

Soviet Anti-Semitism: An Exchange

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By Bertrand Russell

The following exchange between Bertrand Russell and Aron Vergelis, the editor of the Yiddish-language Soviet magazine, Sovietish heimland, was initiated last spring by a letter to Lord Russell from a Russian Jew who wished him to intercede against the suppression of Jewish culture.

Moscow, 20 May, 1964

Dear Mr. Russell:

The Jews of Russia have been very moved by your letters to N. S. Khrushchev concerning the discrimination against them in the trials dealing with economic crimes. But I must say that your advisers have led you to use your influence unwisely. I believe there was a certain tendentiousness in the evaluation of these trials. There was no need to use your name in this matter.

In our opinion, it is much more important that you ask world public opinion and the Soviet leaders to look into the problem of the forced assimilation of Jews that is taking place in the Soviet Union.

Although there are about three million Jews in the USSR, we do not have our own newspaper in Moscow, Kiev, Minsk, or the other population centers; there are no Jewish libraries; there are no schools or courses for those who wish to study the Jewish language; there are no clubs, theaters, or any other centers of cultural activity; there is no public organization that concerns itself with the welfare of the Jewish population.

We find to our deep regret that it is impossible as well as fruitless to place this problem before the Soviet government or any other responsible organization.

We want nothing more than the rights given to the Jews of Poland, Rumania, and Czechoslovakia.

We ask you and other influential people to write to Premier Khrushchev and request him to solve this problem. It is urgent.

With respect.

(Signature withheld)

Please address all questions concerning our letter to the Jewish journal, *Sovietish heimland*, Moscow Center, Kirov Street. This letter was written on behalf of a great number of people by a war veteran who is an invalid of the war, the father of several children, the bearer of several war medals, and a member of the Communist Party.

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22 July, 1964

The Editor,
Sovietish heimland

Dear Sir,

I am writing to you to make known the feelings of several Soviet citizens, including members of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union, who have addressed letters to me recently. These Soviet citizens wish to enjoy the right to a full cultural life in the Soviet Union. They are Jews and they feel that they are denied the means of living a complete and satisfying life in the Soviet Union because they are denied the cultural facilities made available to all other national and minority groups in the USSR. I consider this an important and an urgent problem and I should be glad if you would kindly publish the letter I enclose, as well as my own letter.

I write because I am concerned for justice and for the good name of the Soviet Union. Unless people who are concerned for both raise their voices, the cause of peaceful coexistence and the pursuit of peace and general understanding between peoples and nations will be harmed by silence.

Yours sincerely,
Bertrand Russell

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Dear Mr. Russell:

My colleagues and I on the editorial board of *Sovietish heimland* have read your letter very carefully. We greatly regret that we must tell you openly that only total ignorance of Soviet Jewish affairs and cultural life can account for the fact that a person as experienced as you are in public affairs could have allowed yourself to be involved in a campaign based not on facts but on unfounded accusations.

You sent us a copy of a letter you received from an anonymous writer in the Soviet Union. This anonymous correspondent suggests arguments for your intervention on behalf of Soviet Jews, who are supposedly discriminated against. You ask us to publish the letter, with the assurance that this will serve peace and “general understanding between peoples and nations.”

But Mr. Russell, wouldn't the publication of an irresponsible letter serve aims contrary to those you mention?

Please bear in mind that the anonymous letter criticizes those who earlier counseled you to base your intercession for Soviet Jewry on the so-called “economic crimes” that are allegedly being attributed to persons of the Jewish nationality in the Soviet Union. The anonymous writer admits the tendentious character of the clamor raised in the West about the various Soviet trials involving economic crimes; and he urges you to take up another issue, that of culture. As you can see, the “defenders” of Soviet Jewry are not consistent, or, baldly stated, they opportunistically supply the uninformed person with the “argument” they think has not yet lost its demagogic power.

However, if one objectively considers the development of Jewish culture, I doubt that it can continue to be exploited for political purposes. How, for instance, can you explain the fact that in England there is not one Yiddish school, not one Yiddish newspaper, no Yiddish theater, no variety artists who appear in Yiddish, no Yiddish literary journal, no Yiddish books or translations from the Yiddish, no composers or artists who deal with Jewish themes?

I might be mistaken, but I don't think I have ever heard you express anxiety about this matter. But I have heard, on the other hand, that your compatriots claim that the Jews of London or Manchester are, as a rule, assimilated and that therefore there is simply no need for special Jewish cultural institutions in your country.

This may well be true. But one wonders why you deliberately ignore the obvious and natural fact that here in Moscow, in Kiev, in the Urals, in Leningrad, the Jews take less of an interest in Jewish culture than they did in the 1920's and 1930's and that it is impossible today to artificially expand the scope of cultural work done in Yiddish. How can one talk of satisfying “the cultural needs of the Jewish population” in isolation from their *actual* needs?

The fact of the matter is that the *actual* needs of Soviet Jewry with respect to Jewish culture *are being satisfied*. It is common knowledge that the main elements of Jewish culture have traditionally evolved chiefly through literature and through the works of painters, composers, and artists who cherish and preserve their bonds with their national environment. Study the facts, Mr. Russell, to satisfy yourself that these elements of Jewish culture are developing with sufficient intensity in the USSR.

At the same time, we are not advocates of what is called “cultural autonomy.” On this point you will find many relevant passages in the work of V. I. Lenin, who more than once found it necessary to demonstrate the hollowness of this theory put forward by the Jewish nationalist party, the “Bund,” which went bankrupt at the turn of this century.

Here in the land of socialism, libraries and clubs are not built on the national principle. We have no “pure” Ukrainian or Bielorussian libraries and clubs. And there are also no “pure” Jewish ones. Moscow's Lenin Library has some 70,000 Jewish books on its shelves. The Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library in Leningrad has about 40,000, etc. The Jewish workers are fully equal members in all Soviet clubs, so that Jewish concerts, plays, and literary soirees can be arranged in any club and palace of culture. As for literary activity in Yiddish, I would like you to name one other country where literary people writing in Yiddish enjoy such conditions for fruitful and creative work as in the USSR, where editions of Yiddish books and periodicals run as high as 30,000, where books by Jewish authors are systematically translated into other languages, where Jewish writers participate with full equality in all of the country's literary organizations and institutions. Incidentally, let me inform you that, as I write these lines, the editorial board of *Sovietish heimland* is engaged in a great and important project: we are preparing to change from a bi-monthly to a monthly publication with the new year.

But, speaking frankly, Mr. Russell, this is not the main point. Nor, of course, is the heart of the matter the “cultural autonomy” within which anonymous letter-writers wish to imprison us. The main point is that socialism has produced in the USSR a new type of Jew, one who is a full and equal member of the great, friendly workers' collective. What astonishes me is that after the definitive answer you recently received on this question from the Prime Minister, N. S. Khrushchev, the same question is again being raised.

Mr. Russell, surely you must know that all of these “questions” being raised by tendentious propaganda are nothing but cold war positions which certain circles consider to be advantageous at the moment. Were you to become more familiar with the life of the Jews in the Soviet Union, I am certain that you would refuse to allow your name to be exploited by people who operate on the “catch-the-thief” principle: in order to divert attention from the virulent racism and anti-Semitism in some countries across the water, they raise a hue and cry about the allegedly unsolved Jewish problem in the Soviet Union.

Respectfully,
Aron Vergelis¹

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29th October, 1964

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your reply to my letter of July 22, 1964. I note that this reply was published in the October, 1964, issue of your periodical, *Sovietish heimland*. You did not publish my own letter, or the copy I sent of a letter addressed to me by a Soviet Jew complaining that Jews in the USSR are exposed to forced assimilation and appealing for “nothing more” than the rights accorded to Jews in Poland, Rumania, and Czecho-Slovakia. The reason you give for withholding this from your readers is that it is “irresponsible” and “anonymously written.”

The letter was not anonymous. The decision to withhold the name of the writer was my own and was taken for reasons which you well understand. I should have been content to leave the question of “irresponsibility” to the

judgment of your readers and I should have more confidence in the value of your reply if you had published my letter. Not only did you fail to publish the letter, but you misrepresented its content. The writer does not, as you allege, admit “the ‘tendentious character’ of the clamor raised in the West” around Soviet economic crimes. He states the opinion that public reaction to “the problem of forced assimilation” of Soviet Jews is much more important. In the long term, he is undoubtedly right, although the shooting of speculators and the singling out of Jewish offenders is properly abhorred by enlightened opinion.

Your reply is equally lacking in scruple when it dismisses as a “cold war” attitude, expressions of concern for Soviet Jews which exist in progressive, pro-Soviet, and also Communist circles in the West, and when it makes the ridiculous charge that the motive is the diversion of attention from “the racist and anti-Semitic orgy rife in some countries across the water.” You cannot be unaware that the Communist Parties in Italy, France, United States, Canada, Scandinavia, Australia, and elsewhere have publicly criticized anti-Semitic literature in the USSR, discrimination against Jewish religion, and the depredation of Jewish culture. You are grossly misleading your readers if you suppress this important fact and misrepresent honest criticism of the inequality experienced by Soviet Jews. Your readers are surely able to judge for themselves the sincerity of your statement that it is an “obvious, natural fact” that Soviet Jews today “have less of a yearning for Jewish culture than in the 20's and 30's” and that “one cannot artificially expand, without rhyme or reason, the scope of cultural work done in Yiddish.” They will, I am sure, be as astonished as I am that you omit that during the personality cult of Stalin, Jewish culture and its leading exponents were assassinated; and that restitution has since been quite inadequate. This seems to many of us an unacceptable way of diminishing the yearning for Jewish culture.

Nor can one with knowledge of the true situation of Soviet Jews be impressed by what you say about the “fruitful” conditions available to Yiddish writers. Only five or six books in Yiddish have been published in the Soviet Union since 1948, not one by a living writer. I am fully informed of the cultural facilities that have been accorded to Soviet Jews since 1956. I welcome them as some mitigation of the crimes Stalin committed against the Jewish people, but they are meagre, grudging, and inadequate to the needs of a vigorous intellectual community of some three million Jews, of whom almost half-a-million speak the Yiddish language as a mother tongue. The striking cultural amenities supplied to even the smallest Soviet national and linguistic minorities illustrate injustice at present imposed on Soviet Jews.

You ask why I do not express anxiety about the unavailability of Jewish and Yiddish cultural institutions in Britain. *The Jewish Year Book for 1964*, published by the London *Jewish Chronicle*, lists hundreds of Jewish organizations of every kind, scores of libraries, museums, newspapers, and schools, manifold religious institutions, and a considerable selection of book titles on aspects of Jewish history, religion, sociology, politics, and philosophy. A number of the listed institutions have facilities in both the Hebrew and Yiddish languages. All this exists for a total Jewish population in Britain of 450,000, or rather less than the number of Soviet Jews whose mother tongue is Yiddish and about one-sixth of the entire Soviet Jewish community.

The Jews in Britain are clearly at liberty to decide for themselves if they wish to assimilate, what form that assimilation shall take and in what way they shall express their interests as Jews. If Jews in your country had a comparable choice, within the framework of Soviet society, or if they had opportunities equal to those of the other Soviet nationalities, outside interventions would be presumptuous. Unfortunately, they do not; authority imposes upon them conditions of assimilation in which they have virtually no choice but submission.

As the appointed editor of the only Jewish journal in the USSR, you are not an initiator of policy on Jewish matters but an authorized spokesman. The present moment, however, requires all of us to explain the need for an enlightened Jewish policy to the Soviet government. More than two years ago, as a sincere friend of your country and its policy of coexistence, I said that this situation would do much harm to the reputation of the Soviet Union. This, indeed, has proved true. It will be unfortunate for both the Soviet Union and the Jewish people if something is not quickly done to accord dignity and justice to Soviet Jews. Nor can this letter end without an expression of concern that little has been done to reunite survivors of Jewish families broken up by the war, and so to terminate their prolonged sufferings.

Yours faithfully,
Bertrand Russell

¹ This version of the Vergelis letter was translated from the Yiddish (as it appeared in the Sept.-Oct. 1964 issue of *Sovietish heimland*). The English version Vergelis sent to Lord Russell differs in some small details—Ed.
