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Freedman's "Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union: Its Roots and Consequences" - Book Review

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Theodore Freedman, ed., Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union: Its Roots and Consequences. New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1984. 664 pp. No price listed.

Anti-Semitism is a key feature of the history of Russian and Soviet Jews. It has motivated hundreds of thousands of them to emigrate and has stirred the concern of their Western co-religionists. Tsarist anti-Semitism attracted Western attention as far back as the 19th century. Yet the Bolsheviks, who upon seizing power in 1917 abolished the anti-Jewish regulations imposed by the Tsars, for years successfully depicted themselves as opponents of anti-Jewish prejudice. Iosif Stalin shattered this image after World War II by destroying the remaining Jewish cultural institutions and personnel and launching an anti-Jewish campaign around the theme of "cosmopolitanism" and the allegation--medieval in its resonance--of a Jewish doctor's plot to poison the Kremlin leadership.

Scholarly writing about Soviet anti-Semitism, which began in the 1950s, blossomed only in the 1970s, when a new campaign against Jews began in the Soviet media targeting, variously, Jews and "Zionists," both of whom invariably displayed characteristics previously attributed to them by Tsarist or Nazi propagandists.

Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union: Its Roots and Consequences is a compilation of largely previously published articles, as well as excerpts from Soviet publications.

Perhaps its main virtue is that it provides an English-speaking readership with examples and explanations of contemporary Soviet anti-Semitism. The contributors find the sources for Soviet anti-Semitism in anti-Western slavophilism; factional struggles in the Soviet elite; the movement of Soviet Jews, after World War II, into the "middle class," disliked by the urban working classes; the Soviet government's reaction to the infiltration of Western pluralist ideas in the 1960s; and a wish to garner radical Arab support.

Balanced against this analysis are selections from key Soviet anti-Jewish writings of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and some sensitive portrayals of the effects of the anti-Jewish campaign on Soviet Jews, which one emigre summarizes this way: "Anti-Semitism . . . sometimes becomes a powerful stimulant that awakens Jewish national consciousness. . . . On the other hand, anti-Semitism destroys souls. It pushes people into the rut of abject conformity."

As valuable as it is, this book suffers from insufficient editing. The best analytic collection is Part II of the volume, the

Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, held in Paris in 1979. The other analytic sections, with some exceptions, are repetitive or desultory. A shorter, more focused, volume would be more easily digested by the reader, specialist and non-specialist alike.

There may be no last word on the "roots and consequences" of anti-Semitism, least of all its Soviet variant, the product of a closed society. But history has demonstrated that anti-Jewish feeling, as important as it is to Jews, is equally revealing of the inner workings of the society that breeds it. Which is why the continued pursuit of knowledge about Soviet anti-Semitism is essential.

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