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FROM ETHNOPHOBIA TO ANTI-SEMITISM

Terror Against National Minorities under Stalinist Rule

With a foreword by Irina Sherbakova

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Note on Transliteration

Transliterations from Yiddish in this book are based on the YIVO Romanization table, without the use of special symbols. Transliterations from Russian and Ukrainian are based on the Library of Congress Romanization table, without diacritics. This results in several deviations from popular Anglophone usages, most notably in Russian words with initial "e," which has been rendered as "e" and not "ye." Thus, Ezhov (and not Yezhov), *evseksiia* and *evkom* (spellings recorded on YIVO's website, instead of *yevseksiya* and *yevkom*). We trust that this method of transliterations will ensure more accuracy and closeness to the original language of the source texts.

Foreword

The Long Shadow of Anti-Semitism

Irina Sherbakova

Matthias Vetter's seminal work, *From Ethnophobia to Anti-Semitism. Terror Against National Minorities under Stalinist Rule*, deserves special attention today. It is undoubtedly an important study for anyone seeking to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the history of anti-Semitism against the backdrop of the Soviet socio-political landscape.

Vetter analyzes a complex and contradictory phenomenon: anti-Semitism in the politics of the Soviet state over several decades, from Marxist-Leninist ideas and the repressions of the Stalin era to the anti-Semitic policies of the late Soviet Union. As he aptly puts it: "It was as if the violence directed against Jews acted like a magnet, attracting scattered or latent anti-Semitic elements and combining them into something new."

The question of the history of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union remains extremely sensitive to this day—not least because it is a sore spot in a country with deeply rooted anti-Semitic traditions. The reader is provided with a broad historical overview of this phenomenon—from the pogroms during the Civil War (1919–1921) through the shifting political currents of the Stalinist era to the end of the Soviet period. The book details how and why anti-Semitism took on different forms within the communist system, resulting in a highly complex and multifaceted picture.

After the revolution, there were formally no longer any restrictions on Jews. Many young and active people moved to the cities to take advantage of new educational and career opportunities. At the same time, profound upheavals occurred within the Jewish community: atheism spread, religious and national traditions were suppressed, names were Russified, and the younger generation increasingly distanced itself from the Jewish language and cultural heritage.

The Bolshevik leadership supported this development but, from its earliest years, it also fought against Zionist movements, persecuted their activists, and suppressed the Hebrew language in favor of Yiddish. In the early Soviet era, the class struggle was the primary focus – the fight against the "bourgeoisie" and the "capitalists" was not ethnically motivated. On the contrary: the Soviet regime actively combated forms of everyday anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, overpopulation, housing shortages, and difficult living conditions in the 1920s repeatedly led to outbreaks of anti-Semitism. Soviet propaganda characterized these as remnants of tsarism. At the same time, the leadership occasionally attempted to mobilize this "base" antisemitism for political struggle, for example, in the campaign against the Trotskyist opposition.

Vetter convincingly demonstrates how anti-Semitism in the 1930s was embedded in Stalinist policy with its general repression of national minorities. Anti-Semitic dimensions can also be identified during the Great Terror (1937–1938) – for example, in the context of the Moscow show trials, and later in the removal of Jewish cadres from key positions.

Particular attention should be paid to the thesis that the anti-Semitic policies of the late Stalin era were not a sudden reversal of the state machine but had already been prepared by prewar policies. The Holocaust, accompanied by anti-Semitic propaganda in German-occupied territories, also played an important role in this. The Soviet leadership's response consisted of decades of silence regarding the Holocaust, as well as the use of the evasive phrase "extermination of peaceful Soviet citizens." This was followed by anti-Semitic tendencies in party politics, which had already begun to emerge during the war. The book also sheds light on the tragic fate of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee – from its exploitation for anti-Hitler propaganda, particularly in the United States, to its dissolution and the murder of its members in 1948–1952.

Another focus of the book is Stalin's personal stance on the "Jewish question" against the backdrop of growing sympathy among Soviet Jews for the establishment of Israel. Vetter illustrates how the political shift after 1945 led to Great Russian nationalism

and, in the late 1940s, to state-sponsored anti-Semitism, for example, in the form of the campaign against "homeless cosmopolitans." But, even after Stalin's death, anti-Semitism did not disappear; rather, it transformed—from open campaigns such as the "Doctors' Plot" to anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist policies in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as to military support for Arab states in their war against Israel. This is particularly significant, as the traces of this support are still evident today.

Particularly noteworthy is Vetter's precision in handling sources and facts. He challenges established notions and situates anti-Semitism within the broader context of Soviet nationality policy. Why is this topic relevant today? Although state-sponsored anti-Semitism largely disappeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union, new political developments in Russia reveal a dangerous trend toward the rehabilitation of Stalin and the instrumentalization of historical narratives. The internet plays a special role as a space for the dissemination of hate and conspiracy theories. Anti-Semitic sentiments can spread rapidly there and form international networks. Old clichés and myths—such as those regarding the role of Jews in the Russian Revolution—are experiencing a resurgence.

Anti-Semitic tendencies are also found in certain religious contexts within the Russian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, the relativization of the Holocaust remains a prevalent phenomenon. Not least, the revival of a cult of Stalin contributes to the overall relativization of his policies—including the anti-Semitic campaigns of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Added to this is a problematic instrumentalization of terms such as "National Socialism" and "genocide"—for example, through laws on the "denial of the genocide of the Soviet people" (2026) or through the reinterpretation of historical institutions such as the Gulag Museum in Moscow into a "Museum of Remembrance of the Genocide of the Soviet Peoples by the Nazis," thereby once again suppressing the memory of the Holocaust against Soviet Jews.

At the same time, historical narratives are actively used to construct enemy stereotypes—for example, in the context of anti-Ukrainian propaganda in the aggressive war against Ukraine. Anti-Semitism must not be viewed in isolation from the broader political

developments, which are increasingly taking on authoritarian, nationalist, and anti-Western traits.

These developments go hand in hand with growing nationalism, isolation, and a systematic discrediting of liberal values. Economic stagnation and social insecurity further reinforce the willingness to blame "the other" for one's own problems. Warning signs are evident, among other things, in anti-Semitic statements by public figures, which contribute to the creeping normalization of such positions. The internet plays a significant role here as a space for the dissemination of hate and conspiracy theories. Old anti-Semitic sentiments are experiencing a resurgence and are being exploited for political ends.

Anti-Semitism must therefore not be viewed as an isolated phenomenon. It is linked to authoritarian trends, rising nationalism, and social insecurity. It is evident that Matthias Vetter's studies have not only historical value but also help us understand current developments: They reveal which patterns recur, which myths are being exploited, and how antisemitism adapts to new circumstances. They help reveal what lies behind the mask of the "struggle against Zionism," what parallels exist with today's anti-Semitism, which is spreading in Europe and beyond, and what narratives are employed by populist forces on both the right and the left.

Irina Sherbakova is co-founder and board member of the Russian human rights organization "Memorial" which received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.