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Jews and revolution in nineteenth-century Russia is a carefully researched study of one hundred years of Russian–Jewish revolutionary history, exploring the origins and characteristics of Jewish participation in Russian revolutionary politics between 1790 and 1890. Focusing sharply on Jewish motivations and the qualities of Russian–Jewish activists, it drastically reverses the traditional historiographical trend of de-Judaizing and minimizing the role of Jews who joined Russian revolutionary circles, especially during the movement’s Populist phase of the 1870s and 1880s. By the same token, it challenges many clichés and assumptions which have governed conventional wisdom on the radical behaviour of so-called assimilationist ‘non-Jewish Jews’. This revisionist approach restores a neglected yet important group of Jews to their rightful place in the historical experience of the Jewish people in Russia.

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To
Marietta
Alexa Misha Paul

Die Krähen schrein
Und ziehen schwirren Flugs zur Stadt:
Bald wird es schnein. –
Wohl dem, der jetzt noch – Heimat hat!

Nun stehst du starr,
Schaust rückwärts, ach! wie lange schon!
Was bist du Narr
Vor Winters in die Welt entflohn?

Die Welt – ein Tor
Zu tausend Wüsten stumm und kalt!
Wer das verlor,
Was du verlorst, macht nirgends halt.

Nun stehst du bleich,
Zur Winter-Wanderschaft verflucht,
Dem Rauche gleich,
Der stets nach kältern Himmeln sucht.

Flieg, Vogel, schnarr
Dein Lied im Wüstenvogel-Ton! –
Versteck, du Narr,
Dein blutend Herz in Eis und Hohn!

Die Krähen schrein
Und ziehen schwirren Flugs zur Stadt:
Bald wird es schnein. –
Weh dem, der keine Heimat hat!

Nietzsche

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Preface

That Jews played a significant role in nineteenth and early twentieth-century socialist movements in Europe and particularly in Russia has long been recognized – and demagogically exploited by antisemites of every stripe and country. One only need recall the pseudo-scholarly endeavour of Nazi historians and politicians to equate Bolshevism with Judaism to realize the degree to which the question of Jewish revolutionary involvement has been perverted to serve ideological and political ends. As for Russia, blaming the Jews for undermining established authority through the propagation of socialism and terrorism was already current in the late 1870s. Antisemitism gained momentum in the eighties, remained a force until the revolution of 1917, reemerged in the guise of Soviet anti-Zionism, and regained its nationalist complexion in post-Communist Russia. This has not augured well for serious scholarship. Due to the exaggerated antisemitic claim that Jews were the leading element in all Russian revolutionary parties, Jewish historians have apologetically minimized the role of Jews by ‘de-Judaizing’ this unpalatable phenomenon. Revolutionary Jews, in other words, were considered ‘non-Jewish Jews’ whose supposedly Jewish self-hatred disqualified them as Jews and proper subjects of Jewish history. The same approach, also born out of an unwillingness to recognize the revolutionary contribution of Jews, has been prevalent in Soviet Stalinist and post-Stalinist historiography. Here the prominent presence of Jews, in both Russian Populism and Marxism, has been conveniently ignored by transforming them into Russians, Belorussians, or Ukrainians. The net result of this two-fold negation of the Jewish role in Russian revolutionary history has created the impression, nearly as mistaken as the opposite maximalizing antisemitic assertion, that Jews *qua* Jews were an insignificant revolutionary force, and that as such they contributed next to nothing to the development of socialism in Russia.

The aim of this study is to take a more balanced approach in assessing the role of Jews in the Russian revolution. Beginning with the Haskalah origins of Jewish radicalism, and passing on to the first substantial

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participation of Jews in the liberation movement of the nihilist 1860s, I shall focus on Jews in revolutionary Populism, which dominated Russian radical politics until the rise of Marxism in the 1890s. For Populism has been the most neglected area of research in Russian Jewish revolutionary history. While at least some recognition has been given to the role of Jews in Russian Social Democracy in the works of Shimen Dimanshtein, Abraham Ascher, Israel Getzler, Leopold Haimson, Allan Wildman, Henry Tobias, Naum Bukhbinder, Samuel Agurskii, and Ezra Mendelsohn, this has not been the case with pre-Marxist nineteenth-century Populism despite its pivotal importance for the the revolution of 1917. (See bibliography for works by these and other authors referred to in the Preface.)

The reason for this lacuna is manifold. In addition to the general tendency to play down the influence and number of Russian revolutionary Jews due to antisemitic demagoguery reaching back to tsarist times, research on Jewish participants in Populist organizations and parties has suffered from the preconceived idea that Populism, as an indigenous Russian ideology, was alien to the Jewish character both in *Weltanschauung* and revolutionary practice. Accordingly, Jewish historians have argued that this variant of Russian socialism held no attraction for Jews. Unlike latter-day Russian Social Democracy, which appealed to the Jewish psyche with its Marxist internationalism, messianic determinism, and proletarian universalism, there was nothing in Populism a Jew could identify with. Hence, in the opinion of Lev Deich, Elias Tscherikower, and Leonard Schapiro, who have done most to shape our perceptions on the subject, the national particularism, reactionary traditionalism, and archaic peasantism of the Russian Populists precluded meaningful participation by Jews in the revolutionary movement of the 1870s and 1880s. This, they assert, is reflected in the supposedly minuscule Jewish involvement in the Populist circles and organizations of these two decades. Close investigation bears out none of this. My findings indicate that Jews flocked as much to the revolutionary standard of Populism as to that of Marxism later on; and they did so for the same motives, which were rooted in their Jewish upbringing and Jewish cosmopolitan desire to better the world.

In their generally negative assessment of the role of Jews in revolutionary Populism, Jewish historians would admit of only one exception: namely, that Jews, regardless of their supposedly low ratio in the movement, were extremely important as technicians of the revolutionary underground. Stating this view most succinctly, Leonard Schapiro wrote:

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it is impossible to doubt the importance of the Jewish contribution to the less spectacular business of organization and staff-work. It was the Jews, with their long experience of exploiting conditions on Russia's Western frontier which adjoined the Pale for smuggling and the like, who organized the illegal transports of literature, planned escapes and illegal crossings, and generally kept the wheels of the whole organization running.

But for Schapiro, as for others, this Jewish role was not duplicated in other areas of revolutionary activity, even though he, and especially Tschirikower, have acknowledged that as 'technicians of revolution' Jews were also prominent in the founding of Populist circles and organizations.

That in this latter role Jews may have had an important political, if not ideological, influence has escaped them for two reasons: the already mentioned preconception that Jews were singularly unfitted to add anything to the ideo-political world of revolutionary Populism because of its Russianness, and the unconscious acceptance of a historiographical bias (derived from memoir literature) towards ideological matters at the expense of the political and theoretical attributes of organizational work. The former compounded by the latter prevented historians from recognizing specifically Jewish aspects in the political evolution of revolutionary Populism – aspects which were informed by Jewish motives and explicated by the Jewish activists in the organization of the movement. They ignored the cardinal truth that in the context of Russian autocracy politics meant first and foremost organization. By artificially separating 'organizational' and/or 'technical' functions from ideo-political considerations, Jewish historians found confirmation for their preconception that on a political and theoretical level Jews were of no importance in revolutionary affairs; they concurred with Louis Greenberg's statement that there was a 'complete absence of Jews from among the original leaders and theoreticians of the movement... Jews had no share in the creation of the movement and did not produce even one outstanding philosopher, theoretician, or pamphleteer among the Narodniks'. As I shall demonstrate, neither this nor the absence of Jewish motives, still less the unattractiveness of Populism was characteristic of radical Jews who followed a revolutionary calling in the 1870s and 1880s.

In this work I am guided by the following questions: (1) what was the ratio of Jews participating in the revolutionary movement of the 1870s and 1880s; (2) why did Jews become revolutionaries and to what extent were they activated by motives of a Jewish nature; and (3) what was the importance of their contribution and how much was it a factor of their Jewishness? In researching these questions, three dominant but integ-

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rally linked themes came to the fore. Namely, the degree to which Jews were radicalized due to Jewish circumstances; the importance of their Jewishness in adopting a cosmopolitan socialist *Weltanschauung* in a Russian Populist context; and the Jewish nature of their ideological, political, and material contribution to the development of revolutionary Populism. These thematic leitmotifs signify a reversal of the previous historiographical practice of treating Populist Jews as ‘non-Jewish Jews’, who were largely ignored as a peripheral phenomenon in Jewish history or simply ‘submerged’ in Russian history as Gentile revolutionaries.

In portraying Jewish activists – their beliefs, motives, contribution, and influence – the scope of this book has its natural limits. Although new light is shed on the origins of Jewish socialism on the one hand, and especially the evolution of Russian revolutionary Populism on the other, these two subjects have been touched upon only to the extent that it is necessary to elucidate the role of Jewish radicals. Unavoidably, this has led to a certain disequilibrium in so far as by concentrating on Jews I have not paid the same attention to the important role of non-Jews in the Populist movement, such as, for example, Aleksandr Mikhailov, Sofia Perovskaia, Andrei Zheliabov, Lev Tikhomirov, and Vera Figner. To avoid the impression that Jews were the sole creative force in Russian revolutionary organizations, one may turn to the comprehensive works of Venturi, Levin, Tkachenko, Itenberg, Volk, Sedov, Tvardovskaia, Naimark, and most recently Offord. But having said this, however, it is equally pertinent to point out that these scholars have underestimated, if not failed to mention, the role of Jews in shaping the history of revolutionary Populism.

In concluding this prefatory note, I would like to thank all those individuals and institutions without whose help *Jews and Revolution* could not have been written. I am particularly indebted to my *Doktorvater*, John Keep, who supervised the thesis on which this work is based. His unwavering support and scholarly advice kept up my spirits in difficult times and did much to improve the final product presented here. Special thanks are also due to Harvey Dyck, Joseph Shatzmiller, and Robert Brym, who offered valuable advice and encouragement. Equally important has been the support of the Centre for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Toronto. It provided me with a Mellon Fellowship and a congenial place of work. I should also like to acknowledge the assistance given to me by the staff of the Interlibrary Loan Department of the University of Toronto, the Slavonic and Jewish divisions of the New York Public Library, the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research and the Bund Archives of the Jewish Labour Movement in New York, the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam,

and the State Public Library of Leningrad. I am grateful in particular to the late Boris Sapir and Irina Kurbatova of the archives of the latter two institutions respectively. Their help extended far beyond the call of duty, not only in making materials available but also in discussing my topic of research. Both made valuable suggestions and drew my attention to sources and little-known facts which enriched the texture of the history to be told in this volume.

As for technical details, all dates are given according to the old style Julian calendar if not indicated otherwise. Russian titles and names have been transliterated according to the Library of Congress system. In the text, the Russian soft sign has been omitted in proper names – hence, Iokhelson, Narodovoltsy, Kharkov, instead of Iokhel'son, Narodovol'tsy, Khar'kov – but retained in citations and references. Russian spelling of names, except for the anglicized version of well-known individuals, has been adopted throughout, sometimes with the original Ukrainian or Yiddish form added in parentheses. Foreign words not familiar to the English reader are italicized, as for example *maskil* (but not its adjectival, anglicized derivative 'maskilic') or *Lebenswelt*. Words like Haskalah, however, are left in the original since they have been accepted into the English language. The transliteration of Yiddish terms and titles is based on the format developed by the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research (I took the liberty, however, to capitalize the first letter at the beginning of a sentence and in the names of persons).