Eastern Europe

Soviet Union

Domestic Affairs

After only 15 months in office—the shortest tenure of any Soviet leader up to that point—Yuri Andropov died on February 9, 1984, at the age of 69. He had been out of the public view for the previous six months, during which time—official denials notwithstanding—he had been gravely ill. Andropov was succeeded as both first secretary of the Communist party and as head of the Soviet state by 72-year-old Konstantin Chernenko, who had been Andropov’s major rival for the succession following the death of Leonid Brezhnev in November 1982. Chernenko, a protégé of Brezhnev, had spent his entire career in the party apparatus, largely involved in the areas of ideology and culture, and had served as head of the General Department of the Central Committee.

While Andropov’s tenure had been brief, he managed to make his mark on Soviet society, especially in his attempts to tighten discipline in the economic, political, and cultural spheres. Despite Chernenko’s close association with Brezhnev, under whom corruption and inefficiency had reached levels which Andropov was not ready to tolerate, the new leader did not renounce Andropov’s anticorruption campaign. Rather he continued it at a more moderate pace.

Just before Andropov’s death, and after much public discussion, the USSR adopted a major program of school reform. The first of its two main goals was to insure that non-Russian nationality groups acquire better knowledge of the Russian language; the second was to encourage more Soviet young people to pursue technological and industrial vocations rather than going on to university education. At the time the reform program was announced, about 40 percent of the student population spent the last two years of its schooling in technical-vocational institutions; the goal of reform was to raise this figure to 60 percent. The implications for nationalities with strong traditional aspirations to higher education, such as Jews, Armenians, and Georgians, were clearly negative.

More disturbing in the short run was the passage of a law in February requiring prison terms for anyone caught passing economic, scientific, technical, or other official (“sluzhebnye”) secrets to foreigners, with the definition of “secret” being
determined solely by the state and party. Another new law required Soviet citizens with foreign house guests to register them with the local authorities. Measures like these, together with the continued crackdown on dissidents and the further harassment of scientist Andrei Sakharov and his wife, Elena Bonner, signaled a continued, and perhaps even stepped-up, tightening of the political reins.

In the economic sphere, agriculture continued to be a major problem. The officially planned harvest of 240 million metric tons fell short by some 60 million tons. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimated that the USSR would have to import 43 million tons of grain in 1984, only slightly less than the record 46 million tons imported in 1982. Oil production also fell short, a development that had been predicted by some Western observers, based on the declining output of the Tiumen fields.

Under Andropov there had been expectations that tightened discipline and the imposition of a stronger work ethic would reverse the economic slowdown. Chernenko, however, offered no such hope. He was very much part of the Brezhnev group, which, in the last decade, had emphasized "stability of cadres," opposing all efforts that threatened to disturb the equilibrium of society.

The new faces introduced into the party leadership by Andropov continued in their positions under Chernenko. At the same time, some of the old guard began to slip away. Thus, the minister of defense, Marshal Ustinov, died of a stroke in December at the age of 76.

In the elections to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in March, eight Jews—two more than in 1979—won seats. Of the eight, three were from Birobidzhan, the official Jewish autonomous region, which sent only five deputies altogether to the Supreme Soviet. In point of fact, Birobidzhan Jews accounted for only 5.3 percent of that region's population—and only half of 1 percent of the entire Soviet Jewish population.

**Foreign Affairs**

Soviet-American relations deteriorated further in 1984. The main issues dividing the two countries were the Soviet military effort in Afghanistan, human rights and emigration concerns, differences over the Middle East and Central America, and arms control. Tensions between the two superpowers were reflected in a number of minor incidents, including an assault on an American vice-consul in the USSR, the harassment of tourists in Leningrad—to the point where the American government issued a warning to tourists traveling there—and the beating and temporary jailing of a marine guard stationed at the U.S. embassy.

The most troubling episode of the year was the USSR's announcement in May that it would not participate in the summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles, on the grounds that the U.S. government could not guarantee the safety of its athletes. Several private groups in the United States had announced their intention to demonstrate at the Olympics against the violation of human rights in the USSR, and some
had promised aid to any Soviet athlete who would defect. Whether the Soviets were motivated by these actions or by the desire to retaliate for the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics was not clear. All of the USSR's East European allies except Rumania stayed away from Los Angeles, and a competing set of games was held in Moscow, largely for those athletes whose countries did not participate in the American games.

The two superpowers did make some conciliatory gestures during the year: agreement was reached on modernizing the "hot line" between Moscow and Washington; the 1980 ban on Soviet fishing in U.S. waters was lifted; and the ceiling was raised on Soviet purchases of American grain.

Some sectors of the American public that were becoming increasingly alarmed over the deterioration of U.S.-Soviet relations attempted to revive contacts with the Soviet public and leadership. A delegation of 266 church leaders, sponsored by the National Council of Churches, toured the Soviet Union. The group issued a statement praising freedom of religion there, while condemning the American role in the arms race.

In early November the daughter of Joseph Stalin, Svetlana Alliluyeva, returned to the USSR after many years in the West, declaring that she was disillusioned with life there and wanted to be reunited with the Soviet branch of her family.

**JEWISH COMMUNITY**

**Demography**

Because the published findings of the 1979 census were not as detailed as those of the previous two censuses (1959 and 1970), there was less information available about the current Jewish population. Still, the volume based on the 1979 census, published in 1984, did contain some revealing data. According to the 1979 census, there were 1,810,876 Jews in the USSR, down from 2,151,000 in 1970. The largest concentration continued to reside in the Russian republic (700,651) and the second largest in the Ukraine (634,154), where Jews were the third-largest nationality.

Some 14.2 percent of Soviet Jews declared Yiddish as their mother tongue (*rodnoi iazyk*). There was, however, substantial geographical variation. In the Ukraine, for example, 19 percent of the Jews residing in Vinnitsa *oblast* declared Yiddish as their mother tongue, whereas in Donetsk and Dnepropetrovsk *oblasti*—which were more heavily urbanized and industrialized—only 4.1 and 4.5 percent, respectively, did so. Of the Jews in Birobidzhan, only 13.4 percent claimed Yiddish as their first language. In Lithuania, 41 percent of the Jews declared Yiddish as their mother tongue, but this figure may be misleading. The Jewish population of that republic had declined from 24,000 in 1970 to 15,000 in 1979, due largely to emigration, and the remaining Jews were presumably older and Yiddish-speaking.
While there are no precise figures on intermarriage in the Soviet Union, estimates can be developed indirectly from census findings. Data are provided on average family size, by nationality, for each republic. While families are defined as people living in the same household, it is not clear how the nationality of a family is defined. In the Russian Republic (RSFSR)—to offer one example—there were 2.9 people in the average "ethnically homogeneous" Jewish family. Multiplying the number of Jewish families in the RSFSR (127,281) by average family size (2.9) yields 369,115 Jews living in homogeneously Jewish families. When this figure is subtracted from the total number of Jews in the RSFSR (700,651), the remainder is the number of Jews living in families with a non-Jewish member (331,536), or 47.3 percent of the republic's Jewish population. Of course, when a family is listed as "mixed," we cannot tell how many non-Jews there are in the family or which member or members are not Jewish. Despite these shortcomings, however, the extrapolation does provide some inkling of the proportion of mixed families among Russian Jews. In the Ukraine this proportion was about one-third and in Belorussia slightly less than 30 percent. These data confirm the general impression that intermarriage is highest in the Russian republic and lower in the areas formerly in the Pale of Settlement. It is undoubtedly still lower in Georgia, Central Asia, and Moldavia, areas where Jewish tradition and religion have been stronger than in the Slavic republics.

**Emigration**

The number of Jewish emigrants continued to decline in 1984. For the first time since the late 1960s fewer than a thousand Jews were allowed to leave the country; whereas 1,314 had left in 1983, only 894 did so in 1984. Emigration of ethnic Germans and Armenians was also reduced. At a press conference of the Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Public, held at the Foreign Ministry on May 15 (Israeli Independence Day), Prof. S.L. Zivs, a well-known Soviet spokesman on political and ideological matters, declared that "the process of reuniting separated families is practically over." This was one of several official rationales offered by the authorities to explain the closing off of emigration.

**Antisemitism and Jewish Resistance**

There was no change in the status of Jews within Soviet society. The Soviet media continued to attack Zionism and Israel, as well as the Jewish religion, usually making it quite clear that all of these were associated with Jews as individuals. In the Ukraine alone, nearly a dozen books attacking Zionism were published. Boris Kravtsov's *Flight from the Ghetto*, purporting to be based on the testimony of a Soviet Jew who had emigrated first to Israel and then to the United States before returning to the Soviet Union, was published in Leningrad in 330,000 copies. The well-known anti-Zionist writer V. Bol'shakov published a book, in an edition of 100,000, titled *Aggression Against Reason*, which included a chapter on Zionism, the
“shock brigade” of imperialism. L.E. Berenshtain’s *Zionism—Enemy of Peace and Social Progress* contained chapters entitled “Expansionism and Terror—the Face of Zionism” and “Zionism—Racism in Action.” In Odessa, a book titled *Zionism in the Service of World Reaction* was published in an edition of 25,000. One of the recurring themes in this literature was the alleged collaboration between the Zionists and the Nazis, even at the height of the Holocaust.

The campaign against Zionism was not confined to “agitation and propaganda” but was also expressed in harassment and persecution of would-be emigrants to Israel. Anatoly Shcharansky, sentenced in 1978 to three years in prison and ten years in labor camps, and again in 1981 to three more years of labor, was said to be in declining health. Despite intercession by several international figures, Soviet authorities gave no sign of allowing him to emigrate or even of commuting his sentence.

Prominent as well as relatively unknown Jewish activists continued to be arrested and sentenced to prison and labor camps, often on trumped-up charges. Yosef Bernshtain was sentenced to four years in a labor camp for “resisting arrest”; Yuli Edelshtain was sentenced to three years in a prison camp for “illegal trafficking in drugs,” after the authorities apparently planted some in a matchbox in his home. Alexander Kholmiansky was jailed for “hooliganism,” as was Rabbi Moshe Abramov of Samarkand. Zakhar Zunshain was given a three-year sentence for “defaming” the Soviet system and state, and Mark Niepomniashchy was sentenced on similar charges. Yakov Mesh of Odessa was arrested for “resisting the police” and refusing to testify against another Odessa activist, Yakov Levin, who had been accused of anti-Soviet slander. Others were imprisoned on charges of embezzlement, forgery, “parasitism,” or draft evasion.

In July Ephraim Katzir, a distinguished scientist and former president of the State of Israel, attempted to meet with refuseniks while attending a scientific congress in Leningrad. He was first held and interrogated by the KGB; later he and four other Israelis attending the biochemistry meeting were expelled from the country.

Even while continuing its policy of anti-Zionism, the Soviet Union was careful to retain some low-level contacts with Israel. In March a four-man Soviet Peace Committee delegation visited the Jewish state, and in May seven Soviet citizens traveled to Israel, under the auspices of the Israel-Soviet Friendship Committee, to participate in commemorations of the defeat of Nazism.

**Jewish Religion**

The rabbi of the Moscow Choral Synagogue, Adolf Shayevich, toured the United States at the invitation of the National Council of Churches. He reported a rise in synagogue attendance, which he attributed to an increased desire on the part of Soviet Jews “to identify with one’s roots.”

Chief Rabbi René Sirat of France visited the USSR, the first time in almost a decade that the Soviet government had permitted an official visit of a high-ranking Jewish figure from the West.
Jewish Culture

The Jewish collection in the Leningrad State Museum was described in an article by Tatiana Gelfman in the Yiddish monthly *Sovetish haymland* (1984, No. 2). The 1,100 objects in the museum that are related to Judaism formed part of that institution's section on the "history of religion and atheism." Included were items from the antireligious campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s as well as Torah scrolls, crowns, paintings, amulets, candlesticks, and other objects. According to the author of the article, "The purpose of the museum is to preserve and teach about the monuments of the past, using them for scholarly, atheistic and educational purposes."

An interesting feature article on contemporary Yiddish theater, published in *Sovetish haymland* (1984, Nos. 6, 7), focused on the six existing companies. The Moscow Yiddish Dramatic Ensemble, established in 1962 by survivors of the theatrical group that had been dissolved in 1948, was staffed largely by younger graduates of Moscow theater schools. The ensemble, which had only two plays in its repertoire, employed a considerable amount of Russian in its performances, in order to have "sufficient contact with the general audience." The group staged its work in Siberia, Birobidzhan, and the Baltic, but not Leningrad or Moldavia.

Yuri Sherling, director of the Birobidzhan Jewish Musical Chamber Theater, founded in 1977, related how he had grown up in an assimilated family but had become attracted to Yiddish culture. Like the Moscow ensemble, his group did not perform exclusively in Yiddish. "Our actors are young, and the theater is for them a school for learning the Yiddish language and culture," he explained. With five productions in its repertoire, the group traveled widely in the USSR and even performed in the German Democratic Republic. Sherling was working on an opera based on the life of the second-century Jewish hero Bar Kokhba.

The Vilnius (Vilna) Dramatic Amateur Collective, which originated in 1956, included some 120 participants, among them more than 50 children under the age of 15. Its director disagreed with his colleagues in Moscow and Birobidzhan about the use of Russian. "I believe the language of the Jewish stage should be Yiddish," he argued. "I'm aware of the attempt by the Moscow ensemble to go the route of bilingualism, but I don't agree. And this is the opinion [in] my environment, Lithuanian Jews [being] less assimilated, especially linguistically, than the Jews of Moscow."

The director of the Kaunas (Kovno) amateur theater, which was smaller than the one in Vilnius, suggested that in light of the shrinking number of people familiar with Yiddish language and culture, "we ought to consider establishing a center for preparing creative cadres for Soviet Jewish art."

The long-awaited Russian-Yiddish dictionary, containing 40,000 entries, was published in March in an edition of 20,000. This monumental work had been initiated in 1935 at a Jewish research institute in Kiev. Although ready for publication in 1948, the manuscript was put aside when its editor, I.G. Spivak, was arrested and executed, in 1952. Work on the project resumed in 1965, and the manuscript
was finally given to a publisher in January 1982. Of the three individuals listed as editors—M.A. Shapiro, I.G. Spivak, and M.Ia. Shulman—only the last was still alive when the work appeared.

On the occasion of the observance of the 125th birthday of Sholem Aleichem, it was reported that his works had appeared in 542 editions in 24 languages, with a total of 9.5 million copies printed.

Birobidzhan

On May 7, 1934, the Birobidzhan Jewish national raion (district) was elevated to oblast (province) status. The 50th anniversary of that event was celebrated with a government award to the province, much publicity in Sovetish haimland—which published an article by Lev Shapiro, first secretary of the provincial Communist party committee—and a half-hour television special. Despite the region’s official designation as “Jewish,” there appeared to be little in the way of Jewish cultural activity there. The only Yiddish newspaper in the USSR was published in Birobidzhan, but it carried few items of specifically Jewish interest. The director of the Birobidzhan Folk Theater could name only 16 participants, 10 of them “veterans.”

Personalia

Iosif Amusin, noted historian and expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls, died at the age of 74. Yankl Elkis, poet, died at the age of 89. Khane Blushchinska, a Yiddish actress active in Minsk and Moscow and the widow of the noted Yiddish poet Motl Grubian, died at the age of 69. Prior to her death she had been teaching Yiddish to young actors in Moscow.

ZVI GITELMAN