "Zionist" as anything other than "Jew") or of exposés of the Jewish religion. Anti-Israeli cartoons typically have anti-semitic undertones. Further information on this sort of material is readily available.

What is less well-known is the existence of a quite different type of Soviet anti-Zionist material resembling the critiques of Zionism made by Western socialists. This material not only makes a clear distinction between Zionists and Jews, stressing the role of progressive Jews in the world, but argues that Zionism and antisemitism are linked: The linkage is both theoretical (shared assumptions about the inevitability of national hatreds) and practical (each ideology feeds on and reinforces the other). This type of anti-Zionism is therefore at the same time a protest against antisemitism.

What we have is then not one but two, rival, Soviet "anti-Zionisms". Soviet Jewish loyalists fight anti-semitic anti-



Zionism by elaborating and voicing an anti-Zionism which is not anti-semitic. The Anti-Zionist Committee is one of the vehicles which they use to this end.

The possibility of opposing Soviet anti-semitism is, however, restricted by the pressure exerted on Jews to *deny* its existence. This leads to contradictions in the public line of official Jews. On the one hand, Soviet antisemitism is supposedly just a Zionist myth. A Jewish mathematics student, say, is required to make a speech repudiating the slander that there is discrimination against Jews entering higher-education mathematics faculties (part of the price, one suspects, for her university admission). At the same meeting another speaker attacks Zionism for, among other sins, exacerbating antisemitism, which cannot therefore be so non-existent.

The anti-Zionist committee is also used by Jewish loyalists to promote Yiddish culture. For example, one of their sessions had as its agenda preparing events to celebrate the Sholom Aleichem anniversary. According to Vergelis (editor of the Yiddish newspaper *Sovietisch Heimland*), the USSR is now the centre of world Jewish culture. If that is so, it says more about the decline of Yiddish culture outside the USSR than about its vitality inside. The Yiddish theatre does exist again: usually a mixture of Yiddish and Russian (in a Jewish accent) is used. I had no trouble getting to see the Freilichs musical-drama troupe last year and greatly enjoyed it even though I didn't follow some of the Yiddish. (People were saying it was almost impossible to get in, but in fact you just had to go to the box office and buy tickets.)

Thus a Jewish participant in the anti-Zionist campaign would probably justify themselves in private along the following lines: "I know I have to lie about and whitewash Soviet life, and those who have an absolute view of integrity despise me for that. But I'm doing something useful. First of all, Zionism is an oppressive force, a danger to world peace, and harmful to Jews

as well. Second, given that our leaders require some sort of anti-Zionist campaign, it's better that Jews should handle it rather than the anti-semites. In fact, the anti-Zionist committee is the nearest thing we've had to an officially recognised Jewish body since Stalin shot the Jewish anti-fascist committee after the war. It can protect the status of Jews and of Jewish culture in the USSR."

I keep up contact with the USSR primarily for the sake of peace, as my contribution to averting the threat of nuclear war. Fortunately Soviet anti-semitism is not so powerful as to prevent me from making a contribution to peace between East and West. Maybe being Jewish even helps in some ways. It is easier to make genuine contact with Soviet society if you are of Jewish origin: you probably have relatives there, and even if you don't, Soviet Jews will fairly easily take you into their confidence, irrespective of their political stance (loyal to the regime, dissident, or anything in between).

The work of finding out about the position of Soviet Jews and exerting pressure for improvement should not be left up to the Zionists. Zionists are concerned pretty well exclusively with helping people to emigrate, a process which the Soviet authorities have now decided to stop. Soviet Jews who want to stay generally feel that the would-be emigrants are undermining their position within a very suspicious and "security"-conscious regime. As a result Jewish communities and indeed families in the USSR are bitterly divided between those who want to go and those who want to stay.

Western Jews whose Jewish identity takes a non/anti-Zionist form can do a lot to help Soviet Jews in ways that do not entail direct confrontation with the Soviet authorities. They can exert quiet pressure against Soviet antisemitism while at the same time working for peace between East and West. Perhaps some people would like to try promoting Yiddish as a language of detente and build bridges between the two sides of the Cold War in the process of reviving Yiddish culture jointly with Soviet Jews. The risks involved would be worth taking, and would at any rate be much smaller than the risks involved in promoting Hebrew (identified with Zionism). After all, Yiddish has official recognition as one of the languages of the multinational Soviet Union.

This may sound fantastic, but isn't it worth a try? Who among the readers of *Jewish Socialist* would like to take it on? If you will it (as someone or other said), it is no dream. As Freilichs finished their play singing: Sholom, sholom, sholom.

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