

# Bolshevism in Yiddish

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For most Jews in the United States, the legacy of the Soviet Union is linked to anti-Semitism. This is understandable, given not only the targeting of Jewish writers, doctors, and others by Stalin's terror but also the quotas and petty persecution of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years. Some people remember that the Russian Revolution freed Jews from the pogroms and segregation of czarism. But few have any conception of the extraordinary flourishing of Yiddish-language culture under the Bolsheviks in the 1920s.

Elissa Bemporad's *Becoming Soviet Jews* opens a window into the almost entirely forgotten wealth of Soviet Yiddish life. She is not the first writer to address the subject; Zvi Gitelman (who is included in Bemporad's acknowledgements) made a significant contribution to it over forty years ago in his *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*. But Bemporad's detailed focus on the city of Minsk gives a much deeper sense of what communism and Yiddish culture meant in the 1920s to thousands of individual Jews, in all the diversity of their politics, beliefs, gender, and class backgrounds.

## A Successful Experiment

Though hardly a big city—it had some 120,000 inhabitants in the 1920s—Minsk was the political, economic, and cultural center of its part of the USSR, the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. It also had the biggest single concentration of Jews in the Soviet Union, about fifty thousand of them. Before the revolution Minsk Jewry had lived in the shadow of bigger Jewish centers like Warsaw and Vilna. But in the truncated USSR of 1921-39, Minsk's only major rival as a home of Jewish institutions and a source of authority was Moscow, far outside the area of permitted Jewish settlement under czarism.

Minsk's position allowed it to become a showcase of Soviet Yiddish culture. And despite its poverty, a showcase it was. The Bolsheviks formally decided in 1919 to favor Yiddish as a modern, working-class Jewish language over Hebrew (seen as "clerical") and even Russian (the language of the Russian Jewish bourgeoisie). Yiddish thus became one of the Belarusian SSR's four official languages, alongside Belarusian, Russian, and Polish.

The equality of the official languages was taken seriously. A visitor arriving at Minsk's main train station saw the city's name written in all four languages above the main station entrance. And the role of Yiddish was not merely symbolic. It was a language of newspapers, magazines, book publishing, theater, radio, film, the post office, official correspondence, election materials, and even a Central Jewish Court. Yiddish writers like Sholem Aleichem and Mendeleyev were celebrated as Soviet Jewish heroes.

Minsk had a public, state-supported Yiddish-language school system, extending from kindergarten to the Yiddish-language section of the Belarusian State University. Although Jewish students tended to switch to studying in Russian as they moved on to secondary and higher education, 55.3 percent of Jewish primary school students attended Yiddish-language schools in 1927 (110). Such was the prestige of Minsk's Yiddish scholarship that researchers trained in Warsaw and Berlin applied for faculty positions at the university.

Yiddish also played a disproportionate role in the city's politics. Although only a bit over 40 percent of Minsk's population was Jewish at the time, 19 of its 25 CP cell secretaries were Jewish in 1924 (38, 40). Jewish predominance in the party cells was such that several cell meetings were held in

Yiddish. In fact, Yiddish was spoken at citywide party meetings into the late 1930s.

All this leads Bemporad to conclude that this “very ordinary Jewish city” was in the 1920s a “dynamic, exciting and appealing place to live” (5), “one of the world capitals of Yiddish language and culture,” and “one of the most successful examples of the Yiddish experiment in the Soviet Union” (9).

## **The Bund**

Bemporad shows convincingly that the vibrancy of Jewish communist politics and culture in Minsk was largely due to the legacy of the pre-revolutionary Jewish Workers Bund. The Bund had been by far the strongest socialist current in Minsk and its region before 1917, reflecting the disproportionate share of Yiddish-speaking Jews in its working class, while the Bolsheviks had been marginal. The Minsk Bolshevik party was largely created at a stroke by the Bund’s dissolution into it in 1921. And at first there was a strong continuity between Bundism and Bolshevism.

The main Yiddish-language newspaper in Minsk was the former Bundist newspaper; it kept the same name until 1925, and the same ex-Bundist editor-in-chief until 1937. The top leadership of the Bolshevik party’s Yiddish-language section, the *Evseksiia*, consisted for years largely of ex-Bundists, not only in Minsk and Belarus but throughout the USSR, even as ex-Bundists quickly became a small minority of the party’s Jewish rank and file.

As Bemporad points out, prominent ex-Bundist Bolsheviks suffered from a “Bundist-Communist dual personality,” even an “inner rift” (79). Ex-Bundists tended for years to defend and even celebrate the Bund’s record as a revolutionary organization. This was contrary to the official Communist portrayal of the Bolsheviks as the sole keepers of the revolutionary flame.

The higher ex-Bundists rose, the more quickly they learned and the more expert they became in denouncing the old Bund. They developed a tendency to become more-Bolshevik-than-thou. As part of the rivalry within the *Evseksiia* between the Minsk and Moscow leaderships, for example, the Minsk ex-Bundists tended to portray themselves as more purely proletarian than the Moscow leadership, whom they accused of pandering to a sort of petty-bourgeois Yiddishist cultural nationalism.

In fact there were good reasons for communists in the 1920s to be critical of the Bundist tradition. Bundists had taken pride before 1917 in maintaining the unity of their organization while ethnic Russian socialists were divided between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. The price of Bundist unity had been the absence of a clear revolutionary program and strategy. In the conditions of single-party rule by an increasingly monolithic CP in the 1920s, however, this legitimate criticism of the Bund could not be openly or fairly debated. It therefore tended to petrify into an orthodox, ritualistic, and even hollow creed.

## **Judaism and Zionism**

While celebrating Yiddish language, literature, and culture, Belarusian communists in the 1920s were fiercely hostile to Judaism as a religion and to Zionism as a movement. Like many other Jewish communist attitudes, these were in continuity with the tradition of the Bund. And the Bund’s hostility had been reciprocated. Most pre-revolutionary rabbis had preached that class struggle and socialism were distractions from Jews’ exclusive devotion to God. And even labor Zionists had objected to Bundists’ single-minded insistence that Jews’ future was in Europe and nowhere else.

The Bolsheviks took up where the Bundists had left off. Before the revolution, for example, Bundists had a tradition of occupying synagogues and holding meetings there, since synagogues were often

the most suitable spaces available. In the 1920s Bolsheviks transformed this occasional tactic into a permanent practice, as Jewish workers' clubs successfully demanded that synagogues be seized and transformed into secular cultural centers.

In principle there was no reason why communists should have treated religious property as eternally sacrosanct. But here again, single-party rule and the stifling of even inner-party democracy twisted and distorted communist secularism and anti-Zionism. Since there could be no open or honest debate about the relative merits of using a building for worship or as a secular club, genuine needs and sentiments could easily be manipulated by party officials eager to demonstrate their zeal. The Hebrew language, religious ritual, and a yearning for Palestine could not wither away naturally once they were the objects of official anathemas and orchestrated campaigns against them.

In practice, Bemporad shows, anti-religious and anti-Zionist campaigns were still fairly moderate in Minsk in the 1920s, sometimes to the point of soft-heartedness. Although Hebrew was officially banned in 1921, it was still taught and studied at the university. The left labor Zionist group Poale Zion was allowed to exist for seven years after the Bund was forced to dissolve, and Poale Zion members were allowed to join the CP in 1928 on the same generous terms that Bundists had been granted in 1921.

Of the 657 synagogues in the city in 1917, 547 were still functioning in 1930 (119). Since Jewish kosher butchers had a virtual monopoly on meat, even the Red Army's meat was kosher in Minsk. Although synagogue attendance was officially frowned on, Yiddish-language schools were conspicuously ill-attended during the high holy days. One Jewish Bolshevik even complained in 1928 that his non-circumcised son had been denied admission to a public Jewish kindergarten! (133) In the 1930s, however, flexibility on issues of religion and Zionism came to an end, foreshadowing the almost total destruction of Soviet Jewish culture in 1948.

A particular strength of *Becoming Soviet Jews* is its portrayal of Jewish women's position. There were links between activism for Jewish emancipation and for women's rights, and between the work of the Evseksiia and the party women's organization Zhenotdel.

Jewish women, who had made up a third of the Bund's members in 1905, had a virtual monopoly on the Belarusian CP's work among women in the 1920s; it was hard to find a non-Jewish name among leaders of the Belarusian Zhenotdel. The Evseksiia and Zhenotdel shared the same fate, being dissolved in the same year (1930) with the same explanation: that the emancipation of Jews and women was complete, so that the organizations were no longer needed.

Still, Bemporad shows, Bolshevik women activists in the 1920s were far from feminists, and their activism was fatally undermined by official party positions. Zhenotdel leaders might urge women party members' husbands to take care of the children so their wives could attend meetings; the men just laughed. Jewish men in particular tended to insist on women's backwardness as a way of excusing their own lapses. If a son was circumcised, if the family kept kosher, male Jewish Bolsheviks routinely tried to defend themselves by blaming their wives.

## **Terror and Tragedy**

The most disturbing part of Bemporad's book for me was the chapter on the purges of 1934-39. The fact that horrifying things were done during Stalin's terror is hardly news to anti-Stalinist Marxists. But we tend to focus, if not narrowly on Stalin as an individual, then on the central Stalinist bureaucracy as the sowers of death and destruction in the 1930s. Bemporad's account reminds us that no regime, however totalitarian, is always entirely top-down.

Once the green light is given from above for terror, terrible things can also be done on initiative from below. Jewish Bolshevism in Belarus in the 1930s was no exception. In fact, Bemporad argues convincingly, some of the same factors that had constituted the strengths of Jewish communism in Minsk in the 1920s contributed to its self-destruction in the Stalinist terror.

As noted above, ex-Bundist CP leaders in Minsk tended to compensate for their non-Bolshevik pasts with a stress on their purely proletarian politics and hostility to any kind of cultural nationalism. In the terror of the late 1930s, this tendency degenerated into a spiral of mutual denunciations and an urge to be especially hard on Jewish culture. This probably helps explain the Belarusian SSR's decision in 1938 to close down the entire network of schools teaching in Yiddish, still the self-declared mother tongue of 49.8 percent of Minsk's Jews (198). Soviet Ukraine, with smaller percentages and numbers of Yiddish speakers, retained its Yiddish school system, reopened it after the war, and kept it open for several postwar years.

If Belarusian ex-Bundists hoped to save their skins by joining the campaign against Yiddish, they failed. In 1937-38 virtually all the leading figures of the Belarusian Jewish cultural world lost their jobs and often their lives. Few if any ex-Bundist CP members survived the purges (191).

## **Marxism**

Bemporad is hampered in fully explaining the tragedy of Jewish communism in Minsk by her lack of engagement with Marxism. It is symptomatic that Enzo Traverso's book *The Marxists and the Jewish Question*, an indispensable guide to Bundist and labor Zionist theory and politics, is not even included in her extensive bibliography. She barely touches on the Marxist debates that were central concerns for many of the protagonists of her study.

She repeats in passing, almost ritualistically, the usual charges about the extent of repression in Soviet Russia under Lenin. She makes no clear distinction between repression during the civil war, repression under the mixed economy of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the relatively pluralist cultural climate that accompanied it, and the later terror under Stalin. This might make a reader wonder how the wealth of Jewish and cultural political life in Minsk in the 1920s, which the book describes in such detail, was ever possible.

Gitelman attempted in *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics* to explain the rise and fall of the Evsekstii with a crude sociological theory of modernization. Yiddish-language culture and politics were useful to the early Soviet regime as a means of destroying Jewish traditionalist barriers to modernization, he argued; once its work was done, full-fledged Russification was more useful, so Yiddish was swept out of the way. Bemporad does not take up that simple-minded theory. But she puts forward hardly any alternative explanation of her own.

Gitelman's account at least interwove the Evsekstii's history with the history of the inner-party struggles of the 1920s. He showed that Yiddish-language communists had particularly close ties to the Bolshevik right around Nikolai Bukharin, and that the left and the Stalinist faction were weaker in the Evsekstii. This makes it logical that the Evsekstii's dissolution in 1930 followed soon after the right's definitive defeat in 1929. Bemporad hardly mentions the inner-party struggle at all.

In any event, the issues at stake went beyond faction fights. The fate of Yiddish-language communism was bound up with questions about the kind of Soviet society that would succeed the mixed economy of the NEP (in which Jewish traders and small-scale capitalists played a disproportionate if far from exclusive role).

The Jewish world of Minsk might have survived if industrialization had built on the existing working-

class foundation and on the light industries (garment, shoes, leather, meat) in which Jewish workers were concentrated. It stood no chance in a breakneck process in which a new working class was created by mass migration of peasants fleeing a countryside ravaged by forced collectivization, and those industries closest to the consumer were (as Trotsky warned in *The Revolution Betrayed*) the most neglected.

Bemporad's lack of attention to the broader fate of the Russian Revolution deprives her book of some of the explanatory power it might have had. Still, the detailed tapestry she weaves of Soviet Jewish life in the 1920s should make it impossible for informed readers to dismiss Bolshevism as uniformly "bad for the Jews." It makes clear that early Soviet nationalities policy still has useful lessons to teach about ways of structuring multicultural, multi-linguistic societies. And if the world that the book conjures up is irredeemably lost, its memory is worth preserving.