

## Antisemitism and Orthodoxy in Russia Today: a sociologist's view\*

VLADIMIR BORZENKO

In response to the request to name Jews who have made an important contribution to science and culture, in both 1990 and 1992 the majority named Einstein and ... Sakharov. (From a survey)

### Introduction

Antisemitism in Russia has a complex and colourful history and its influence on Russian history has been very significant. The 'Black Hundreds' element within politics undoubtedly played an important role in the disintegration of the Russian state system before the Bolshevik revolution, as the memoirs of Count S. Witte clearly demonstrate. Until 1917 the majority of Russians automatically considered themselves Orthodox. Orthodoxy was the state ideology and it was therefore impossible to compare Orthodox antisemitism with non-Orthodox antisemitism. There are many examples of protests by the Orthodox intelligentsia against the phenomenon of antisemitism, for example, V. Solov'yev's letter *Protiv antisemiticheskogo dvizheniya v pechati* (*Against the Antisemitic Movement in the Press*), which was signed around 1890 by practically all the leading literary figures of that time. We also know that priests attempted to prevent pogroms carried out by the Black Hundreds, who called themselves the champions of Orthodoxy and used Orthodox phraseology and symbols; and that the Black Hundreds persecuted Orthodox priests, the most typical story being that of Metropolitan Antoni (Vadkovsky) (d. 1912), who refused to bless the activity of the Union of the Russian People. These are all well-known facts; but it is not possible to make a quantitative analysis of them.

After 1917 a new era began for both Jews and Orthodox – and for statistical surveys of society. Under Khrushchev sociology was allowed a little freedom, but under Brezhnev it was carefully restricted again with the result that until the late 1980s proper social research was inconceivable, especially in such a sensitive area.

Historical circumstances then changed again, and it became not only permissible but also fashionable to consider oneself Orthodox; the number of those who did so grew rapidly to half the Russian population. In general, people began to express their opinions more openly, including what they thought of Jews. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which were born in the depths of the tsarist secret police and then played their evil part in fascist Germany, appeared in our shops again amidst a whole

\*This article was written in December 1992.

variety of new Black Hundred literature preaching 'Orthodoxy, autocracy and nationhood' and accusing Zionism and Jewish masons of all the ills of Russia and of humanity in general. At the same time liberal-intellectual articles started appearing, like the one by S. Lezov in the journal *Oktyabr*', which claim that Orthodoxy is fatally infected by antisemitism, starting with the gospel texts and continuing to this day.

How strong, in fact, is antisemitism in Russia today, and what is its connection with 'Orthodoxy'? (The inverted commas remind us that this is a word which people use to describe themselves.) In 1990 and 1992, as part of an international research project on nationalism and antisemitism, the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) conducted two extensive and fruitful surveys in Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union, questioning about 2000 people. The surveys were an unprecedented opportunity for researching the link between antisemitism and Orthodoxy from a sociological point of view, both qualitatively and quantitatively comparing antisemitism among believers with that among unbelievers.

### **Some Preliminary Observations**

The first observation to be made is that antisemitism is a many-sided phenomenon. More often than not, hostility towards members of other nationalities is nowadays linked to the level of their involvement in international conflicts, the expectation of danger ensuing from contact with them and their presence in the socially negative aspects of Russian life. These factors particularly help to explain hostility towards Armenians and Azeris – which is not abated by the fact that Armenians are Christians – and also towards Chechens, Georgians and Gypsies. The role of these factors as far as hostility towards the Jews is concerned, however, is insignificant. The survey shows that Jews are in fact among the nations which Russians feel most sympathy for. There is however a very widespread manic-depressive feeling among Russians that our dog's life is a result of people plotting, of a harmful conspiracy of some kind. Almost half the Russian population believe that 'there are clandestine organisations in existence which are secretly directing the course of events in this country and the world as a whole'. It is not surprising that this is a breeding ground for rumours about a 'world Zionist conspiracy aiming to establish worldwide Jewish supremacy'. More than half of those without a secondary education who had heard of such a conspiracy (they made up around 15 per cent of the group) believed in its existence. The majority of people in this educational category do not have even distant acquaintances who are Jews. This is mythological antisemitism: its source is not real impressions but historico-political myths, which are invoked in order to explain current events.

Despite this very significant figure, a comparison of analogous data from surveys conducted in other countries shows that the level of antisemitism in Russia (measured, for example, by the number of those who would prefer 'there to be no Jews in the country at all') is no higher than that in most developed European countries.

It is clear, then, that antisemitism varies and that one or another kind of antisemitism is characteristic of different social groups and subgroups. For example, to compare simply all 'Orthodox believers' with all 'unbelievers (atheists)' would be pointless. The surveys show that the clearest results are obtained by comparing subgroups of Orthodox believers and atheists divided by age and education. It will later be shown that in every category of education and age there is less antisemitism

among Orthodox believers than among unbelievers. The one exception is the question of the guilt of the Jews before other nations. In the category of those without a secondary education, the levels here were higher among Orthodox believers than among unbelievers. This is because of the view that Jews are guilty of the crucifixion of Christ. However, the question of Jewish guilt towards Russia (the Revolution, the mass repressions, drunkenness and current difficulties – things much closer to home) produced the usual result of greater evidence of antisemitism among atheists than among Orthodox believers. The figures speak for themselves so clearly that they need very little commentary. The data produced by the 1992 survey are fully supported by the data produced in 1990. Changes in response were insignificant. The only aspect that showed a slight fall was the popularity of the slogans of extremist ‘Black Hundred’ organisations. To the questions ‘Do you consider yourself to be an atheist or a believer? If you are a believer, which faith do you adhere to?’, the respondents answered in the following way (figures are percentages).

I am an atheist	21
I am Orthodox	53
I am Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, other	3
I am a believer, but do not adhere to a particular faith	7
Hard to say	16

These results, obtained in the spring of 1992, are typical and show a stabilisation after the boom of 1989–91 when the number of adherents to Orthodoxy increased by a factor of two. Since then the number of Orthodox believers has wavered around 50 per cent and the number of unbelievers (atheists) around 25 per cent. The remaining quarter, most of whom are ‘undefined’, gave average answers to the questions which concern us, and we shall not be looking at them in any detail.

In our analysis we use the following abbreviations: Age: 1, respondents under 25 years; 2, 25–55 years; 3, older than 55. Education: H, higher education; S, secondary education; L, lower secondary (less than ten years). Faith: A, those calling themselves atheists; O, those calling themselves Orthodox.

### **Antisemitism in Figures**

Question: In your opinion, how much influence do the following have in our society?

	HA	HO	SA	SO	LA	LO	1A	1O	2A	2O	3A	3O
Russians – too little	43 = 45		36 > 31		36 > 24		40 < 43		37 > 30		40 > 24	
Jews – too much	22 = 22		10 > 8		10 = 10		17 > 7		11 = 11		14 > 9	

Each number here is the percentage which chose that particular answer. Throughout this survey, when numbers are shown as equal this signifies that the difference between the atheist subgroup and the Orthodox subgroup is insignificant when admissible errors (of 1–2 per cent) are taken into account. Dissatisfaction about the influence of Jews is more characteristic of atheists; nationalism does not seem to be more common among Orthodox than among unbelievers. The figures also show that when the respondents speak about the undesirable influence of non-Russians it is not necessarily Jews they have in mind. Among those nations which evoke a special feeling of goodwill and sympathy, the Jews rank on roughly the same level as the Germans, Latvians and Moldovans (2–3 per cent), after the Slavs – Russians,

Ukrainians and Belarusians. In the subgroup ‘young Orthodox believers’ (10) Jews rank at third place (7 per cent), right after the Russians (14 per cent) and Ukrainians! Orthodox believers display particular goodwill towards the Jews in more instances than unbelievers do:

HA	HO	SA	SO	LA	LO	1A	1O	2A	2O	3A	3O
1.3	< 3.4	1.1	< 3.0	0.0	< 1.4	0.0	< 7.0	1.4	< 2.1	0.0	< 1.0

However, Jews also feature among those nations which provoke hostility, coming next after the Caucasian nations (Armenians, Azeris, Georgians), Chechens and Gypsies. The Jews are the only nation to appear among the first dozen of those most beloved and of those most despised by our people. This is understandable, for on the one hand Russians respect the Jews for their contribution to science and culture and their attitude towards work and the family, while, on the other hand, in this time of crisis when we have lost all direction and feelings of humiliation and anxiety prevail, many terrible stories about Jewish–Masonic conspiracies provide a superficial explanation for all our current ills: they have wide popular support and are actively promoted by ‘Black Hundred’ politicians. Again, in every category, atheists show more (or not less) hostility towards Jews than do the Orthodox:

HA	HO	SA	SO	LA	LO	1A	1O	2A	2O	3A	3O
7	> 2.3	3	= 4	8	= 6	10	> 4	3	= 5	6	= 3

We have deliberately given the more exact number of 2.3 for the subgroup HO, for these are the very same people who in answer to the question ‘Who, in your opinion, now has the biggest influence on the authorities in Russia?’ from a wide variety of possible answers chose the Jews.

We categorised Jewish characteristics and the corresponding responses thus:

	HA	HO	SA	SO	LA	LO	1A	1O	2A	2O	3A	3O
Money and profit are more important to Jews than human relationships.												
Yes	44	> 32	48	> 36	40	< 45	53	> 30	43	> 38	46	= 46
There are many skilled and talented people among the Jews.												
No	13	> 7	13	> 4	13	> 5	21	> 7	12	> 6	9	> 3
Jews live at someone else’s expense.												
Yes	26	> 18	27	> 17	49	> 33	50	> 26	26	> 20	34	> 30
The majority of Jews are honest, decent people.												
No	20	= 21	15	= 15	25	> 12	27	> 21	16	> 13	15	> 13
Jews have an unpleasant appearance.												
Yes	18	> 11	18	> 14	18	= 20	27	> 15	16	= 14	20	= 19

Jews have made a great contribution to world science and culture.

No                    14 > 10    12 = 11    21 > 11    19 > 8    11 = 10    22 > 14

The figures in column 1A are the highest nearly every time and the contrast between the sympathy felt towards Jews by Orthodox young and the anti-Jewish feeling among young unbelievers is most striking, especially when we remember that subgroup 1O is almost double subgroup 1A in size.

Data gathered from traditional questions on the desirability of contact with Jews were of particular interest.

How would you react to Jews working with you in your workplace?

	HA	HO	SA	SO	LA	LO	1A	1O	2A	2O	3A	3O
I would not like it.	10 = 10	16 > 11	18 > 12	17 > 15	13 = 12	21 > 10						

How would you react if a family of Jews came to live next to you?

I would not like it.    16 > 12    14 > 12    19 > 17    18 > 11    14 = 15    18 > 14

In every group between 10 and 20 per cent found it difficult to answer.

Let us move on to look at the mythological aspects of antisemitism.

We sometimes hear about a 'world Zionist conspiracy' which aims to establish Jewish supremacy over other nations. Do you believe in such a conspiracy?

	HA	HO	SA	SO	LA	LO	1A	1O	2A	2O	3A	3O
Yes	12 = 14	10 > 7	13 = 11	17 = 15	8 = 9	15 > 8						

The propaganda of recent years has undoubtedly made an impression.

To the question 'What is Zionism?' our groups answered thus:

	HA	HO	SA	SO	LA	LO	1A	1O	2A	2O	3A	3O
A policy to establish worldwide Jewish supremacy.	30 = 32	22 > 16	12 = 10	23 > 11	21 > 17	22 > 14						

More than half of every subgroup found it difficult to answer. Only 6-7 per cent chose the correct answer from the choices given.

The next question was practically the only one on which the Orthodox subgroup with 'lower' education displayed more antisemitism than the subgroup of atheists. This was the question about the Jews' guilt before other nations. However, this question was so unclearly formulated that I am not going to quote the figures; I simply draw the obvious conclusion that the guilt of the Jews before other nations is linked in the minds of the LO subgroup with their responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ.

Do you agree or disagree that the Jews are guilty before other nations?

	HA HO	SA SO	LA LO	1A 1O	2A 2O	3A 3O
Agree.	13 > 10	17 > 8	13 < 21	23 > 18	13 = 12	17 = 17

This question naturally begs another:

Do you agree or disagree that other nations are guilty before the Jews?

	HA HO	SA SO	LA LO	1A 1O	2A 2O	3A 3O
Agree.	22 < 29	24 = 23	25 = 24	21 < 25	26 = 25	20 = 22

The fact that almost all groups here are sympathetic towards the Jews rather than critical of them seems to us to be very important. No less important is the low level of criticism of the Jews for sins against Russia itself.

Do you agree or disagree that Jews are to blame for:

The drunkenness of our people?

	HA HO	SA SO	LA LO	1A 1O	2A 2O	3A 3O
Agree.	9 > 5	11 > 4	16 > 4	29 > 2	8 > 3	12 > 6

The disasters of the Revolution and the mass repression during the years of Soviet power?

Agree.	20 > 16	10 < 15	15 > 11	19 > 16	11 = 12	14 = 13
--------	---------	---------	---------	---------	---------	---------

The hardships Russians face today?

Agree.	9 > 7	9 > 3	18 > 12	25 > 4	7 = 7	12 > 8
--------	-------	-------	---------	--------	-------	--------

It is here that the differences between Orthodox believers and atheists become obvious. Even among those without higher education the atheists show a higher degree of antisemitism on questions about the Jews' guilt before Russia. We especially note the very high figures in column 1A.

Finally, we asked a question about general attitudes towards the presence of Jews in society. The findings on this question are often used to make a general evaluation of the level of antisemitism in our country, and the data received show that the level in Russia is not high in comparison with other European countries.

Do you agree or disagree that it would be better for Russia if there were no Jews here at all?

	HA HO	SA SO	LA LO	1A 1O	2A 2O	3A 3O
Agree.	10 > 8	15 > 8	19 > 13	27 > 11	12 > 8	14 = 14

In each group 20–30 per cent found it hard to answer. Once again we note the worrying figure in the subgroup of young unbelievers.

Analogous tendencies can be seen in the varying attitudes among the different sub-

groups towards restricting or infringing Jews' human rights.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, then, we looked for evidence of antisemitism of four types – social, political, mythological and legal – in all categories of age and education. The results of our research allow us to draw the following conclusions:

- 1 The general level of antisemitism in Russia is lower than average in comparison with developed European countries.
- 2 Over the period from 1990 to 1992 evidence of antisemitism in general showed no significant change, while evidence of mythological antisemitism decreased.
- 3 In practically every category and on practically every question there was less evidence of antisemitism among the Orthodox subgroups than among the atheists. The exception was the question about the Jews' guilt before other nations, where Orthodox believers without a higher education showed more antisemitism than unbelievers. This is linked with the question of Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ.
- 4 Young atheists showed most evidence of antisemitism. On the basis of the data we can confirm that around 25 per cent of this group are more or less completely anti-semitic, whereas not more than around 10 per cent of the Russian population as a whole could be said to be such.

(Translated from the Russian by Emma Watkins.)