

Introduction

The history of European Jewry over the last two hundred years divides into three periods or, to be more exact, has followed three distinct but overlapping patterns of development. The original mode of Jewish life as it existed throughout most of Europe in the early eighteenth century was still medieval. Juridically defined as a separate community in the hierarchy of different orders and estates, assigned specific economic functions, possessed of its own languages (Yiddish and Hebrew) and laws (those administered by the rabbinical authority), the Jewish people from the Rhine to the Dnepr formed a highly conservative (albeit not unchanging), inward-looking, and self-contained entity.

A new historical process, which drove an ever wider breach through the walls of this medieval community, was set in motion under the combined impact of the Enlightenment—known in the Jewish world as the *Haskala*—and the various governmental acts of emancipation. The idea of one law for all and equality before that law was carried eastward by the French armies of the revolution and Napoleon; and even though that program was not fully carried out anywhere in central or eastern Europe, no state there failed to implement it in part.

Increasingly, throughout the early and mid-nineteenth century, a sharply contrasting way of life emerged in the Jewish world alongside the old. Speaking the vernacular rather than Yiddish, regarding himself as an equal citizen in his land of birth, narrowing the idea of Judaism to a religion rather than a nationality, and reforming the religion to fit this concept (or simply discarding it as outmoded), the modern Jew adapted himself to the changing times. It was assumed that Europe as a whole was moving inexorably along the trail already pioneered by revolutionary France and by the United States of America; that the future promised total emancipation, equal opportunity for all, and the steady acculturation of minority groups. The trend was toward liberalism in politics, individualism in thought and as a way of life, *laissez-faire* and industrialization in economics: in short, toward westernization.

However, it is the third, the postliberal, pattern in modern Jewish life with which this book is concerned—not 1789, but 1881; not emancipation, but the failure of emancipation; not the absorption of the Jews in the West, but their savage exclusion in the Russian Empire of Alexander III and Nicholas II. In general terms, this is a study of the political response to the crisis of Russian Jewry in the period 1881–1917, a crisis that was marked by a population explosion, chronic underemployment (and unemployment), poverty; by periodic waves of pogroms and governmental harassment; by a massive emigration which carried the east European Jews in hundreds of thousands—and eventually millions—to new centers all over the world.

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To a great extent, the experience of German (and Austrian) Jewry anticipated that of the Russian Jews. There, too, reaction and virulent antisemitism followed the revolutionary periods of 1789–1812 and 1848–9. There, too, the steps taken toward civil equality were subject to sudden reversal. After 1848 Jews emigrated in enormous numbers from Germany, too (particularly to the United States). But the Jewish people in Russia had been molded far less completely by the emancipation era and, with the reversal of 1881, it moved, as it were, directly from a preliberal to a postliberal stage of development, from medieval community to projects for national revival, from a religious to a social and secular messianism.

It was the intelligentsia (in the prerevolutionary Russian sense of that term) that played the crucial part in creating the postliberal politics and ideologies. And this work concentrates specifically on the role of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia as a new leadership stratum within the Jewish people. The intelligentsia did not replace the established authorities—whether theocratic or plutocratic—which had hitherto reigned supreme in Russian and world Jewish affairs, but it emerged parallel to them, possessed of its own alternative philosophical attitudes, culture, and way of life. It was created as a political force by the prolonged Russian-Jewish crisis, and its politics and ideology were stamped by that crisis.

The sudden and drastic reversal in attitudes that marked the emergence of the new ethos was summed up brilliantly by Lev Pinsker in 1882 with his slogan, “self-emancipation.” Contained in this term was the conviction that the Jewish question could not—and would not—be solved by the grant of equal rights from above nor by a return to the status quo ante of traditional Judaism, but had to be won by total change, collective action, political planning, and organization. With liberalism and individualism pronounced a failure, the radical and collectivist ideologies—nationalism and socialism—naturally came into their own.

In many ways, the politically active and conscious intelligentsia that after 1881 became a new force in the Jewish world can be best understood as one of the branches of the Russian (and Russified) intelligentsia. Certainly, it developed under the continuous influence of Russian oppositional politics.

Thus, in organizational terms, its most characteristic creation was the political party, small in number but fiercely committed to its own particular ideology. Again, as in the Russian revolutionary movement, the party ideologies were marked by strong elements of messianism or utopianism, on the one hand, and populism (“all for the people and by the people”), on the other. A narrow leadership stratum was thus in constant search of a mass base. Last but not least, the intelligentsia, which created the Russian-Jewish politics of the postliberal era, shared the outlook of the Russian intelligentsia as a whole. There was the same glorification in the role—in part freely chosen, in part forced upon them—of outsiders, youthful rebels, standing against the existent and condemning it in the name of future salvation. There was the same ascetic strand, with its pride in self-sacrifice, its reckless defiance of objective difficulties, its determination to translate thought into action, dream into reality.

But there was another side to the coin. That section of the intelligentsia that chose to work in the Jewish world differed in important ways from its Russian (and Russified) counterpart. First, after 1881, it enjoyed far easier access to the Russian-Jewish masses than did the intelligentsia as a whole to the Russian *narod*.

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Faced by a bitterly hostile government and environment, forced in large numbers to leave their homes and motherland, often penniless, the Russian Jews were much more ready (albeit sporadically and inconsistently) to accept the socialists and the nationalists as their spokesmen and leaders. Where the rabbis could easily be dismissed as belonging to an irretrievable past, and the bankers and magnates as tied to a hopeless and fickle present, there the radical youth alone remained to promise the days of the Messiah.

Second, the involvement of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia in Jewish politics was never confined to the Russian Empire but, on the contrary—from the time of Aron Liberman—was clearly international in scope. Wherever the Russian Jews migrated in large numbers, they were accompanied or followed by the socialists and nationalists of the various and rival camps. And, while competing among themselves, these immigrant politicians were, nevertheless, soon ready to challenge the established Jewish leadership in their new countries. One political subculture came into being in Vilna, Minsk, Belostok, the East End of London, and the Lower East Side of New York. Its lingua franca was Yiddish; its economic base, the clothing industry and the sweat shop; its politics, the running dispute and constant interaction between socialist internationalism and Jewish nationalism; its organizational expression, the Yiddish press, the public meeting, the trade union, the ideologically committed party, and (where relevant) the armed self-defense unit. A further outpost of this Russian-Jewish subworld was created in the Palestinian colonies, but there—lacking the mass environment—the intelligentsia (or *polu-intelligentsiia*) developed its ideologies and institutions in a Hebrew-speaking and agricultural context. Successful political innovations on the Lower East Side were adopted in the Pale of Settlement and vice versa. The politically involved youth passed restlessly from one center to another, spending years now in Russia, now in London, New York, Galicia, or Palestine. The Borochovs, Litvaks, Brenners, Medems, Goldfarbs, and Ben Gurions were nothing if not peripatetic; and yet, moving across three continents, they always remained within the same Russian-Jewish environment.

Finally—and this is the central theme of the book—the dilemmas of the intelligentsia working in the Jewish world were to a great extent qualitatively different from those facing the Russian intelligentsia in general. Psychologically, it found itself grappling with a double alienation—at once estranged from, and drawn to, the ways and problems of their own nationality, on the one hand, and a Russian or universalist political philosophy, on the other. How far was it legitimate to return to the old world without betraying the new? Was Russian or Yiddish or Hebrew the rightful language of the Jewish future? At what point did nationalism become chauvinism or obscurantism? And when did internationalism degenerate into “cosmopolitanism,” a desertion from one’s own people in its hour of need?

The search for an identity both Jewish and socialist, national and international, was not unique to the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia. It was revealed in all its pathos in the life of Moses Hess, a German socialist and (ultimately) a Jewish nationalist. But Hess turned to the preliberal Jewry of eastern Europe for the fulfilment of his proto-Zionism, and it was only in Russia that his experience eventually became that of an entire sociological stratum.

Politically, the crucial choice had to be made between two totally different (and

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on the surface at least) contradictory strategies—between revolution and exodus (organized emigration and colonization). But beyond that were other choices. Did loyalty to the Russian revolution exclude the need for Jewish political organization, for national rights? Did a commitment to a territorialist solution logically exclude participation in Russian revolutionary politics?

In the context of prerevolutionary Russia, these were unique political issues. To find a parallel one has, perhaps, to turn to black history in the United States, which likewise has been torn between integration and separatism, territorialism and cultural autonomism, organized emigration and violent opposition to the state. A nonterritorial and oppressed national minority inevitably has to grapple with political options significantly different from those of majority and territorial nationalities.

What is to be traced here, in sum, is the search over two generations and three continents for a Jewish solution to the Jewish question—a solution both universal and particular, of the future and yet rooted in popular reality, socialist but also national, scientific and nonetheless messianic.

I

The preparatory stage

The year 1881–2, as a major watershed in modern Jewish history, looms large over what came after. In that year the problem of Russian Jewry was first revealed in something of its true magnitude and menace; the vision of the exodus caught the popular imagination and at the same time became an issue of wide-ranging political debate; and Jewish nationalism became a significant political force. These developments in turn made possible the gradual emergence (first in the emigrations, later in Russia) of the Jewish socialist movements that sought a synthesis between socialism and Jewish nationalism or, at the very least, between internationalism and the cause of Jewish auto-emancipation.

But for all the centrality of 1881–2, it should not blind the observer to what had gone before. It opened a new era in the sphere of political action but not in that of political thought. Highly articulate theories of Jewish socialism had been formulated long before the assassination of Alexander II. There was no constituency of any significant size ready to adopt these ideologies. They were not written in response to any widely perceived imperatives. They were, rather, the work of men in the wilderness, seeking to bridge the inner gulf between their instinctive loyalties to the Jewish world in which they had grown up and their commitment to the avant-garde, revolutionary world. This anticipation in miniature of the future has its own intrinsic and independent importance. Moreover, in the post-1881 period, these thinkers were gradually “discovered” and (in the case of Hess, for example) exerted an influence unthinkable during their own lifetime.

In sum, this section illustrates both the autonomy of ideology and also its total dependence as a force for change on the sociopolitical context. A seed in isolation can encapsulate life, but it can only grow in the right soil.

CHAPTER I

Dilemmas of the messianic conscience

Moses Hess and Aron Liberman

Moses Hess and Aron Liberman were the first “Jewish socialists,” the first to argue that Jews should form an independent unit in the fight for international socialism. In 1862, Hess—successively mentor, comrade, party opponent, and finally part-time ally of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels—published the case for the establishment of a Jewish socialist state in Palestine. He thus anticipated by almost forty years the next major statement of socialist Zionism, that presented in 1898 by Syrkin, who saw himself as in some sense his heir. Liberman presented his theories of Jewish socialism in Lavrov’s revolutionary journal *Vpered!* during the years 1875–6. If Hess was the first drawn to the maximalist pole of Jewish socialism, then Liberman was the first to explore its minimalist counterpart. Jewish socialists, he contended, should not put forward any national demands and yet they should organize the Jewish workers as an autonomous unit within the movement, be it the Russian party or be it the Socialist International.

However, what makes a study of Hess and Liberman important here is not that they were first in the field, nor even that they had a marginal influence on later developments, but that their own lives are of intrinsic interest to the historian of Jewish socialism. In their biographies can first be seen the type of inner tension that was to constitute a basic characteristic of Jewish socialism.

On the one hand, they were drawn powerfully to the assumption that socialist internationalism as applied to the Jews meant assimilation. Negatively, they were repelled from Judaism as a medieval religion and from Jewish life as dominated by trade or, at least, by traders. Positively, they were attracted to socialism as a movement of new men who were fighting the past and already living in the future, in a new world undivided by outmoded ethnic barriers. But, for all that, neither could surrender himself totally to this logic. They felt restraints, counterpressures, that hundreds of other socialists of Jewish origin at that time did not.

Reared in boyhood and youth on Biblical, rabbinical, and later forms of Hebrew literature, both found themselves moved by the parallels between the prophetic and apocalyptic elements in their national tradition and those in contemporary socialism. More specifically, Liberman was bound by the power of place. He was the product of the culturally autonomous life led by the Jews of Lithuania, complete with their two national languages and literatures (Hebrew and Yiddish), their developed sense of collective responsibility, their emerging political groupings. He came to the Russian revolutionary movement as a citizen of what Vera Zasulich would later dub ironically “the Minsk-Vilna Fatherland.” As against this, in the political and psychological development of Hess was demonstrated the power of pride—pride in the Jewish “nation” as he came to call it. For some twenty years he

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repressed this emotion but, at a particular juncture, it swept over him, carrying him back to, and beyond, the ideology of his early manhood.

Thus each in his own way felt compelled to question the meaning of internationalism as applied to the Jewish issue. Seeking, even (in the case of Liberman) demanding, the approval of the socialist leadership, accepting its legitimacy, they nonetheless deviated from its norms. They found themselves becoming reluctant heretics. In so doing, they anticipated what was perhaps the major theme in the history of Jewish socialist ideology at least until 1914.

Moses Hess

Early writings, 1837–1841

In 1837 Moses Hess, then twenty-five years old, published his first book, *The Sacred History of Mankind*. This work has been described by Auguste Cornu as marking the “transition from a Jewish ideology to a socialist ideology.”¹ It is true that this was the first socialist work to be written and published in Germany, but Cornu was wrong to describe the socialist element as excluding the Jewish. In his writings of 1837–41 (not all of which were published at the time), Hess, in fact, assigned a role of critical importance to the history of the Jews. Only from late in 1841 did he begin to see his socialist commitment as being in conflict with his profound interest in what he had hitherto chosen to call his “Jewish nationality.”

It is no exaggeration to say that everything Hess ever wrote, from his *Sacred History* to his posthumously published *Dynamic Theory of Matter*, was inspired by his faith in the socialist millennium. But Hess took his socialism for granted—it was an axiom, a given—and so the transition to, or structure of, the future society seldom held his attention. Throughout he concentrated on what he saw as the essential preconditions of socialism.

Like every new religion—and Hess described socialism as just that—it needed a revelation of the new truth. And, in turn, philosophical truth had to be translated into ethical terms. Most difficult, the new ethics had to be absorbed by and so transform mankind. Thus, as a socialist, Hess was led to explore ceaselessly two basic fields of interest: philosophy and nationality. Without philosophy there could be no socialism, because freedom was an integral element of Hess’s socialism. In his view, no man could be free unless he understood the laws governing nature and society. But the actual task of transforming abstract truth into social truth belonged to the nations of the world. Socialism could only become reality when adopted and implemented by national states.

In consequence, from the late 1830s until his death, Hess was gripped by an intense interest in the major nations of Europe. His book of 1837 concentrated on the relationship of Germany and France. Germany was to contribute to socialism the religious spirit, the philosophical truth; France, with its proven revolutionary energies, the element of ethical social commitment. One nation was the more passive, the other more active; the one contemplative, the other practical; Germany a nation of the spirit, France of the will. If the German genius could merge with the French, the millennium was assured.

Jewish history was vital to Hess’s presentation. Only in the Old Testament, he

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argued, could be seen—albeit in embryonic, partial, and instinctive form—an example of what mankind was about to experience universally, totally, and consciously. This was a bold assertion but it was central to the argument of *The Sacred History*. Psychologically it was understandable enough. Until his late teens, Hess had been given an intensive Jewish education of the traditional kind with its heavy emphasis on the Talmud and Bible, and later rabbinical commentaries. At the age of five, when his parents moved to Cologne, he had been left behind in his grandparents' house in the Jewish quarter of Bonn to receive the thorough Jewish education befitting a boy whose maternal grandfather and paternal great-grandfather were both rabbis.²

His secular education, which was informal and consisted largely of an intensive immersion in modern philosophy, did not lead to a simple or violent reaction against his earlier Jewish training. Rather, he found himself thrown into a profound spiritual crisis. Dissatisfied with orthodox Judaism, he was nonetheless unable to find any ready-made substitute. In a letter of 1831 to a friend, Hess, then twenty-two years old, described the “immeasurable revolution which has taken place within me and raged for a good two years. . . . And I suffered a lot in that time, in so many ways I could have become its victim; the struggle was hard; always new dangers, always new reinforcements, finally victory—the free, the natural, the true!”³

The Sacred History was evidently the result of some six years of such battling for a personally tenable philosophical position. It was written, as Edmund Silberner aptly puts it, in “a kind of prophetic trance.”⁴ Given the autodidactic, private, and inspirational origins of his first work, it was hardly surprising that in it the Jewish past loomed so large. This was the history that had been absorbed most deeply into his consciousness.

In *The Sacred History*⁵ can already clearly be seen what was perhaps the fundamental characteristic of Hess's approach to philosophy and politics. He sought monistic solutions to the problems of being and becoming, but he also sought room within the monistic framework for a mass of seemingly contradictory elements. Of all modern thinkers, the one who probably influenced him most was Rousseau; in him Hess recognized his own passionate need to find the ultimate meaning of life together with his own respect for the complexity and variety that characterize that life.

He rejected what he described as the one-sidedness of Hegel and Schelling, although he readily acknowledged his debt to both. Hegel was wrong to describe Nature as inferior to Man, as “alienated Spirit,” just as Schelling erred in reducing the historical and philosophical to the natural and the poetic. The divine force, Hess argued, was immanent equally in nature and society, in the world of unchanging instinct and in the ever unfolding world of human consciousness. “The sacred,” Hess wrote,

is to be found exclusively neither in faith nor in knowledge, neither in Schelling's blissful sensibility nor in Hegel's religion of intellectual ideas, neither in the static nor the dynamic, neither in the past nor the future—but in both together, not with the one absorbed into the other but with both existing in peace side by side. They thus form true life.⁶

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This view of the world, Hess argued, had inspired the Hebrew Bible. Mankind, nature, and the cosmos were seen as equally the creation of God and as such each was possessed of its own independent but interrelated value. Man felt himself an integral part of this world and had no need for another idealized world, for a heaven. No barrier divided the spiritual life from the physical. The real was understood to be permeated by the ideal and the present to hold within itself the seeds of a perfected future. Of course, all this was understood poetically, prophetically. God was feared as an authoritarian father figure demanding obedience, not offering freedom. And yet, at its own primitive level, here was an integrated view of reality—the polar opposite of both the dualistic asceticism dominant in medieval Christian thought and of Hegel's exaggerated idealism. Taken up again by Spinoza at the higher level of speculative and universal thought, this philosophy was destined to remake the world. Once mankind understood that life itself is God and that life in turn is conceived and maintained by love it would have to create its own heaven here on earth.

In outline, *The Sacred History* followed the same three-stage progression followed by Hegel: a first period marked by innocence and instinctive unity, an intermediate period characterized by fragmentation and conflict but also by new heights of spiritual awareness, and a final era of reintegration at the level of full consciousness. But while Hegel saw the Greek polis as typical of ancient history, Hess chose the Hebrew state for this role. And while Hegel dealt only with historical experience, Hess argued that it was possible to extrapolate the future from the past. Hegel found in history "the cunning of Reason," a logic hidden from contemporary man; Hess confidently argued that the laws of history like those of nature were open to discovery. "Mankind," he wrote, "is like man, a natural phenomenon; it develops like everything in nature according to an eternal and necessary law."⁷

The logical unfolding of events that Hess discovered in the pre-Christian history of the Jews became for him the standard pattern, which had inevitably to repeat itself at successively higher levels in the two post-Christian periods. Thus, *The Sacred History* traced the Biblical parallels in medieval history. The first period opened with Adam, natural man emerging from Eden, and his immediate descendants; a society of the "free and the equal," just becoming aware of God the Father. The middle period likewise opened with the exceptional individual, with Christ, the "God-Man," with the recognition of the fact that God exists within man and with the disciples determined to carry this truth to the entire world. (Christ, Hess wrote, "broke through the narrow bounds of nationality as the young man breaks away from the bonds of family and strives for . . . universality and eternity.")⁸

But in each case early promise was corrupted by over-rapid growth, competition, and greed. And then came the period of destruction and rejuvenation. In the Bible there was the great Flood; in the Christian era the same task fell to the barbarian invasions sweeping over the Roman Empire. On the ruins new societies were slowly created—societies that sought to build the religious concept into the state. Thus King David, in building Jerusalem, represented the culmination of a process which had started with Moses, just as the Hildebrandine Papacy (symbolized by the Crusades and conquest of Jerusalem) was the climax of a process initiated by

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Gregory the Great. From the peaks only descent was possible, and the Babylonian exile was paralleled by that of Avignon (both of seventy years' duration). Yet the political decline was accompanied by a new spiritual ferment. Post-Maccabean Palestine witnessed a proliferation of sects (Sadducees and Pharisees being only the most prominent), and a turmoil of messianic expectations. The same process repeated itself in Europe before and after the Reformation, when Lutherans, Calvinists, and the many break-away churches confidently prophesied the millennium.

This pattern, argued Hess, was now going through its third and final cycle. In the modern epoch the role of Adam and Christ had fallen to Spinoza. While they had been respectively "natural man" and "God-Man," he was man pure and simple.⁹ He had developed a philosophy that was speculative and rational and yet embodied within itself the prophetic insights of Judaism and the mystic truths of Christianity. ("The speculative spirit is as poetic as philosophic, as prophetic as mystic, as real as ideal.")¹⁰ The French Revolution was the new flood, Napoleon the modern Attila. Everything, Hess insisted, pointed to the conclusion that the era of the New Jerusalem was imminent. This messianic society, this sabbath of history,¹¹ would, like the kingdoms of David and Hildebrand, be based on an alliance of state and religion—the socialist creed; would, like the ancient Jewish state, combine national cohesion with the goal of social equality; and would, like the medieval church, be universalist, striving for a community of states.¹² But now, at last, the growth of citizens to full self-consciousness and the abundance of goods ensured by the rational use of technology would permit the ideal to become the real.¹³

However, there was a basic paradox in Hess's relationship to the Jews. On the one hand, there was his conviction that Jewish history had been of archetypal importance, holding human potentiality embryonically within itself. (He even discerned a significance in the fact that Mohammed had a Jewish mother and that Spinoza was born of Jewish parents.)¹⁴ But when he had to define the present and future role of the Jewish people he became hesitant, self-contradictory.

Despite his often critical attitude toward Hegel, he tended to accept his view that a world-historical nation could only appear on the stage of history once. The future belonged to France, Germany, and (Hess added in 1841) also to England. A threatening question mark hung over Russia; but the Jews, surely, had had their day. And Hess frequently described the Jewish people as a kind of walking corpse:

Where truth reigns there is life; . . . where the lie reigns there is death. Life now sundered may carry on for some time, but God is no longer its essence. History furnishes us . . . with two major and cautionary examples. We are terrified when we behold them as if we had seen some nocturnal spirits. Both have long since fallen into the grave. One can still be seen like some cloud up in the skies; the other like a rigid corpse. We mean the Jewish people—the spirit without a body; and the Chinese, a body without a spirit.¹⁵

From this perspective, of course, the natural conclusion was that the sooner the Jewish people disintegrated the better. And in his book of 1841, *The European Triarchy*, Hess gave seemingly his implicit approval to the concept of assimilation. "Thanks to the widespread intelligence of all the [Christian] denominations in Germany," he wrote there, "thousands of educated Jews—perhaps in greater num-