

January 2009

Anti-Semitism in Russia: 2008

Overview

Popular manifestations of anti-Semitism rose in Russia during the fourth quarter of 2008 as the harsh impact of a global economic crisis and a rise in political instability coincide with increased nationalism among disaffected youth and the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. As in previous years, anti-Semitic incidents spiked before, during and after Hitler's birthday on April 20th, and around the prominent Jewish holidays of Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Hanukkah, and around Holocaust memorial events.

Some of the public demonstrations held to protest Israel's actions in Gaza included openly anti-Semitic rhetoric. Distribution of anti-Semitic materials in print and online was widespread. Anti-Semitic newspapers and books were openly sold, and dozens of anti-Semitic Russian-language websites operated online. Observers also reported that online hate speech targeting Jews grew more common in Russian electronic chat rooms, blogs, and discussion boards. Vandalism also accompanied the increased popular anti-Semitism, especially attacks on synagogues and other Jewish communal buildings, cemeteries, and Holocaust memorial sites.

In contrast with the increase of popular anti-Semitism, official anti-Semitism remained tempered by good relations between the Russian government and the Russian Jewish community, and between Israel and the Russian government. The Russian government openly condemned anti-Semitic acts. However, and despite government actions, some officials, educators, and other public figures continued to make openly anti-Semitic public comments, including blood libel accusations. The singularly most disturbing official sanctioning of anti-Semitism involved members of the "Young Guard," the youth wing of the ruling "United Russia" party, who participated in anti-immigrant demonstrations that typically featured racist hate speech; and the distribution by the Interior Ministry of a brochure on extremism that described "Satanism" as originally a "secret fanatic Jewish kabalistic sect."

Anti-Semitic trends in 2008 were inextricably tied to the continuing rise of anti-immigrant, skinhead, and neo-Nazi extremism. Speaking in late 2008, the Interior Minister estimated that up to 200,000 Russian youths were involved in extremist criminal activity, much of it connected to violent hate groups. These largely youth-based groups were responsible for a tripling of hate crimes since 2004, according to official Russian statistics. A year-end survey by human rights NGOs in Russia reported nearly 300 hate crimes and 122 murders on racial or ethnic groups in 2008, the majority of which were committed in Moscow and St. Petersburg, which are also home to Russia's largest Jewish communities. In January 2009, the U.S. embassy warned of a rise in racially motivated crimes in Moscow and other large Russian cities, and urged U.S. citizens,

particularly those of Asian, Latin American, or African heritage, to exercise caution, especially in public venues.

Domestic Russian sources have countered international assessments with lower statistics of hate crimes and increased numbers of successful prosecutions. Russian NGOs estimated that in 2004, 69 hate crimes and 25 race-based murders were committed; in 2005, 200 attacks and 25 murders; in 2006, 210 attacks and 56 murders; and in 2007, 231 attacks and 74 murders. Interior Ministry officials also provided alternative numbers for hate crimes for the same time period: 130 in 2004, 152 in 2005, 262 in 2006, and 356 in 2007. A third set of statistics provided by the State Duma Security committee counted 130 race-based crimes in 2005, 152 in 2006, 263 in 2007, and 460 in 2008. Moreover, Russian human rights watchers reported an increased conviction rate with 205 persons convicted of various hate crimes in 2008, as compared to 116 in 2007, 109 in 2006, 52 in 2005 and 23 in 2004. The convictions came despite the persistence among many lower-level or regional Russian law enforcement officials to dismiss hate crimes as mere "hooliganism," reduce penalties to small fines, refuse outright to register hate crimes, or in some cases, to even blame the victims.

During the December 2007 parliamentary and March 2008 presidential election campaigns some officials used the 2002 law on extremism, which was intended to fight hate crimes and violent xenophobia, to bring charges against opposition politicians, journalists, and human rights activists critical of the Kremlin. The January 2008 appointment by then-President Putin of Dmitry Rogozin as Russia's ambassador to NATO was a further disturbing signal. Following his appointment, Rogozin, a prominent radical nationalist, openly called for his fellow nationalists to infiltrate the Russian government and work to change it from within.

Notable Developments

December 2008

Moscow - a neo-Nazi and anti-migrant extremist rally was held in downtown Moscow with official sanction and police escort.

Moscow - Russia's Interior Minister (its top law enforcement official) estimated that as many as 200,000 Russian youths were involved in extremist or criminal activity, much of it related to hate groups.

Moscow - security officials detained a Russian human rights activist who was an ethnic Uzbek, accused him of working for a "Jewish" organization, and threatened to kidnap and kill him, prior to releasing him.

November 2008

Moscow - a city court ruled that, in 2006, the newspaper "Duel" had published an extremist article that featured anti-Semitic hate speech.

Moscow - a prominent Jewish musician was attacked by skinheads on the Moscow subway.

Perm - a march against illegal immigration featured anti-Semitic rhetoric and slogans.

Ryazan - a statue of Lenin was defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti and then blown up with explosives.

Saratov - the Jewish Agency for Israel office was vandalized with anti-Semitic graffiti.

Vladivostok - a Chabad rabbi was beaten unconscious and robbed of his laptop in an attack which was either anti-Semitic or a robbery.

October 2008

Kaliningrad - a Holocaust memorial was vandalized with anti-Semitic graffiti.

Moscow - Russia's main anti-migrant movement announced plans to collaborate with German neo-Nazis and other extreme nationalist groups in Europe.

Omsk - the synagogue received a bomb threat; police did not find explosives after evacuating and searching the building.

Orenburg - police detained a known neo-Nazi with a live grenade near the city's main train station. The man was already facing trial for defacing a synagogue with swastikas.

Saratov - the Jewish Agency for Israel office and a Jewish charitable organization's buildings were vandalized with anti-Semitic graffiti.

September 2008

Nizhny Novgorod - a court sentenced an anti-Semite to over two years on parole on hate crime charges for vandalizing a Jewish cemetery.

Stavropol - a court banned three anti-Semitic books as "extremist."

Ulyanovsk - four residents were convicted of writing anti-Semitic death threats on a Jewish community center.

August 2008

Russia - a popular social networking website allowed users to create anti-Semitic sites and post anti-Semitic materials online.

Makhachkala - two Jewish cemeteries were vandalized.

Nizhny Novgorod - a synagogue and cemetery were vandalized again, the latest in a series of attacks; suspects were charged with hate crimes.

July 2008

Bryansk - a businessman was convicted on hate crime charges and received a fine for selling anti-Semitic videos.

Chita - a newspaper editor was charged with extremism for consistently publishing anti-Semitic articles.

Ivanovo - a Jewish cemetery was vandalized and a swastika was painted on the door of the Jewish community leader's home.

Kineshma - a Jewish community center was vandalized twice in two days.

Moscow - anti-Semitic books and pamphlets were openly sold at a monarchist rally in Moscow.

Moscow - President Medvedev promised to oppose anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and nationalism while speaking at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

June 2008

Blagoveschensk - three far-right extremists who tried to incite violence against Jews and other minorities received suspended sentences.

Krasnoyarsk - four youths were convicted on hate crime charges for vandalizing a Jewish cemetery.

Murmansk - vandals broke windows at a Jewish charitable institution's office.

Nizhny Novgorod - a synagogue was vandalized and attacked with a Molotov cocktail.

Nizhny Novgorod - three suspects in a string of anti-Semitic vandalism attacks on cemeteries were charged with hate crimes.

Volzhsky - two men severely beat a Jewish man after asking him if he was Jewish.

May 2008

Akhtubinsk - police arrested three men, including a member of a regional municipal committee, on hate crime charges, for public incitement of violence against Jews.

Bryansk - hate crimes charges against a youth gang, who had attacked a Jewish school on five separate occasions, were dropped. Prosecutors instead charged the gang with hooliganism and vandalism.

Salavat - drunks tried to break into a Jewish community center during a religious service, but were detained by police.

Tula - neo-Nazis vandalized a Jewish community center and attacked two of its Jewish employees with a shovel.

April 2008

Bryansk, Orenburg - synagogues were vandalized with swastikas and death threats. Local neo-Nazis were later detained and charged.

Moscow - nationalists and neo-Nazis, with police escort, rallied downtown and called for violence against migrants, Jews and the government, in violation of Russian anti-extremism laws.

Tambov - anti-Semitic graffiti appeared on city streets.

Tyumen - a university academic affirmed her belief in the medieval blood libel against Jews while lecturing in a state-sponsored educational program on Russian Orthodox belief and culture.

Vladivostok - the synagogue was vandalized for the third time in two years.

March 2008

Ivanovo - a man who, in 2007, assaulted a rabbi and another Jew while shouting death threats was sentenced on hate crime charges.

Moscow - the chief mufti of the Russian Muslim community in Siberia (also co-chairman of the Council of Muftis of Russia) called Zionism "a cancerous tumor" and "fascism" during a rally in Moscow.

Murmansk - a Jewish community office was vandalized, but officials refused to investigate.

Novosibirsk - numerous anti-Semitic posters appeared around the city promoting blood libel charges, and warning parents to safeguard their children as Passover approached.

Tomsk - stone-throwers broke windows at the synagogue.

February 2008

Russia - nationalists posted numerous online allegations that presidential candidate Dmitry Medvedev was secretly Jewish in the run-up to March 2008 elections.

Moscow - a joint study by the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Russian Jewish Congress reported that many Russian history textbooks do not adequately cover Jewish history in Russia and repeat anti-Semitic assertions.

Tver - authorities charged a neo-Nazi gang with hate crimes, including murder, assault, and vandalism, allegedly committed over several years.

January 2008

Moscow - the chairman of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia called on the government to fight what he called a dramatic surge in hate crimes and general xenophobia in Russia.

Nizhny Novgorod - a synagogue was attacked by visiting fans after a hockey game.

Ulyanovsk - a Russian nationalist group defaced a synagogue and Jewish community center during an anti-Semitic rally that was forcefully dispersed by police.

Volgograd - a Holocaust memorial site was vandalized.