

Jews And Russian Treaties

Many hundreds of San Franciscans are writing and wiring their Congressmen and U.S. Senators this week, urging them to help pass the Jackson-Vanik bills. These bills would deny Most Favored Nation status to the Soviet Union. There is a strange and pertinent historical footnote to this effort.

In 1911, the American Jews were asking the Congress to revoke America's long-standing commercial treaty with Russia! It was the major issue on the agenda of the prestigious American Jewish Committee, and a major preoccupation of the Yiddish newspapers in New York.

The issue then, as it is now, was Russian discrimination against Jews in the matter of immigration. There was a difference. At that time, Russian Jews were able to leave Russia. But, having become naturalized Americans, they were denied permission by Russia to return to their native land for any purpose. Today, as we know, many Soviet Jews are being denied permission to leave. As a matter of fact, today we might be tempted to accept the older arrangement; let them go, and don't let them back in. But the issue was larger than that. It was not just a matter of some American Jews being inconvenienced because they couldn't return to Russia. The Commercial Treaty with Russia had included the guarantee of fair treatment for American citizens. That meant *all* American citizens.



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If American Jews would have accepted their exclusion from the provisions of this Treaty, they would have been accepting the legitimacy of Russian discrimination against Jews. But they also would have been accepting the legitimacy of a second-class American citizenship. In fact, it was important for the United States to oppose this discrimination for its own sake. The internal integrity of the American concept of equal citizenship was at stake.

Similarly, in the present situation, there is more at stake than the fact that a number of Jews are not being allowed to leave Russia. Not that this is a small matter in itself. We have become callous indeed if we are not shocked by the virtual imprisonment of educated Jews who cannot leave the Soviet Union unless they pay an exorbitant and impossible head tax—if then. And by the literal imprisonment and terrorization of those who peacefully protest such treatment.

But, beyond that: Is the United States going to put its seal of approval on such flagrantly inhumane practices—counter to every current international document on human rights—by awarding a *special* bonus to the Soviet Union? This is what Most Favored Nation status amounts to. The U.S. and the Soviet Union can—and will—trade without the Soviet Union having Most Favored Nation status. Most national Jewish organizations feel that it would be a mistake for the United States to cut itself off from all trade with the Soviet Union. Aside from other considerations, bringing the Iron Curtain down again would not serve the Soviet Jews well, and would remove all existing leverage. But to go beyond that, and offer *special* privileges to a country engaged in such barbarous practices, would be an evil symbolism. The NCCJ might as well award Kosygin its Man-of-the-Year Award for his contributions to brotherhood.

In its own way, it would be as demeaning and damaging to the United States for this government to give Most Favored Nation status to the Soviet Union at this time—as it would have been for the United States government 60 years ago to passively accept Russia's discrimination against a class of American citizens.

Many Americans apparently felt that way in the 1900's. In December, 1911, the House of Representatives voted 300 to 1 to abrogate the commercial treaty with Russia because of its discrimination against Jews.

It was a significant symbolic victory, at least, and important to the internal health of American democracy, as well as to the Jews. Those who are writing and wiring this week, asking Congressmen to support the Jackson-Vanik bills, might point to this earlier historical episode. Can we do less in 1973 than we did in 1911?