

THE PARADOX OF PERESTROIKA: ETHNIC TURMOIL AND ANTI-SEMITISM

A specter is haunting Soviet society. The specter is the economic, cultural and political turmoil that a writer in the government newspaper *Izvestiia* likens to "a fever... that weakens *perestroika*... and deafens the leadership to the voices that cry out in alarm to prevent disorder and anarchy." As democracy and diversity sweep through much of Eastern Europe, the Soviet behemoth is mired in ethnic upheavals and nationalist upsurges. Such is the nature of the troubles in this era of *glasnost* that extremist groups with names like Fidelity, Renewal, Fatherland and Memory, all xenophobic and ostensibly devoting themselves to the preservation of historic buildings, churches and monuments, combating drunkenness or reviving Russian folksinging, are waging a rearguard action, deploring Western-style freedoms and advocating anti-Semitism. The actions of these groups cause Soviet Jews to think about a modern exodus.

Though worries about anti-Jewish outbursts have been increasing for nearly two years, anxieties were inflamed by recent events—notably the disruption of a meeting of "April," the liberal writers' society, at the Central House of Writers in Moscow on the evening of 18 January. A gang of about 30 bullyboys, members of a paramilitary group called *Pamyat*, broke into the hall, shouting, "Yids, get out to your Israel" and "Today we are here with loudspeakers; tomorrow we will come with guns."

Anti-Jewish episodes are becoming bolder. Jewish cemeteries have been desecrated. Since late January, posters have appeared on Moscow's Arbat Street with the text "If you are Russian, kill the Jewish." *Pamyat* has gone so far as issuing a blacklist on which appear the names of prominent Jewish physicists such as Arkady Migdal. In addition, leaflets are being distributed warning that pogroms will take place in May.

To many Soviet Jews the organized hatred is a paradox. Conditions for Jews have improved considerably under Mikhail S. Gorbachev's policies. Synagogues have been allowed to reopen. Jewish books and newspapers, though still few in number, are being published again. Jewish cultural societies have sprung up in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and many provincial cities, especially in the

Baltic republics. Jews are being admitted to more universities and taking command of the news media. Many more Jews are being allowed to emigrate, and more visas have been issued for Jews to travel.

Yet memories of tsarist oppression and Stalinist violence run deep. The mood of Soviet Jews hovers between pessimism and panic.

Soviet leaders have been curiously silent. Last year, a Lithuanian Jewish writer, Grigory Kanovich, joined by two members of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, physicist Vitaly Ginzburg and biophysicist Oleg Gazenko, submitted a petition to Gorbachev, signed by more than 200 of their fellow members of the Congress of People's Deputies, calling on him to condemn anti-Semitism and to create a special committee to investigate the problem. The petition was buried. A few weeks later, ten prominent scientists and writers sent a letter on the subject to Gorbachev (see the box on page 54). No formal answer was received—though one of Gorbachev's associates informed them that their message was discussed with Politburo members.

Then, on 21 February, Soviet prosecutors indicated they had begun a criminal investigation of *Pamyat*, the most aggressive faction of the anti-Jewish extremists. The Interior Ministry announced the same day that "rumors of pogroms against Jews... have no grounds whatsoever." The statements did not allay fears. As one Jewish physicist told an American colleague, "Whenever a stranger comes to my door I think I am about to be shot dead."

Jewish scientists have long been prey to open and furtive discrimination. But after the end of the Stalin era their condition improved—though they could still be sent to prison or gulags for acts considered hostile to Soviet policies, such as participating in human rights demonstrations. Refuseniks were fired from their jobs for no other reason than that they applied for an exit visa.

Today's enemy of Soviet Jews seems to be, ironically, *glasnost* and *perestroika*, which have unleashed forces that appear out of control. Gennadi I. Gerasimov, spokesman for the Soviet Foreign Ministry, told an interviewer recently that "we have no history of democratic experience.



Goldanskii: Ringing the alarm bell.

Freedom to some means anarchy."

When the Soviet public contemplates the harsh realities of food shortages, urban crime and ethnic strife, along with the deterioration of authority, they may wonder whether their leaders, Gorbachev included, aren't just fiddling while the USSR burns.

In his column in *The New York Times* on 12 February, William Safire wrote that "with their inborn barometers of bigotry, Soviet Jews sense a coming disintegration of authority and know they will be scapegoats in any return to ethnic passions." While Soviet authorities are unsure of the exact number of Jews in the country, US groups estimate that about 1.5 million consider themselves Jews. Increasing numbers seek to emigrate.

Indeed, Soviet scientists are coming to the US as immigrants and visitors in record numbers. "It would be easy for any one of my colleagues to get a tenured professorship here," says a visiting Soviet physicist. "But I don't know any who want to emigrate. Still, the Jewish ones are frightened about the political instability and the anti-Semitic insanity."

In the past year or two, "Little Russias" have emerged at such universities as MIT, Princeton and the University of Minnesota. Yuri Cherniak, a planetary physicist at MIT who once ran the refusenik science seminar in Moscow, insists that Soviet authorities aren't likely to improve conditions for Jews—and that negligence, he says, will impel more scientists to "join the brain drain" from the USSR.

One who understands the current situation is Vitalii I. Goldanskii, director of the Semenov Institute of Chemical Physics and a member of the Soviet parliament. Goldanskii recently wrote a pointed and poignant essay; it is published in this issue, beginning on page 53.

—IRWIN GOODWIN