

Soviet anti-semitism

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THE JEWS IN SOVIET RUSSIA SINCE 1917, edited by Lionel Kochan (Institute of Jewish Affairs: Oxford, 50s).

IN this centenary year of Lenin, an overriding interest of the Soviet press after tributes to the founder of modern Russia has been the evils of "fascist," "Hitlerite," "man-hating," "Shylockian" Zionism. Since the beginning of last November the impression has been given that the Zionist "global threat" preoccupies the Soviet leadership even more than China, Vietnam, international arms control, or world pollution.

This stupendous propaganda effort—as costly, one imagines, as the provision of an entire SAM III radar system to the UAR—has been marshalled like a military campaign. It has even included the pitiful spectacle of prominent and not-so-prominent Soviet Jews being paraded to demonstrate their Soviet patriotism by denouncing Israel, Zionists, and "Rothschilds" as Hitler's heirs committing unspeakable atrocities against innocent women and children. Soviet cartoons of fanged, hook-nosed Zionists, their claws dripping blood, bear a spine-shuddering resemblance to caricatures of the thirties, and articles in "Pravda" are no less depraved. Russians are repeatedly told that the "international rich Jewish bourgeoisie" want to control the world. What on earth has gone wrong? Who gains?

The fifteen scholarly essays in this symposium, by well-known Jewish historians and Sovietologists, go far to provide answers to such questions. They analyse, often brilliantly and with authority, the historical, sociological, and ideological factors underlying the present situation, the persecution of Judaism and the strangulation of Yiddish culture. There are few books

in English about Soviet Jews and this is certainly one of the most informative. It conveys, as Professor Schapiro points out in his balanced introduction, a disconcerting impression of the Jewish predicament in the USSR.

But one is still perplexed. Most of these essays are in the mood of a few years ago when critics of the treatment of Soviet Jews scrupulously avoided using the term "anti-semitism." They talked of "inequalities," of "discrimination against the Jewish minority," of the failure of the Soviet Government to allow Jews to freely exercise the national rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

Since 1964

That discussion now seems as dated and nostalgic as the time when the American civil rights movement expressed itself in lunch-counter "sit-ins" and bus desegregation. In 1964 the Soviet Communist Party condemned as anti-semitic a book on Judaism and Zionism, published by the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. Within four years its author was awarded honours and promotion. An even more anti-semitic book, "Beware: Zionism!" was written by Yuri Ivanov, an adviser to the CPSU Central Committee, and massively publicised throughout the Soviet press.

In neighbouring Poland anti-semitism was given ideological respectability and became a component of bureaucratic State communism with the approval of the Soviet press, which presumably reflected the views of Soviet leaders. Zionism has been held responsible for the 1956 Poznan riots in Poland, the Hungarian Rising, the 1968 student dissent in Warsaw, and the Czech "counter-revolution."

Soviet involvement in the Middle East crisis is clearly an excuse rather than an explanation for these developments. Nor can rational analysis provide the answer,

as these essays show. The powerful psychic forces discharged in anti-semitism may be triggered off by economic and political factors but are not created by them.

One inexplicable omission in the book is the voice of Soviet Jews themselves. At one time it could be said that only the testimony of "official" Soviet Jews was available, but the "Jews of Silence" are now speaking up in disregard of the consequences. When some forty prominent Jews appeared at a recent Moscow press conference to denounce Zionism, 60 rank-and-file Jews in Moscow and Leningrad issued two statements repudiating their right to speak for Soviet Jews. These, and the writers of scores of appeals sent to the West, gave their names and addresses. The growth of anti-semitism has predictably brought about a confrontation in which many assimilated young Jews have turned ardently to Jewish nationalism. This is the most significant development among Soviet Jews for more than twenty years and the story of Jews in Russia is incomplete without it.

In his introduction to this volume Leonard Schapiro writes that no serious scholar "would go so far as to equate the position of the Jew in the Soviet Union today with the oppression of the Jew in Russia of 1881 or 1903." This is true except in two respects where the present authorities are even harsher than their predecessors. In the worst days of Tsarism Russian Jews still retained an organised society, with their own literary, educational, and social institutions; secondly, they were free to emigrate. Today Jewish society has been suppressed, and Jews are refused the right to leave. Yet, since 1968 alone, 80,000 heads of families are reported to have applied to settle in Israel. For this, Soviet anti-semitism must be held largely responsible.