

# Levy's Book on the Soviet Jewish Question

A searching look at the revised  
American edition

By LOUIS HARAP

WHEN Hyman Levy's *Jews and the National Question* was published in England early this year, it evoked extremely sharp, biting criticism from British Communists. R. Palme Dutt, leading British Communist theoretician, denounced the book in a long review in the London weekly, *World News* (March 8). A review in the same vein by Robert Ramelson, head of the Jewish Committee of the British Communist Party, was published in the London *Daily Worker* and reprinted in the New York *Worker* (April 30). The book has just been brought out in this country in a much revised edition. (Cameron Associates, 100 W. 23 St., New York 10. 128 pages. \$1.50.)

Professor Levy has made numerous changes in response to criticism and has added considerable new material. The new edition also contains a special preface by Levy and Dutt's critical review is reprinted as an appendix. All in all, this newer version is superior to the first although the author's theses remain substantially unchanged.

Following publication of this book Levy was expelled from his branch of the British Communist Party, of which he was a member for many years.

Until his recent retirement, he was a well-known professor of mathematics at several British universities. Early in 1957 Levy was a member of an official British Communist Party delegation to the Soviet Union on which his

special function was to look into the situation of Jews in the USSR. Levy's forthright report on this question, part of the overall delegation report, was published in *World News*.

As a conscious Jew and obviously sincere socialist, Levy felt impelled to write this book about the Jews of the USSR. "On this matter," he states, "speech, if it is based on specialist knowledge, is golden and silence is betrayal of the very cause itself." This reviewer agrees. Levy feels himself to be a friend of the Soviet Union and socialism and has made a genuine effort to interpret this perplexing problem. We agree with much that Levy writes but also see grave shortcomings, as will appear.

The focus of the book is the present situation of Soviet Jews and the author tries to explain how it came about. Levy delves far back into Jewish history to discover how the Jews were able to survive and retain their present character as an international people. His not unfamiliar conclusions are that their dispersal, their fulfillment of a special economic function, their enforced separation from the people in whose midst they lived and the persistence of anti-Semitism largely account for Jewish survival through the centuries. As a consequence of this history, the Jews are an "international minority," that is, they are a minority people in many countries. By virtue

of the common elements in their historical background they have a "national feeling" wherever they may live. But Levy emphasizes that the Jews are not a "nation" on a world scale since they do not fulfill the criteria of the nation set forth in Stalin's famous definition, with which Levy presumably agrees.

### ***Under the Soviets***

Levy then describes the conditions in which the Jews lived under tsarism, the liberation of the Jews under the Soviets and the flourishing of Jewish life and culture up to 1948, encouraged by the Soviet application of the Leninist approach to the national question. The Nazi invasion effected the break-up of the traditional areas of Jewish concentration. He notes that the evacuation of Jews to the east by Soviet authorities saved them from the frightful fate of those caught in the Nazi trap.

Levy then tries to indicate the immediate factors which contributed to the post-war predicament of Soviet Jews. The Hitlerian holocaust had intensified Jewish consciousness among Jews all over the world, including Soviet Jews. Jewish refugees from Nazism flocked to Palestine. The formation of the State of Israel in the arena of struggle of the Arab world for national liberation and Israel's subsequent alignment with western imperialism, Levy holds, created a problem for Soviet leaders. The Soviet Union was helping the Arab liberation movement. In view, then, of the "emotional affiliation to the people of Israel" felt by many Jews, "how dependable, the Soviet authorities are bound to ask, can their Jewish population be in an emergency" when Israel is pursuing a hostile policy toward the Soviet Union? Levy gives in

some detail his version of the relationship of Israel to the Arab liberation movement and of both to the Soviet Union and the unfavorable consequences for Soviet Jews.

Furthermore, Levy holds that Soviet leaders see that many prominent Jews in the United States especially are cold war enemies of the Soviet Union. Under cold war conditions the international community of feeling of many Jews caused Soviet leaders, Levy argues, to adopt a cautious attitude toward Soviet Jews. Complicating factors are the problem of Arab refugees and the demand of the Zionist movement and many Jews over the world that Soviet Jews be allowed to emigrate to Israel.

All the considerations briefly summarized above, Levy contends, contributed to the policy of the USSR toward Soviet Jews. During the "Black Years" of 1948-1953 which culminated in the Moscow doctors' frame-up, Jewish cultural figures were executed and the Jews lived in fear. In the post-Stalin period this fear has considerably diminished, but the fact remains that Soviet Jews "are not now accorded regular national minority rights," although they are still designated as a "nationality" in passports and other identification papers. Soviet leaders have concluded from all these considerations, Levy maintains, that if the Jews are not a nation in the Soviet Union in view of the failure of Birobidjan, the only alternative is that Jews are "simple Soviet citizens entitled to citizenship without discrimination of any kind." Hence the refusal of Soviet leaders to grant Soviet Jews their rights to full Jewish cultural activity.

### ***Do Jews Want Yiddish Culture?***

It is unfortunate that Levy has not mentioned the partial revival of such

activity in the post-Stalin period (Yiddish concerts and translation of Yiddish works into Russian). But so long as there is no publication in Yiddish (except for a small paper in Birobidjan), so long as no Yiddish theater or Jewish secular institution exists the Jews are deprived of the full exercise of their minority rights. Levy affirms that a socialist approach to the question requires full restoration of these rights and he points out how much the Soviet Union would gain thereby.

Is Levy's analysis of the reasons for the present situation of Soviet Jews accurate? Since the Soviet Union has not itself provided any specific explanation of its policy towards its Jews, it has been necessary to attempt an explanation from available information. In the light of all such data, it seems to this reviewer that Levy's picture does present the elements of the situation. But it is doubtful if he has put them in their proper relation. He assigns too central an importance to Israel. For the real root of the problem is the distortion of the national question as a whole during the Stalin period. The Jews were only one of many Soviet nationalities that suffered from this Great Russian chauvinism. As the famous *Folks-Shtimme* article of April 4, 1956 pointed out, however, this distortion with respect to the Jews began in the late thirties, when a number of political and cultural figures in Jewish Soviet life were among those unjustly imprisoned or executed and several secular Jewish organizations were closed down. Thus the emergence of Israel does not have the critical importance that Levy attributes to it, although it would be idle to deny its significant influence. The basic problem still remains the mistakes in the theoretical approach to the national question with respect to the Soviet Jews.

Some criticisms levelled against the book in the English edition are valid, as Levy himself indicates in his preface to the American edition and as is evident from the many changes he has made in this edition. But those criticisms which dispute his basic thesis, namely, that Soviet Jews are not now accorded full minority rights, it seems to this reviewer, are mistaken. It has been asserted by Soviet leaders that a Yiddish press, theater and Jewish cultural institutions are not being revived because Soviet Jews do not want them. R. Palme Dutt writes that "practical experience has shown that the overwhelming majority of Soviet Jews no longer want it and are not prepared to support it." Or, as Robert Ramelson put it rather crudely, why should the Soviet Union revive a Yiddish press and theater "in a language that few under 50 can understand"?

But this view runs counter to the preponderant evidence that considerable numbers of Soviet Jews, whatever their ages, *do* want Jewish culture. In March, Soviet Deputy Minister of Culture M. Danilov told an official delegation of French Jewish Communists that "during 1957 there were some 3,000 cultural presentations in the Yiddish language in the USSR with audiences of almost 3,000,000 in attendance." Do not these official figures show a significant public for Yiddish culture?

During the 1957 Youth Festival in Moscow a number of the 70 productive Yiddish writers met with foreign correspondents. Joseph Rabin, one of the younger writers, told the foreign visitors: "We Jewish writers are not silent. We are constantly demanding our rights before the Union of Soviet Writers. We are demanding a Yiddish publishing house and a Yiddish theater. The Union of Soviet Writers is completely united with us around

these just demands. . . . In our literature have appeared new names who were unheard of before. . . . I know that many people in our country are awaiting the printed Yiddish creative word." (*Canadian Jewish Weekly*, Sept. 12, 1957.)

### **Some Disagreements**

Although we agree with Levy's basic thesis that Soviet Jews are still denied full minority rights, there is much in the American edition of the book, however, that disturbs us. Many questions are put in terms of subjective feelings which obscure the primacy of objective conditions. For instance, in his discussion of the nation, Levy assigns as the "first criterion" of nationhood, "whether or not there exists, in the present, a community of feeling in this respect." But surely this criterion is no less primary than others, such as common territory and economic life. There are many Zionists outside of Israel who *feel* that they are part of a Jewish "world nation," but this feeling is a delusion because it does not correspond to the objective conditions. Another instance of subjectivity is the passage in the next section where Levy asserts that the struggle of a people for nationhood could not be "waged in an economic vacuum" and that *consequently* people "created some semblance of an economic order." But this is to put the cart before the horse: the emergence of a common economic life among a historically developing people in a given area *gives rise* to national feeling.

Nor would this reviewer altogether concur in Levy's brief discussion of Zionism. It is true, as he observes, that Zionism was a product of nineteenth century capitalism and was an attempt to solve the problem of anti-

Semitism primarily in Eastern Europe (and Western Europe, too, as in the Dreyfus case). It was "basically much more than this," Levy notes: Zionist leaders looked on Zionism as a means to divert the Jews of Eastern Europe from the revolutionary movement, as indeed leaders like Herzl openly admitted. Levy also sees that the Zionist leadership tied its objectives to an alliance with imperialism.

We cannot agree, however, that "the original tenets of Zionism are now of no consequence." The present alignment of the Ben Gurion government with imperialist powers, primarily the United States, is an extension of the classic Zionist approach. The agitation for the "ingathering of the Jews" to Israel, while not carried on officially by the Israel government with respect to the United States only because American Jews have made unequivocally clear that they regard this country as their home, is being applied to Jews in other parts of the world, such as Eastern Europe and the Asian-African lands. In addition, the left-wing Zionist Mapam, the Israel party which, Levy says, "claims to be Marxist," is the most persistent and militant advocate of ingathering in the international Zionist movement today.

This reviewer found the book least satisfactory in its views on relations among Israel, the Arab liberation movement and the Soviet Union. In considering the relationship of Israel to the Soviet Union, Levy does not seem to me to give a full picture of Soviet policy in the Middle East. While he recognizes that Israel is now, against its own best interests, aligned with the West instead of adopting a neutral policy, Levy does not appreciate the basic peace policy which the Soviet Union is pursuing in the Middle East, as well as on the world scene.

The Soviet offer to negotiate an arms embargo in the Middle East is only one indication of such a peace policy.

Of course the Soviet Union is very much concerned over the threat to her from the Eisenhower Doctrine and alliances like the Bagdad Pact. But Levy presents this Soviet policy as merely one of self-interest to the Soviet Union without explicitly bringing out that this self-interest also coincides with the peace needs of the world. One need not endorse every recent step taken or utterance made by the Soviet Union in relation to Israel, as this reviewer does not, to recognize that *basic* Soviet policy in that area is a real program toward peace.

### **Middle East**

Also very puzzling is Levy's charge that the Soviet Union was following a policy in the Middle East that "is in practice to repudiate working class unity between Arabs and Jews." While recognizing that Nasser has played a progressive role for Arab liberation and for peace through his neutralist policy, Levy flatly asserts that, since Nasser retains support of the Arab landlords and bourgeoisie at the expense of the peasants and Arab refugees, the Soviet Union should therefore openly acknowledge that fact and somehow base its policy on it. Levy argues that the Soviet Union cannot "ignore the need for working class unity for the sake of winning temporary allies in the anti-imperialist struggle."

He maintains that Marxist ethics require that the Soviet Union make "a clear unequivocal statement that the prime necessity is the unity of Jewish and Arab workers, and that any move on either side that militates against this is dangerous and reaction-

ary." But, he says, the Soviet Union remains silent on this point, instead of at least stating "unequivocally that, if the Israeli working class ceased to be dominated by a pro-imperialist government, its security and the continued existence of the Israeli State are entitled to respect." But for the Soviet government to make either statement or to agitate on this score would constitute interference in the internal affairs of the states involved. The Soviet government cannot control the development of radical movements in the Arab countries, although it can help to accelerate economic development, as it is doing, and help in that way. As to Israel, clearly, if a neutralist policy were adopted by the Israel regime, both Soviet and Arab policy toward it would change drastically. But the Soviet Union cannot be accused of complicity in the failure of the Arab and Jewish working classes to unite. This is the task of peoples's leaders in these countries and not the Soviet Union.

There is much in this book that one would want to debate as well as much with which one agrees. There are a number of points which, we believe, Levy has not thought through thoroughly. At the same time, Levy is the only professed Marxist in the capitalist world (the quality of his Marxism as applied to the Jewish question is another matter) who has attempted in the post-war period a theoretical book on the much vexed question of the situation of the Soviet Jews. For this he deserves credit. We only wish he had digested his subject more thoroughly in all its ramifications.

However, sober discussion, without the abuse that has characterized some of Levy's hostile reviewers, can develop a debate that would contribute to Marxist thinking on the Jewish question.