

REVIEW AND REAPPRAISAL

Why did we fail to perceive and protest crimes against Jewish culture and leaders in the socialist countries?

By *THE EDITORIAL BOARD*

THE wiping out of Soviet Jewish culture, confirmed in the past few months, horrified us. The revelations also impose obligations upon us. Why did this magazine in the past eight years fail to raise questions concerning the shutting down of Jewish cultural institutions in the Soviet Union? Why did we not suspect foul play in the disappearance of leading Soviet Yiddish writers? Why did we not detect the anti-Semitism injected in the Prague trial?

Answers to these questions constitute our form of apology to our readers for having failed them in these important respects.

We feel sorrow and resentment—but these are not enough. Understanding and perspective are just as necessary. What is the significance of the injustices against the Jews in the Soviet Union for the continuing fight for peace, which is central for all people? What are the prospects for a revival of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union?

To regard these anti-Semitic manifestations in isolation from the evil condition of which they were one expression would be a distortion. For not only were crimes committed against Jews. Other nations and nationalities also suffered from the one-man rule that afflicted the Soviet Union for some 20 years. These manifestations, so harmful to the East European countries, were profoundly anti-socialist in character, for they violated socialist principles of democracy and equality.

The leaders of the socialist countries are taking steps not only to repair whatever damage can be remedied, but also to avoid recurrence of these evils. Our anguish and anger do not blind us to the efforts made during the past three years to uncover the malignant growth on a state that is advancing the cause of peace and equality of peoples. The disclosures by the socialist countries themselves of anti-national and undemocratic practices

are signs of the determination to prevent a recurrence of the evils exposed.

But why were we so insensitive to anti-Semitism as to ignore or to deny outright the reports published in the press about measures taken against Jews and Jewish culture in the Soviet Union in the five years before 1953?

It is true that no authentic information from any original socialist source was forthcoming. We did know, however, that all Jewish cultural institutions in the Soviet Union outside of Birobidjan were closed down after 1948 and that the flow of literature from Soviet Yiddish writers ceased. This should have been enough to arouse insistent questions that should have been expressed and pressed. For such drastic cutting off of cultural expression could not be justified. If, as we privately speculated, some Jewish writers may have violated Soviet law, could this have justified the wiping out of a whole culture? The answer is obvious now. It should have been apparent then and expressed publicly. The reasons why this wasn't done will be discussed later.

Mistake on "Cosmopolitanism"

Again, why did we not perceive that the campaign against "cosmopolitanism," which was directed preponderantly against Jews, was a thinly disguised form of anti-Semitism? Most people suppose that the

idea of "cosmopolitanism" was thought up recently in the Soviet Union. But it was in fact a leading idea of the Russian revolutionary democratic literary critic V. G. Belinsky in the mid-nineteenth century. He polemized against Russian writers of his time who slavishly looked for inspiration to foreign literature as their model and held their own national literature in contempt. This concept was applied in the Soviet Union during the cold war to polemize against those who were according to the critics, in their writing expressing pro-imperialist attitudes in the cold war. Critics of "cosmopolitanism" maintained that such writing became an instrument in United States attempts at world economic and political domination.

Speaking for ourselves, we were not acquainted with the content of the writings against which this accusation in the Soviet Union was levelled. We could not therefore judge the validity of the charge. But it should have been clear that the predominance of Jewish names in this campaign and the use of Jewish-sounding names in parentheses were anti-Semitic in intent and effect. It is not a matter of pride to us that we did not share in protests but rather tried to explain away the practice.

Mistake on the Prague Trial

This magazine erred also in its treatment of the Prague trial of the

Slansky group in November 1952. We categorically denied that any anti-Semitism was involved. That we were mistaken has now been proved by the Czech government itself. While the Czech government in April confirmed the validity of the Prague trial, it pointed out several illegitimate aspects of it.

On May 12, the *N. Y. Times* reported a Czech radio broadcast by Premier Siroky stating that Slansky's chief crime was that he used the "cult of personality" to create a special police organization, independent of the Communist Party, for his own purposes and that Slansky had been guilty of "bourgeois nationalism."

Premier V. Siroky said on April 13 that in addition to the falsity of the charges concerning "Titoism," "certain manifestations of anti-Semitism" had been wrongly injected into the trial. Siroky maintained that the distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism was valid but he declared that the prosecutor in the case was wrong in bringing out that most defendants were Jewish (*N. Y. Times*, April 14).

Designating defendants as being "of Jewish origin" was undoubtedly an anti-Semitic device. In the interrogation of defendant Bedrich Geminder the charge of "cosmopolitanism" because he could not speak Czech without an accent was certainly an anti-Semitic thrust. Sidney Gruson reported (*N. Y. Times*, April 27) that an article in the Czech

trade union paper *Prace* admitted that, in Gruson's interpretation of the article, "a wave of officially inspired anti-Semitism swept Czechoslovakia" after the Prague trial. "We went so far," said the author of the *Prace* article, "as to blame people not only for their own sins but also for sins committed by someone belonging to a certain group"—that is, to the Jewish people.

From the Soviet Union, too, there have been intimations of criticism for the criminal treatment of Jews and other nationalities. The *N. Y. Times* reported from Moscow (April 14) that an article in the journal *Voprosi Historii* (Problems of History) recalled Lenin's condemnation of anti-Semitism as "alien to the spirit of the proletariat" and his campaign against "Great Russian chauvinism." The article pointed out that "serious errors in the leadership of the party and country in the post-war period" had resulted in deviations in carrying out "Leninist nationalities policy."

Why Did We Err?

These Soviet acknowledgements of anti-Semitism and of crimes committed against Jews and other peoples are highly significant. They indicate that these crimes were part of an effort to undermine and destroy socialism. They were in no way consonant with socialism. On the contrary, these crimes were contrary to socialist policy toward national-

ities and constituted a great danger to socialism itself.

We have sketched some of the grave delinquencies of this magazine. Why, then, did this happen?

Our disbelief of charges of anti-Semitism in socialist countries was based on our belief that the basic socialist policy of equality of nations made highly improbable the brazen violations charged. Like many others we knew that the tsarist "prison house of nations" had been dissolved in the Soviet Union, that formerly oppressed and backward nations had in an incredibly short time developed into modern states and had achieved equality.

We were by no means alone in recognition of this fact. One example will suffice.

In 1947, the independent liberal scholar, Prof. Frederick L. Schuman, wrote in his *Soviet Politics at Home and Abroad* (p. 304): "The greatest glory of the Soviet State is its achievements of effective equality in rights and opportunities for people of all races, languages and cultures."

More specifically, it was well known that all barriers to equality for the Jewish people had been demolished in the Soviet Union. Anti-Semitism itself was outlawed. Educational and vocational opportunity was opened to all Jews. Jews played an important role in Soviet life at all levels and in all fields. Yiddish culture itself flourished. Yiddish literature, theater, schools

and press blossomed in a land where Jews had been ghettoized and oppressed for centuries.

When all this was suddenly stopped in 1948—and this we, like everyone else, knew—it was hard for us to believe that this earlier policy had been discarded. But we had no authentic information beyond the bare fact that the institutions had been shut down. We should have suspected foul play and made a noise about it. Our confidence in the Soviet nationalities policy led us to disbelieve that charges of anti-Semitic intention had a valid basis.

There was another reason why we tended to disbelieve the press reports about anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. They seemed to us to be, and often were, used as a means of heating up the cold war and of intensifying the anti-communist, anti-democratic, anti-peace hysteria that flourished in our country in those bitter years.

Distortion and Cold War Tactics

We were fortified in this position by the baseless rumors and downright misrepresentation that accompanied these reports. One of the most brazen of these misrepresentations was the false charge that a cartoon in the Soviet satirical magazine *Krokodil* had in 1949 used the word "Zhid," Russian equivalent of our "kike." The truth was that this word in *Krokodil* was the Russian

transliteration of the name of Andre Gide, French writer, in a cartoon lampooning "cosmopolitanism." *Newsweek* actually shadowed over the "Andre" in its reproduction of the cartoon in order to bolster the charge that the epithet "Zhid" was used. Instances of misrepresentation could be multiplied from the files of our magazine, where we often exposed such crude falsifications.

The role of the Soviet Union in saving hundreds of thousands of Jews during the war by evacuating them to the East was scandalously misrepresented by professional anti-Soviet writers. The decisive part played by the Soviet Union and other socialist countries in gaining passage of the UN resolution on the establishment of Israel and in arming Israel to defend itself against the Arab invasion was played down or misrepresented in the interests of the cold war.

Since expounders of the cold war were using reports of anti-Semitism to further their dangerous aims, we did not wish to do anything that could seem to range us on the side of the enemies of peace. We were not resourceful enough to develop means of inquiry and protest that would have clearly distinguished us from the enemies of peace. We misguidedly held the view that to question the policy of the Soviet Union or to protest its results would harm the cause of peace. We now realize that in fact the cause of peace would

have been strengthened, had we followed a more independent and courageous path.

We have stated the causes of our failure to perceive the anti-Semitism that occurred in socialist countries in recent years: we had no authoritative information; we had blind faith in the nationalities policies of the Soviet Union; the provable misrepresentations in some reports of anti-Semitism led us to the extreme of questioning the truth of all of them; and the cold war use to which these reports were put led us to reject them as part of the incitation of world war.

These reasons help to explain but not to excuse our failure to protest the anti-Semitism revealed in some reports and activities that should have been apparent to us.

Correction Is Under Way

Yet, the revelation of anti-Semitism and suppression of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union should not distort our understanding of the large degree of freedom gained by Jews under socialism. Jews did win the right to live where they pleased, to equal opportunity in jobs, education and religion. This freedom was gravely undermined by some anti-Semitic elements in the socialist countries and full recovery of these rights is still to be reached. For some years Jews in the Soviet Union suffered from intimidation and anti-

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Semitism and Yiddish culture was all but obliterated in the Soviet Union. Yet equality of all nationalities is so basic to socialist principles that these crimes were finally admitted by the Soviet leadership itself, and correction undertaken.

It was because socialist theories of equality were basic, however, that anti-Semitism had to be practiced by innuendo and indirection and never directly and overtly. For even while Jews in the USSR were intimidated by the anti-Semitic acts, the socialist policy of equality continued to operate and to be enunciated.

Jack Raymond reported in the *N.Y. Times* (April 15) that 50,000 Jews live in Kishinev, the city of the frightful pogroms early in this century. "An important post-war change in the situation of the Jews," wrote Raymond, "stressed by city officials and confirmed by Jews here, was that they no longer live in a ghetto-like community but are scattered throughout the city. Jews are no longer limited to the old vocations of trade and tailoring. Now Jews can be found side by side with others doing construction and industrial labor."

In addition, information has reached us, which we have published in this magazine, that gives promise of a revival of Jewish cultural activity in the Soviet Union. We have

noted that numerous programs of Yiddish songs and writing have been performed in past months in all centers of Jewish population. Yiddish songs have been broadcast on the Moscow radio. About 60 Yiddish writers are active and preparing their work for publication. And for the first time in some years a greeting signed by 14 Soviet Yiddish writers was received in April by the third annual conference of the Jewish Social and Cultural Association of Poland in Warsaw.

Urgent Questions Remain

Despite these signs of recovery and the revelations gradually being unfolded about crimes against Jews and others in the socialist countries during the period when the security police were above the law, much still needs to be ascertained.

With respect to the Prague trial, the situation is not yet wholly clear. Even if the trial is valid, as Czech authorities maintain, precisely how does this case differ from those of Lazlo Rajk in Hungary and Traicho Kostov in Bulgaria, both of which have been declared as frame-ups by their own governments? The same type of confessions were presented at the Prague trial as in these cases. Further, which defendants in the Prague trial, most of whom were Jewish, were actually guilty and which innocent?

Does the reported release of the three Slansky co-defendants, Artur

London, Vavro Hajdu and Evzan Loebel, mean that they were innocent or not? Other witnesses at this trial who were themselves tried and imprisoned, such as Edward Goldstuecker, former Czech ambassador to Israel, have been released. Who was guilty and who was framed? What is the situation regarding Mordecai Oren, a leader of the Israel Mapam Party who was implicated in the Prague trial, and sentenced to 15 years, and was just released? To what extent have the charges against the Zionist movement made in the Prague trial been sustained by the recent review of the case? We believe that these questions should be answered by the Czech government.

The shocking information concerning the anti-Semitic closing down of Jewish cultural institutions in the Soviet Union and execution of leading Yiddish writers came in a statement from Poland (see our May issue). Why has no word on this terrible series of events come from the Soviet Union itself? We believe that it is incumbent upon the Soviet government to make known through its own channels the full truth about the crimes against the Jewish culture and the Jewish writers. The world is entitled to know just who was affected, what exactly did happen in this series of events, who was responsible and what punishment has been meted out to the perpetrators of these crimes. Even at this late date too much is obscure. And obscurity harms the cause of peace.

The Work Ahead

At the same time, we believe that the radical turn of events in the Soviet Union in the past three years and especially in the past few months indicate that the genuine socialist national policy will be resumed.

We expect to observe the resumption of Jewish cultural activity in the Soviet Union in accordance with the socialist principle of the rights of nationalities. We hope the government will actively encourage the Jews in re-establishing a Yiddish press and theater and any other forms of cultural expression the Soviet Jews themselves may desire. Whatever degree of integration Soviet Jews have reached up to now, numbers of them desire cultural expression in Yiddish. This is attested by reports of crowded and enthusiastic audiences for concerts of Yiddish song and poetry held in the past months in many Soviet Russian and Ukrainian cities. So long as such an audience exists, socialist policy requires satisfaction of this desire.

The correction of the violations of the rights of Soviet Jews is further demanded in the interests of peace. For with such remedial action the socialist countries not only fulfil the socialist policies that were permitted to be violated, but they also make a contribution to peace. The removal of this justifiable grievance will greatly facilitate the unification of all the forces laboring for peaceful co-existence.