Memorandum on

The Situation of the Jews in the Soviet Union

Submitted to His Excellency Anastas I. Mikoyan
First Deputy Premier of the Soviet Union

by The American Jewish Committee

January 22, 1959
The American Jewish Committee, following the discussion which its representatives had the honor of holding with First Deputy Premier Mikoyan, on January 15, 1959, herewith submits to His Excellency a summary of information relating to those expressions of anxiety concerning the condition of Soviet Jewry which our representatives voiced on that occasion.

The facts which have come to our attention are listed under the following main headings:

A. The cultural rights of members of the Jewish nationality as recognized, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Constitution of the USSR, under Paragraph 5 of the internal passports issued to Soviet citizens.

B. Facilities available to Soviet Jews in the field of religion.

C. The participation of Jews in Soviet public and economic life.

We have made every effort to include in this memorandum only information secured from sources which, by their very nature, cannot be suspected of any intent to distort the facts in a manner hostile or detrimental to the interests of the Soviet Union.

A. The cultural rights of members of the Jewish nationality as recognized under Paragraph 5 of the Soviet internal passport, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Constitution of the USSR.

Important recent data on this question is contained in the report submitted by the official Delegation to the Soviet Union of the British Communist Party, a group headed by Mr. J.R. Campbell, editor of the London Daily Worker, published on January 12, 1957, in World News, the official weekly of the British Communist Party. This report states:
"For some years, prior to the death of Stalin, rumors began to spread that all was not well in this field, and well known Jewish writers and intellectuals had disappeared. Then came the revelations of the Twentieth Congress, and later (4/4/56) specific charges in the Folksztyme, a Polish Jewish workers' paper, that could not be ignored, for these charges were consistent with the kind of accusations which Khrushchev had levelled against Stalin, Beria and the security police.

"The charges specifically name a number of Jewish writers, artists and intellectuals as having been tortured and physically destroyed, particularly during the period 1948 to 1952, and this included the whole of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee which had done such yeoman service in helping to mobilize Jewish support and sympathy for the struggle of the Soviet Union during the darkest days of the war. The charges implied also that deliberate efforts had been made to repress all expressions of Jewish culture; that the Moscow Jewish State Theatre had been shut down; that Jewish papers had ceased publication, and the Yiddish Publishing House had been closed.

"Naturally these charges created consternation and bewilderment in the ranks of Jewish communists in all countries, so that it became a matter of urgency and importance to expose their truth or falsehood. Moreover, these charges in their minds became an acid test of the extent, if any, to which the Soviet Union had moved away from the path of socialism."

The report of the British Communist Party then goes on to say that it was decided to launch a special investigation into the subject and make a report. The report states that:

"Many difficulties were encountered (in the investigation)... The first piece of concrete information came from a visit to the Lenin State Library... Here there exist a Yiddish and a Hebrew section... It turned out that there is nothing in Yiddish later than 1948, when publication of Yiddish papers and journals must, therefore, have ceased. The Soviet Encyclopaedia, which in its 1932 edition devoted about 160 columns to the Jews, reduces this in the 1952 edition to 4 columns. The biographies of many prominent Jews had been removed. Marx was no longer referred to as a Jew."
"While the changes in content of the Encyclopaedia could have been the individual decision of the editor himself, interpreting what he considered to be the official mood, the cessation of publication of Yiddish books and papers, could have hardly been anything else but official policy. For example, 'Heimland', a Yiddish journal, was in the library up to the volumes of 1948, and no later. The collected works of Halkin and Vergelis, Yiddish poets still alive, were there up to 1948. That year seemed to be marked out as a significant date. The first task there was, therefore, to meet a few Jewish writers and to examine their reactions to this. Official requests to this end were made, but we were informed this was not possible as they were all on holiday, while Halkin, who was at home, was too ill to receive anyone."

The report then reveals that "From private conversations with Jews" it was discovered that

"The years 1948-1952 were known among them as 'The Black Years', the period during which many Jews were dismissed from their posts; Jewish poets and writers were arrested and charged with treason and executed; Yiddish disappeared from the street and the market-place; the Jewish population closed up together, becoming tense and nervous, and young Jews who otherwise would have merged with the general population, and have forgotten that they were Jews, awoke to a new sense of unity in distress... But let it be said that this fear did not emanate from any feeling of antagonism from among the Russian population, but from official or quasi-official sources, from the Security Police in fact..."

Following this description of the serious situation in earlier years, the present status of Jews is described in the report as follows:

"It remains first to examine what is the present policy of the Soviet Union toward the Jews. What perspectives can be said to exist for Jews -- as a people -- in the cultural sphere? For it might be supposed obvious, from what has been said, that the printing of books in Yiddish, the publication of Yiddish papers, and the reinstitution of the Yiddish theatre would follow as a matter of course. Not at all... Jews in official position, both in Moscow and Leningrad, explained that it was easier to close an institution than to open it..."
"Among ordinary Jews of the older generation -- of the type of the two thousand who gathered in Leningrad Synagogue this summer to celebrate the festival of the 'Rejoicing of the Law' (Simchas Torah) -- the non-existence of a Yiddish paper was regarded as a deprivation and an injustice."

The report then clearly states that the ban on Jewish cultural activity is the considered policy of the Soviet government:

"Just before the delegation departed, however, it had a long interview with Comrade Suslov, the chairman of the Central Committee, and this question of the reinstitution of the theatre and the Yiddish press was raised clearly and specifically. The answer came back equally clearly and unequivocally: 'Unless there is specific demand for them from Soviet Jewry, no, these things will not be reinstituted'."

Both this report and another official report produced by the delegation of the Canadian Communist Party, following its visit to the Soviet Union in August, 1956, make it clear that any "specific demand from Soviet Jewry" is in fact being severely discouraged by the authorities, whose clearly expressed views Soviet Jews would hardly wish to defy. In this respect, a member of the Canadian Communist delegation quotes Premier Khrushchev himself as having stated: "Integration (assimilation) is, historically speaking, progressive..." Mr. Khrushchev added that he did "...not agree to the thought of creating Yiddish elementary schools and it would be much better for Jewish children to attend general schools." This was his specific reply to a demand that the forcible assimilation of Jews be prevented and that they be granted the same cultural autonomy as all other Soviet nationalities enjoy.

The official report of the British Communist Party's delegation states:

"It seems quite clear then that accepting Comrade Suslov's statement as official policy, that policy expects that the Jewish people in the Soviet Union will become completely absorbed... that there is no need, therefore, for special encouragement of Yiddish culture, and that it is undesirable to take such steps...

"It remains now to attempt to give a rational explanation of how it happened that this particular kind of drive against certain elements in Jewry developed. Its importance lies in the fact that although it is concerned particularly with the Jewish problem, it nevertheless appears
to throw considerable light on the general situation. That many Soviet intellectuals must themselves be puzzled and confused, and indeed ashamed of it, seems clear from a uniform attitude adopted everywhere, when this question was raised."

The American Jewish Committee is devoted to the accepted ideal of American life, which postulates the full equality of the rights of the individual, regardless of race, culture or creed, including his right to maintain freely his ties with his religious-cultural background. At the same time, we recognize the fact that the accepted principle of Soviet public life has been and is "Socialist in content, National in form," by virtue of which the present nationality system has developed in the Soviet Union. We understand that this system grants all nationalities, cultural and ethnic units certain degrees of cultural autonomy, among which are the right to and enjoyment of such basic facilities as schools and other institutions of learning conducted in their own languages and including the teaching of their history and traditions. Where numbers are insufficient for separate schools, there exists the right to institute supplementary courses in their own languages and history for minorities attending general schools. Other national facilities of the various nationality groups include theatres, publishing houses, newspapers, broadcasting, and organizations of writers, artists and intellectuals.

It is known that these principles have been applied in the Soviet Union not only to nationalities which are territorially concentrated, but also to nationalities which are widely dispersed and constitute minorities in certain areas. (These include the Great Russian people insofar as they live outside the RSFSR, the former Volga Germans in their present dwelling places in Asia, and many minor Caucasian and Siberian tribes like the Tat, the Udege, and other small groups, which a few years ago did not even possess an alphabet.)

Thus there is a remarkable contrast between the general picture of major cultural activity among nationalities in the Soviet Union and the unique treatment of one single nationality -- the Jews. This exception is even more striking when consideration is given to the tremendous Jewish cultural organization which existed throughout a considerable period of the Soviet Union's history, and which, at its peak during the 1930's, included some 1,400 Yiddish schools with almost 150,000 pupils, some 20 theatres and theatrical groups, nearly 20 daily, weekly and monthly journals in Yiddish, publishing houses with an annual output of almost 2,000,000 copies of books and pamphlets, and even local Jewish Soviets in certain villages and townships, and special sections of local courts in which Yiddish was the official language. In addition there was the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee,
as well as major organizations of Jewish writers and intellectuals who had inspired and activated this significant cultural framework.

The report of the British Communist Party makes it clear that all of these cultural activities came to an abrupt and violent end in 1948, not because of any disappearance of interest on the part of the Jewish population, but through official administrative action on the part of the authorities. There is no doubt that this action constitutes an unprecedented and willful act of destruction of major cultural values and large-scale institutions of one particular nationality, among more than one hundred national groups which continue to enjoy their cultural privileges.

In view of these facts, we find it difficult to understand the statement made by Your Excellency at the United Nations press conference on January 15, 1959, as follows:

"In my country all peoples enjoy freedom, and freedom for the development of their culture. They can have their theatres, their literature, and that includes the Jews. However, the Jewish population has merged with the Russians in Russian culture so fully that Jews participate in general culture and literature, on the Russian stage and in Russian literature. There are many Jewish writers who consider themselves Russian and prefer to write Russian. We cannot interfere in that matter. This is a matter of the Jewish intelligentsia. We do create all conditions in which the Jewish and Russian literatures, and the literatures of all other Soviet peoples should have full opportunities for their development, writing and creation."

Jewish literature and culture obviously do not have equal facilities with those of other peoples, when there is not one school in their own language for the 3,000,000 Jews in the Soviet Union, even in the so-called "Jewish Autonomous Region" of Birobidzhan; when there is not one Jewish theatre throughout your enormous country; when not a single book, pamphlet, or dictionary in Yiddish has been published since 1948 or can be found in any bookstores, and when even in Birobidzhan there is only a two-sheet weekly newspaper in Yiddish (which is not obtainable anywhere else in the Soviet Union). It is evident that this situation resulted from no other factor but interference by the Soviet authorities.

There is no precedent in history of a people thus "losing interest" in its own culture and literature, that 2,000,000 books were printed in its own language before a certain significant date and not a single one following that date. Can it seriously be considered that among 3,000,000 Jews there should not be one
writer, one poet, one intellectual who has written a line in Yiddish since 1918? Did they all "lose interest", by any chance, on the same day in 1918, and could that day have been the one during which hundreds of Jewish writers and intellectuals were arrested and the Jewish institutions destroyed?

The Communist Party journal in the United States, The Worker, stated on January 18, 1959, that a year ago there were published in the Soviet Union 70,000 copies of the works of the Jewish writer Bergelson and 300,000 copies of Kvitko's works and recently, on the occasion of his centenary, 700,000 copies of Sholom Alechem's writings, "in the Russian language." Can it seriously be contended that among 3,000,000 Soviet Jews there was not a sufficient number of potential purchasers to justify the printing of any of these Yiddish classics in their original language?

The Worker further stated: "In the year 1957 alone, there were 3,000 concerts and dramatic performances by Yiddish artists with an attendance of 3,000,000." This certainly indicates a tremendous thirst among Jewish citizens of the Soviet Union for a word spoken or sung in Yiddish. If the desire to enjoy even such ephemeral aspects of Jewish culture as short occasional concerts by small wandering troupes is so strong, surely there must be a large potential public for a permanent Jewish theatre and for Jewish books and newspapers. Can it, then, seriously be maintained that the Jews themselves do not want or need these things, and do not appreciate their own cultural values?

These facts are clear, obvious, and indisputable. It is therefore earnestly to be hoped that Your Excellency's statements to the United Nations press conference and to leaders of The American Jewish Committee at our meeting with you in New York, regarding non-discrimination against Jews in the Soviet Union, were intended to signify not so much a description of the state of affairs that exists today, but rather an indication of the shape of things to come. May we take your statements as an earnest of the Soviet government's preparedness, at long last, to permit the establishment of an adequate system of Jewish schools, Hebrew and Yiddish courses, a Yiddish theatre, a publishing house, and other Jewish cultural facilities? May we hope that the confiscated cultural properties of the Jewish nationality in the Soviet Union will once again be placed at the service of Jewish cultural life? The fulfillment of this hope, we believe, will remedy a glaring and disquieting anomaly in the life of your country.

B. Facilities available to Soviet Jews in the field of religion.

While it is true that religious worship is permitted in the Soviet Union, for Jews as for the other indigenous faiths, it must be stressed that religious facilities at the disposal of Soviet Jews are statistically inferior to those available to other faiths.
Of the four major denominations in the Soviet Union -- Russian Orthodox, Moslem, Baptist and Jewish -- only the Jewish faith is kept organizationally in an atomized condition.

The Russian Orthodox churches are permitted to maintain a centralized, nation-wide organizational structure of religious congregations, with the Patriarch as its head. Similar systems exist on a national basis for the other religious faiths -- except for the Jews. Not only is there no federation of Jewish communities, or even a Chief Rabbi, but contact and communication between the local congregations appears to be disrupted, and even the distribution of gifts of ceremonial objects appears to be hindered by the authorities.

The Jewish communities are also at a severe disadvantage in terms of available religious facilities. Today there are some 60 rabbis available for 3,000,000 Jews -- one for every 50,000 persons. Many of these rabbis are not properly ordained, all are very old and many officiate in small rented rooms instead of synagogues. In hundreds of localities, with sizeable Jewish populations, such as Kharkov, with some 70,000 Jews, there are no houses of Jewish worship at all. In contrast with this situation, the Russian Orthodox Church, as stated by Patriarch Nikolai himself, has 22,000 churches and 35,000 priests, representing a priest and a church for every 4,000 Russian Orthodox citizens. Thus, in proportion to their population percentage, the Jews have less than one-twelfth the religious personnel available to members of the Russian Orthodox faith.

The construction or re-dedication of churches and seminaries is a normal phenomenon in the Soviet Union today, and many confiscated Mosques have been returned to Moslem congregations. Not a single synagogue has been built or returned to Jewish congregations. While there are ten Russian Orthodox seminaries with about 1,000 students, no rabbis could be trained at all for some 40 years, until the establishment of a small seminary, whose student body is limited to twenty persons, was permitted in Moscow in 1957. This means that within a few years Soviet Jewry will be three times as badly off in terms of religious practice as it is today.

While religious education for young people under eighteen is prohibited for all faiths in the Soviet Union, it must be stressed that in this field, too, Jewish children have been placed at a special disadvantage. The children of the Russian Orthodox and Baptist faiths can at least participate in prayers in their churches, in a language taught to them at school. Jewish children cannot follow the Hebrew prayers of their faith, since the teaching in schools of the ancient tongue of the Jewish people has been entirely prohibited for three decades.
We sincerely hope that in this area Jews may be granted comparable facilities to those enjoyed by other faiths in the Soviet Union, especially a nation-wide organization of Jewish religious congregations in line with the traditional way in which the various faiths are enabled to perform their recognized functions.

C. The participation of Jews in Soviet public and economic life.

It is difficult to find clear-cut statistical evidence concerning the application of policy in an area involving high-level appointments and the utilization of highly qualified personnel. Nevertheless, no one acquainted even superficially with general conditions in the Soviet Union can doubt that the part played by individuals of Jewish origin in important institutions of Soviet public life has faded into insignificance, if it has not disappeared entirely.

We would like to bring to Your Excellency's attention only one example for which statistics are available — the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, in which the branch known as the Soviet of Nationalities is, as indicated by its very name, intended to give fair representation to all national groups. In December, 1937, Jews constituted 4.1% of the membership of the two houses of the Supreme Soviet. In 1946, this percentage had been reduced to a mere 0.8%, in March, 1950 to less than 0.4% and in 1958, to 0.25%, or three members out of 1,336 in the two houses. Today Jews constitute at least 1.5% of the total population, so that their representation in the highest constitutional body of Soviet public life is merely one-sixth of what it might be in relation to their proportion of the population.

It also appears that the contribution of Jews, and their distinguished services in various fields, are at times systematically disregarded or even concealed. An outstanding example is the official brochure, "The National Traditions of the Peoples of the Soviet Union," by M. Morozov, published in April, 1957 by the State Publishing House for Political Literature in Moscow. In listing the exact numbers of soldiers who received the Order of Hero of the Soviet Union for bravery in the second World War, a total of 10,940, the nationality groups of 10,543 soldiers are specified. The remainder are accounted for under the heading of "other peoples," or those belonging to groups of whom fewer than six persons received this distinction. The fact that Jews are not referred to at all, creates the utterly incorrect impression that fewer than six Jews distinguished themselves in the great war against Hitlerite Germany. The truth is that, as was publicly and officially stated at the Third Conference of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in April, 1944, among 3,517 persons who had been awarded this medal up to that time, there were more than 100 Jews, who thus occupied third place among the peoples of the USSR honored by this Order.
Since the total number of soldiers who received the Order of Hero of the Soviet Union was more than three times the number announced in 1914, it is logical to assume that at least 300 Jews were ultimately granted this award. It is exceedingly difficult to understand or condone this kind of deliberate blotting out of the very name of a whole nationality from the record of Soviet public life and history.

A similar case in point is the latest issue of the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia, from which most Jewish names have been omitted.

Another vital aspect of the situation is the tendency, initiated during "The Black Years" preceding 1953, to dismiss Jews from their posts solely because they are Jews. That this tendency still exists is clearly indicated by recent public statements of responsible Soviet leaders.

The National Guardian, a New York weekly known for its consistent advocacy of friendship with the Soviet Union, published an interview on June 25, 1956 with Madame Purtsheva, one of the leading personalities of the present regime, which contained this statement: "The government had found in some of its departments a heavy concentration of Jewish people, upwards of 50% of the staff. Steps were taken to transfer them..." This statement makes it clear that the transfers were made not for reasons of economy, but solely because of the Jewishness of the persons concerned. The Soviet spokesman, Mr. Ilyichev, stated in explanation of this interview that "It is quite understandable that any people should want to create their own cadres and prefer their leading ones to be of their own nationality".

This creates the clear impression that the Jews of the Soviet Union are regarded as outsiders who do not "belong," who are not to be looked upon as being "our own". This impression is significantly strengthened by the following verbatim account of an interview given by Premier Khrushchev and Mr. Pervoukhin to the visiting French Socialist delegation on May 12, 1956:

Premier Khrushchev: "In due course, we have created new cadres..."

Mr. Pervoukhin: "Our own intelligentsia."

Premier Khrushchev: "Should the Jews want to occupy the foremost positions in our Republics now, it would -- naturally -- be taken amiss by the indigenous inhabitants. The latter would ill-receive these pretensions..."
It seems to us that these and other similar statements justify the assumption that something in the nature of a double standard of thought and action has developed insofar as Soviet Jews are concerned, which places the Jewish citizens of the Soviet Union in a unique and unprecedented category. This standard rejects them both as a nationality -- as Jews -- and as assimilated citizens of the Soviet Union.

On the one hand, we are told that the Jews wish to assimilate and are assimilating, and that therefore the restoration to them of their cultural autonomy is neither needed or justified nor desirable. As a result, they alone are denied the cultural rights available to more than one hundred other Soviet nationalities. On the other hand, where public life and employment are concerned, we are told that the Jews are not indigenous, and therefore must yield their places in Soviet society to "our own cadres".

Although the absence of full and free communication and the scarcity of published information makes it difficult to reconstruct a realistic picture of the proportionate participation of different nationalities in other aspects of Soviet life, the examples cited here cannot but create serious doubts about the position of the Jews in such areas as general employment and education. This disquietude is intensified by the fact that relatively few persons who may be identified as members of the Jewish nationality group are to be found among the numerous Soviet diplomatic, consular and economic representatives in other countries.

Thus these inevitable questions arise: What is the meaning and the purpose of the present Soviet policy toward its Jewish citizens? What is in store for Soviet Jewry?

The deep concern which we express to Your Excellency has prevailed for more than a decade and has recently been intensified by reports concerning the possible physical segregation of Jews in a remote area of Siberia. We were gratified to hear from you, at our meeting in New York, that this report is incorrect and that no such transfer of Soviet Jews is contemplated.

Nevertheless, interest in and concern about the ultimate fate of Soviet Jewry will continue so long as the issues raised in this memorandum remain unresolved. Until the present condition of Soviet Jewry is remedied, the situation will redound to the advantage neither of Soviet Jewry, nor of the Soviet Union itself.

We are certain that satisfactory means can be developed to find solutions to these problems, in consonance with the legal and political system of the Soviet Union, and in harmony with the universal principles of equal rights for the individual and equal status for the nationality group alike.
We wish to thank Your Excellency for your interest in this grave and important matter, and earnestly hope that your statesmanship will prove an effective help in finding satisfactory solutions.

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