

Unending plight of Soviet Jewry

Prepared by the Action Committee for Soviet Jewry



We do not wish to pass judgement on the Soviet Union with respect to the principles on which its political and economic systems are founded. Beyond the problem of ideologies, our concern is for the rights and freedoms of the 3,000,000 Jews in the Soviet Union. As Jews we would protest discrimination against our brethren in any country, and therefore we take our stand at this time against the repression of our people in the Soviet Union.

We have two demands: neither of them require the Soviet government to allow its Jewish population extra privileges; both of them only ask the Soviet government to live up to its own and international law.

For those Jews who wish to remain in the Soviet Union, the demand is that they be given a measure of religious and cultural freedom equivalent to that which is possessed by other Soviet minorities.

For those Jews who wish to emigrate to Israel, the demand is that they be able to do so. The UN Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, both of which have been signed by the Soviet Union, guarantee the right of any people to leave any country; and so in desiring to exercise this right, Soviet Jews are fully justified.

The Action Committee for Soviet Jewry

Soviet Jewry Teach-In
Dalhousie University
McInnes Room
Wednesday, November 24, 1971
Time: 12:30 - 1:30 p.m.; 8:00 p.m. - 1:00 a.m.
Dr. Louis Rosenblum — Cleveland Council for
Soviet Anti-Semitism.
David Sadowski — Student Action for Soviet Jewry.

At 8:30 a.m. on June 15, 1970, nine Rega Jews were apprehended at Leningrad's Smolney Airport as they were walking from the terminal to the airplane. At about the same time, eight Leningrad Jews were arrested in scattered places; at work, at home, on assignment some distance from the city, and on vacation as far away as Odessa.

The same morning police searches were made in the homes of those arrested with the given aim of removing "the tools of crime". What were these "tools"? They consisted of the following: Hebrew grammars, Jewish history books, letters of appeal to leave for Israel and post cards from Israel. In other words, those materials by which the newly arrested men identified themselves as Jews were the materials that seemed to constitute their "crime".

But what reasons have we for believing that the Soviet government is carrying on an anti-Jewish campaign? What reasons are there for believing that, more than all other minorities in the USSR, the Jewish community has been singled out for persecution? The facts as they fall should speak for themselves.

According to the official Soviet census of 1959 there are 2,268,000 Jews in the USSR. However, most observers contend that the actual is at least three million since the census takers accepted respondents' answers without checking their documents and, because of this, a good many Jews, particularly those married to non-Jews, may have suppressed their Jewish origin. Be that as it may, according to the census, Jews comprise 1.09% of the total Soviet population.

In the 1959 census, four hundred thousand Jews gave Yiddish as their native language, yet there is not a single Yiddish school or class today in the SU. This situation exists despite the fact that the occasional Yiddish or Hebrew concerts given by foreign artists are invariably sold out thereby indicating Jewish interest in Jewish culture.

There are no Jewish education facilities because they are banned. In the country which, into the 1940's

had the world's largest Yiddish school system, the only Yiddish university in the world, fourteen permanent theatrical companies, three daily papers, and five literary journals in Yiddish, there is now only one monthly Yiddish magazine — Sovietish Heimland with a circulation of sixteen thousand. However, the articles used for even this magazine are largely reprints of older articles, without Jewish content, from Tass and Pravda and, of the sixteen thousand issues printed, some twelve thousand are exported — leaving four thousand copies for the entire Jewish population. For the Jews, Hebrew is also banned and Jewish contributions to the Russian press are officially ignored or minimized. The first edition of the "Large Soviet Encyclopedia" carried a hundred and sixteen pages about Jews. The second, and present one, reduces this to two pages.

Although the Soviet Communist Party is officially against all religions, the state as distinguished from the Party does claim to guarantee the right of religious freedom (Decree of The Council of People's Commissars, January 23, 1918). This includes the right exercised by the Russian Orthodox Protestant and Islamic groups to establish official ties with co-religionists abroad.

In 1962 for example the Orthodox Church entered the World Council of Churches. In contrast to this, official ties between Soviet and foreign Jews are totally banned. Although Moscow's Chief Rabbi did visit North America in 1968 on a strictly supervised tour, no other contacts with foreign Jews are permitted.

Jews who do meet with visiting Jews inside Russia are denounced as "loafers and traitors" by the Soviet press (Trud, Soviet Trade Union paper, June 1, 1963).

Is the Jew in general Russian society penalized for being Jewish? It appears that he is. Soviet Jews, a high proportion of which are professionals, depend heavily on higher education but a 1964 report, by Nicholas DeWitt, specialist formerly of the Harvard Russian Research Center, noted that the quota system in

university admission policies works "to the particularly severe disadvantage of the Jewish population."

Since 1935 the percentage of Jews in higher education has dropped over 10% although the Jewish proportion of the population decreased only .4%.

In political life, too, Jewish involvement has been curtailed. In 1937 5.6% of the deputies in the Supreme Soviet were Jewish while only .5% were Jewish in 1967. There has also been a decline in the number of Jews with leadership positions in the Party and fewer Jews than ever are now members of the Soviet diplomatic corps.

Jewishness is thus linked to political subversion. The tragedy is, however, not only that such distortions do appear, it is that the Soviet authorities do nothing to expose them as fraudulent. Their silence betokens their support of these attacks.

The largest actual anti-Semitic campaign took place from 1961 to 1965 as part of a series of "economic trials" which saw the reintroduction of capital punishment for embezzlement and bribery. Of the several hundred executed, more than 50% were Jews — who constitute 1.09% of the population.

The present trials in Leningrad, with their mention of Zionist conspiracies et al, are reminiscent of earlier such crudities by the Soviet authorities. Although Jews are being attacked as traitors, past experience of Soviet use of this and other such epithets should alert the world to the true nature of the Soviet trials.

The evidence seems conclusive. Singled out as both religion and nationality, the Jews of the Soviet Union are undergoing an unremitting programme aimed at their obliteration as a people. But a turning point may have been reached. For a while, Soviet authorities claimed that the decline in Jewish cultural and religious life was a result of the rejection of Judaism by young Soviet Jews; however, the opposite seems true.