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Soviet anti-Semitism

A CLANDESTINE document that has been circulating among Soviet Jews for almost two years has recently reached the West. It is an anonymous letter to Khrushchev after his attack on the poet Yevtushenko for writing about anti-Semitism and the martyrdom of the Jews in his poem "Zabi Yar."

On internal evidence, this anonymous letter was probably written by one of those Soviet Jewish party members who experienced Stalinist persecution "on their own hide," as they say in Russia. It is a sardonic, impassioned analysis of the re-emergence of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union since the mid-1930s. Because it is a victim's protest it has an uncomfortable neurotic insistence, but it is a necessary reminder of how profoundly many Soviet Jews have been alienated from their society by the tragic sequence of events of the past 25 years.

Undercurrents of anti-Semitism persisted in the Soviet Union after the Revolution and it would have been unrealistic to expect otherwise. During the Nazi occupation Russian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian and Baltic citizens sometimes collaborated in killing Jews, and this might also be expected. But the five years of Government-instigated anti-Semitism before Stalin's death in 1953 inflicted on Soviet Jews a psychological injury second in degree only to the extermination policy practised by the Nazis.

They had survived the cattle trucks, concentration camps, gas chambers and mass-executions, but instead of a post-war convalescence they were subjected to a systematic attempt to erase their group identity, particularly after the establishment of the State of Israel. Overnight the Jews ceased to be a Soviet nationality and were left with only a precarious religious status. Yiddish disappeared from the printed page as if it had never existed, except for a small news-sheet in the remote Siberian outpost of Birobidzhan; it could not be sung or spoken in theatres;

its scholars and creative artists joined the vast prison population of the USSR or were executed. Jews were hunted down as "rootless cosmopolitans" whatever their language and however advanced their assimilation, irrespective of whether they were Communist or non-Communist. Jews were widely represented as agents of an international Western imperialist conspiracy against the Communist world. They disappeared from political life and were dismissed from academic posts. The Slansky trial showed that even the most prominent Communist Jews were liable to execution as "Zionist spies," and the "Doctors' Plot," where the accused were described as "a terrorist group of Jewish doctors," indicated that no charge was too fantastic where Jews were concerned. Until the death of Stalin their future seemed hopeless.

Assimilation

They emerged from this experience a different people. The process of assimilation that had gone into reverse during the war was now at a standstill. Persecution had inflamed their national feelings. It is unlikely that many of them were left with the old illusions of international brotherhood, or would ever again experience the exhilarating optimism of those early post-Revolutionary years. They hoped for reinstatement of their national rights. They wanted their own theatres, publications, institutions, and the right to transmit to their children a knowledge of Jewish history, tradition, and culture. They expected the Government once more to enforce the laws prohibiting anti-Semitism and, particularly, to exclude its propagation in the thinly disguised anti-Jewish articles rife in the Soviet press. They also wanted some public acknowledgment of the contribution made by Jews to Soviet achievements and in the war against Nazi Germany.

Moscow Radio this week reported an interview with the Moscow Chief Rabbi, announcing "concessions" to the Jewish community. EMANUEL LITVINOFF wonders how real the concessions are

Apart from inconsiderable exceptions, they were not forthcoming. Khrushchev was in fundamental agreement with the Stalinists that Jews must cease to exist as a nationality, and he did what he could to accomplish it without the extreme coercion employed by his predecessor. The result was that in one respect at least the condition of Soviet Jews deteriorated after 1956—Judaism was exposed to more severe persecution. Khrushchev also carried farther the elimination of references to Jewish achievements in Soviet reference books and censored criticism of anti-Semitism in the published writings of Lenin, Gorky, and others. The use of the Jews as scapegoats in Soviet trials of currency speculators was initiated under his leadership, and he was notably indulgent towards the writers of anti-Semitic books and publications. He was contemptuous when public opinion protested against these things.

The new leaders appear to be less indifferent to foreign criticism. Since they assumed power they have diverted considerable energies to the task of persuading world opinion that Jews in the Soviet Union are not victims of discrimination. There have been some widely publicised token concessions. These amount to little more than the printing of a couple of Yiddish books and the recently announced promise to Moscow's Chief Rabbi that a new prayer-book will be printed, that restrictions in Moscow on the baking of unleavened bread will be removed, and that the synagogue's rabbinical seminary will be permitted to function. One can assume, therefore, that the new leadership is more tractable, but it is certainly not enough to justify claims of a "new deal" for Soviet Jews, whose difficulties are not primarily religious and who live in the great majority well outside the Soviet capital.

No radical improvement is likely without a frank recogni-

tion by the Soviet Government that the "threat" of national extinction must be lifted from the Jews. They have recently acknowledged this in the case of the Soviet Germans, whose situation is roughly analogous, by publishing a Supreme Soviet decree acquitting them of charges of collaboration with the Nazis during the war.

Germans as equals

This decree, in effect, reinstates the Germans as equals in the Soviet family of nationalities and makes it incumbent on regional authorities to aid them in rebuilding German cultural and educational institutions. The Supreme Soviet could accomplish the same end for the Jews by condemning Stalin's total liquidation of Jewish culture in 1948 and posthumously acquitting the executed Jewish intellectuals of the charge that they had plotted to turn the Crimea into a Jewish state hostile to the Soviet Union. This might well provide a suitable beginning for a national educational drive against anti-Semitism, which is now too prevalent in Soviet life to be ignored.

The pressure of the problem on Soviet society would also be relieved by a liberal attitude to the festering problem of family reunification. Other East European Communist countries have eased their difficulties by quietly allowing Jewish war victims to join their relatives abroad and only the Soviet Union has adamantly refused to do so. Yet it has turned a blind eye to the fact that a great many Jews who were repatriated to Poland used Warsaw as a staging post in their journey onward to relatives in Israel and the United States. It is considered that nothing would boost the morale of Jews in the USSR more than the extension of this understanding to survivors from the Baltic States, Moldavia, and other fringe areas where Jewish communities were fragmented and destroyed.