

Introduction

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Jews played highly visible roles, over an extended period, in the leadership of leftist movements – including socialist, communist, and anarchist organizations – around the world. In the first half of the twentieth century, significant numbers of Jews were also evident in the rank and file of specific left-wing political parties. In addition to participating in general leftist movements, Jews in Eastern Europe created and fostered a number of distinctive Jewish socialist parties with tens of thousands of members. Why were so many Jews sympathetic to left-wing causes? Explanations revolving around the purported characteristics of Jews, the impact of Jewish religious ideas, and the marginality of the Jewish population have been expounded by prominent scholars. However, there is reason to question both of the first two of these explanations. At the present time, left-wing ideas no longer hold the same degree of attraction for Jews as they did one hundred years ago. The relationship of Jews to the left was historically contingent, specific to political, historic, and economic conditions that prevailed between the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries in Europe, and that impacted upon Jewish political opinion in the United States and other countries that received large numbers of Jewish immigrants from Europe.

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In a book that first appeared in 1911, the German sociologist Robert Michels noted “the abundance of Jews among the leaders of the socialist and revolutionary parties” and attempted to illuminate this phenomenon by reference to “specific racial qualities” that “make the Jew a born leader

of the masses, a born organizer and propagandist.” Michels asserted that among these qualities were “sectarian fanaticism which, like an infection, can be communicated to the masses with astonishing frequency; next we have an invincible self-confidence (which in Jewish racial history is most characteristically displayed in the lives of the prophets) . . . remarkable ambition, an irresistible need to figure in the limelight, and last but not least an almost unlimited power of adaptation.”¹ He cites examples of “the quantitative and qualitative predominance of persons of Hebrew race” in leftist parties in Germany, Austria, the United States, Holland, Italy, Hungary, Poland, and other lands, and adds that Jewish involvement with socialist parties is also linked to the “spirit of rebellion against the wrongs from which” Jewry suffers, that is, the Jewish response to continuing antisemitism.²

Some scholars interested in the relationship between Jews and the left have emphasized not supposed Jewish qualities but rather purported similarities between Judaism or Jewish religious ideas, on the one hand, and ideas supported by leftist writers, on the other. Dennis Fischman, for one, has argued that Marx “approaches the standpoint of the Jewish tradition . . . In his stress on the indispensability of human action, Marx echoes the Jewish motifs of *partnership in Creation* and *dialogue*.”³ Michael Löwy, far more compellingly, has made creative use of Max Weber’s notion of *Wahlverwandschaften*, has written of an elective affinity illuminating links between Jewish messianism and a revolutionary, libertarian, worldview, and suggests that the views of such thinkers as Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Gustav Landauer, Leo Lowenthal, and Georg Lukács can all be clarified, to varying degrees, through reference to the affinity he describes.⁴

Yet another, alternative, explanation for the attraction of some (very prominent) Jews to leftist ideas revolves around Jewish marginality. Isaac Deutscher – himself a leftist of Jewish origin – claimed that Marx, Luxemburg, and Trotsky (among others) “dwelt on the borderlines of various civilizations, religions, and national cultures” and “were born

¹ Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Free Press, 1962), p. 245.

² Michels, *Political Parties*, pp. 246–248.

³ Dennis Fischman, *Political Discourse in Exile: Karl Marx and the Jewish Question* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), pp. 110–111.

⁴ Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe. A Study in Elective Affinity*, trans. Hope Heaney (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

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and brought up on the borderlines of various epochs.”⁵ This, he proposed, “enabled them to rise in thought above their societies, above their nations, above their times and generations, and to strike out mentally into wide new horizons.”

The notion that Jews are a race has long since been discredited by reputable social scientists (if not necessarily by all geneticists). There were, and are, Jewish leftists who have found elements of the Jewish religion to be compatible with their political proclivities. The idea that Judaism per se is intrinsically progressive, however, is not tenable. Jewish religious beliefs can lead and have led many to deeply conservative political positions. But Deutscher’s explanation for the onetime link between Jews and the left, the fact that it is colored by his political sympathies notwithstanding, has a great deal of merit. Jews were regularly marginal to the societies in which they lived when the left came into being and in the era during which it developed. Antisemitism made it impossible for Jews in many European lands to break into any number of powerful institutions. Jewish marginality, and the political, economic, and sociological conditions that existed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and that fostered marginality, clarify the political inclinations of any number of prominent Jewish leftists of earlier generations. The rejection of Jews by mainstream society contributed to their sense that a dramatic change was both desirable and necessary.

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THE LEFT AND THE JEWS

The left arose out of the French Revolution, and was, initially, committed to that revolution’s ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Indeed: the term “leftist” originally referred to those French political leaders who supported the Revolution. Specific French leftists in the National Assembly, none of whom were Jews, endorsed the emancipation of French Jewry. The positions taken by these founders of the French left led some Jews in France to ally with the left. There are known to have been Jewish Jacobins, for example, in Saint-Esprit, near Bayonne.⁶

⁵ Isaac Deutscher, “The Non-Jewish Jew,” in *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1968), p. 27.

⁶ Zosa Szajkowski, *Jews and the French Revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 1848* (New York: Ktav, 1970), p. 822.

Left-wing movements ultimately came into being not only in France but also in many other lands. In general, these movements tended to favor equal treatment of citizens and opposed the legal disabilities that had been imposed upon Jews, in specific countries, in earlier times.

To be sure, individual, highly visible, leaders of the left were not immune to anti-Jewish prejudices. The Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who was of aristocratic, non-Jewish, origin and who was a foremost leader of the International Workingmen's Association (the First International), for example, penned an essay in 1869 in which he proclaimed that "modern Jews ... considered as a nation ... are *par excellence* exploiters of others' labor, and have a natural horror and fear of the popular masses, whom, moreover, they despise, either openly or secretly. The habit of exploitation ... gives it an exclusive and baneful direction, entirely opposed to the interests as well as to the instincts of the proletariat."⁷ However, the views of figures such as Bakunin notwithstanding, the left was generally open to the participation of individual Jews within its ranks in ways that the European right was often not, and many late-nineteenth-century leftists (though not all) ultimately opposed the anti-semitic political movements that came into being in that era. It was by no means the case that outspoken opposition to political antisemitism and personal attitudes rooted in prejudice or stereotypes were mutually exclusive.⁸ Nevertheless, it is significant that German Social Democracy, the world's strongest Marxist-influenced movement in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, was less antisemitic than other major political parties in imperial Germany. It is worth noting that representatives of the Center Party advocated linking the number of Jewish judges in Bavaria to the proportion of Jews in the Bavarian population, that the National Liberals of Germany were not consistent defenders of equal rights for Jews, and that even the Progressives of Germany (to whom significant numbers of German Jews were attracted) were initially very cool to the notion of nominating Jewish candidates.⁹

Many Marxist-oriented parties operating at the end of the nineteenth century (or in the first decades of the twentieth) had positions on the

⁷ Edmund Silberner, "Two Studies on Modern Anti-Semitism," *Historia Judaica*, XIV, 2 (October, 1952), p. 96. Statements tinged with anti-Jewish sentiment can be found in the writings of any number of other socialists, anarchists, and communists.

⁸ For a recent discussion of this issue see Lars Fischer, *The Socialist Response to Antisemitism in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁹ Marjorie Lamberti, *Jewish Activism in Imperial Germany: The Struggle for Civil Equality* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 25, 33, 34, 42.

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so-called Jewish question similar to that of German Social Democracy. The leading figures of the Marxist movement in France, Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue, were opponents of political antisemitism, as were the leaders of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party. Edmund Silberner, among the first scholars to conduct sustained research on the attitudes of leftists toward Jews, once asserted that there is "an old anti-Semitic tradition within modern Socialism" and that this tradition sheds light on the views of quite a few socialist writers and parties.¹⁰ However, the attitudes of leftists toward Jews were far more differentiated than Silberner's conclusions might lead one to believe. There are important, deplorable examples of antisemitic leftists. Silberner to the contrary notwithstanding, on the other hand, there is not an undisputed "tradition" of antisemitism on the left per se.

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JEWES ON THE LEFT

The relative openness of the left made it possible not only for individuals of Jewish origin to become involved in leftist movements, but also, in some cases, to become leaders of such movements. Karl Marx and Ferdinand Lassalle, who were of Jewish descent, are manifestly among the most important mid-nineteenth-century leftists and exemplify the highly visible roles played by individuals of Jewish origin in left-wing movements at a specific historic moment in time.

Marx knew little about Jews or Judaism. His father, Heinrich Marx, converted to the Lutheran faith in 1817, the year before Karl was born. Karl himself was converted to Lutheranism at the age of six. The school he attended as an adolescent, from 1830 to 1835, had been founded by Jesuits, and was attended primarily by Catholic students.

As a university student, however, Marx became friends with the Young Hegelian and Protestant theologian Bruno Bauer and took a course taught by Bauer on Isaiah. It is not surprising, therefore, that Marx paid close attention to Bauer's work on the Jewish question, and that he published responses to and critiques of Bauer's perspective.

Bauer had insisted that Jews, who did not have full civil rights in Prussia, would not be emancipated until such time as they had renounced

¹⁰ Edmund Silberner, "Anti-Semitism and Philo-Semitism in the Socialist International," *Judaism*, II (1953), p. 122.

Judaism. Marx replied to Bauer, most famously in “On the Jewish Question,” stressing that there was a distinction between political emancipation and human emancipation, and noting that Jews were entitled to the former even if they did not first abandon the Jewish religion. For Marx, the extent to which Jews had been granted equal political rights was a criterion by which to judge the modernity of a given state.

Marx never devoted sustained attention to the “Jewish question” after he wrote the discussions of Bauer’s work noted, though he referred to Jews in passing from time to time. In so doing, Marx sometimes made use of slurs and epithets (particularly in private letters to Friedrich Engels and other trusted confidants). These statements, and a review of Marx’s writings, led Edmund Silberner to proclaim, in an article first published in 1949, that “If the pronouncements of Marx are not chosen at random, but are examined as a whole, and if . . . by anti-Semitism aversion to the Jews is meant, Marx not only can but *must* be regarded as an outspoken anti-Semite.”¹¹

But, as was the case with Silberner’s general pronouncements, this assessment has been contested. Henry Pachter, for one, asserted in 1979 that “the term ‘anti-Semitic’ as we understand it today does not apply to the author of ‘On the Jewish Question’ and to his contemporary audience, which understood his meaning in the context of the Hegelian philosophy and its language . . . He is not preaching anti-Semitism but trying to defuse it.”¹² But it should be added: even if one rejects the label “anti-Semitic” as inappropriate when applied to Marx, and there is good reason to do so, it remains the case that Marx expressed personal antipathy toward individual Jews.¹³

Lassalle, the founder and the first president of the General German Workers’ Association, was, at the height of his career, one of the world’s most prominent socialists, and was widely popular among German workers. He was born and raised in a Jewish family. Lassalle’s mother was strictly orthodox in her observance of Jewish religious ritual during Lassalle’s youthful years. Lassalle never formally converted – though he became estranged from Judaism, particularly as he became acquainted with Hegelian and Young Hegelian thought.

¹¹ Edmund Silberner, “Was Marx an Anti-Semite?” *Historia Judaica*, XI, 1 (April, 1949), p. 50.

¹² Henry Pachter, “Marx and the Jews,” *Dissent* (Fall, 1979), pp. 452, 466.

¹³ The most thorough study of Marx’s attitude toward Jews is that of Julius Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism* (London, Henley, and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), which contains an annotated guide to relevant works.

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However little Marx published on Jewish matters, Lassalle published even less. Indeed, there are no works by Lassalle meant for public consumption that focus directly on Jews, Judaism, or Jewry. Lassalle's private correspondence, however, is revealing. In one letter he notes:

I do not like Jews at all. I even detest them in general. I see in them nothing but the degenerate sons of a great, but long past epoch. As a result of centuries of servitude, these people have taken on the characteristics of slaves, and for this reason I am hostile to them.¹⁴

At another point, he proclaimed: "There are above all two classes of people that I cannot stand, writers and Jews – and I, unfortunately, belong to both."¹⁵ Thus: like Marx's, Lassalle's attitude toward Jews was characterized by general lack of interest in Jewish affairs, and by personal antipathy (a matter quite distinct from advocacy of political antisemitism).

How might we explain this personal antipathy? Robert Wistrich relied on a psychological diagnosis – "self-hatred" – in explaining both Marx's attitude toward Jews and that of Lassalle.¹⁶ As used by Wistrich, Jewish self-hatred refers to negative attitudes of a person of Jewish origin toward Jews linked to "feelings of rejection" that "arise in the individual who cannot achieve full acceptance by virtue of his origin."¹⁷ Though not out of the question in Lassalle's case, the diagnosis of Jewish self-hatred seems far-fetched in the case of Marx, who was not inclined to think of himself as Jewish.

Wistrich insinuates that Jewish self-hatred was evident not only in Marx and Lassalle but also in a number of other figures of Jewish origin active on the left, and writes in general terms about "the role which Jewish self-hatred played in activating latent prejudices in the socialist movement."¹⁸ However, Wistrich does not provide compelling evidence in support of his contention, does not provide a list of those socialists who he believes were afflicted with Jewish self-hatred, and thus paints with an overly wide brush. To be sure: internalization of antisemitic hatred has

¹⁴ As translated in Robert Wistrich, *Revolutionary Jews from Marx to Trotsky* (London: Harrap, 1976), p. 56.

¹⁵ Quoted in Edmund Silberner, *Sozialisten zur Judenfrage* (Berlin: Colloquium Verlag, 1962), p. 178.

¹⁶ Wistrich, *Revolutionary Jews*, pp. 36–37, 56. Cf. Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred. Antisemitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 188–208.

¹⁷ Wistrich, *Revolutionary Jews*, p. 7. ¹⁸ Wistrich, *Revolutionary Jews*, p. 6.

affected any number of individuals of Jewish origin. On the other hand, as Wistrich was well aware, there is no reason at all to presume that self-hatred is (or was) more common among leftists than among conservatives (or others).

Exceptionally prominent leftists of Jewish origin in the generations immediately following those of Lassalle and Marx include Eduard Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg, Victor Adler, Otto Bauer, and Max Adler, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, Pavel Axelrod, Julius Martov, Trotsky, and Leon Blum.¹⁹ Some may well have exhibited traces of self-hatred. Others did not. They had rather different attitudes toward Jews and issues of interest to the Jewish community.²⁰ For example: Eduard Bernstein and Max Adler ultimately developed a sympathetic attitude toward Zionism. Rosa Luxemburg and Otto Bauer did not.

The preceding list of world-renowned figures should not be taken as suggesting that most leftist leaders have been Jewish. August Bebel, Auguste Blanqui, Eugene V. Debs, Friedrich Engels, Charles Fourier, Antonio Gramsci, Jean Jaurès, Karl Kautsky, Peter Kropotkin, Wilhelm Liebknecht, Robert Owen, Georgii Plekhanov, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Karl Renner, and Henri de Saint-Simon were not Jewish; nor were many,

¹⁹ For additional examples, and consideration of relevant matters, see Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ: Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 84–86. Slezkine is off base on some subjects, including the Frankfurt School. His assertion that “members of the Frankfurt School did not wish to discuss their Jewish roots and did not consider their strikingly similar backgrounds relevant to the history of their doctrines” [Slezkine, *Jewish Century*, p. 87], for example (while true for Felix Weil), is undermined by Max Horkheimer’s explicit statements, late in his life, as to the relationship between Critical Theory and the Jewish prohibition against graven images.

²⁰ I have discussed the attitudes of Bernstein, Luxemburg, Victor Adler and Otto Bauer to Jewish matters in Jack Jacobs, *On Socialists and “the Jewish Question” after Marx* (New York, London: New York University Press, 1992). Cf. Enzo Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate (1843–1943)*, trans. Bernard Gibbons (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), pp. 58–91. On Emma Goldman see Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 23–26. On Trotsky see Joseph Nedava, *Trotsky and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972). Wistrich discusses all of these leftist figures (except Goldman) and considers relevant aspects of the life and ideas of Blum, in Wistrich, *Revolutionary Jews*. Cf. Robert S. Wistrich, *Socialism and the Jews: The Dilemmas of Assimilation in Germany and Austria-Hungary* (Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1982), and Robert S. Wistrich, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, the Jews, and Israel* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

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many, other key figures of European, American, or other socialist, communist, or anarchist movements. Nevertheless, the presence of Jews and individuals of Jewish descent in the leadership of leftist movements was, at one point in time, considerable, and was regularly disproportionate to the percentage of Jews in the general populations of the countries in which these Jews were active.

Particularly in the first decades of the twentieth century, there were not only a remarkable number of Jews in the most prominent leadership positions of leftist parties, but also a disproportionately high number of Jews in (somewhat) lower-ranking positions within some of these parties, and in particular roles in party-related institutions. An analysis of the family backgrounds of those who participated in the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party congress in 1907 reveals that 23 percent of the Menshevik delegates were Jewish, and that 11 percent of the Bolsheviks at this congress were Jews.²¹ Robert Michels noted in 1911 that "among the eighty-one socialist deputies sent to the [German] Reichstag in the penultimate general election, there were nine Jews, and this figure is an extremely high one when compared with the percentage of Jews among the population of Germany, and also with the total number of Jewish workers [in Germany] and with the number of Jewish members of the socialist party."²² Eighteen of the twenty-nine people's commissars in the government of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 were Jewish.²³ Eduard Bernstein suggested in 1921 that there were roughly five hundred journalists employed by social democratic newspapers in Germany, and that it would not be unreasonable to estimate that fifty of those journalists were of Jewish descent.²⁴ By the end of 1923, roughly 20 percent of the

²¹ Robert J. Brym, *The Jewish Intelligentsia and Russian Marxism: A Sociological Study of Intellectual Radicalism and Ideological Divergence* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978). There was less of a Jewish presence among the Bolsheviks than among the Mensheviks throughout the period preceding the Revolution of 1917. Moreover: the total number of Bolsheviks who were Jewish in the prerevolutionary period was rather small. A Communist Party census conducted in 1922 demonstrates that there were at that time merely 958 Jewish members in the party who had joined before 1917. The total membership of the Bolshevik group in January 1917 was 23,600 [Zvi Y. Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917–1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 105–106].

²² Michels, *Political Parties*, p. 246.

²³ Traverso, *Marxists and the Jewish Question*, p. 33.

²⁴ Eduard Bernstein, "Di yidn un di daytshe sotsial-demokratie," *Tsukunft*, XXVI (March, 1921), p. 151.

membership of the Communist Party of Poland (KPP) was Jewish.²⁵ Official Communist sources (not inclined to exaggerate on this subject) estimated that 35 percent of the KPP membership was Jewish in 1930.²⁶ In 1949, it has been alleged, approximately half of those in the American Communist Party were Jews.²⁷

But the presence of Jews on the left extended, in the twentieth century, well beyond membership in political parties, or association with party-related institutions. Jews were also highly visible in major periodicals and intellectual groupings that had left-wing orientations but were not party affiliated. The Institute of Social Research, for example, which was founded in Germany in 1923, and which became the crucible within which the Frankfurt School came into being, ultimately proved to be particularly attractive to intellectuals of Jewish origin. Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal, Erich Fromm, and Friedrich Pollock were all Jews, and so was Herbert Marcuse, who first became closely associated with the Frankfurt School in the 1930s.²⁸

Though Jews were manifestly present in leftist movements in a number of different countries during the twentieth century, this fact does not by any means imply that most Jews in these countries were members of leftist parties. The total number of members of the KPP in 1930 was roughly 6,600.²⁹ To say that 35 percent of the members of the party in that year were Jews is to suggest that 2,310 Jews were members of the KPP. A census conducted by the Polish government found that there were 3,113,933 individuals of the “Mosaic faith” in Poland in December

²⁵ M. Mishkinsky, “The Communist Party of Poland and the Jews,” in *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars*, ed. Yisrael Gutman, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jehuda Reinharz, and Chone Shmeruk (Hanover, NH, and London: University Press of New England, 1989), p. 62.

²⁶ Celia S. Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland between the Two World Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 254. There are no reliable statistics on the proportion of Jews active in Trotskyist movements. However, it appears to be the case that Jews played a disproportionate role in many of these movements. I have discussed Jews active in the Trotskyist movement in Poland in Jack Jacobs, “Communist Questions, Jewish Answers: Polish Jewish Dissident Communists of the Inter-War Era,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, XVIII (2005), pp. 369–379.

²⁷ Gennady Estraiikh, “Metamorphoses of Morgn-frayhayt,” in *Yiddish and the Left*, ed. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov, *Studies in Yiddish*, III (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), p. 145.

²⁸ Jack Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁹ Gabriele Simoncini, “Ethnic and Social Diversity in the Membership of the Communist Party of Poland: 1918–1938,” *Nationalities Papers*, XXII, Supplement 1 (1994), p. 59.