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SOVIET JEWRY: ITS SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND IMAGES OF ISRAEL

Notes on a Visit to the Soviet Union

by Dan Caspi

In August 1979 this writer was one of thirty delegates of the Israel Political Science Association who attended the triennial convention of the International Political Science Association in Moscow. During our visit we had opportunities to talk with Russian Jews, and the following report is based on those discussions.

It should be noted that the Jews with whom we met were all middle class academicians living in Moscow and Leningrad. Thus, this report does not pretend to describe the situation of Soviet Jewry as a whole. Some of the statements made here were expressed by the Russians while some are personal impressions.

Soviet Jewry's Sources of Information

The Jews of the Soviet Union possess at least six sources of information on Israel:

The official Soviet mass media. Reports from these media are partial, biased and unreliable. Nevertheless, the Jews obtain information on some events relating to the Middle East, such as the Camp David agreements, by extracting factual data from the Soviet interpretations. Moreover, even those who reject the propaganda of the local media cannot fail to be influenced by the facts as reported about such issues as, for example, the military tension in the region or Israel's economic difficulties.

Western shortwave broadcasts. Overseas programming on the BBC, the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe has a high level of credence within the Soviet public in general and among the Jews in particular. Relative to Israeli broadcasts (see below), the Western programs enjoy two major advantages. First, they are comparatively easy to receive, since they are not usually jammed by the authorities. Second, they are considered by the listening

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audience to be more balanced and objective. However, the Western media often present a negative picture of Israel, thereby lending support to Soviet propaganda. For example, they assert that Israel is responsible for the events in Lebanon and is the cause of aggression in the area.

Israeli shortwave broadcasts. Soviet Jews receive programming transmitted on two channels by the Israel Broadcasting Authority.

a) The Voice of Zion in the Diaspora. Special short-wave broadcasts are directed to Russian-speaking Jews in the Soviet Union. Though there were reports of Soviet interference, this should not be taken to mean that the broadcasts are successful. On the contrary, there is some fairly serious criticism of the programming content. Many people with whom we spoke argue that the Israeli broadcasts err in their open and sometimes crass propaganda aimed at listeners who are already suspicious of this type of programming as it emanates from the Soviet media.

Insofar as Western broadcasts are concerned, Soviet Jews expect a different approach and attitude. Yet they find that, while the content differs, Israeli broadcasts resemble those of the local media. Hence, the Israeli programming is counterproductive, forcing its potential audience to turn to other Western stations, repelling rather than attracting it. Moreover, by suffering from a low level of credibility, the Israeli broadcasts contribute to the further distortion of images of Israel (see below). In particular, the Voice of Zion's perceived shortcomings stem from the contradictions between the information it transmits and that available from other sources.

By failing to report on the problems in Israel, for example, the Voice of Zion undermines its credibility because these difficulties eventually become known to Soviet Jews through letters from Israel. Paradoxically then, the correspondence tends to confirm Soviet propaganda which seeks to convince the public that all Russian immigrants experience great difficulties during their absorption into Israeli society. In contrast, there is warm praise for the BBC and the Voice of America which, because of their neutral and balanced tone, have established themselves as the real alternatives to the propaganda-oriented Soviet media.

b) The Voice of Israel - Second Channel. The second channel of the domestic Kol Israel (the Voice of Israel) Radio is picked up reasonably well in the Soviet Union on short wavelengths. It appears to be popular among the small but influential group of Hebrew-speaking Jews. The Soviet authorities are aware of this and they jam the transmissions in the Moscow area thrice daily during the principal news broadcasts and reviews (8:00 a.m., 2:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.).

The fact is, though, that very few of those who tune into these Hebrew-language programs understand them fully. One reason is the unfamiliarity of the cultural background on which the broadcasts are based. For example, Israel radio carries commercial advertising which does not exist in the Soviet Union. A second factor involves problems in comprehending Hebrew. Listeners claim that the rate of speech is too fast, especially during the news broadcasts.

Despite these difficulties, Reshet Bet fills the gaps left by the Voice of Zion and underscores the biased character of its program. Sig-

nificantly, the small listening audience in the Soviet Union comprises the leaders of the Jewish community. This elite disseminates the information acquired through the rest of the community.

Written and recorded material. Though relatively scarce, this material is especially valued in acquiring information about Israel and studying its language and culture. Unlike the broadcasts, exposure to this material is more problematic since its possession may be incriminating. Nevertheless, Hebrew language textbooks and periodicals in easy Hebrew are in particular demand. Because of the scarcity, any available material is copied and passed from hand to hand.

Letters from relatives. Letters come from new immigrants in Israel or Jews who settle in other countries, primarily the United States. During their first few months outside the Soviet Union, they keep up intensive contact with their friends and relatives left behind, and these communications are considered to be the most trustworthy sources of information about Israel.

Insofar as letters from Israel and the United States are concerned, there appears to be a consistent difference. The former are said to be preoccupied with descriptions of problems in the absorption process, especially at the bureaucratic level, and the difficult nature of the economic situation. These letters arouse particular aversion since they deal with issues which are characteristic of the Soviet Union as well. On the other hand, letters which arrive from the United States are highly optimistic, even exaggerating the success of economic integration.

Meetings with tourists. Soviet Jews do meet Western tourists, Jews and non-Jews, though their encounters with Israelis are sporadic since very few Israelis visit the Soviet Union. Those who do are usually members of Rakah, the Israeli Communist Party, who do not normally seek out Jewish contacts. Moreover, the Soviet Jews place little trust in the members of these delegations. (For this reason, the Jews with whom we met immediately inquired about our political affiliation in order to ensure that we were not Communists.)

Interpersonal meetings with Western tourists are very important for Soviet Jews since they provide an opportunity to ascertain the veracity of information acquired from Western sources. Thus, during our encounters, we were extensively queried, even about topics which are accorded intensive treatment on the Voice of Zion. Among the issues most commonly raised in our conversations with Soviet Jews were: a) rights of immigrants during the absorption process in Israel; b) types of professionals most in demand; c) status of army-age immigrants with regard to military service; d) the situation of mixed-marriage couples in Israel; e) attitudes of the Israeli population towards Russian immigrants; f) the military-political-economic situation; g) relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

Conclusions. There is a marked distinction between exposure to foreign mass media and direct encounters with tourists which, while limited, are

sought after and may prove to be more effective. In addition, the lack of current information has created a vast network of interpersonal communication within the Jewish community which, though based on hearsay and half-truths, is necessary in order to fill the information vacuum.

Soviet Jewry's Images of Israel

The images of Israel prevalent among Soviet Jews are, in part, the result of the nature of the information to which they are exposed. The following are some of the images most frequently expressed.

Israel as a country of war and insecurity. This image is primarily fostered by the Soviet media as well as by the Western broadcasts received in the Soviet Union. It is especially unsettling to women and youth who justify their decisions not to immigrate to Israel in terms of their determination not to go to war again (memories of World War Two are apparently still traumatic for Soviet Jews).

Israel as a country of economic hardship. This image is reinforced by letters from Russian immigrants in Israel. Those who read the letters can easily conclude that there is no real difference between the respective economic situations in Israel and the Soviet Union.

Israel as an ideology-laden society. In general, it is believed that Soviet Jewry is imbued with a Zionist national spirit as embodied in the State of Israel. However, many Soviet Jews view Israel as a society laden with values which it attempts to impose on the individual, and this image is partially fostered by the Voice of Zion. Moreover, Soviet Jews share their society's negative reaction to officially imposed values and attempts at indoctrination, and they draw a parallel between these activities in the Soviet Union and what they deem to exist in Israel.

Israel as a theocratic society. Israel is seen as ruled by a religious spirit, strange to a large majority of Soviet Jews who, because of the conditions under which they live, have lost much of their religious heritage. They perceive the country to be dominated by a rigid religious establishment which impinges on the life of the individual - an anathema to those Jews who seek to flee the Soviet Union. The difficulties of couples in mixed marriages add to this image.

Israel as a society hostile to Soviet immigrants. Among other things, this image is also fostered by letters which do not, of course, explain the universal phenomenon of tension between any recipient society and its immigrants. The hostility towards immigrants is often misunderstood and leads to the erroneous conclusion that "Perhaps we are not wanted in Israel."

Israel as a Levantine state. This image is held by an elitist minority which is concerned not only with the character of the state of Israel but also - and primarily - with the nature of Israeli society. It is reflected in letters from Russian immigrants who experience a culture shock when encountering Israeli mass society with its particular Oriental characteristics. Russian immigrants describe in detail the noise and filth of Israeli society in contrast to the imposed order and cleanliness typical of the Soviet Union.

Conclusion. In addition to these, the Soviet Jews have other images of Israel, many of them possible. But the negative images have been reviewed here because they serve, whether sincerely or not, as justification for the decision not to immigrate to Israel. Coming to grips with the problems which give rise to these images may help to increase the immigration of Soviet Jews and also curtail the drop-out rate among those who do leave.

The main purpose here is to convey impressions of my visit to the Soviet Union to those parties who deal with Russian Jewry and are concerned with its fate. I have deliberately refrained from presenting operative suggestions in the belief that those must be made and assessed in a forum more suitable to this delicate subject. Nevertheless, my conviction is that policy regarding information for Soviet Jewry and details of its information channels and network require constant re-evaluation.

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