Book Review


“It is a tragedy that a nation that fought so valiantly to defeat Nazi fascism now sees the emergence of neo-fascist groups among its own citizens,” said former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Alexander Vershbow in a speech he delivered in Moscow in March 2004. According to recent polls, 72 percent of Russia’s population of approximately 143 million people believe that nothing prevents its Jews from living in Russia in peace and harmony. (There are about 500,000 Jews in Russia, few of whom observe religious laws, belong to a temple, or give their children a Jewish upbringing.) However, a recent opinion poll in Moscow indicated that 21 percent of respondents thought that the activities of Nazi groups should not be curtailed. Anti-Semitism, which has plagued the world for centuries, has deep roots in the history of Russia and its people. Indeed, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, an anti-Semitic, tsarist book, which was established as a hoax in 1921 and is still widely circulated in Muslim countries as evidence supporting the Jews’ desire for world domination through secret control of the media and manipulation of the money supply, was written by a Russian from Orel, Sergey Nilus, in 1902. And the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), unlike the Roman Catholic Church and most Protestant churches, has never accepted responsibility for its anti-Semitism during the Holocaust nor repudiated its main traditional charge that the Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ.

Political Anti-Semitism in Post-Soviet Russia shows that anti-Semitism is alive and well in contemporary Russia, in general, and in its political life, in particular. The book is based on research conducted by the author between 2000 and 2002. Because of the rapidly changing political life in post-Soviet Russia, the book is topical now, but could become dated over time.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is devoted to an analysis of anti-Semitism in the context of the political parties in the contemporary Russian Federation. Two elements of this issue are discussed: first, moderate anti-Semitism found in the parties of the political mainstream, and second, the anti-Semitism found in marginal groups in the extreme Right, including the ultra-nationalist and religious fundamentalist groups, along with the attitude of the state toward both. For purposes of understanding this portion of the book, the Abbreviations summary and the Glossary of Organizations’ Russian Names added to the front of the book by its editor, Dr. Eugene Veklerov, along with his informative footnotes, are invaluable. The author makes the important point that Russia’s predicted slide into a fascist state fortunately did not occur.

The second part of the book is devoted to anti-Semitic propaganda. The anti-Semitic press and its financial resources are discussed in detail. For example, publications may be deliberately overpriced, resulting in a profit after selling the first issue, and the profits are then used to increase the circulation and size of the publication. Or, volunteers may perform the technical production jobs in cheap basements or private apartments and then
distribute the publications. The author also analyzes the structure and content of anti-Semitic propaganda in periodicals and newspapers and the authorities’ successful efforts to shut down many of the publications.

In the third part of the book, the author provides a description of the social, conspiratorial, religious, and racial aspects of anti-Semitism. He then analyzes the function of anti-Semitism in the ROC and in Islam in contemporary Russia, including an examination of the Russian extreme right-wing movement as a “religious” movement.

As someone who works to combat hate crime in California, I am somewhat familiar with the type of anti-Semitism found in the United States. What I found most interesting about Likhachev’s book was that it gave me a better sense of the different manifestations and origins of anti-Semitism in Russia. For example, I had not realized that Karl Marx was anti-Semitic, given that I associate Marxism in Russia with Leon Trotsky, who was Jewish. I also had not understood how the failure of the ROC to repudiate the anti-Semitism contained in its teachings (as Western Christianity did within the so-called theology after Auschwitz) has perpetuated anti-Semitism among the Church’s followers. According to ROC doctrine, such a repudiation is doctrinally impossible, because any innovation is viewed as a departure from the purity of Orthodoxy. However, there is a liberal minority within the ROC that has attempted to reexamine the church’s treatment of the Jews and the main anti-Judaic myths, such as the sinful and Satanic character of Judaism, the accusation that they are God-killers, and the “blood libel”—the accusation that Jews kill non-Jewish children to use their blood to prepare food for their religious feasts. Indeed, it has been said that perhaps nowhere in the world is anti-Semitism so openly aggressive as in modern Russian Orthodoxy. The vast majority of Russia’s believers belong to the ROC, which played a vital role in the development of Russian national identity. During times of foreign domination, the church played a key role in safeguarding national languages, traditions, and historical memory. Even nonreligious Russians mostly associate themselves with the orthodox faith for cultural reasons. When the ROC gift shops carry copies of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, it makes eradication of anti-Semitism among its believers much more difficult.

Yet in other ways, the anti-Semitism in Russia is quite similar to that found in the United States. One might even argue that the rise of the Internet has made it easier to export skinhead beliefs and behaviors from the United States to countries such as Russia and for hate groups to share information and freely disseminate materials. (David Duke, the American white supremacist, has visited Russia three times since first meeting in 1999 with Albert Makashov, then a prominent leader of the Russian Communist Party, who openly shared his anti-Semitic views.) As of 2003, there were at least eighty Russian Web sites and three large Web portals regularly engaged in distributing anti-Semitic and hate propaganda online. Yet there has been little indication that Russian law enforcement takes anti-Semitic Web activity seriously, perhaps because Russian law does not restrict online media. Many of the skinheads’ crimes are committed against dark-skinned and illegal immigrants from the Caucasus, who are afraid to report the crimes to the police for fear of being deported. (The use of the word Caucasian in this book thus has a different meaning than the usual one in English; I was surprised to learn that Russians expressed more prejudice against the Chechens and other groups from the Northern Caucasus, Armenians, gypsies, blacks, and the Balts than they did against the Jews.) As of 2004, the number of young skinheads, who are the predominant ones committing violent attacks against Jews
and Jewish institutions, numbered approximately fifty thousand. Other anti-Semitic crimes are committed by ultra-nationalist and other far-right elements. Islamic revivalism among Russian Muslims, of whom twenty-five million lived within the Russian Federation as of 2002, has also contributed to anti-Semitic activity.

Russia has legislation banning the incitement of religious animosity, although in 2000 not one hate crime case saw its way through a Russian court; for those that made it to a Russian court, the charges brought were either dropped or delayed indefinitely. Influential politicians, including Russian president Vladimir Putin (who currently has about a 70 percent approval rating), have made strong verbal commitments to fight anti-Semitism. Putin also demonstrated his support to the Jewish community by attending two events at the Moscow Lubavitch Center in 2000. However, it is feared that Putin’s statements are intended for the international community, and that lower-level state officials do not feel comfortable enough to come out domestically against anti-Semitism. Likhachev points out that the rhetoric of the Russian state is better than are its actual practices. Many perpetrators of anti-Semitic crimes are found guilty of the lesser crime of hooliganism, rather than the more serious crime of inciting ethnic hatred, and sentences are often not lengthy. (For example, three individuals who were convicted of desecrating a Jewish cemetery in 2004 received two years’ probation, whereas two other participants were considered too young to be prosecuted.)

The primary criticism of this book is that, in an attempt to be scholarly, neutral, and dispassionate, the author sometimes comes across as emotionless and dry, particularly when he relates various characteristics of the political parties, which become a hodgepodge of acronyms at times, or provides names and details of the numerous anti-Semitic publications. The book would have benefited from including more detailed and intimate depictions of events that happened to real people to counter the above-mentioned effect. For example, the story of the prosecution of Eduard Liminov, a National Bolshevik Party leader who was arrested on a bee farm, is more interesting, as are the descriptions of the actual content of the publications, such as the document containing alleged insidious plans by the Jews to increase the acidity of the goyim’s blood.

Interestingly, the events covered in this book from 2000 to 2003 were also studied by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) in its reports on anti-Semitism in Russia. These reports corroborate Mr. Likhachev’s findings. In its 2000 report, the ADL concluded that “Anti-Semitism remains one of the most common expressions of ethnic and religious intolerance and xenophobia in Russia today.” The ADL noted that anti-Jewish prejudices and conduct were not only a heritage of the tsarist and communist past, but at any given moment in Russian history, anti-Semitism and the type of response it received reflected the current economic, social, and political situation in Russia and the level of maturity of its civil society. Eighteen major attacks on Jews and Jewish property were reported during 2000, although many more likely went unreported to the police or to human rights organizations. According to the report, the standoff between Putin and the oligarchs was welcomed by the public, but many made no clear distinction between the class of rich and influential tycoons (some of whom were Jewish) and the Jewish people in general, perpetuating anti-Semitic stereotypes.

In its 2003 report on anti-Semitism in Russia, the ADL concluded that while the number of incidents remained stable, the nature of the attacks became more violent. Some candidates featured anti-Semitic rhetoric in their campaigns for the State Duma (Parliament)
in December 2003 and in the presidential elections in March 2004, and this is common at May Day celebrations. The war in Iraq has provoked a new wave of anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli sentiment. One tactic used by skinheads was to post a sign featuring anti-Semitic slogans in a public spot, often with hidden explosives attached. When people attempted to remove the objectionable signs, the explosives detonated. Anti-Semitic vandalism has always been common in Russia. However, the ADL report noted the tendency of vandals to choose the same sites to vandalize, implying that the attacks were premeditated and not spontaneous. Anti-Semitic articles and books produced by extremists are common and easily available. (According to the State Department's Report on Global Anti-Semitism, released January 5, 2005, an anti-Semitic novel, *The Nameless Beast* by Yevgeny Chebalin, has been on sale in the State Duma's bookstore since September 2003.) Although much of the content of these publications violates Russian law, the publishers are rarely prosecuted. There is no clear legal definition of “ethnic hatred,” and the judge has to make the determination individually. Anti-Semitic literature is sold freely all over the country. (Some argue that it is not so much that the number of anti-Semitic publications has increased, but that censorship has decreased.) The main surprise of the 2003 elections was the victory of Rodina. This proudly nationalist organization was founded only several months before the election, but won 10 percent of the vote.

Since the publication of Likhachev’s book, the middle class in Russia has experienced an increase in wealth unmatched by its counterparts in the past thousand years, in large part because Russia’s oil and gas reserves are commanding high prices and because Russia has undertaken market reforms to join the international capitalistic system. One report in December 2006 said that, driven by high commodity prices, the Russian economy has been growing at nearly 7 percent a year. There has been a 15 percent reduction in poverty, real income went up 8.5 percent in 2006, and unemployment is down 7.5 percent. Anti-Semitism tends to be cyclical in nature. There is a certain correlation between the state of economic and social affairs and the level of anti-Semitism in a society without fully developed democratic institutions, such as in Russia. To the extent that anti-Semitism seems to rise and fall with the health of a country’s economy, Russia’s improved economic situation is a good sign for those committed to combating anti-Semitism in Russia.

There have been both positive and negative developments since 2003. On the positive side, in March 2004, then-Russian Minister for Nationalities Valdimir Zorin brought extremism to the forefront of public attention by calling anti-Semitism and xenophobia major threats to the country, calling for stricter enforcement of the country’s existing statutes outlawing extremism and anti-Semitism, and urging tolerance education programs. In addition, Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev became the first high-ranking official to acknowledge the existence of right-wing extremist youth groups in the country and to indicate that combating this extremism would be one of the top priorities for the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Federal Security Service. In September 2004, a new course, “A History of World Religions,” was introduced at some Moscow schools, pursuant to which some students were taken on field trips to local synagogues to increase mutual understanding. In October 2004, President Putin met with prominent Rabbi Berl Lazar and promised that the state would help to revive Jewish communities in Russia. (According to census figures, about half of Russia’s Jews left the country between 1989 and 2002, many for the United States or Israel.) In June 2005, the leader of the Rodina faction in the Duma, Dmitry Rogozin, condemned all types of anti-Semitism in Russia and in other parts of the
world. In December of that same year, the twenty-five-year-old leader of the St. Petersburg extremist youth group Schultz-88 was sentenced to six years in prison for inciting racial hatred and encouraging juveniles to join an extremist group. (The figure 88 stands for chronological location of the two capital letters of Heil Hitler.) In April 2006 a group of Russian political and cultural activists and top athletes announced the foundation of the League for Civil Resistance to Fascist Outbreaks.

However, in a disturbing development during this same time period, members of an extremist gang shot Nikolai Girenko, a renowned ethnographist and Russia’s leading expert on hate crimes, in the doorway of his apartment in June 2004, likely because his studies led to the convictions of several skinheads. And in early 2005, more than five hundred public figures, including about twenty members of the Duma, signed a flagrantly anti-Semitic letter calling for a ban on Judaism and Jewish institutions. The January 13, 2005, letter, from which the Russian Foreign Ministry publicly distanced itself, called Jews anti-Christian and accused them of performing ritual murders. The 2005 International Religious Freedom Report delivered to the United States Congress, indicated that in Moscow alone in 2005, as many acts of violence against Jews had been reported in the first four months—by April—as had been reported in all of 2004.

Mr. Likhachev’s book serves as a reliable compendium and a good starting point for future research on post-Soviet xenophobia and ultra-nationalist politics, with their accompanying anti-Semitism. A large measure of Russia’s strength lies in its diversity. As the largest country in the world, geographically speaking, the Russian Federation is, by its nature, a nation of many religions and of seventy-five distinct ethnic groups. The fight against anti-Semitism in Russia requires the joint effort of government, civil society representatives, educators, and legal professionals. It is important that Russian government and law enforcement officials at all levels publicly condemn all manifestations of anti-Semitism and xenophobia in the territories under their jurisdiction; increase the number of international and domestic programs targeted at supporting pro-tolerance education in Russia; ensure that law enforcement pays attention to the anti-Semitic content of hate crimes; and help the public differentiate between the oligarchs as a social class and the Jews as an ethnic group. Human rights organizations can do their part by monitoring when and where discrimination occurs; establishing hotlines; instituting legal clinics; developing training manuals for prosecutors; creating human rights and tolerance curricula for the justice system, civil servants, and the schools; and sponsoring roundtable exchanges between local authorities and the community, and joint projects between Russian and American law enforcement. Hopefully, Mr. Likhachev’s book will be useful ammunition in this ongoing fight against anti-Semitism in Russia.

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