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Rubenstein, Joshua

Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

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By Joshua Rubenstein

Nothing is consistent about Russia. Freedom of speech and artistic expression are accompanied by deadly attacks on journalists, which are routinely condemned and routinely left unsolved. The Soviet empire imploded without a shot, but two wars in Chechnya have more than made up for the pacific nature of the earlier collapse.

Russian anti-Semitism today exhibits similarly inconsistent dimensions. Three times in recent months, President Vladimir Putin has made unprecedented goodwill gestures toward Russia's Jews. In September, he visited the opening of the country's first Jewish community center. Located in Moscow, the center is believed to be affiliated with the Federation of Jewish Communities, a rival organization to the Russian Jewish Congress which is headed by Vladimir Gusinsky, one of the notorious Russian Jewish oligarchs who recently has been targeted by the Kremlin for harassment and criminal prosecution. Putin is said to be behind efforts to elevate the influence of a new and rival Federation of Jewish Communities at the expense of the Russian Jewish Congress. This may well explain his attendance that day.

Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored that Israel's former minister of the interior (and famous prisoner of conscience), Natan Sharansky, was on hand alongside Israel's Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliahu, as well as the ambassadors of Israel and the United States. Rabbi Eliahu honored Putin by presenting him with a shofar. According to Izvestia, the rabbi also urged Putin to "blow the shofar," an unprecedented gesture for a Russian head of state. (The article failed to say if Putin availed himself of the opportunity actually to sound the ram's horn. (2))
Three months later, Putin personally appeared alongside Hasidic rabbis at an outdoor ceremony to light the Hanukah candles on an oversize menorah. This is the kind of political symbol which is routine for American mayors, but hardly a familiar sight in Russian history. For more than a decade now, Jewish holidays have been acknowledged in major newspapers, with greetings from local dignitaries and even brief explanations of the holidays' significance. But having the country's president participate in a public lighting of Hanukah candles goes far beyond ordinary respect.

And then in a widely reported incident this January, Putin hosted Israeli President Moshe Katsav for a strictly kosher meal in the Kremlin. As The New York Times reported, "the vegetable-stuffed veal was kosher. The roast turkey with fruits was kosher. The mushroom soup was kosher. The caviar was kosher - red salmon caviar, because black caviar comes from sturgeon, which have no scales, which is not kosher."

But that was not the most surprising part. "The Kremlin created an entire kosher kitchen for the occasion," the Times continued, "an undertaking that required, among other things, an army of rabbis, all-new cooking utensils and a blowtorch." (3) The day after his kosher meal in the Kremlin, President Katsav called Putin "a great friend of the Jewish people." Putin added, in an observation whose relevance for the entire occasion should not be overlooked, that "bilateral trade between Russia and Israel had passed the $1 billion mark last year."4

Not so long ago, kosher meat was hardly available to practicing Jews. Back in 1952, when 15 figures associated with the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were secretly brought to trial on charges of espionage and treason, the judges were completely unfamiliar with the idea of kosher meat. They frequently questioned the defendants about this ritual practice, especially when one of the defendants had to explain that her father had worked as a shohet (or ritual slaughterer). And in 1970, this writer was directed to an old kosher butcher in a sprawling market in Leningrad. There was no sign to make the public aware of his specialty. When a friend took his photograph, elderly
ladies shooed us away, afraid that bringing undue attention would compromise the man's livelihood and their access to his produce.

So while there is a superficial quality to Putin's gestures, which makes them easy to dismiss, they are so unprecedented in Russian history that they must be part of a calculated strategy of some kind. In trying to discern what Putin has in mind, however, it is also necessary to consider more worrisome happenings in Russia.

The Washington, DC-based Union of Councils for Soviet Jews is about to publish its second annual summary of anti-Semitic incidents in the Russian Federation. Titled Antisemitism, Xenophobia and Religious Persecution in Russia's Regions 1999-2000, the report catalogs a broad, disquieting array of physical attacks, public denunciations and violent threats against Jews and other minority groups, all of which have taken place with complete impunity. Newspapers like Zavtra, the leading nationalist newspaper in the country, publish caricatures of Jews that would have made Julius Streicher of the Nazi newspaper Der Stürmer proud. Other regional newspapers like Vladimirskie vesti publish anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi articles that would appear to be comical if they were not appearing in a seemingly modern country that a half century ago played a decisive role in destroying Nazi Germany. In one grotesque incident in Vladimir region, "the city agency for youth affairs awarded the winners of a high school contest books written by Hitler and Goebbels, on the anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany."5

This past fall other provocative incidents took place. In Ryazan on 17 September 2000, 15 neo-Nazi thugs armed with metal chains burst into a Jewish Sunday school. They smashed windows, furniture and a children's art exhibit, then made death threats and raised their arms in a fascist salute before leaving the building. The 25 children, ranging in age from 6 to 13, were traumatized by the attack. Local authorities have reacted with studied indifference. The school building is located next to the province administration building, where a police detail is situated around the clock. But the police did not bother to intervene.
This area of Russia, in fact, has one of the strongest chapters of Russian National Unity (RNU), an explicitly Nazi-oriented political party. "On almost every post in the majority of districts in Ryazan you can find leaflets of Russian National Unity," according to the website of NTV, an independent television station based in Moscow. "The abbreviation 'RNU,' along with swastikas, are painted onto the bus stops and fences of the city... In off the record conversations, several leaders of the local NGO community don't rule out the possibility that there are supporters of the Nazis within the ranks of law enforcement agencies."6

According to subsequent news reports, local police have identified the young men involved in the school attack, but the police have not arrested them or seen fit to charge them with a hate crime. The incident is being treated as a nuisance, a random act of hooliganism that does not require serious investigation or prosecution.

A month later, the local newspaper accused the head of the Ryazan Jewish community, Leonid Reznikov, of deliberately lying about the incident in order to damage the prospects of the local mayor, Valery Ryumin, a well-known anti-Semite, in his bid to become governor of the province.7 In Moscow, the newspaper Sevodnya has been following developments in Ryazan and expressed its own anxiety that such an assault in broad daylight cannot be compared to nocturnal attacks on synagogues or the desecration of Jewish cemeteries. It was too brazen and involved too many people to be dismissed as solely the work of a small group of "hooligans."8

Such incidents occur at a time when provincial officials enjoy proclaiming their anti-Semitic prejudices. In Kursk region, where only about 3,000 Jews live, the newly elected governor, Alexander Mikhailov, celebrated his victory by telling his nationalist supporters during the 7 November holiday (commemorating the Bolshevik revolution) that "We have won the battle against international Zionism."9 Two days later, he amplified his remarks in an interview with the Russian newspaper Kommersant. He accused former Governor Alexander Rutskoi of being supported by the Jewish businessman (and oligarch) Boris Berezovsky. Rutskoi is best remembered for leading the failed October
1993 uprising that led to the shelling of the Russian Parliament building in Moscow; he has broad ties to Russian nationalist groups and is hardly the reform-minded politician who is usually the target of extreme reactionary attacks. Mikhailov went on to claim that his election was "a sign that Russia today is starting to free itself of all the filth that has accumulated over the last ten years. In this, the president and I are allies, not opponents. Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] is, incidentally, a Russian man. So am I. In case anybody doesn't know it, Rutskoi's mother is Jewish - Zinaida Iosifovna."

Putin has not publicly repudiated Mikhailov's claim. Rutskoi, at least, had the sense to respond. In a radio interview on Echo of Moscow, he said that "When people are hungry, they look for someone to blame. Back in 1917, they yelled, 'Beat the Jews, save Russia!' But that didn't save anybody." Even Gennady Zyuganov, the head of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation who wrote a work citing as authentic the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," suggested that Mikhailov stop "looking up other people's family trees."10

Mikhailov is not even the most vivid example of an extreme reactionary among Russian provincial leaders. In Krasnodar Krai, an area in the northern Caucasus, the popular former Governor Nikolai Kondratenko gave outrageously anti-Semitic speeches throughout his term in office. He "accused Jews of everything from destroying the USSR to somehow 'inventing' homosexuality."11

Moscow itself has not been immune from ugly incidents. Last fall, on 19 October, armed police officers entered the Choral Synagogue, the capital's central synagogue for decades, and rifled through financial documents. According to the Associated Press, "the officers counted the synagogue's cash, scrutinized telephone bills, and demanded the numbers of people who had spoken with rabbis on the phone." The officers claimed they were investigating donations to the synagogue from Vladimir Gusinsky and allegations of money-laundering. The Choral Synagogue is under the leadership of Rabbi Adolf Shaevich, who also directs the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organizations - a religious partner to Gusinsky's Russian Jewish Congress. Putin
has already exhibited overt support for the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, a rival to the Russian Jewish Congress, as a means to undercut further Gusinsky's public profile. An intrusive and insensitive police raid into a synagogue could be just another transparent maneuver against Gusinsky and his allies.12

These anti-Semitic incidents reflect a culture of impunity in Russian political life. There has always been a strain of anti-Semitic prejudice that previous regimes, from the tsar through Stalin and his heirs, found useful to exploit for their own purposes. It is true that, in the 1920s, the new Soviet regime instituted legislation that banned anti-Semitic attacks; it was understood that official communist ideology, with its emphasis on internationalism and repudiation of racial and national chauvinism, would have to limit overt expressions of anti-Semitism, in part because the tsarist government had been so closely identified with extreme anti-Jewish measures. However, all that changed with Stalin's rise to power.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, different problems arose. A strange amalgam of nostalgia for Stalin and respect for Nazi ideology began to emerge. Just off Red Square, vendors sold buttons depicting Stalin alongside other buttons of swastikas on red enamel.

Few things exemplify this mood more vividly than a recent report that the American Nazi and racist David Duke, who once ran for the US Senate in Louisiana on the Republican ticket, can now enjoy watching the sale of his book, The Jewish Question Through the Eyes of an American, in the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament. The Boston Globe reported on 26 January 2001 that the book is "doing a brisk business at $1.70 a copy." Duke has visited Russia to promote his book and declared Moscow to be Europe's "whitest capital." Boris Mironov, a former minister in Yel'tsin's cabinet who describes himself as an anti-Semite, wrote the preface to the book and claims that he has received numerous requests for copies from provinces throughout the country.13
Liberal figures are now lonely voices of protest. The trial lawyer Genri Reznik and other human rights advocates have charged the government with failing to apply legislation against hate crimes and racial incitement. Kremlin leaders only condemn anti-Semitism "in a hushed voice, if at all," according to Yuri Levada, the head of one of the country's leading polling firms. His agency recently found that only 12 percent of the population had expressed openly anti-Semitic attitudes, a rate which Levada believes is close to other countries in Europe. But in Europe, political leaders vigorously denounce anti-Semitism. In Russia, "nobody fights anti-Semitism; nobody publicly condemns it."14

Putin wants it both ways. By nurturing good ties with Israel and making personal gestures to Russia's Jews, he creates the appearance of being a tolerant leader, eager to separate himself from the Kremlin's ugly history of anti-Jewish policies. At the same time, though, his government does little to uphold laws against the incitement of racial hatred, while he himself fails to condemn vicious anti-Semitic demagoguery by provincial and even national political leaders who appear to be his allies in the Duma.

For now, he is having his cake and eating it too.

1 Joshua Rubenstein is the Northeast Regional Director of Amnesty International USA and the author of Tangled Loyalties, the Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg. His latest book, Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, will be published by Yale University Press (in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum) in May as part of its Annals of Communism Series.

2 Izvestia, 19 September 2000, p. 3.


6 The NTV website <www.NTV.ru>, 1 November 2000; as cited in UCSJ, Antisemitism, Xenophobia, p. 73.

7 News release of UCSJ, 20 October 2000, about an article in Vechernaya Ryazan.

8 Sevodnya, 28 September 2000, p. 4.

9 Cited in UCSJ, Antisemitism, Xenophobia, p. 53.

10 Kommersant, 9 November 2000; as cited in UCSJ, Antisemitism, Xenophobia, p. 53.

11 UCSJ, Antisemitism, Xenophobia, p. 11.


14 Ibid.

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