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978-0-521-13005-9 - Class Struggle in the Pale: The Formative Years of the Jewish
Workers' Movement in Tsarist Russia

Ezra Mendelsohn

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CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE PALE

*The Formative Years
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in Tsarist Russia*

BY

EZRA MENDELSON



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Introduction

Autonomous Jewish political movements, which aimed at solving the 'Jewish question' by mobilizing the Jewish population in support of a particular program, were the product of Eastern Europe. It was there, and particularly in the Russian Empire, that the necessary conditions for the creation of such political movements were to be found. That is, there existed an enormous, unassimilated Jewish community which was clearly distinguished, linguistically and otherwise, from other ethnic groups, and a secularized Jewish intelligentsia which, though at least partly assimilated, found it difficult to enter the gentile world. This situation differed sharply from that of Western and Central Europe, where Jews were much less densely settled and where, by the end of the nineteenth century, assimilation had all but destroyed the distinctive Jewish life of medieval times. If the rate of assimilation may be regarded as an index of modernity, the very backwardness of East European society encouraged the emergence of independent Jewish political movements.

The massive Jewish settlement of Eastern Europe originated in the flight of German Jews to Poland during the persecutions of the Middle Ages. The secular intelligentsia, however, was the creation of the nineteenth century. Early in that century the Jewish 'Enlightenment' ('Haskalah') movement penetrated Eastern Europe from its country of origin, Germany. The 'Haskalah' stood for a general purification and reform of Jewish life, particularly in the cultural sphere; it also insisted that Jews become good and loyal citizens of the state. The impact of this movement, though largely restricted to the middle class, was such as to provide a number of willing recruits for the state gymnasia (high schools) and universities, which were opened to Jews during the course of the century. And many who could not gain entrance to these schools studied secular subjects on their own, or in modern Jewish schools, or possibly abroad. Thus was born a small but vitally important Jewish secular intelligentsia.

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The history of Jewish politics in the Russian Empire is largely the story of how members of this intelligentsia forged an alliance with the Jewish masses to create specifically Jewish political movements. Such an alliance was, at first, rather unlikely. For many Russian Jewish intellectuals were, by their very nature, estranged from the Jewish masses, having abandoned both the language of the masses, Yiddish, and religious orthodoxy. As they themselves had left traditional Jewish life behind, their most natural inclination was, often enough, to advocate the integration of Jews into Russian society and to participate in general political movements. This inclination, however, was sorely tested by the all-pervasive nature of Russian anti-semitism and the 'Chinese wall' which separated Jew from gentile. While some Jewish intellectuals continued to hope and work for integration, and became active in Russian socialist and liberal movements, others advanced new ideologies which contained specifically Jewish solutions to the 'Jewish question'.

Such ideologies were based on the idea that the Jews were a nation, and that among their tasks was to preserve themselves as a nation. The bearers of the national culture were, of course, the unassimilated Jewish masses, and by articulating national ideologies the intelligentsia signaled its return 'to the people'. Just as Polish or Russian-educated Ukrainians became the champions of the Ukrainian renaissance, and German-educated Czechs became the leaders of Czech nationalism, so many russified Jewish intellectuals found their identity as leaders of Jewish nationalism.

Of these national ideologies the best known (because it has proved the most successful) is Zionism. Russian Zionism, the backbone of the world Zionist movement, proclaimed that Russian Jewry had no future within the Empire and insisted that the only viable alternative was organized mass emigration. The Zionist position, however, was overshadowed in its mass appeal, at least until 1905, by a Jewish social democratic party known as the Bund. The 'General Jewish Workers' Union ("Bund") in Russia and Poland' ('Lithuania' was added later) was founded in Vilna in 1897. Its history illustrates the pattern discussed above. The progenitors of the party were russified Jewish intellectuals,

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who originally intended to dedicate their lives to the Russian Marxist movement. As we shall see, their confrontation with Russian reality led them to create an all-Jewish movement by allying themselves with the Jewish proletariat. This alliance eventually obliged the intellectuals to voice not only socialist slogans, but specifically Jewish demands. These demands were initially restricted to equal rights for Jews, but soon were expanded into a full-blown national program.

The Bund's national ideology, unlike that of Zionism, was based on the concept of national cultural autonomy. The Russian state of the future, based on socialist principles, would guarantee to all nationalities, including the Jews, the right to maintain their national life through the creation of national cultural institutions. Thus the Jews, while lacking a clearly defined territory, would be permitted to maintain Yiddish schools and promote Yiddish culture in areas of dense Jewish settlement.

The Bund's mixture of nationalism and socialism, not untypical of Eastern Europe, was naturally rejected by the Palestine-oriented Zionists. It was also rejected by the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, of which the Bund had been a charter member. The Russian Marxists refused to recognize the Jews as a separate nation, and opposed the Bund's claims to absolute jurisdiction over the Russian Jewish proletariat. At the second congress of the Russian party, held in 1903, the Bund's national program was condemned and the Jewish organization found itself isolated within the Russian Marxist camp. Despite Zionist and Russian Marxist hostility, however, the Bund remained a potent force in Russian Jewish life until the Bolshevik revolution ended its legal existence.

A history of the Bund would naturally place considerable emphasis on the development of its ideology and its relations with other political parties, both Jewish and non-Jewish. This study is emphatically not concerned with such questions.¹ Rather, it concentrates on the mass labor movement itself, which took place under the auspices of the Bund but which was not always con-

¹ A number of studies, many still unpublished, deal with these problems. See 'Unpublished Sources' in the Bibliography.

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trolled by the party. To be sure, the Jewish labor movement cannot be entirely disassociated from certain ideological developments; it was, for example, the theoretical decision to advance from propaganda to agitation which inaugurated organized class warfare between Jewish workers and their employers. This book, however, will focus not on the policies of the party but on the activities of the thousands of workers attracted to the labor movement. Among the questions it will attempt to answer are the following: What did the Jewish workers hope to attain by their adherence to the movement, and to what extent were these hopes realized? How did they set about to improve their economic and cultural situation? How did their aspirations coincide with those of the leadership? Finally, it will try to explain the reasons for the very distinct evolution of the Jewish labor movement within the Russian Empire.

Chronologically, the book deals with the Jewish labor movement from its origins up to, but not including, the revolutionary events of 1905–6. By that time its major characteristics had become clearly manifest. Geographically, it is chiefly concerned with the three Belorussian and three Lithuanian provinces (Minsk, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Vilna, Grodno and Kovno) which constituted the so-called northwest region of the Russian Empire. In Russian-Jewish parlance the area was often referred to simply as 'Lithuania'; (all of these provinces had been part of the Lithuanian segment of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). It was in this area that the Jewish labor movement, as an organized phenomenon, originated; it was there, too, that it attained its greatest influence over the Jewish proletariat and intelligentsia.

One explanation for this was demographic. Jews lived in great numbers in the Russian Ukraine and in Russian Poland as well as in 'Lithuania', but while the urban proletariats of the former two regions were chiefly Christian, in the northwest the Jewish element predominated. In addition, the Jewish intelligentsia of the northwest, which was a buffer area between Russian and Polish culture, was subject to weaker assimilationist pressures than were its counterparts in the Ukraine and Russian Poland. This combination of a dominant Jewish proletariat and an intelligentsia more

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likely than elsewhere to be sensitive to its needs made possible the emergence of a specifically Jewish labor movement.¹ The movement eventually spread beyond the frontiers of Belorussia-Lithuania—and material from other areas has been included—but its leadership remained chiefly of ‘Lithuanian’ stock, and the primacy of Vilna, the movement’s birthplace and the Jewish cultural capital of the region, was never challenged.²

A Note on Spelling and Transliteration. With regard to place names, I have used those forms which (1) were employed during the period under discussion, and (2) will be most familiar to the reader. Thus Kovno, not Kaunas; Grodno, not Gardinas. These forms correspond to both Yiddish and Russian usage. Where Yiddish and Russian usage disagree, I have again chosen the more familiar form. Thus Brest-Litovsk, not Brisk.

Yiddish orthography was not consistent at the turn of the century, and therefore my transliteration system is also inconsistent. Thus the word ‘worker’, for instance, is occasionally written ‘arbeter’, and occasionally ‘arbayter’. At all times I have tried to distinguish clearly between Yiddish and German.

¹ See Moshe Mishkinsky, ‘Regionale faktorn bay der oisforemung fun der yidisher arbeter-bavegung in tsarishn rusland’, available in mimeographed form in the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York City.

² It should be noted that the administrative frontiers of the Russian northwest region did not always coincide with the frontiers of ‘Jewish Lithuania’. The Province of Suwalki, for example, which was included in the Kingdom of Poland (after 1863 known as the ‘Vistula lands’), was in all other respects an integral part of Belorussia-Lithuania, and the Jewish labor movement in that province was indistinguishable from that of the above-mentioned six provinces. On the other hand, the city of Bialystok, included in Grodno Province, resembled more a Polish than a Lithuanian city, and its labor movement was far more similar to that of Lodz (in Russian Poland) than to that of other cities in the northwest.