Love-hate relationship

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Russia and the Jews: Solzhenitsyn’s revision of the traditional version

By Geoffrey A. Hosking

In spite of mounting evidence to the contrary, we are still inclined to think of Russians as congenitally anti-Semitic. We carry mental images of Cossacks with whips charging Jewish crowds and smashing into Jewish shops. Yet in 1915, at the height of the First World War, when Russian mobs in Moscow were trashing and plundering German shops, Jews – whose surnames were often indistinguishable from German ones – would hang notices outside their enterprises saying “Jewish shop”. It is reported that the hooligans would then pass them by.

It is true that the Russian-Jewish relationship has often entailed suspicion and tension during the two centuries or more since Jews were first absorbed in large numbers into the Russian Empire. But at the same time, seldom have two peoples of such different ethnic origins achieved such a degree of coalescence as the Russians and the Jews. This is one of the great love-hate relationships of history, and it has left an indelible mark on both peoples: Jews were prominent in the Bolshevik party which seized power in Russia in 1917, while Jewish exiles from Russia formed the main ranks of the Zionist movement and created the state of Israel.

The first volume of Dvesti let vmeste (Two hundred years together) is an account of this relationship by one of the outstanding writers of the twentieth century. We have tended to forget Alexander Solzhenitsyn in recent decades, but in the 1960s and 70s, everything he wrote seized the immediate attention of the world’s literati. Not all the comment on him was favourable, since he was seen as anti-Western, anti-liberal and a Russian nationalist. Some whispered that he was anti-Semitic.

Not the right person, then, to write about the Jews in Russia? On the contrary, when he launched this book in Moscow last summer, Solzhenitsyn declared that he wanted to help reconcile Russians and Jews. The result is a fascinating work, written with all its author’s verve and linguistic inventiveness. It is sympathetic – though far from uncritical – towards the Jews and often disparaging about the weakness of Russian government and the fickleness of Russian public opinion.
The partitions of Poland between 1772 and 1795 brought nearly a million Jews into the Russian Empire. Over the next century, they were to increase fivefold.

Their energy, communal cohesion and highly literate education made them formidable competitors, well placed to take advantage of the economic growth of Russia during the nineteenth century. Many Jews enriched themselves in occupations like tax and liquor-farming, sugar-refining, the grain and timber trade. By the second half of the century, Jews were in leading positions in the railways, banking, newspapers, the professions and culture. The so-called Pale of Settlement in the west and south, to which most of them were confined, proved extremely porous in practice, and not only because of exemptions for the wealthy and educated. The salaries of some big-city police officers were probably exceeded by the backhanders they received from Jews living illegally.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Jews were split into two major categories: on the one hand, those living in the main cities, largely assimilated to Russian language, culture and ways of life, and so successful as to arouse chronic envy among other peoples; and on the other, the majority, far from affluent, many in fact dirt-poor, living in a shtetl somewhere in the Pale, visiting the synagogue regularly, taking their disputes to the rabbi and observing the traditional dietary laws.

The imperial regime reacted to the success of the urban Jews like proverbial rabbits in headlights. Both the Government and the Orthodox Church saw themselves as embattled, constantly under threat from border tribes and disloyal ethnic groups, as well as from religious sects whose zeal always seemed more intense than that of ordinary peasant Orthodox believers. The Jews appeared to the servants of Church and State to be ultra-disloyal and ultra-zealous, and, to make matters worse, they were energetic, talented and living in the strategic western approaches to the imperial heartland. So they had to be confined and regulated. When Moscow merchants complained about the Jews’ competition, the Government restricted their trade to Lithuania, Belorussia and Ukraine. This was the first step towards setting up the Pale of Settlement, where all except wealthy or highly qualified Jews were supposed to live for the next century. The Pale was a measure of the Jews’ success. It was the only measure of its kind in an empire which otherwise promoted inter-ethnic mixing. Who would have dreamt of confining the Tatars, the Georgians or even the Germans in that way?

All the same, for much of the nineteenth century the Government did attempt to integrate the Jews into Russian society in such fashion as the bureaucratic mind could devise. Even as the Pale was being decreed, the Government was planning ways to attract the Jews to the Russian educational system and to offer them help towards settling the newly conquered fertile steppe land north of the Black Sea. The aim was to divert them from their traditional occupations to more “productive” ones, while at the same time giving them a Russian cultural background and inculcating habitual use of the Russian language. In the 1830s, when Nicholas I was dragooning thousands of twelve-year-old Jewish boys into military schools in preparation for a lifetime of service in the Army, his Minister of Imperial Domains, Count Kiselev, was establishing model
settlements in which Jews could be offered help to become good farmers, like the German colonists already ploughing up virgin land in southern Ukraine.

Little came of these reform plans. The Imperial Government was never ready to invest the sums of money which would have been required to make them a success, and in any case the elders of the kahals (local Jewish councils) were reluctant to see their young men leave the traditional communities to take up unaccustomed economic activities. Those who did were often unsuccessful, not having any experience of agricultural labour, and many of them later turned with relief to running taverns or administering landlords’ estates.

All the same, many Jews did assimilate to Russian society, but they did so in ways unforeseen and unprovided for by the Imperial Government. Russian society was itself fragmented and uncertain. If Jews assimilated, to which model should they conform? There was not a single way of life accepted or aspired to by most Russians. There were huge differences between the various cultures of the peasantry, the merchants, the clergy, the professions and the official culture centred on the court. The model which came most naturally to the Jews was that of the intelligentsia.

There was much to attract educated Jews and the Russian intelligentsia to each other. Both were intensely bookish, non-conformists spurned by the mainstream of society, both dreamt of a better world, not just for Jews and Russians but for humankind as a whole, and they readily found a common basis for political action. Young Jews discontented with synagogues, rabbis and kahals, as many of them were once they had been to Russian schools, found a natural home in the smoke-filled rooms where Russian students debated politics. Soon quite a number of them, both men and women, joined the revolutionary movement. They were involved in the “going to the people” movement, in which altruistic students took their socialist wisdom to the countryside, living among the peasants in order to educate them and prepare them for the revolution which they anticipated. What was remarkable here was that the peasants, of course, were Russian, yet the Jewish radicals pursued their self-imposed work of enlightenment with as much conviction as the Russians. Presumably they assumed that emancipating Russian peasants would bring Jewish emancipation on to the agenda as well. At a deeper level, Russian and Jewish activists shared a kind of international messianism, the aspiration to redeem humanity as a whole.

The Jews’ participation in the revolutionary movement had its cost, though. The assassination of Alexander II in 1881, though no Jew was directly involved in it, prompted horrifying revenge on Jews. In 1881-2, and again during the years 1905-07, numerous pogroms took place in the towns of the Pale. Jewish premises were plundered and destroyed, Jews themselves were beaten up, raped or lynched by bands of marauding hooligans. Until recently, most historians assumed that these thugs were encouraged by the Imperial Government, which was disoriented by its failure to cope with the revolutionary movement, and wanted to mobilize popular support by stirring anti-Semitic prejudice. Solzhenitsyn points out that some of the evidence for this view rests on a forged letter in The Times, purporting to be from the Minister of the Interior, Pleve.
He urges us instead to see the pogroms in the context of unrest throughout the Russian Empire, especially in 1905-07 and, of course, in and after 1917.

Russians are not inherently anti-Semitic, he argues, and did not molest the Jews anywhere outside the Pale. But inside it, peasants and workers were alarmed by the insecurity of those years, and exercised their traditions of samosud – do-it-yourself justice – in a new and virulent form against those who had for decades collected their exorbitant taxes and overcharged them in the taverns. The Government, Army and police were to blame for not getting a grip on the outbreaks sooner. Significantly, even a known anti-Semite like Fr John of Kronstadt condemned those involved in the pogroms: “Instead of a Christian festival, they have celebrated a foul and murderous festival to Satan.”

In taking this line, Solzhenitsyn has much in common with recent Western scholarship such as John Klier’s and Shlomo Lambroso’s Pogroms: Anti-Jewish violence in modern Russian history (1992). All the same, he lets the authorities off a little too lightly. He does not mention that Nicholas II publicly accepted the insignia of the Union of the Russian People, which was behind some of the pogroms, for himself and Tsarevich Alexei. Such publicly declared monarchical anti-Semitism almost certainly inclined officials to react with greater leniency to violence against Jews than they would have done to other types of public disorder. Solzhenitsyn mentions that one of the most virulent anti-Semitic pamphlets was produced on the printing press of the Department of Police, but ascribes it to a maverick at work there. He may be right; but why then did the Minister of the Interior, responsible for the police, not publicly disavow it?

However, the image of tsarist Russia as an obscurantist Asiatic despotism cold-bloodedly conniving at the murder of thousands of Jews has long been ripe for reinterpretation, and Solzhenitsyn is right to reject it. After the anti-Jewish atrocities of 1905-07, Russian liberals and socialists became unanimously pro-Jewish, and called for 100 per cent emancipation of the Jews as an urgent item on the political agenda. So complete was the mutual identification that serious discussion of the Jewish problem became almost taboo on the left wing of politics – and that meant most of the serious press.

What Solzhenitsyn calls “a-Semitism” set in. As for the Government, especially when Stolypin was Prime Minister, it was not unwilling to take serious steps towards emancipation, but Stolypin’s proposals on the subject came back with Nicholas’s blue pencil in the margin: “My conscience does not allow me to proceed with this measure.”

In spite of its title, this book is only the first volume of Solzhenitsyn’s account, and it takes us to the threshold of 1917. He reinforces its authenticity with long excerpts from documents, such as Senator Derzhavin’s report of 1800 on famine in the western provinces, the Jewish Statute of 1835, and the official investigations of the early twentieth-century pogroms in Kishinev and Odessa. He takes almost to a fault the practice of quoting at length from the sixteen-volume Jewish Encyclopedia, published by Brockhaus and Efron in St Petersburg in 1906-13, as well as from recent encyclopedias published in Russia and Israel; there are times when I would have preferred his own opinion in his own words.
Still, overall there is little doubt about Solzhenitsyn’s views. He sees the Jews as a uniquely talented and energetic people, whose gifts could have contributed greatly to Russia’s development, but who were treated with vacillation, ambivalence and distaste by a regime that was losing its grip and demonstrating its unworthiness to rule a great empire. There is nothing anti-Semitic about this approach; if anything, Solzhenitsyn comes across as more anti-Russian. It will be interesting to see how he treats in the second volume the no less contentious history of the Jews in the Soviet Union. In the meantime, we must hope that this vigorous and insightful book will soon be published in English.