

The USSR's "Friendly Critics"

By Hyman Lumer

Basic in the current anti-Soviet drive is the aim of bringing Soviet Jews to Israel. The slanderous allegations of official persecution of Jews in the USSR are geared to the false slogan "Let my people go." Soviet Jews, it is charged, are threatened with cultural genocide. Says Phil Baum of the American Jewish Congress: "Soviet leaders clearly have determined at all costs to obliterate the corporate Jewish presence in history." (Congress Bi-Weekly, February 23, 1973.) To escape this fate, it is said, some tens of thousands have already migrated to Israel and the additional numbers wanting to leave run into the hundreds of thousands.

These Zionist elements, moved by a boundless hostility to socialism and the Soviet Union, would like nothing better than to see every Soviet Jew depart for Israel. And the wish is father to the thought; hence these unsupported, fanciful notions that the average Soviet Jew seeks only to escape the land of his supposed persecution.

This anti-Soviet campaign receives significant aid, even though it may not be intended, from those in progressive Jewish circles who speak as "friends" of the USSR, who decry the anti-Soviet hysteria in this country, but who then charge the Soviet government with having brought the attacks on itself by its policies vis-a-vis the Jewish people. In the forefront of such groups is the Morning Freiheit.

The editors of the Morning Freiheit seek to justify their stand in the name of a "balanced approach." We must combat the attacks on the Soviet Union, they say, but we must also recognize and be critical of its errors. And the two are then placed on a par. The end result of such a false "balance" is to land its proponents in the anti-Soviet camp.

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The point is strikingly illustrated in an article appearing in the English pages of February 11, 1973, in which the editors take the Soviet Jewish journalist Reuven Groyer to task for his treatment of the migration of Soviet Jews to Israel and the return of part of them to the Soviet Union.

First, Groyer is accused of making an undue fuss about those who return. Say the editors: "Always during a mass migration there will be a few who, for one reason or another, wish to return. But it is a serious mistake to dwell constantly on this point." The important question, they maintain, is the tens of thousands who are emigrating and the reasons for their leaving. They assert that 50,000 have already left ("we have before us the published figures"), not 21,000 as Groyer claims, and that the exodus continues apace despite the stories of those who come back.

For the exodus they give two main reasons: 1) "... the Jews are faced with an almost complete lack of opportunity for national identification"; 2) there is appearing a growing volume of "dangerous anti-Zionist propaganda" with clearly anti-Semitic overtones or content, which is bound to create serious apprehension among Jews. The influence of Zionist propaganda as a cause of emigration is discounted; the Soviet Union, it is contended, has ample resources to counteract it. So, too, is the idea that any substantial number leave in order to make money; scientists, professionals and writers who are well off in the Soviet Union, they say, would not be influenced by such a motive.

In short, substantial numbers of Jews are leaving the Soviet Union because they are deprived of Jewish (i. e., Yiddish) cultural life and because they are subjected to dangerous anti-Semitic propaganda in the guise of anti-Zionism. Such is the Morning Freiheit's "friendly criticism" of the USSR. We submit that although it is couched in different language, it is essentially similar to certain allegations of the anti-Soviet crusaders.

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Let us examine these contentions. First, how many have migrated to Israel and how many wish to migrate? We have no precise figures and neither, we believe, does the Morning Freiheit. It speaks of "published figures" but does not say who published them. Certainly the figure of some 50,000 migrants (32,000 of them in 1972 alone) has been widely publicized, but we have seen no authoritative source for it. On the other hand, the figure given by Groyer appears to be too low. We suspect that the actual figure lies somewhere between the two. The claims that hundreds of thousands want to go are totally unsubstantiated and we see no reason to question the recent statement of Soviet Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Boris T. Shumilin that more than 95 per cent of all visa applications have been granted. In other words, the number who have gone represent substantially the number who have asked to go.

Thus, migration of Soviet Jews to Israel is of about the same order of magnitude as that of U.S. Jews (the number now living in Israel is somewhere in the vicinity of 35,000, the majority of whom have arrived since 1967). Though it is not insignificant, it is certainly not a cause for concluding that something is radically wrong with the situation of Jews in the USSR.

How many want to return? The Novosti Press Agency states that about 1,500

applications have been received during the past two years. But this figure is undoubtedly much lower than the number who would like to go back. The immigrant who wishes to leave Israel must first repay in full the amounts advanced by the settlement agency for such expenses as travel, buying and furnishing an apartment, etc. These are usually substantial sums which most immigrants are in no position to repay. Many who would like to return, therefore, do not apply. According to some estimates, as many as 20 per cent want to return within a year of their arrival. To dismiss this as inconsequential, as the editors of the Morning Freiheit do, is entirely unwarranted.

A key question is: why do Soviet Jews go to Israel in the first place? To understand this it is necessary first of all to see which of them are going.

A large part of the emigrants are Georgians; in 1971 they accounted for about 40 per cent of the total. Their main reason for leaving is religious. They want "to lead a more religious life" and evidently they feel that they can do so more readily in a Jewish state where Judaism is encouraged than in a socialist country where religion is discouraged. The question of Yiddish culture is in no way involved; the Georgian Jews have never used the Yiddish language.

Of the remainder the great majority come from the Baltic republics, which truly became part of the Soviet Union only after World War II. Hence there is still a not inconsiderable survival of bourgeois ideology, including ideas of making money in business, which is not possible in a socialist state. Such ideas influence a section of the Jewish population, among others. The great majority of those who leave are not scientists, professionals or writers; they are not among those who are best off economically. Therefore the argument of the Morning Freiheit editors that the desire to make money is insignificant as a motive for migration does not stand up.

Nor can the influence of Zionist propaganda be so lightly dismissed. The fact is that in the Soviet Union, too, there were Jews who reacted in a nationalist and emotional fashion to the 1967 war, who saw Israel as in danger of extermination and rejoiced at its military victory. These rejected the Soviet condemnation of the war as an act of aggression. They became increasingly susceptible to Zionist propaganda, of which there has been no shortage, whether through the radio broadcasts of Kol Yisrael or the literature systematically brought in by tourists. To them, "living as a Jew" came to mean living in Israel, in keeping with the Zionist credo.

The editors of the Morning Freiheit express skepticism about the inability of the Soviet authorities to counteract these Zionist influences. But here let it be noted that the editors themselves have exhibited the same Zionist-influenced reactions to the 1967 war, which they regard as a war of self-defense on Israel's part. Indeed, their criticism of the Soviet leadership rests in great part on its characterization of the Israeli ruling clique as deliberate aggressors. Obviously the Soviet Union's resources have not been sufficient to make them think otherwise.

Not a few of the emigrants left because they wanted to be reunited with relatives. In this connection it should be noted that, according to Shumilin, the great majority of the emigrants are older people.

There are also among those who left shady elements and criminal characters who were one jump ahead of the law. Notorious among these is one Grisha Feigin, who has been prominently exhibited as a victim of Soviet persecution, jailed for wanting to go to Israel. Feigin had served time in prison, but it was on such charges as counterfeiting gold coins and selling non-existent automobiles. Not a few such individuals seized the opportunity to clothe themselves in the garb of righteous victims of injustice.

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Were there Jews who left because they felt themselves deprived of Yiddish cultural life? Yes, there were. A section of the emigrants have said so. It is, of course, ironic that these chose to go to Israel, where Yiddish is especially frowned upon, and some have discovered this to their great consternation. We submit, however, that the Morning Freiheit grossly exaggerates this problem. Its approach is one based on nationalist premises and displaying the editors' own variety of wishful thinking. They write:

In the 1970 Soviet census, 400,000 Jews gave Yiddish as their mother tongue. Yet there are no Jewish children's schools as was the case in the 1920s and 1930s, no supplementary schools or Jewish courses, no textbooks, not even an alphabet, and no books in Yiddish or any other language about the history of the Jewish people such as exist about the history of the Russians and other peoples. There is no question that even Jews who did not list Yiddish as their mother tongue, also wish to know something about their own history. It is painful to say all this, but there is no sense in concealing the facts. (February 11, 1973.)

They also state:

... in 1931 there was a large network of Yiddish children's schools in the Soviet Union, there were many weekly and monthly Yiddish publications, many Yiddish books were published then, there was a famous Yiddish theater in Moscow and about a dozen other theaters in various cities, there were Jewish institutions and scientific institutes. Russian-speaking Jews had a Jewish journal Tribune, published in Russian. (June 11, 1972.)

In the latter years of the Stalin regime these institutions were abolished. Today, however, there exist the Yiddish literary magazine Sovetish Heimland with an unprecedented circulation of 25,000 and the Yiddish newspaper Birobidjaner Shtern, appearing four times a week and circulating far beyond the bounds of Birobidjan. There are a number of Yiddish theatrical groups and musical ensembles which perform before packed houses. Moreover, at the University of Leningrad and in other universities courses in the Hebrew language,

Biblical texts, medieval poetry and Jewish history are offered. A small but growing number of books in Yiddish is being published, along with massive editions of works by Jewish writers translated into Russian and other languages.

One would think that this constitutes substantial evidence of availability of Jewish culture (and other items could be added). But not in the eyes of the editors of the Morning Freiheit. To them such things as the popularity of Sovetish Heimland or Yiddish theatrical performances and concerts are merely evidence of the existence of a widespread demand for Jewish culture which goes unsatisfied. What must be done to remedy this? According to the editors, nothing less will do than the restoration of Jewish cultural life essentially on the plane of the thirties. They say:

... a Leninist solution of the national and Jewish question calls for a complete rehabilitation of the Jewish cultural institutions--the press, publishing houses, children's schools, state theaters, etc., with a view to the creation of a culture--national in form and theme and socialist in content--in Yiddish and also in Russian and perhaps in other languages--that would provide the new generation of Jews--for those who want it--with the possibility of national identification. Because of the lack of this in Soviet Jewish life, certain elements seek to emigrate from a socialist to a capitalist country. (August 20, 1972.)

The idea of such a "complete rehabilitation" is pure fantasy. For the existence of such a need, which implies that nothing has basically changed since the thirties, no evidence is offered other than that (a) some 400,000 Soviet Jews claim Yiddish as their mother tongue, and (b) some Soviet Jews are emigrating.

First of all, what does it mean to state that Yiddish is one's "mother tongue"? In response to a similar question asked in the U.S. 1970 Census, 1,594,000, of whom nearly three-fourths were native-born, said that their mother tongue is Yiddish. But here "mother tongue" is defined as the language spoken in the home at the time of one's birth. Clearly, today the overwhelming majority of these 1.6 million U.S. Jews do not use Yiddish as a spoken language (indeed, many speak it only very imperfectly, if at all), do not read Yiddish books or periodicals, and have at most a minor interest in such things as Yiddish theater. And with the passing from the scene of the older Yiddish-speaking generation, Yiddish culture progressively declines.

These things are even more true of the Soviet Jews, since they are more fully integrated into the life of the Soviet people as a whole than are U.S. Jews into our capitalist society. Obviously, the number who declare Yiddish to be their mother tongue is in itself no measure of the demand for Yiddish cultural institutions today. Least of all is it an indication of a demand for Yiddish schools. Those Jews who give Yiddish as their mother tongue are elderly or middle aged and have themselves no need for schools. And for their children and grandchildren the situation is vastly changed.

In the early years of the Soviet Union, when Jews were still living in compact communities and when most Jewish children knew only Yiddish, schools taught in Yiddish flourished. But with freedom to live and work anywhere and to attend Russian schools, these Yiddish schools eventually found themselves without students. Nathan Ausubel, describing Yiddish cultural life in the USSR in the twenties and thirties, writes:

Yet, for all this unprecedented, large-scale Yiddish cultural activity, its decline was already in evidence at the very time of its flowering. Although hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jewish youth had been raised in Yiddish-language schools, the political and cultural pressures from without proved well-nigh irresistible....

In time, there was a sharp decline in the attendance of the Yiddish-language schools... the youth turned more and more to reading Russian newspapers, periodicals and books. (Pictorial History of the Jewish People, Crown, New York, 1958, p. 253.)

In short, the Jewish schools were already on their way out by the end of the thirties, and would have disappeared sooner or later even if they had not been administratively closed down. The same is true of other Yiddish cultural institutions as well. Today very few Soviet Jewish youth know Yiddish and fewer still have any interest in studying it. They have no desire to be segregated into separate schools and their parents are equally opposed to sending them to such schools. Says Riva Vishchinikina, head of the Executive Committee of the Valdheim Rural Soviet in Birobidjan: "It may sound paradoxical, but it is a fact: Jewish mothers closed the Jewish schools." (Soviet Life, July 1971.)

In calling for the restoration of the cultural institutions, the editors of the Morning Freiheit simply fail to understand Soviet reality. In particular, they fail to grasp that in the half century since the formation of the USSR something unprecedented has happened--the development with the building of socialism of a new historical community, the Soviet people, embracing in one harmonious whole all the diverse nationalities in the Soviet Union. They fail to see the Soviet Jews as an integral part of this new community, whose relationship to the total society is basically different from that of Jews in the United States or any other capitalist country.

Moreover, motivated by Jewish nationalism they view the preservation of Yiddish culture as an end in itself. Not only do they grossly exaggerate the demand for it, they also argue that the Soviet government should provide the full range of Yiddish culture that existed in the thirties even if only a bare handful of Jews should demand these activities; to do anything less is to pursue a policy of forced assimilation of the Jewish people. But this is precisely the charge leveled against the Soviet government by the avowed foes of the Soviet Union, and it is no less false and no less slanderous when it comes from people who call themselves "friends" of the Soviet Union.

Finally, a word about "dangerous anti-Zionist propoganda" as a cause of the emigration of Soviet Jews. It is true that there are Soviet writings on Zionism which go to excess and contain at least overtones of anti-Semitism. Certainly we must reject as false and harmful those which characterize Israel as a fascist state, which equate Zionism and Nazism or which portray Zionism as a conspiracy for domination carried on by an all-powerful worldwide cabal of Jewish capitalists.

At the same time, however, it is necessary to recognize that in the racist oppression of Arabs in Israel, and in the resort to collective punishment, administrative arrests, torture and similar practices in the occupied territories, the Israeli ruling clique is in fact guilty of fascist-like acts which merit the strongest condemnation. Yet the Morning Freiheit, which is so ready to criticize the Soviet leadership, is remarkably mild in its treatment of the outrages committed by the Israeli ruling circles. Indeed, it devotes itself rather to criticizing those among its readers who use the word "fascist" to describe such acts. And it has distinguished itself by failing to conduct any struggle worth mentioning against Zionism.

Secondly, the idea that Soviet Jews are fleeing to Israel because of their apprehensions about anti-Semitism in the guise of anti-Zionism is nonsense. The lives of Soviet Jews are on the whole remarkably free of anti-Semitism and they are well aware of it, as they are aware of the role of the Soviet government in saving masses of Jews from Hitlerite extermination. They are not at all likely to seek a haven in the capitalist world simply because of the excessive zeal and crudeness of certain opponents of Zionism.

The Morning Freiheit editors would have us believe that the emigrants to Israel are in general ordinary Soviet citizens who would be quite content with their life in socialist society were it not that they are deprived of their cultural rights and subjected to anti-Semitic propoganda. But the contrary is true. The emigrants are in very large part anti-socialist and anti-Soviet in their outlook, as is demonstrated by the fact that those who become politically active in Israel attach themselves not to the Left but to the parties of the ultra-Right and the reactionary religious parties. Not a few have joined hands with the Jewish Defense League.

In falsifying the picture as it does, in charging the Soviet government with seeking the forced assimilation of Jews and with anti-Semitic propoganda, the Morning Freiheit joins the anti-Soviet camp. Neither the Soviet Union nor the cause of socialism, peace and freedom generally is served by such "friendship."

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