A revolution in Jewish life

THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH WORKERS' BUND

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by
Clive Gilbert
with a foreword
by Majer Bogdanski

a
Jewish
Socialist
pamphlet

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For my son Joel who I hope will carry on the fight

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Foreword

We are now at the threshold of the tenth decade since the founding of the Jewish Workers' Bund of Russia, Lithuania and Poland. At that time, Lithunia and Poland were part of the Russian Empire, ruled by a tyrannical, absolutist monarchy. This regime was cruel to all its citizens, but it was particularly cruel to the Jews who, as a result, suffered doubly, both as citizens and as Jews.

After centuries of the apathy and resignation which resulted from that double oppression, the Bund brought a revolution into the lives of the Jews. It told the 'pariahs among the pariahs' that they need be pariahs no more.

But the Bund was not simply a political party; it was a whole movement. This singled it out from the socialist parties of all other nations. Of course, like any other socialist party, it constantly had to wage the political struggle. But it also fell to the Bund to be the defender of the Yiddish language and, indeed, the whole Yiddish culture. No other nation has seen such bitter opposition to its own language by its own nationals. Yet we had to grapple with this anomaly day in and day out. Although both the Zionists and the Agudists (religious party) operated entirely in Yiddish, they opposed every development. The Zionists, with the exception of the tiny Left Poale Zion group, considered Yiddish a language which ought to be done away with. The Agudists were opposed to any secularism. Thus it fell to the Bund to create and maintain the Yiddish libraries and Yiddish schools where all subjects were taught in Yiddish. And the Bund stood alone, through its councillors in the town and *Kehila* (Jewish community) councils, in supporting subsidies for the Yiddish theatre.

Now, 42 years after the Holocaust in which most of the Bundists perished at the hands of the Nazis and, also, in no small measure, on Stalin's orders, it is, indeed, pleasing, to know that the present generation of Jews is still interested in the Bund.

In this pamphlet, Clive Gilbert presents the reader with a condensed but complete history of the Bund, from its beginnings right up to the present day. The Bundists of the pre-War generation will, indeed, be most grateful to him.

Great credit is due to the Jewish Socialists' Group for the respect with which they treat the Bund and for producing this pamphlet.

On the 90th anniversary of the Bund, I salute you, comrades of the Jewish Socialists' Group, with the greeting of the Bund's children's organisation, SKIF: *Khavershaft*! Friendship!

Majer Bogdanski

Introduction

In 1897, in a small house in Vilna, the General Union of Jewish Workers in Russia, Lithuania and Poland (the Bund) was founded. From then until 1939 it was a significant factor in the political and cultural life of the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe and also in the workers' movement in Russia and Poland.

In spite of its relative historical prominence, the Bund is conspicuous by its almost total absence from mainstream Jewish and socialist historical accounts. Today, Jewish communal life throughout the world is dominated by a hegemony whose major components are Zionism and conservatism. The history of the Bund and of large scale Jewish involvement in workers' struggles are a considerable embarrassment to Jewish establishments. Also, throughout much of the political left, at least among those sections advocating alternatives to Stalinism and Reformism, Leninist norms are taken for granted. The struggle of the Bund to maintain its autonomy is a reminder to the 'Leninist' left of an earlier debate about alternative methods of organising – a debate still continuing today.

Though the Bund continues to exist as an organisation with tiny groups of adherents scattered among the Jewish communities, its significance lies not in its severely restricted ability to intervene in politics, but in the legacy of its ideas and the lessons to be learnt from its history. The experience of the Bund constitutes an important chapter in Jewish history; its heroic age in tsarist Russia coincides with the most culturally and politically creative phase in the life of the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe. For the workers' movement, the Bund's experience addresses itself to vital issues: socialism and nationalism, socialism and culture, socialism and oppressed minorities and the nature of the revolutionary party.

The following account tells the story of the Bund and indicates the issues raised by that story. It is based on some secondary sources and other works translated from Yiddish. The life of the Bund in Poland between the World Wars is the less studied period and the sources are largely untranslated. The Bund's existence is very much bound up with the development of the Yiddish language, and an adequate treatment of the subject in English must await prodigious efforts in translation from Yiddish and Polish.

The experience of the Bund is an inspiring story of the struggle for emancipation of an oppressed working class minority, supremely conscious of its role in the fight to transform society. As such it demands inclusion in the annals of the international Labour Movement.

Russia in the 19th century

The Jewish community which gave birth to the Bund had the misfortune to find itself situated in tsarist Russia, described by Lenin as the prison-house of the nations. An epoch behind Western Europe in terms of political, social and economic development, Russian society contained elements of Western European culture existing side by side with feudal barbarism. The tsars held sway over vast territories stretching from Poland to the Pacific, numbering among their subjects the aristocrats and bourgeoisie of Moscow and St Petersburg, together with Siberian tribes living in near stone-age conditions.

For centuries, the overwhelming fact of life in Russia was the peasant economy. It was only in 1860, during the reign of the so-called Liberalising Tsar, Alexander II, that the serfs were emancipated. The challenge of the great powers of the West, manifested in the struggle with Britain and France in the Crimean War, gave some impetus to Russian attempts to industrialise during the second half of the 19th century.

Industrial growth was limited to the cities of European Russia and financed mainly by foreign investment (mostly British and French). The new Russian bourgeoisie that arose in the wake of industrial development was unable to exercise political influence in the state on anything like the scale of the bourgeoisie in Western Europe. It yearned for liberal reforms, perhaps even a constitutional monarchy, but lacked the political will or the strength to bring them about. The small liberal intelligentsia, which for the most part was recruited from the bourgeoisie, flirted with populism and terrorism in response to the all-pervading and sinister tutelage of the tsarist state. The small industrial proletariat, concentrated in the western cities, lived and worked in miserable conditions.

The inexorable decline of Russian feudalism, and the dislocation of society which accompanied it, meant that the tsarist state began to stagger under the weight of the contradictions contained within the social system that had sustained it.

It is against this backdrop that a number of interwoven dramas were enacted, involving what was then the largest Jewish community in the world, and the Russian Revolution.

The Jews in Russia

Until the latter half of the 18th century there had been virtually no Jews in Russia. Successive tsars had pursued a policy of exclusion of the Jews, partly resulting from a distant memory of the Judaising heresy which had influenced members of the royal family during a much earlier period. Stringent immigration controls were enforced to keep Jews out of the Russian Empire. This situation was dramatically transformed during the second half of the 18th century when the kingdom of Poland was partitioned by its stronger neighbours, with Russia receiving the lion's share of Polish territory. Thus the tsars acquired as their subjects over a million Jews who had lived under Polish rule for centuries.

Poland was very much a feudal country and the Jews fulfilled the same economic functions as had been their lot in Western Europe during the Medieval period, as agents of trade and finance in a peasant economy. As we shall see, though, a large section of the Jewish population had always been involved in very small scale domestic craft production. Polish antisemitism was largely a product of the peasantry's perception of the Jews as agents of oppression, since the feudal ruling class would often make use of the Jews as tax collectors or in other similar roles. Antisemitism in Russia was enforced by the hostility of the dominant Russian Orthodox Church, 'Great Russian Chauvinism' and the centralising tendencies of the tsarist state.

The Jews had lived mostly in small towns and villages maintaining their own religious and cultural institutions and speaking the Yiddish language. During the 19th century the development of industry in the Russian cities attracted them eastwards into European Russia proper and they began to be urbanised comparatively rapidly. The urbanisation process was

reinforced by government action. Alleging that the Jews were the cause of the peasantry's impoverishment and misery, and that in certain regions they had established an unhealthy dominance over rural life, the government of Tsar Nicholas I issued decrees designed to expel the Jews from the rural areas altogether.

Despite these attempted expulsions, Jews were not allowed to settle in whichever towns they chose. In 1835 they were restricted to the Pale of Settlement, which included the Ukraine, the provinces of White Russia, Lithuania and Poland. The reign of the liberal Tsar Alexander II saw these restrictions eased somewhat for the tiny Jewish haute bourgeoisie, for university graduates and for Jewish prostitutes; but for the Jewish masses they remained in force.

The hostility of the government was a constant threat to Jewish communities. The objective of the tsars' policy was the elimination of the Jews as a factor in national life; it was to be achieved by creating conditions in which, they believed, one third of the Jews would convert to Christianity, one third would emigrate, and one third would die. Systematic attempts were made to undermine Jewish culture and religion, mainly through the provision of government sponsored rabbinical schools which were intended to counter the influence of the Jews' own educational system and promote conversion. However the government's efforts proved unsucessful as most Jews remained loyal to their own cultural and religious institutions.

The Jewish working class

Traditionally, the bulk of the Jewish population had been involved in crafts as well as trade. By the 15th century in Poland there were Jewish glassmakers, furriers, painters, leadsmiths and goldsmiths. By the 18th century they were involved in more than 60 different crafts. By the mid-19th century, three quarters of the artisan class of the Pale were Jews and 25% of these worked in the clothing trade.[1] Thus the emergent Jewish proletariat was overwhelmingly a proletariat of artisans rather than factory workers.

This is how Karl Kautsky, the 'Pope' of German Marxism, described the conditions of the Jewish workers in 1901: 'If the Russian people suffer more than other peoples, if the Russian proletariat is exploited more than any other proletariat, there exists another class of workers who are still more oppressed, exploited and ill-treated than all the others; this pariah among pariahs is the Jewish proletariat in Russia'.[2]

In a situation where Russian capitalism was generally weak, Jewish capitalism was even weaker. Profits were marginal and capital accumulation low. Businesses were very small, usually employing no more than two or three workers, while the difference in standard of living between boss and workers was often minimal. Since the 16th century both masters and workers had been organised in craft guilds known in Yiddish as *Khevra Baaley Melokhe* (literally, Society of Craftsmen), the aims of which were to ensure the master a decent livelihood and to cater for the social and religious needs of the artisan. Masters and workers usually prayed and studied religious texts together in a synagogue founded by the guild. The system was entirely paternalistic and there were many complaints from workers that the masters abused them with words and blows.

After he had had contact with Jewish workers, Felix Kon, an early Polish socialist, claimed that there was little potential to develop class

consciousness among them since Jewish workers all seemed to aspire to be bosses one day. However, the expansion of Russian industry rendered this situation anachronistic. In order to compete, the masters were forced to hire more workers. Meanwhile the growth of competition meant that it became more difficult for small shops to survive so workers were more reluctant to leave and open their own workshops. As a result, Jewish artisans succumbed to gradual proletarianisation. As early as the 1820s there is evidence of unprecedented feuds between Jewish masters and their workers which actually came to blows. In 1841, in the cities of Minsk and Bialystock, groups of Jewish tailors broke away from the craft guilds to form their own societies from which the bosses were excluded. These early indications of embryonic class consciousness among the Jewish workers in Russia were an important factor in the later, more rapid, growth of proletarian class consciousness among the Jews when compared to other national groups in the empire.

An important element in the tsarist campaign to convert the Jews to Christianity was the compulsory recruitment of Jewish boys at the age of 10 or 12 into the army. Military service might last for 25 years or more and, acutely conscious that they were unlikley to see their sons again, families of the draftees would say the prayer for the dead for those taken. Jewish communal leaders, always the wealthier members of the community, who were responsible for providing the authorities with fixed numbers of draftees, would organise press gangs (called in Yiddish *khappers*), who would concentrate on snatching the children of the poor. This further increased hostility to the rich and served to widen the class divisions within the Jewish communities.

The conditions of the Jewish workers were obscene. When the tsarist government reluctantly began to pass legislation designed to ensure that factory workers were sufficiently healthy to produce and reproduce, the inspectors appointed never bothered to enter the dark and dingy Jewish shops. So even the minimal protection operating in Russian workplaces was unavailable to the Jew. The average Jewish workday was 16-18 hours long; wages were low; bosses paid irregularly and in most trades piecework was the rule. For most Jewish workers, only seasonal employment was available. They might do fairly well in a busy period but if the season went slack, they might have to endure long periods of unemployment.

The living conditions of the Jewish workers were no better. An early Jewish Socialist, Aaron Lieberman said that the Jews of the Pale lived in 'the semi-darkness of cellars and similar hovels that had wet walls and floors and were crammed together in an oppressive, stupefying atmospnere.'

With the expanson ot Russian capitalism later in the century, some Jews began to obtain work in the new factories. At first employment opportunities were limited to light consumer industries such as clothing and cigarette and cigar manufacture. This was partly due to the antisemitism of the Russian workers who were intent on keeping the more lucrative jobs in heavy industry as their monopoly. But it was also because employers, both Jewish and gentile, were reluctant to hire Jewish workers who, for the most part, would not work on the Sabbath. Young Jewish women began to get work in the factories, especially cigarette and hosiery manufacture, and this had profound implications for traditional Jewish family life.

So towards the end of the century, most Jewish workers were artisans in fairly small shops employing, at the most, 20-25 workers, while a

growing number were employed in factories producing light consumer goods. In Bialystock, which rapidly became a major centre for the textile industry, considerable numbers of Jews worked for larger firms employing hundreds of workers.[3]

The crisis of 1881

In 1881 Tsar Alexander II was assassinated by militants of *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will), a revolutionary populist organisation. The assassination sent a series of shockwaves through Russian society and ushered in a period of reaction, in contrast to the limited 'liberalisation' fostered during Alexander's reign. Among the assassins was a young Jewish seamstress named Hessia Helfman who was executed along with her other comrades who had taken part in the killing. Following the executions, a wave of pogroms swept through the southern part of the Pale, and hundreds of Jews died and thousands lost their homes. The riots lasted for almost a year and constituted the most serious popular anti-Jewish disturbances since the great massacres of 1648-9.

The government branded anarchists and socialists with responsibility for instigating the pogroms, but the Jewish population was convinced of the government's guilt. This conviction was confirmed by the reluctance of the police or the army to intervene and halt the violence. Further, the government reinforced already existing discriminatory anti-Jewish legislation, more residential restrictions on the Jews of the Pale forbidding Jews to work on Sunday. These laws, passed at a time of rapid population increase, and given that Jews were reluctant to work on Saturday, meant further economic pressure on the already hard pressed Jewish workers.

One of the important effects of the crisis among the Jewish masses was a hysterical attempt by tens of thousands of Jewish families to leave the country. In a totally unplanned and unorganised manner, streams of Jewish refugees used all means, legal and otherwise, to cross the western frontier, as they sought frantically to get to Western Europe and the United States. This marked the real beginning of the great migration that was to take over a million Jews to the United States by 1914.

Emigration, as well as providing an escape route from the pogroms and the miserable conditions of the Pale, also offered a solution to the deeper social crisis of Russian Jewry. The growth of capitalism in Russia had undermined the traditional role of a large section of the Jewish population in pre-capitalist society as agents of trade and finance in a peasant economy. As a result there were no longer any automatic or secure positions for Jews, as a group, to occupy almost exclusively. Henceforth, the Jewish aspirant to bourgeois status would face unequal competition from the emergent Russian bourgeoisie. So many Jews sought economic opportunities in what they believed to be the more secure and prosperous west.

The Jewish intelligentsia

The 1881 crisis marked a major turning point for the Jewish intelligentsia. The Jewish bourgeoisie managed to send a very restricted number of their children to Russian schools and universities. As a result there developed among the Jews of Russia a small group of Russified intellectuals, originally inspired by the Jewish enlightenment movement (*Haskalah*) which had

begun in Germany a century earlier and was an attempt to grapple seriously with modern secular ideas. The Jewish intellectuals, for the most part, aspired to complete integration into Russian society. They believed that the process initiated by the French and American revolutions must sooner or later penetrate eastwards and that what lay in store for the Jews and other minorities of the Russian Empire were equal rights and political emancipation. This tiny, but fairly influential, intellectual elite, delighted by the prospect of its own assimilation into Russian society, felt alienated from the Yiddish speaking masses whose culture it had abandoned and whose language it dismissed as *zhargon*.

Politically, a number of the intellectuals were very much influenced by the radical ideas which inspired hatred of the tsarist regime. Most radical students and intellectuals, including the Jews among them, were attracted to Russian Populism. They believed that the peasantry were a potential revolutionary force capable of refashioning society in the image of the Russian village commune. The relatively small size of the industrial proletariat did not impress them; still less did they conceive of the Jews as being able to contribute to the revolution, since there were few, if any, Jewish peasants. The Jewish intellectuals fell in love with Rusian literature and culture while rejecting the culture from which they sprang — the culture of the *shtetl*, the little Jewish town — which for them was characterised by intense parochialism and religious obscurantism.

Vladimir Jochelson, later to become a leading figure in the Bund, wrote: 'We maintained a negative attitude towards the Jewish religion as to all religions. The jargon (Yiddish) we considered to be an artificial language and Hebrew a dead language of interest only to scholars. National beliefs, tradition and language in general did not seem valuable to us from the common standpoint of humanity. But we were sincere assimilationists and it was to the Russian enlightenment that we looked for salvation for Jews.

'One must also confess that Russian literature, which implanted in us love of culture and the Russian people, also to some degree implanted in us the conception that Jews wre not a people but a parasitic class. Such views were not rarely expressed also by radical Russian writers and that, it seems to me, was one of the causes of our defection.'[4]

One of the results of the crisis of 1881 was that severe restrictions were imposed on the entry of Jewish students into the universities, and this shattered the hopes of the Jewish intellectuals for emancipation. The harsh reality confronting them now was the choice between emigration or supporting and contributing to the revolutionary transformation of society. Jewish intellectuals had been active in revolutionary movements before 1881 but the numbers increased dramatically after the assassination of Alexander II and the upheavals it sparked off.

These years also saw the emergence of Marxism as a serious rival to Populism as the ideology of the Russian revolution. Many Jewish intellectuals were attracted to Marxism and its emphasis on the crucial role of the proletariat rather than the peasantry, as agents of revolutionary change. The fact that revolutionaries of the stature of Georgi Plekhanov ('the father of Russian Marxism') and Vera Zasulich became leading Marxists meant that many young radicals, Jews included, switched their allegiance from Populism to Marxism.

The workers begin to organise

If the Jewish intellectuals were conscious of the existence of the Jewish workers at all, they must have conceived of them as beaten, starved and pathetic figures, incapable of independent initiative. During the 1870s and 1880s this image underwent a considerable transformation as the Jewish working class began to display signs of class combativity. In 1871 there were riots and hunger strikes in the Vilna cigarette factories, while the textile factories of Bialystock were hit by a major wave of strikes organised by Jewish workers. These were, in fact, the first large strikes in the Russian empire. One Bialystock worker recalled: 'In these quiet, still times when Jewish workers throughout Russia were sound asleep, dreaming of the Messiah and the world to come, we Bialystock workers were already in battle, beating up the bosses, breaking looms, striking, struggling.'[5]

One particularly notable strike, involving several hundred Jewish weavers, took place in Bialystock in 1882.[6]

The workers realised that their spontaneous efforts to better their conditions required organisational support, and they began to replace the old craft guilds with embryonic trade unions, known in Yiddish as *kasses*, which started out as mutual aid societies designed to support workers' families during strikes. In response to escalating confrontation with the bosses, these rapidly developed into fighting organisations: *kamfkasses*.

The wave of strikes brought the existence of the Jewish workers to the notice of the Jewish intellectuals. Confined to the Pale, and cut off from the Russian peasantry and workers by an almost impenetrable wall of anti-semitism, they began to turn their attention to the Jewish workers, almost for the want of anything better to do.

The Workers' Circles

Revolutionary intellectuals at that time concentrated much of their activity on bringing together circles of motivated workers for educational purposes. The Jewish intellectuals adopted a similar model for their political work. The pioneer of the earliest Jewish workers' circles was Aaron Lieberman who was born into a religious family but nevertheless influenced by the *haskalah*. Lieberman was not a Marxist, but he said that Marx had been brought up 'In the spirit of our people'. In Vilna in the early 1870s he gathered together a small circle of Jewish workers and students to read illegal literature and discuss socialist ideas. Lieberman translated some socialist texts into Hebrew but not into Yiddish, which he never considered a language of scholarship. The circle was broken up by the police and Lieberman fled to Berlin and later to London where, in 1876, he founded the Hebrew Socialist Union.

Lieberman's significance for the Jewish labour movement lies in the Vilna workers' circle he founded, which offered a model to other intellectuals intending to work among the Jewish masses. Throughout the Pale young intellectuals began to teach small groups of Jewish workers and religious students Russian language, natural science, economics and the basic concepts of socialism. The key to instruction was the Russian language, since there was no socialist literature in Yiddish. The intention was to build small groups of educated worker militants who would in turn pass on their knowledge to other workers and thus contribute to the building of revolutionary class consciousness.

The intellectuals were totally unprepared for the response. The workers' demands for books became insatiable and the range of subjects studied widened to include even the English Parliament and trade unions. The workers treated the young teachers with a respect formerly reserved for Rabbis. One worker recalled: 'I remember as if it were today with what a remarkable feeling of awe and fear I, and other students, sat on a wooden bench near a large brick oven that was hardly warm. Opposite us, at a table, sat a young man of 27 or 28, the teacher. His knowledge was unlimited. I believed that were there only a few more like him, we could already begin the revolution. I returned home as if a new soul had entered me.'[7]

In Vilna, the most important centre of such activities, the first Jewish Social Democratic Workers' Group was founded in 1889 out of a number of small educational circles. During the early 1890s other such small Marxist groups arose among Jewish workers in Bialystock, Minsk and Warsaw.

However, problems with the circles raised widespread doubts among the revolutionary intelligentsia. Some of the workers who studied in the circles became obsessed with the education they had received which they regarded as having set them apart from the masses. They began to speak in a mixture of Russian and Yiddish and to look with some contempt on their fellow Jews who had not shared the experience. They saw education as a means of personal advancement and were reluctant to share their knowledge. Thus many intellectuals became concerned that the circles were not doing the job for which they were intended. Nevertheless, the great advantage of the circles lay in the numbers of workers they brought into contact with socialist ideas.

'On Agitation'

In response to these promising developments among the Jewish workers voices started calling for mass agitation. In 1893, a young Jewish revolutionary intellectual, Arkady Kremer, published a pamphlet entitled *On Agitation*. Written in Russian, Kremer's pamphlet was addressed to the Russian revolutionary movement as a whole, though Kremer himself had been active almost exclusively among Jewish workers, and he was eventually to become one of the leaders of the Bund. Kremer argued that revolutionaries should now turn to agitation among the masses on the basis of their everyday economic concerns, and this would eventually lead, through a process of escalating confrontation, to the workers drawing the correct revolutionary political conclusions. Thus the working class would gradually find itself in direct confrontation with the bourgeoisie and the tsarist state. Initially, the pamphlet's argument was well received since it suggested a method of transcending the old circles. Later, revolutionary leaders such as Lenin were to condemn Kremer's approach as 'economism' and claim that the working class could never move beyond trade union demands and develop socialist consciousness without the intervention of the revolutionary intelligentsia and, ultimately, the revolutionary party.

For the Jewish socialists of the Pale, the new strategy demanded a change in emphasis, from encouraging the learning of Russian to mass propaganda in the language of the Jewish masses – Yiddish. The majority of the Jewish intellectuals were ignorant of Yiddish, so they could not implement the strategy themselves. Instead they were obliged to recruit

among working class Jewish youth who were alienated from religion but nevertheless steeped in the culture and folklore of the Jewish masses, and totally at home with the Yiddish language. These 'half intellectuals' as they came to be known, ensured that the close links between the Jewish socialist intelligentsia and the Jewish working class were maintained.

The changes urged in Kremer's pamphlet also reflected important growth in trade union organisation among Jewish workers throughout the Pale. Jewish printers, tailors, carpenters, brush makers, locksmiths and cigarette makers found themselves in conflict with their bosses and made prodigious efforts to build trade unions.

Some of the workers who had been educated in the circles accused the teachers of abandoning them and betraying socialism by their new policies of mass agitation. They argued that an ignorant proletariat could never become revolutionary. It is probable, however, that they resented the loss of special status which the new orientation to the masses meant for them.

The great strides being made in the building of a Jewish labour movement were matched by very significant and progressive developments in Yiddish culture especially in literature. Great literary and socialist classics were translated into Yiddish for the workers, and Yiddish writers, novelists and dramatists emerged from the movement. Exiled Jewish socialists began to publish socialist newspapers in Yiddish and smuggle them into Russia. Among such newspapers were *Nayes fun Russland* (News from Russia), *Der Yiddisher Arbayter* (The Jewish Worker) and *Di Arbayter Shtimme* (The Workers' Voice), which was eventually to become the official newspaper of the Bund. The workers' insatiable thirst for culture, and the importance attached within the *kasse* or circle to the illegal library, contributed to the identification of the virtual explosion that was taking place in Yiddish culture with the growth of the labour movement.

Esther Frumkin, a prominent revolutionary intellectual, captured the atmosphere of the period beautifully: 'I see them now, crate makers, soap workers, sugar workers, those among whom I led a circle. Pale, thin, red-eyed, beaten, terribly tired. They would gather late in the evening. We would sit until one in the morning in a stuffy little room with only a little gas lamp burning. Often little children would be sleeping in the same room, and the women of the house would walk around listening for the police. The girls would listen to the leaders' talk and would ask questions, completely forgetting the dangers, that it would take three quarters of an hour to get home wrapped in the cold torn remnant of a coat in the mud and deep snow; they would have to knock on the door and bear a flood of insults and curses from parents; that at home there might not be a piece of bread left and one would have to go to sleep hungry. . .and then in a few hours arise and run to work. With what rapt attention they listened to the talks on cultural history, on surplus value. . .wages, life in other lands. What joy would light their eyes when the circle leader produced a new edition of *Yiddisher Arbayter* or *Arbayter Shtimme*, or even a pamphlet. How many tragedies young workers would suffer at home if it became known they were running around with the brother and sisters of the movement, that they were reading forbidden books – how many insults, blows, tears! It did not help. "It attracts them like magnets!" The mothers wailed to each other.'[8]

The founding of the Bund and the early years

In a small house in Vilna, on 7 October 1897, thirteen Jewish workers' delegates from the cities of the Pale attended a meeting. While lookouts anxiously kept an eye out for the police, the meeting declared the formation of the General Union of Jewish workers in Lithuania, Poland and Russia — the Bund. The first mass socialist organisation in the Russian empire was born.

Eight of the delegates were workers, five were intellectuals. The intellectuals were not entirely happy with this development. Their entire purpose in working among the Jewish masses had been to prepare themselves for integration into the future Russian party, the formation of which was then being discussed among Russian revolutionaries. The existence of a Jewish workers' party was something they had not intended, and with which they were not entirely comfortable. However, their activity among the Jewish workers led the intellectuals to consider seriously the national oppression of the Jews in Russia and eventually forced the national question on to the agenda of the Bund.

The view prevailing in European socialist and marxist circles was that the Jews, though perhaps a nation under feudalism, were now merely a caste, doomed to disappear by the deepening of capitalist social relations. The 'Jewish Question' was perceived in terms of the small 'emancipated' Jewish communities of Western Europe rather than the oppressed Jewish masses of the Russian empire. The marxist attitude was itself a legacy of the 'emancipation' heralded by the liberal ideology of the French revolution. a century before, the slogan adopted by the enlightened leaders of revolutionary France had been 'to the Jew as an individual, everything; to the Jews as a people, nothing!'

The demand for Jewish national rights was seen by European Marxists as a reactionary diversion from the class struggle. Marxism had not yet come to grips with the phenomenon of national liberation struggles, let alone with the fact that there exist within capitalist society groups whose oppression stems from historical sources other than capitalism itself. Some socialists went so far as to welcome antisemitic pogroms as a mass phenomenon which would somehow automatically impel the masses in a general anti-capitalist direction. Even the sophisticated Austro Marxists, Adler and Bauer, whose experience of living in the multi-national Austro-Hungarian Empire led them to devise a theory of 'national cultural autonomy' for national minorities, denied that this applied to the Jews. Enlightened socialist opinion was unanimous in believing assimilation to be the only progressive solution to the Jewish question.

The founding of the Bund marked the beginning of a conscious refusal by the Jewish workers to accept the extinction of their demands for national and cultural freedom. Julius Martov (originally active in the Jewish labour movement before becoming a leading Menshevik) had already described this development: 'Life forced us to change our tactics. The primary reason was that whilst all our hopes were tied up with the general Russian movement, we at the same time, although barely conscious of it, raised the Jewish movement to a level the Russian movement had not yet attained. . . The Jewish proletariat cannot rely solely on the Russian or Polish proletariat. It is always conceivable that non-Jewish proletarian leaders may be willing or obliged to make concessions at the expense of the Jews. Accordingly, the Jewish proletariat must be prepared to fight as

an organised Jewish group alongside the other groups, for economic, civic and political liberty. A working class that is content with the lot of an inferior nation will not rise up against the lot of an inferior class. The national passivity of the Jewish masses, therefore, is also a bar to the growth of their class consciousness. The growth of national and class consciousness must go hand in hand.'[9]

The Bund's definition of Russian Jewry as a nation bore no relation to Zionist or religious concepts of Jewish nationality which were grounded in idealist or mystical interpretations of Jewish history. The Bundist view was based on an analysis of the material reality of Jewish existence in Russia. The millions of Jews of the Pale of Settlement spoke their own language, maintained their own culture and religion and lived, for the most part, in territorially concentrated communities. Statistics for the ethnic composition of 12 major cities of the Pale in 1897 reveal that the Jews constituted over 50% of the population in eight of them, and over 40% in the other four.[10] The Jews of Russia thus constituted a clearly definable national group, whose national consciousness had been further intensified by anti-semitism, government-inspired pogroms and discriminatory legislation.

The leaders of the Bund never intended to limit themselves to the formation of an autonomous Jewish workers' organisation. Since the start of his revolutionary activities, Arkady Kremer, for example, had been vitally concerned to form an all-Russian socialist party. The Bundist leaders saw the establishment of a Jewish social-democratic organisation as an important step along this road – a particularly opportune step since the Jewish workers were proving themselves the most class conscious workers in the empire and the most willing to respond positively to socialist propaganda.

It was largely the Bund's organisational efforts which led to the founding congress of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDRP) in Minsk in 1898. The congress was attended by three delegates from the Bund and six Russians. The only worker present was a member of the Bund delegation. At this stage the Bund had already recruited many workers, while the infant Russian party consisted of a few hundred intellectuals.

The Bund immediately made its already active printing presses, as well as resources and expertise available to the Russian party, and submitted itself to the latter's authority, while having its autonomous status confirmed. The RSDRP grew, and by the time of the 1905 revolution it had about 9,000 members. At that time, the Bund's membership was about 30,000.[11]

The Bund recruited so many people in such a short time by rooting itself firmly in the consciousness of the Jewish working class, from whom it won a loyalty much deeper than that normally given to political parties. The Bund came to identify unreservedly with the aspirations of the Jewish workers for national and cultural rights as well as for social justice. It took the lead in organising self-defence squads against the pogroms, in offering practical support to workers in struggle and in openly challenging clerical and bourgeois reaction within the Jewish community.

The activity of the Bund in the years following its foundation was phenomenal. The paper of the movement, *Di Arbayter Shtimme*, was published regularly in Russia, and local branches began to publish their own political journals in Yiddish; the journal of Vilna branch was called *Klasnkamf* (Class Struggle). Whole trade unions declared their affiliation to the Bund, like the large Jewish bristle-makers union which published the political journal *Der Veker* (The Awakener). Jewish socialist exiles in

Geneva set up their own printing press and, together with others all over Europe, formed a foreign committee of the Bund. Between 1897 and 1900, apart from helping to distribute the literature of other Russian Social Democratic groups, the Bund itself published 22 original pamphlets and distributed 52,000 copies of them, many smuggled in from abroad. All this, of course, was done in the face of constant police harassment and regular arrests.

The rapid growth of the Bund during this period coincided, and was intimately bound up, with a considerable increase in the number of strikes by Jewish workers. Some strikes were unprecedentedly large, such as that of 800 women workers at Shereshevsky's cigarette factory in Grodno. When strikes broke out in a particular town or industry, the Bund would strain its resources to organise solidarity throughout the Pale and carry out socialist agitation in connection with the industrial action.

The progress of the Bund was not without its setbacks. Between 1897 and 1904, 7,000 Bundists were arrested by the tsarist police. Indeed, soon after the birth of the movement, almost the entire central committee found itself enjoying the Tsar's hospitality in prison. However, such was the stability of the organisation that its functions were hardly impaired. The impact of the Bund in Russian society was significant enough for the government to regard it as deadly serious. Apart from resorting to direct repression, the government attempted to infiltrate the movement with informers, while at the inspiration of Zubatov, head of the Moscow *Okhrana* (tsarist secret police), the government allowed and encouraged the formation of legal, non-political Jewish trade unions. These *Zubatovite* unions, it was intended, would concentrate exclusively on economic demands and thereby divert the workers from revolutionary politics. The Bund was able to overcome the threat and the authorities, uneasy at the thought of encouraging the formation of any trade unions, political or not, eventually dropped Zubatov's ideas.

What also characterised the membership of the Bund during this period of amazing growth and hectic activity was that political principles spilled over into personal life. The historian Nora Levin described the atmosphere among young branch members: 'Comradeship in the movement helped compensate for the loss of family affection and offered members a new set of values, a new morality, a new way to live. Not only did this new life have its own unique institutions – the *kasse*, the circle, the illegal library, the special celebrations – it also expected those who joined this new world to become different from what they had been, to give up old habits and norms of personal behaviour. "Honourable behaviour" was stressed, particularly in relations between the sexes. . .There was a keen desire to translate a general world view into specific norms of personal conduct, to live one's personal life as part of the redemptive process.'[12]

In areas where the Bund was strong, its membership began to play a crucial role in Jewish communal life. The people began to bring their disputes to the local branch, as if to a court of law or to a Rabbi. The Rabbis themselves were, for the most part, hostile to this atheist and rebellious movement which posed such a direct threat to their traditional authority. Moreover, the Rabbis were accustomed to Jewish powerlessness and passivity in the face of oppression, and were terrified that the Bundists, with their strikes and revolutionary assertiveness, were attracting too much attention to the Jews and that they would all suffer for it.

The first years of the new century witnessed a massive upsurge in worker

and student unrest throughout Russia. Acts of repression by the government provoked terrorist reprisals by the workers. The Fourth Congress of the Bund repudiated terrorism as a diversion from the main task of the Social Democrats which was to build a mass revolutionary organisation capable of seizing power and transforming society. However in 1902 the new governor of Vilna, Victor von Wahl, ordered his troops to disperse the Bund's May Day celebrations and on the following day ordered the public whipping of six Polish and Jewish workers.

In response, on 18 May, Hirsh Lekert, a Jewish shoemaker, fired two shots at von Wahl, slightly wounding him. Lekert was immediately arrested and hanged ten days later. Despite its disapproval of terrorism the Bund had acquired a hero whom it never repudiated, despite his adventurist act. However, the problem of defending the Jewish communities against large scale violence was posed most acutely by the Kishinev pogrom in 1903. This notorious outrage, in which many Jews were cruelly murdered and mutilated and hundreds of homes were destroyed, provoked international condemnation.

The Bund had first formed small local self defence squads in 1902, but after Kishinev, efforts were made to substantially expand them. In some towns, like Dvinsk, as many as 200 Bundists armed themselves with knives, clubs, axes and revolvers in order to forestall hate-crazed mobs of antisemites intent on murder. In other places the police and the army had to be called out to protect the mob from the Bundists. By 1905 the Bund was able to field an armed force consisting of 10,000 of its members. Though its membership was 30,000, the Bund's role in defending Jewish communities meant that its influence became far more widespread among Jews of all classes. There were strikes where the mere suggestion that the Bund might become involved resulted in the boss immediately conceding to the workers' demands.

The 1905 revolution

In 1904 Russia went to war with Japan. The war exposed the incompetence of the tsarist regime and demonstrated its inability to wage a successful war against even a semi-industrialised enemy. The pressure on society caused by the war, reinforced by the rising tide of working class militancy, the longstanding disaffection of the peasantry and national animosities resulted in the 1905 revolution. The RSDRP, with its small membership had already split into Bolshevik and Menshevik sections, both of which, by then, were hostile to the Bund. Moreover, its leaders were mostly living in exile and, in consequence, the party was totally unprepared for the convulsions that shook Russian society.

The Bund, on the other hand, had been carrying out agitation among Jewish soldiers and threw itself into the revolution with tremendous energy. The Bund organised thousands of Jewish workers in very large demonstrations and strikes throughout the Pale. Its battle squads seized control of towns and villages. A leaflet, one of thousands that poured from the Bundist presses during the year, captured the hopes of the time: 'The great day has come; the revolution has come. Comrades in all towns, arm yourselves. Let every street become a battlefield. Break into the arsenals. Seize rifles and revolvers.'

Many Russian revolutionaries, despite their serious differences with the Bund, expressed their admiration for the part it played in the aborted

revolution. The year 1905 marked the zenith of the Bund's existence in Russia. The period of reaction which ensued was one of decline and difficulty for the revolutionary movement as a whole. Until 1905 the Bund was the strongest revolutionary workers' organisation in Russia; indeed, it was acknowledged almost as the senior partner by the RSDRP at least until 1903, when Russian Marxism was to be transformed by Lenin.

The Bund and the Zionists

The year that the Bund was born, 1897, was also the year of the first congress of the Zionist movement in Basle. The Zionists were to emerge as the Bund's most serious ideological opponents within the Jewish community, and the struggle between them was often conducted with great bitterness and hostility. Initially, the Zionists' recruits were almost exclusively limited to Jewish bosses, attracted by what must have seemed a novel means of expressing their Jewish identity which would not get them into trouble with the authorities and might serve to wean the Jewish masses from socialism. While this situation existed, class struggle often counterposed Bundist workers to zionist bosses.

Theodor Herzl, an assimilated Viennese Jewish journalist, normally regarded as the founder of political Zionism, was familiar with the existence of the Bund. Several times during 1903 Herzl met with the Tsar's minister, von Plehve, a notorious antisemite and advocate of total suppression of the workers' movement. Herzl's aim was to secure the Tsar's support for a Jewish charter for Palestine, while von Plehve was attracted by the idea of ridding Russia of the troublesome Jews. Soon afterwards Herzl met with Chaim Zhitlovsky, a Jewish member of the Social Revolutionary party, whose account of the meeting displays evidence of Herzl's naivety and an informed outsider's view of the Bund's reaction to Zionism:

'The first question Herzl asked me was: "Do I have the honour of speaking to the leader of the Bund?" "No," I replied. "I do not belong to the Bund." Both of us were taken aback for a moment but Herzl quickly recovered. "Never mind, you are after all the leader of the Jewish revolutionists?" "No, not that either. I do not belong to any Jewish party at all. I belong to the Social Revolutionary party, but I am a Jew and the interests of our people are dear to me." Again both of us were taken aback. "But you can bring me together with the Bund?" asked Herzl . . . "Most certainly," I said. "But first I must know what is involved." We sat down and in a dry, businesslike tone, Herzl proffered the following information. "I have just come from Plehve. I have his solemn binding promise that in 15 years at the maximum he will effectuate for us a binding charter for Palestine. But this is tied to one condition – the Jewish revolutionists must cease their struggle against the Russian government. If in 15 years from the time of the agreement von Plehve does not effectuate the charter they become free." He stopped speaking. I felt sick at heart. It required the greatest effort of will on my part to overcome the wave of cold suspicion that engulfed me and to hear him out calmly with a clear head. "Do you wish to help me in this?" said Herzl, peering directly at me. I replied that I must positively reject the mission. I had to explain to him the total hopelessness of such a step. "Even if the Jewish revolutionists were to believe that Palestine was an answer to the Jewish question and that von Plehve could effectuate a charter, they would still be incapable on their part of betraying the interests of their struggle because of a side issue, an

issue foreign to them. Even the Bund, which is certainly permeated with concern for Jewish needs and interests, will under no circumstances accept von Plehve's proposal. We are not Zionists and do not believe that Zionism is able to resolve our problem. To transfer the Jewish people from Russian to Palestine is in our eyes a utopia, and for the sake of a utopia we will not renounce the path of revolutionary struggle against the Russian government, which will also lead to the freedom of the Jewish people."[13]

The Bund was uncompromising and irreconcilable in its opposition to the bourgeois Zionists and their fantasies of doing deals with antisemitic regimes. The socialist Zionists, however, presented a problem of a different order. Although they were never anything like the force that the Bund was, the socialist Zionists attracted sizeable number of Jewish workers, particularly after the Kishinev pogrom. Several parties were formed, the most famous being Ber Borokhov's *Poale Zion*. Another Party which was, in fact, an alliance between Zionists and 'territorialists' (those who did not look to Palestine as the site of the proposed Jewish homeland), was called the United Jewish Socialist Workers' Party.

Ber Borokhov, the major theoritician of socialist Zionism, argued that the Jewish working class in Russian could never develop a truely revolutionary consiciousness because it was largely a class composed of artisans; and that the abnormal circumstances of Jewish life in the diaspora distorted the class struggle and rendered the development of a genuine Jewish proletariat impossible.

Especially after the Kishinev pogrom, the socialist Zionists were unable to ignore the immediate oppression of the Jewish working class in Russia, though there were differences among them as to how much energy they were prepared to spend on fighting for Jewish rights in the diaspora. Despite being prepared to co-operate with the socialist Zionists in strikes and self defence, the Bund regarded the Zionists, socialist or otherwise, hopelessly utopian and thoroughly corrupted by mystical notions of nationalism. The Zionists' tended to prioritise nationalism over socialism, which the Bund, always loyal to Marxism and internationalism, was never prepared to do, so the gulf between them was unbridgeable. Nevertheless, the rise of Zionism and the formation of Jewish bourgeois liberal civil rights groups around such figures as the Jewish historian Simon Dubnow, meant that the Bund was forced to consider the national oppression of the Jewish masses ever more seriously.

The struggle with Lenin

The other major ideological conflict which dominated the history of the Bund in Russia, and as far as the Bundists were concerned, was of much more consequence than the clash with the Zionists, was its dispute with the RSDRP and the two tendencies into which it eventually split, the Bolsheviks and the Menshiviks. The conflict was to erupt at the second congress of the RSDRP held in Brussels and London in 1903.

All historical accounts of the Russian revolutionary movement, whatever their ideological bias, emphasise the importance of the 1903 congress. It was there that Lenin took perhaps the most vital step towards the formation of the vanguard party of the revolution. The congress was momentous for the Bund too. In setting the scene for the great Bolshevik-Menshevik split, historians usually allude briefly to the clash with the Bund as if it were an appetiser preceding the main dish. But, an examination of

the nature of this clash, all to readily described as secondary, reveals issues of vital importance to the workers' movement.

The factors that precipitated the conflict were varied and complex. It may have been embarrassing for the Russian Marxists to have to suffer the existence of a junior partner determined to preserve its autonomy, especially when this particular junior partner had been founded before their own party and continued to enjoy a larger membership and greater prestige. Furthermore, they may have found it difficult to accept the need for the Bund's existence while some of their respected comrades, like Trotsky and Zinoviev, themselves Jewish, though assimilated, were unaquainted with, or contemptuous of, the culture of the Jewish masses. Moreover, across almost the entire spectrum of Marxist thought, hardly a voice was raised in defence of the need of Jewish workers for their own autonomous organisation.

For Lenin, whose personality dominated the preceedings, the congress marked a crucial turning point in the building of the revolutionary party. Lenin saw succuss in imposing his will on the party as vital to the future of the revolution. If the RSDRP was to function underground, as it had to in the repressive tsarist state, Lenin saw no alternative to a tightly disciplined vanguard party composed of dedicated professional revolutionaries working within an almost military structure. At this stage there could be no room for autonomous or semi-autonomous sections, especially not for the Jews, whose right to any kind of independent status Marxists rejected.

Lenin, influenced by Plekhanov who had said that Bundists were 'Zionists with sea sickness', engaged in a bitter polemical exchange with Bundist leaders in which he accused them of capitulating to the Zionists and 'clerical chauvinists' in promoting the idea that there existed a Jewish national culture. Lenin and others further resented the claim of the Bund to exlusive representation of Jewish workers within the party. They wished the party to organise the workers on a regional basis, irrespective of nationality, while the Bund had begun to recruit Jewish workers in regions where RSDRP branches already existed.

Although at the time of the congress the Bund was much larger than the Russian party it was allowed only five delegates. Lenin and the *Iskra* (*Iskra* was the theoretical journal of the RSDRP) group had prepared well for the proceedings, ensuring themselves the maximum advantage. Among the Bundist delegates was the Jewish intellectual, Vladimir Medem, who had been a major influence in the fight against Zionism and who was now to engage in a bitter struggle with Lenin in order to maintain the Bund's independence.

The Russians, including Lenin and the Jews, Martov and Trotsky, demanded that the autonomy granted to the Bund at the first RSDRP congress in 1898 be revoked. They argued that the Bund should become merely an agency of the party, and that its primary function would be to communicate party decisions to the Jewish workers in Yiddish, rather than being an autonomous organisation with special responsibility for work among the Jewish proletariat. The Bundists were always prepared to make concessions, but their ideas concerning the struggle for Jewish national rights and the nature of the revolutionary party dictated that the Bund's independence, albeit as a junior ally of the RSDRP, be defended at all costs.

The Bund never came close to demanding that the future socialist government of Russia establish a Jewish state or designate a special territory for the Jews of Russia. According to the Bund, the implementation of

national cultural autonomy would mean that the Jewish people would enjoy self-determination within the Russian socialist state to the extent that they exercised unhindered control of their own cultural and educational institutions.

Medem, who emerged as the Bund's main theoritician on the national question, argued that national conflicts arose essentially in the area of culture, and that there were no inherent reasons for economic and political conflicts between nations. According to Medem, solutions to questions of culture needed to be found separately, thus freeing the arena for the development of class consciousness and full solidarity between the workers scattered among the different national groups throughout the empire.

The Bund's contention that national cultural autonomy should apply to the Jews and all other national minorities had profound implications for its conception of the structure of the revolutionary party, and it was this Lenin feared most. If an oppressed national group was not allowed to develop a consciousness enabling it to struggle against national oppression, it could not develop class consciousness nor make any meaningful contribution to the social revolution. Thus, in order to become an effective and consistently democratic revolutionary force, the Russian party had to be organised in a way that gave it the capacity to learn from the experiences of oppressed nationalities and committed it to the fulfilment of demands for national rights. The Bund therefore concluded that the party ought to be constituted as a federal alliance of all the autonomous socialist organisations in the empire.

Lenin secured the support of others within the party who, though they may have sympathised with the concept of national cultural autonomy, denied that it was applicable to the Jews, and considered that the best course open to Jewish socialists was to contribute to the process of assimilation. On the fight against antisemitism, Trotsky said, 'There is no need to fight against antisemitism specifically. Antisemitism is nothing but the result of the general lack of consciousness of the broad masses. It is therefore necessary to make the masses conscious and then they will cast antisemitism away. To talk to them about Jews is superflous.'[14] This statement was made in the same year as the Kishinev pogrom!

The overwhelming majority of the delegates voted consistently with Lenin and against the Bund. The five Bundist delegates believed there was no alternative but to declare the Bund's reluctant withdrawal from the RSDRP. They walked out of the congress. But as soon as the Bund had withdrawn, the organisational problem was once again raised and it was to prove the major cause of the Bolshevik-Menshevik split. The Mensheviks objected to Lenin's vision of the party and preferred a looser form of organisation which, they believed, would move the organisation towards having a mass membership.

The split did not become formal until some years later as the ideological gulf between the factions widened. A small group of party members, including the then anti-Leninist Trotsky, remained aloof from either faction and carried on a doomed fight for re-unification. The Bund remained a factor in the manoeuvring between the factions because of its mass membership, experience and resources. Its prestige, even among hostile Marxists, was enhanced by its heroic role during the 1905 revolution.

The years following 1905 were years of reaction, and the mass movement against the regime subsided. The working class seemed quiescent as it learned to cope with a downturn in the Russian economy. The tsarist

regime at first used limited reforms to try and dampen the revolutionary spirit of 1905. It then launched fullblooded counter revolution against its enemies, encouraging the Black Hundreds, a reactionary antisemitic movement, to 'drown the revolution in a sea of Jewish blood.' A vicious wave of pogroms against the Jews followed.

The failure of the 1905 revolution and the subsequent recession made many Jewish workers feel disillusioned with socialism, and the Bund, like all socialist organisations in Russia, entered a period of decline. In 1907, Lenin supported the re-entry of the Bund into the Party, but only for tactical reasons. At that point both the Bolsheviks and the Bund agreed on the need to boycott the *Duma* (a quasi-parliament set up by the tsarist regime to placate the liberals) and on the need to maintain the underground organisations, despite the severely restricted opportunities for legal activity, which attracted the Mensheviks. However the leadership of the Bund gradually developed a close relationship with the Mensheviks, who eventually incorporated national cultural autonomy into their programme.

The Bund concentrated on cultural work within the Jewish communities during these years. Its much reduced membership put a great deal of energy into raising the cultural level of the Jewish workers and in promoting developments in the Yiddish language and literature. Bundists worked hard to ensure the survival of their network of industral militants, and in fighting the growing influence of Zionism and of the bourgeois liberal Jewish groups that emerged.

By 1910, the Bund had completed the integration of national cultural autonomy into its theoretical framework. The process had really begun at the fourth congress in 1901, but it had been long and sometimes tortuous. For a long period the Bund refrained from advocating national cultural autonomy for the Jews, since it feared a too rapid growth of Jewish national feeling at the expense of class consciousness, at a time when the overwhelming priority, as far as the Bund was concerned, was for solidarity between the working class of all the empire's nationalities. The adoption of national cultural autonomy was in part a response by the Bund to the demands of its working class membership for whom being Jewish was as major a component of their identity as their being members of the proletariat. The judgement of the Bund's leadership was that it could not leave the national field to the Zionists, the Rabbis and the Jewish bourgeoisie.

In the meantime, the Bolshevik Party was beginning to deal seriously with the national question. In 1913, under the tutelage of Lenin, Stalin published a work entitled *Marxism and the National Question*, in which he cited possession of a territory as one of the definitive characteristics of a nation. Lenin's writings on the subject and his attack on the Bund also increased in output. Although he expressed resolute opposition to antisemitism, Lenin denied the existence of a Jewish national culture. He praised Jewish contributions to progressive causes but claimed that the emancipation of the Jews was inevitably linked to the provision by society of opportunities for assimilation. The problem facing the Jews of Russia, he wrote, was that the government was thus two-pronged. He utterly rejected the Bund's concept of the party and continued to hold strongly that only a disciplined and centralised party would ensure the success of the revolution. Secondly, though perhaps less convincingly, he ridiculed the claim of the Bund that the Jews of Russia constituted a nationality.

The 1917 revolution and the end of the Bund in Russia

By 1912 Russian industry was beginning to recover from the recession it had been suffering, and there was a corresponding upsurge in working class militancy. The Bund was able to rebuild its organisation in the factories and to reclaim its status as the mass party of the Jewish workers. It became increasingly identified with the Mensheviks, and Bundists began to serve on the Menshevik central committee. The first indications of a serious split in the Bund occurred when the First World War broke out. The debate about what attitude to take towards the War polarised the Bund, as it did the entire European socialist movement. Many Bundists agreed with the Bolsheviks and Rosa Luxemburg that they were faced with an imperialist war in which the duty of the working class was to work for the defeat of their own governments. Others, including most of the leadership, emphasised the need to defend the Russian workers movement from German imperialism.

The fighting on the Eastern Front devastated the Pale and severely dislocated Jewish life. The revolution of February 1917 which overthrew the Tsar was of course unreservedly welcomed by the Bund. This was the moment it had been waiting for and, in common with most Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, the Bund confidently expected the establishment of a bourgeois democratic republic. However, the Jewish workers, along with the working class as a whole, longed for an end to the war, and when the October revolution brought the Bolsheviks to power, the Bund was divided. Vladimir Medem wrote: 'Socialism is the rule – the true, not the fictional rule – of the majority which must in the end take its fate into its own hand. A socialism based on the rule of the minority is absurd.'[15]

The 'minority' Medem referred to consisted of the Bolsheviks, whose emphasis on centralism Medem argued would lead to the state again being dominated by Great Russian Chauvinism and national oppression. Many Bundists, probably a majority, disagreed with him and welcomed the Bolshevik revolution. There had been tremendous optimism when the interim regime had abolished legislation which discriminated against the Jews; but when the new Soviet constitution was promulgated, the fact that if outlawed antisemitism as a crime, attracted many Jewish workers to the Bolsheviks. In 1919 the Bund declared its support for the Soviet government and placed its hopes in the constituent assembly, which the Bolsheviks eventually dispersed. During the civil war the Bund fought in defence of the revolution. The counter revolutionaries perpetrated vicious massacres of Jews in the areas under their control, which further stimulated Jewish support for the Bolsheviks.

Meanwhile, the Bolshevik leadership encouraged the formation of national sections of the Communist Party, as the organisation had now become, and despite the earlier, bitter exchanges between Lenin and the Bund, a Jewish national section of the party was established. It is interesting to note that the ideas of the Bund had some influence on the Soviet regime's policy towards the nationalities. Medem's *How to Pose the National Question in Russia* was reprinted in Soviet Russia in 1924 and again, suprisingly, as late as 1934; this was despite the fact that its author had been a well-known anti-Bolshevik.

The progressive policies of the regime of Lenin and Trotsky towards the Jews meant that many active Jewish workers preferred to leave the Bund

and join the Jewish section of the Communist Party. The grave threats facing the infant Soviet republic posed by the intervention of capitalist armies in the civil war, famine, general disruption of industry and society and the Kronstadt rising, required the implementation of severe repressive measures by the regime, and in 1921 the Bund, along with many other political parties, was dissolved. A handful of Bundist leaders formed a short-lived Social Democratic Bund, but most of the members transferred their loyalty to the Communist Party.

The party of Lenin and Trotsky was eventually transformed into the monster of Stalin, and many Bundists perished alongside the old Bolsheviks as Stalin tried to extinguish the bright flame of revolution which had been ignited in 1917.

Thus, the epic story of the Bund's existence in Russia came to an end. It is ironic that the success of the revolution to which the Bund had devoted itself resulted in the demise of the organisation in Russia.

The Bund in Poland

After the First World War, Poland had its ancient independence restored, and among its national minorities were over three million Jews, about one tenth of the population. The institutions and the character of the new state were permeated by the embattled spirit of Polish nationalism. The Poles, in fact, barely enjoyed a majority over other national minorities; but the identification of the Polish nation with the Polish state and with Catholicism proved a powerful and exclusive force. Antisemitism was as virulent a factor in Poland as it had been in Russia. Popular prejudices against the Jews were reinforced by discriminatory practices of the government as well as in education and industry. The economic recession of the inter-War period resulted in a higher rate of mass unemployment among Jews than among any other national group in Poland. The League of Nations attempted to monitor the treatment of national minorities in Poland in order to ensure equal treatment, but with regard to the Jews, the League's efforts had little effect except to increase the resentment of Polish nationalists.

Initially the Bund's major concern was with what attitude to adopt towards the Comintern (Communist International) and the Polish Communist Party. The Bund was split between those wishing to affiliate to the Comintern and those supporting the still anti-Bolshevik Medem, who remained critical of the Soviet state. Medem eventually left Poland for the United States where he died in 1924. When the Comintern demanded that all potential affiliates agree to 21 points, the Bund was prepared to accept all but two which would have meant ending its autonomy. Relations between the Bund and the Polish CP thus became strained, and often bitter, as the two competed fiercely for the loyalty of the Jewish workers. The Jewish membership of the CP (whose total membership reached about 10,000) was around 30%.

The Polish Socialist Party (PPS), strongly influenced by Polish nationalism, resented the Bund's autonomy, and though the two were to co-operate closely in the 1930s the relationship was somewhat uneasy at first. Within the Jewish community the Bund entered a period of relative decline. The popular nature of Polish antisemitism made the Bund's principled insistence on class solidarity a liability in a situation where Jewish workers suffered the almost total hostility of gentiles of all classes. In elections to the Polish parliament the Zionist and religious parties far outstripped the Bund in the competition for Jewish votes. In a manner reminiscent of

the post-1905 reaction, the Bund concentrated on the patient building of an industrial base and on trade union work. Simultaneously emphasis was placed on cultural and education work, and on fighting the Zionists and the Jewish bourgeosie within the Jewish communal councils (*kehilles*).

Towards the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s the Bund began to recover strength rapidly as it became clear that the other Jewish parties had no idea how to combat the growth of Fascism. The consistent and dogged work of the Bund in industry was rewarded as its working class membership again came to be numbered in thousands. In organising militant and physical resistance to the Fascists in the streets, the Bund worked closely with the more reformist PPS, in comformity with Trotsky's advice to both revolutionary and reformist workers' organisations: 'March separately but strike together!'

One of the remarkable developments of the Bund's history in Poland took place on the theoretical level. Apart from the small and fragmented Trotskyist groups, the Bund was one of the few socialist organisations to criticise both Stalinism and social democratic Reformism. It participated briefly, together with the Independent Labour Party of Britain and the Belgian Socialist Party, in the so-called 'second and a half International', which briefly flickered as an alternative to the inconsistency of the now Stalinist Third International and the reformist Second International.

In the municipal elections of 1938, the Bund emerged as by far the largest Jewish political party. The Zionists' solutions were decisively rejected by Polish Jewry as being irrelevant to their concerns. In some circles there was talk of the Bund being invited to join the PPS in a coalition socialist government after the next general elections. But the next general elections never took place as, in the autumn of 1939, Hitler's armies invaded Poland.

The Bund in the Second World War

The incredible fact that emerges from the tragic experience of the Bund during the Holocaust is its enduring loyalty to Marxism and class solidarity. As the Jews were isolated in the indescribable conditions of Nazi-occupied Poland, the Bund was initially reluctant to participate in Jewish-only resistance organisations, preferring to seek alliances with socialist groups.

Superhuman efforts were made by Bundist militants to keep the organisation functioning, and, within the ghettos, to maintain Jewish political and cultural life. During the Warsaw Ghetto uprising Bundists played a heroic part in the awe inspiring Jewish struggle against the Nazi war machine. In the forests of Poland, together with Jewish Communists and Zionists, the Bund co-operated to form Jewish partisan groups which launched guerrilla offensives against the Nazis.

At the height of the Nazi exterminations a Bundist member of the Polish government in exile in London Szmul Zygielbojm committed suicide as a protest against the world's silence, His farewell statement: 'I cannot be silent. I cannot live while the remnant of the Jewish population of Poland, of whom I am a representative, are perishing. My friends in the Warsaw Ghetto died with weapons in their hands in the last heroic battle. It was not my destiny to die together with them, but I belong to them and in their mass graves. By my death I wish to make my final protest against the passivity with which the world is looking on and permitting the extermination of the Jewish people.'

The War smashed the Bund. Its militants were killed in the death camps or died fighting in the forests and in the ghetto uprisings. The history of the Bund as the mass socialist organisation of the Jewish people of Eastern Europe effectively ended with its May Day declaration in Warsaw in 1943, while the uprising raged: "Comrades! Notwithstanding the terrible tragedy and suffering which we, the surviving remnants, have endured in the terrible past, and which we continue to endure in the concentration camps, prisons, forests and other places, we do not indulge in lamentations. True to the great commands of life we must be active and, within the limits of our modest forces, we will continue to be active. In keeping with our glorious tradition, we are bound to the working people of Poland and other lands through our common destiny in the common struggle against our common enemy for our common ideals of liberty. These ideals are today the slogans and postulates of our common labour holiday, the First of May.' [16]

Conclusion

The Bund, as an organisation, did not disappear. After the War, the central committee was reconstituted in New York, and the Bund still publishes newspapers, journals, and pamphlets in Yiddish throughout the Jewish world. However, the changing class nature of the larger Jewish communities has deprived it of a class base, while the hegemony enjoyed by Zionism has also served to diminish the memory of the Bund and its ideological legacy among Jews.

As far as the workers' movement is concerned, perhaps the clash with Lenin was the most dramatic and prophetic moment in the Bund's history. It foreshadowed the differences that exist today between autonomous movements of the oppressed, such as the women's movement and Black organisations, and the democratic centralist organisation that lay claim to the mantle of Lenin.

The Bund was a fighting socialist organisation with an ethnic as well as a class base. It could not confine itself to economic and political issues while the Jewish workers forcibly pressed their demands for national-cultural and class struggle which enabled the Bund to extend its roots deep into the Jewish working class.

The contradiction evident in the clash with Lenin over the nature of the revolutionary party lay in the Bund's realisation that the party needed to organise in such a way as to ensure that post-revolutionary society would be pluralist and democratic, while Lenin was supremely conscious of the need to forge an instrument with the necessary discipline to bring about the revolution itself. These conflicting needs have yet to be reconciled.

The significance of the Bund lies not in any nonexistent possibilities to reconstruct the organisation 'as in the days of old', but in the heritage of its ideas and experience for both the workers' movement and the Jewish people. Whatever appearances to the contrary, the conviction of the Bund that the fate of the Jewish people, along with that of humanity as a whole, depends on the socialist transformation of society, remains as true today as it ever was.

Notes

1. E. Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale* (Cambridge University Press, 1970) page 6.
2. Ibid, page 9.
3. Ibid, page 17.
4. Quoted in A. Litvak, *Vos Geven* (Vilna 1925).
5. *Der Bialystoker Arbayter,* No 1 (April 1899).
6. Mendelsohn op cit, page 28.
7. Miriam Raskin, *Tsen Yor Lebn* (New York, 1927).
8. Quote in Zvi Y. Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics* (Princeton, 1972).
9. Julius Martov, *The Turning Point in the Jewish Workers' Movement* (1900, in Russian).
10. Mendelsohn op cit, pages 4-5.
11. H. Tobias, *The Jewish Bund in Russia* (Stanford University Press, 1972) page 140.
12. N. Levin, *Jewish Socialist Movements 1871-1914* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).
13. Chaim Zhitlovsky, *Several Hours with Dr T. Herzl* New York CYCO Publications, in Yiddish).
14. Quoted in A. Liebman, *Jews and the Left* (Wiley, New York, 1979).
15. Quote in B. Johnpoll, *The Politics of Futility* (Cornell University Press, 1967) page 65.
16. *The Forward*, 2 September 1944.

Appendix
The Bund in 1930s Poland

Majer Bogdanski, a lifelong member of the Bund, recalls the life and work of the organisation in Poland in the days leading up to the Second World War

The Bund consisted of three tiers – the party, the youth organisation (*Yugnt Bund Tsukunft*) and the children's organisation (*Sotsialistisher Kinder Farband*, SKIF). We had many additional associations; a *yeshiva* group, a women's organisation, and a university students' group. We also had a group among secondary school pupils. These were young people who understood little or no Yiddish, but we wanted to gain our influence among them.

The Bund was affiliated to the Socialist International, the youth organisation to the Socialist Youth International, and SKIF to the Socialist Education International. There were other Bund organisations from whom we gained support. There were Jewish trade unions: clothing workers, woodworkers, shoemakers, metal workers, textile workers. In Warsaw, we successfully organised a trade union of the housemaids. And we also had all over Poland a union of the artisans – outdoor workers who worked with the staff they employed, and often longer hours than them. They were exploiting their workers, but were exploited by those for whom they worked. Often we organised strikes with them against the chief employers. The trade unions were affiliated to their internationals, and within Poland all Jewish trade unions were organised in one central national committee. The Central Council was affiliated to the General Central Council of Polish Workers.

The Cultural Dimension

We had a system of Yiddish schools all over Poland, organised in one central authority. We also had a *Kultur Lige*, which would buy up cinema or theatre performances, organise concerts and cater for libraries. They had one of the finest Yiddish choirs in Poland. We had our own sports clubs called *Morgnshtern* which catered for athletics, football, gymnastics, and was affiliated to the Socialist Workers' Sports International.

We ran our own press with the daily *Folkstsaytung* (paper of the people), as well as periodicals. The Bund Central Committee issued a monthly called *Unser Tsayt*. There was also a journal of the minority called *Kegn Shtrom*. They didn't agree with the politics of the Central Committee as explained in the official Party paper, so they had their own journal. We also had local weekly or bi-weekly periodicals in towns which could afford them. Once a week the children had a page in the *Folkstsaytung*. The youth organisation had a monthly. This was one of the nicest journals you could ever see. We also had a youth periodical in Polish called *Voice of the Bund*. This was aimed at the intelligentsia. We wanted to gain influence and let them know who we were.

Political Links

Ideologically we were Marxist. Politically we called ourselves socialists. Where we could gain power by the vote, in a democratic way, we would.

But if this was not possible, like in Italy or Portugal, or in our own Poland, and if force was the only way of gaining power, we would use force. We were absolutely against war and absolutely against the army. We thought it should be disbanded. But this was only until the advent of Hitler. Hitler changed our minds in this respect. We were anti-Zionist and anti-communist. The communists believed that the first fight was against the Bund and the socialists. In all our political actions we tried as much as possible to work with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), and also the socialist parties of the other minorities – Germans, Ukrainians, White Russians and Lithuanians.

We took part as much as we could in the local authorities. We had to co-operate; without the PPS we were always a minority. We organised strikes; not frivolously – we couldn't afford it – a strike was a dire necessity. Strikes were mainly for economic matters. We also called political strikes for a shorter working day. We had demonstrations on all sorts of occasions. If there was a pogrom somewhere, we would call a half-day strike and the shopkeepers would usually support it. This was the only way they could protest against such atrocities.

What did we have to contend with? Poland had a constitution. It was a republic. You could never find a more beautiful constitution. It was drafted and established just after 1919 when Poland regained statehood. The constitution guaranteed minority rights, there couldn't be antisemitism, but a constitution is only a piece of paper. The political system we had in the '30s we called semi-fascist, and this was no exaggeration. The parliament was elected but the last elections in 1936 were boycotted by all the political parties, right, left and centre, except the Government Party – the *Sanacja*. The Polish military leader, Pilsudski, created it. He was once a member of the PPS. When Poland became independent he left the socialists.

He committed a coup d'etat in 1926. In Warsaw he assembled military units from all over the country who were faithful to him and he dissolved the existing parliament. We had an elected parliament but the election system was such that no one could get any real representation, only them. In some places 105% votes were cast. Over 90% were always for them. It was such a horrible system that even the *Endeks* boycotted it. The *Sanacja* were antisemitic, the *Endeks* even more so, and still it was consitutional. They said it was a democracy led by an authority. The Government was oppressive to all its citizens. It was horribly anti-labour and anti-socialist. When the workers struck, the police would come and make massacres.

Official Antisemitism

Antisemitism was the hardest thing we had to contend with all the time. Antisemitism was official in that no Jew could hope to get employment from a non-Jewish employer or in any government establishment such as the railways, post and banking system, which were all nationalised. The local authorities would carry out open works such as canalisation. They would employ local people but not Jews. To get them to employ Jews was like getting blood from a stone. This was our great struggle. In those councils where the socialists were a majority we were successful. They would employ some Jews. In 1924 the government nationalised the production of alcohol and tobacco. These industries employed masses of Jews. After nationalisation the government excluded the Jews. Thousands and thousands of Jews found themselves without the means to buy bread, and there was no social security.

As for our Yiddish schools, the Government wouldn't pay one penny towards them. We charged the parents a fee, but the parents were poor workers. Even with their fees the schools could not exist. Every year we sent somebody abroad to collect money for them. The Jewish trade unions were asked to charge their members 5 *groshen* every week. Again you couldn't pay the levy. Most of us were employed six months a year. I was a tailor. I had two seasons – summer and winter. Each lasted three months and out of it I had to eke out the other months.

We also had to organise defence groups simply to defend our lives. The *Sanacja* discriminated, but didn't call for pogroms. In 1938, with Hitler by the door, the Prime Minister stood up in Parliament and said: it isn't nice to make pogroms against the Jews; economic discrimination by all means! The students in the universities didn't allow the Jews to take part in the lectures. They would have to stand in the corner and make notes on each others' backs. In one case a student was thrown out of a window and killed. The *Endeks* called for pogroms. They had a youth organisation – the *Nara* – comprising only of students. They not only incited others but they would attack individual Jews or in small groups They put bombs in Jewish shops. They employed children. In my home town, Lodz, a little boy lost an arm when they gave him a bomb to throw but it exploded early.

In defence we sought, and often got, the help of the PPS. Their militia had men among the *Nara* and they would tell us that the *Nara* were planning to attack Jews when they came out of the prayer house. We would organise ourselves in groups of five, each with a walking stick. This was the only weapon we could afford or dare to have, because if the police caught us with a knife they could de-legalise the Party. We would go to the prayer houses and stand outside. The people inside didn't even know. Sometimes they came out and hissed us because on the Sabbath you mustn't carry a stick. They thought we were organising an anti-religious demonstration. Make no mistake: we were the only ones to actively fight antisemitism. The socialist-Zionists weren't interested and neither were the Communists.

These were the conditions and these were the things we had to do. Life was hard but it also had very beautiful moments. We managed somehow to have a lot of happiness and enjoyment. With the youth organistion and the children's organisation we organised summer camps and dances. We had our sports organisation. The children were particularly interesting and nice to be with. They would organise summer camps which we called socialist children's republics, and they learned to live together as socialists.

Conflict within the Community

Inside the Jewish community we had to contend with the Zionists – we were anti-Zionist – and also with the orthodox. Religion to us was a private matter. There were Bundists who were deeply religious. If we were anti-religious we wouldn't have support at elections. The people knew that we didn't go to synagogue to pray but they knew that we were fighting to the last drop of blood for their right to religious practice. Politically we had a hard struggle with them. Apart from the town councils there were also the Jewish councils. We had to belong, and pay rates to the Jewish *kehila*. They were mostly dominated by the religious – the *Aguda*. There was a time when we boycotted the *kehilas* In 1930, on

their suggestion, the Government passed a law restricting certain Jews from being members of the councils – those who didn't wear sidelocks and beards. In Lodz, two of our most famous leaders couldn't be candidates because they applied this law to them. Voting rights were only for men. Women had no right to vote and that was against our principles.

But in 1936 a conference of Party leaders decided that we should recommend our comrades to take part in the elections. The *kehila* had at its disposal masses of money. If we were not there we didn't get a penny, but if we were there in strength we may get something. So the members thought: it is horrible depriving half of the population – the women – of voting rights but on the other hand, the *kehilas* are disposing of our money. We decided to take part. *Fun a khazer a hor opgerisn* (if you can pluck a hair from a swine) – and where we managed to get a sizeable number of people, we could get some money for our needs. Without the money you can't imagine how difficult it was to keep the daily paper going. And we had the Yiddish schools and libraries. The socialist-Zionists (*Poale Zion*) were split into right and left. The left were very small but were Yiddishists and co-operated with us in the Yiddish schools. Right *Poale Zion* were stronger but completely anti-Yiddish so there was no co-operation. In the town councils they joined with the *Aguda* to oppose subsidies for our schools and libraries. The Zionists had their own schools

The greatest triumph for the Bund in Poland was in 1939. In January 1939, there were elections to the town councils all over Poland. In Warsaw there were 20 Jewish councillors; 16 were from the Bund. In my home town, Lodz, 7 out of 11 were Bundists. This pattern was repeated all over Poland. I remember a comrade of mine who asked a very religious Warsaw Jew, "Who did you vote for?" He replied, "I voted for the Bund." "Why did you vote for the Bund? You are a religious Jew." He said, "Yes, they defended me."

The Invasion of Poland

That year also saw a sordid thing. During the summer the governments of Britain, France and the Soviet Union met with the objective of concluding a pact against Hitler. Then in the beginning of August, like a bolt from the sky came the news that the Russians had concluded a pact with the Germans, the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. At the same time that they were conferring with the British and French, they were conferring with the Germans. Ostensibly this was a 'friendship' pact, in fact, as it soon appeared, it was a pact according to which they divided Poland and the rest of Eastern and North Eastern Europe between them. On September 1st, the German armies came over the Polish frontier from the west and the the Russians came a few days later from the east. The tragedy was that the best of our comrades – those that didn't fall into the hands of the Germans – fell into the hands of the Russians and were shot. I mention only a few names: Henryk Erlich, Victor Alter and Anna Rosenthal – an old revolutionary from Vilna. Erlich was a member of the executive committee of the Socialist International. They were the most beloved people in Poland.

And then the Holocaust began and put an end to everything.

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The formation of the Bund in Vilna in 1897 heralded the golden age of Jewish participation in the struggle for socialism in Eastern Europe. Until it was almost entirely obliterated in the Holocaust, the Bund played a dynamic and courageous role in mobilising the Jewish masses in the fight for a better world. It supported and organised workers in struggle, formed self-defence squads against antisemites and championed the cultural rights of the Jewish people. This pamphlet tells the history of the Bund and highlights the importance of its ideas and experiences for the workers' movement and for the Jewish people today.

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