Myron Perlman

In the Ranks of Liberation: The Jewish Workers' Bund

Most Jews know something of their biblical past, and a little about Zionism and the state of Israel. Unfortunately, few know anything about the Jewish labor movement, or groups like the General Jewish Workers' Union in Russia and Poland, or the Bund as it came to be called.

The Bund organized the Jewish working people in the Pale region of the Russian empire. This region includes present-day Poland, Lithuania and western Russia. Jews in the Pale were generally poor, uneducated, and without any secular organizations to serve their interests.

Haskalah, or the Enlightenment, came into the Jewish Pale in the late 1800's. Students began to read non-religious books and discuss new philosophies; small groups of assimilated Jewish intellectuals studied the works of Marx and Plekhanov, the Russian popularizer of Marx. They met in secret, since discovery meant suffering at the hands of the Czarist police.

Eventually the groups expanded to include some workers who were first taught the Russian language, since little was written in Yiddish, the tongue of the masses. Starting with subjects like mathematics and natural science, they advanced to social theory and Marxism.

Industrialization created a vast working class among the Jewish masses, and social change swept the Pale. While the social democrats organized the workers into small study groups, more militant elements formed Kases (self-help organizations) that led strikes. Increasingly, the Jewish community was divided by struggles between Jewish workers and Jewish employers.

Led by the group from Vilna, Poland, the social democratic groups met in 1897 to discuss establishing a broader organization. The proceedings were dominated by the people from Vilna who supplied most of the leadership for the new Bund and decided to use Yiddish to educate the masses since it was the language of the people.

The early social democrats were Marxists first and Jews second. Yet they couldn't help but notice the advanced degree of militancy among Jewish workers as compared with the Russian proletariat. Meanwhile, Zionism was emerging in the Pale and this forced them to consider it as an alternative to Jewish oppression and to rethink their Marxist internationalism.

As Marxists they were internationalist—that is, they spoke of the common interests of all working people. So why organize Jews? Martov, an early Bundist (later a Menshevik) wrote:

> Although tied to the Russian movement, the Jewish proletariat must not await liberation either from the Russian movement or from the Polish movement . . . . The pressing task is winning for every nation, if not political independence, then at least full equal rights.[1]

The new Bund made unions the base of their strength; where none existed, they helped organize them. Where they already existed, the Bund would aid them during strikes and introduce the workers to Marxism. In strong unions existing before the Bund, there was sometimes animosity over Bundist intellectuals coming in to organize.

The Bund grew quickly. In the 1890's small secret gatherings of workers and intellectuals met to celebrate May 1st, the workers' day. In the 1900's, a thousand met in Vilna and seven hundred in Vitebsk on May 1st. And three thousand gathered in Bialystok for a bristleworker's funeral.

Worker militancy grew. Strikebreakers were attacked and political terror was on the increase. The Bund first took a position against all terror, calling it a divergence from building a mass movement. But when government repression increased and workers were beaten in jail, the central committee of the Bund called for defensive terror: "Our human dignity must be defended to our last drop of blood."

Bund activity expanded. From the spring of 1898 to the fall of 1900, the Bund distributed forty-three different leaflets totaling 74,750 in number. Then between the fourth and fifth congresses of the Bund, again just over two years, the Bund passed out 101

different handbills totaling 347,150. The May 1st leaflet of the central committee grew from twenty thousand in 1902 to seventy thousand in 1903.

In this period the Bund was clearly the largest and strongest of the Russian revolutionary organizations. With some outside aid it organized the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (RSDWP). The Bund hosted the meeting, maintained security, smuggled people in and out of Russia, and undertook to print material for the new organization.

Revolutionary Debate

The growing Bund came into conflict with the Iskra literary group headed by Lenin and Martov. At stake was control of the RSDWP, the direction of the Russian revolutionary movement, and the type of future society the revolutionaries would create. Lenin and Iskra proposed a highly centralized party and faulted the Bund for its national orientation. The Bund also wanted a centralized party, but one that would be a federation of national organizations.

Anticipating conflict within the RSDWP, the Bund's fourth congress passed resolutions explaining their stand on the national question:

> Each nationality, apart from its aspirations for economic, civil, and political freedom also has national aspirations based on characteristics dear and peculiar to it—language, customs, way of life—culture in general—which ought to have full freedom of development.[2]

This was an advance for the Bund, which faced pressure in the community and among younger members for a stronger national position. One of the younger members, Mark Liber, would have had the Bund go further:

> Our task is to prepare the Jewish proletariat for national autonomy, to develop national consciousness in it. To a significant degree we have been cosmopolites until now. We ought to become national . . . National is not nationalist. When a class recognizes that it belongs to a given nationality, it becomes national; nationalist signifies the sum total of all classes or the domination of one nationality over another.[3]

The Bund was not ready to go that far; as it was, they came under attack from Lenin for their earlier position. He maintained that: (1) no Jewish nationality existed because nationality depended on territory; (2) the Bund by emphasizing differences was dividing the workers; and (3) the answer to Jewish oppression was assimilation.

At the RSDWP congress it became apparent that the party controlled by Lenin wouldn't allow any autonomy for the Bund. Faced with organizational death, the Bund withdrew. The Bundists were particularly angry because the Iskra-dominated conference accepted the minority proposals of other groups while rejecting theirs.

The fight with Iskra had forced the Bund to come to terms with their Marxism. Meanwhile, a growing socialist-Zionist movement pushed them on the question of nationalism. Nakhman Syrkin, a socialist-Zionist, said that autonomy was not enough—the Jews needed territory. Yiddish, he argued, was the language of degradation and assimilation; Hebrew should be revived. The Bund was attacked by the Zionists as assimilationist while Iskra condemned them as nationalist and Zionist.

Self-Defense

A new wave of pogroms broke out in Russia. The Bund responded by organizing battle squads (BO's). They protected the Bund demonstrations and went to the aid of the communities during pogroms. The BO's fought well in Gomel and Dvinsk. They protected Jews from attacks, while Czarist troops called out to protect Jews either stood by doing nothing or urged the rioters on. The fighting organizations demonstrated that pogroms would not go on unpunished. Czarist police met this new threat from the Bund with more repression, but the Bundists were so well rooted in the masses that they were impossible to destroy.

Revolutionary Jewish Socialism

The Bund was a new kind of organization in the Jewish community, based on national feelings and class oppression instead of religion. It was the first modern Jewish political party. The Bund was often anti-clerical, especially when rabbis took the stance of supporting the status quo.

The Bundists developed a revolutionary lifestyle that broke with Jewish tradition:

> Women formed a substantial segment of both the Bund's intelligentsia and kase organized working force. Among lower-class Jewish families the very idea of educating women, beyond the minimum needed for prayer, was out of the question. In these families the break with the older generation was excruciating . . . The gradual move toward

the emancipation of women shook the very foundation of Jewish social life.[4]

The Bund was organized collectively; there was a strong feeling of community. No star personality cult developed, which existed in other Russian groups. Often, the most important Bundist was the least visible or audible. The Bund was not dependent on a single leader. As one Bundist, Mark Kitvak, pointed out, the leadership was truly collective:

> One had an idea, others seized upon it, added to it . . . . When it finally became a decision, it lost its individual character and became a collective work. It was no longer the creature of one person, but belonged to all.[5]

Although a centralized organization, it depended on the initiative, trust, and practical needs of its members for direction and discipline, and they depended on the Jewish masses for support. Accordint to Litvak:

> [they] drew as many people as possible to the leadership so that the voice of the masses could be heard as clearly as possible.[6]

There was always internal democracy. When several factions developed in the Polish Bund between the two World Wars, each faction was given representation on the central committee and on the editorial staffs of the newspapers.

Bund activities changed with conditions. During strike periods the Bundists organized support and supplied food to the strikers. Self-defense groups continued to spring up under their direction, and a vast Yiddish school system was started as an alternative to the Khedorim (religious schools).

Meanwhile, the Bund continued its debates with Iskra and the Zionists. In the course of these debates a new ideology grew. Bundism stressed that program could only give the most general guidance and consistent tactics could come only from constant and close ties with the masses.

Lenin and Iskra argued that assimilation was moving forward and that the Bund, by pushing national identification, was reactionary. Vladimir Medem answered for the Bundists that the capitalists want assimilation because it provides internal harmony: reactionaries always accepted assimilation; what they could not accept was national development.

Medem was against forced assimilation and worked for complete, unhindered development of Jews and other minorities. The Bund later took this position one step further by advocating national cultural autonomy. Social democracy, they held, had:

> the task of fighting national oppression in a positive as well as a negative sense, that is, it had to guarantee national freedom . . . . The collective functions of a state, education in particular, were active rather than passive, and the realization of rights depended on how these functions were exercised. Freedom for nationalities meant the state would have to provide schools that would not grant advantage to the majority. This could be managed through national self-rule or autonomy in all matters touching national life, i.e., cultural matters.[7]

The Bund envisioned a post-revolutionary Russia with significant cultural autonomy for all minorities. They had arrived at the place where they saw Jewish identity as positive and something to be maintained, yet they still viewed class struggle as primary to solving the problems of the Jewish working people.

Revolution of 1905

Revolutionary activity reached a new height in the Russia of 1905. Following the massacre of peaceful demonstrators led by a priest on "Bloody Sunday," strikes and demonstrations broke out throughout the empire.

The Bund was in the vanguard of these actions, calling for general strikes and marches in the streets. In Riga, seven to eight thousand Jews were part of a demonstration of sixty thousand. In a small town called Krinski, the Bund and Polish Social Democrats struck, and captured the government building. The police fled and the town was in the hands of the revolutionaries until troops arrived the following day.

Strike activity was uneven, and reflected the uneven development of revolutionary workers. In Warsaw, disunity and police repression prevented any mass strike or demonstration. Over-all, the activity in the empire was one of protest rather than insurrection. It was greatest in Bund areas and where other national minorities lived. The minorities showed the greatest militance, followed by the workers who lived near by, and finally by the workers in Russia proper.

The Bund was ecstatic. They saw the Jewish workers' actions as vindication of their efforts. The sixth congress issued orders to obtain arms and train the masses in their use, expecting a major revolutionary push to occur soon. In October half a

million workers went out on strike. As before, the areas where the Bund was strongest showed the greatest activity. As its legend grew, the Bund became even more powerful. The threat of their intervention in a strike would often cause the employer to give in.

The Bund would use any and all gatherings to promote their political views. The Birzhes, open-air labor markets, became liberated zones under the protection of the battle squads. Here, the Bund became a state within a state.

One Bundist remarked:

> Divorce, dowries, a falling out between business partners, the complaints of a servant girl—all sorts of matters were brought here. And it was impossible to refuse help, to say that it would be better to go to the rabbi.[8]

Repression and Revolution

After the 1905 outbreaks, the Czar encouraged the development of liberal groups. Simultaneously, the government assisted right-wing anti-semitic groups. The Bund responded by forming more self-defense groups to protect people from the pogroms everyone felt were coming. At the same time, the Bund came "above ground" and increased its democratic base.

In 1907 the Bund rejoined the RSDWP, which was now led by the Mensheviks. They aligned themselves with the Mensheviks because they saw them as less rigid on the question of party form. In 1912 the Mensheviks accepted the Bund idea of a federated party and the Bund became, in effect, an autonomous section of the RSDWP.

When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, many of the Bundists were shocked and outraged. They felt that the Bolsheviks weren't interested in a social revolution, that all they wanted was power. 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.[9]

The Bund correctly forecast that Bolshevik rule, without concern for national minorities, would lead not only to rule just by Russians, but eventually to rule by a minority of Russians, the Great Russians.

The Polish Bund

World War I physically separated the Bund in Russia from the organization in Poland. Anticipating this, the parent group ordered the Polish members to form a new central committee. From its inception the new Polish Bund was faction-ridden, although ultimately unified. At the founding conference, one month after the Bolsheviks seized power, Shulman of the right wing condemned the Bolsheviks for terror and adventurism. Meanwhile, Vasser of the Left praised the Bolsheviks.

The new Polish Bund found itself in conflict with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). The PPS had put the goal of national independence before class struggle, and the Russian Bund condemned them as nationalists. Meanwhile, the Polish Bund withheld support for independence, insisting on PPS support for cultural autonomy.

Independence for Poland after the war was followed by a wave of pogroms. Three million Jews, 10 percent of the Polish population, suffered. The new conservative government not only sanctioned the pogroms but fired Jews from their government jobs.

The Polish Bund's reaction to its new situation was dependent on which Bund faction held greater influence. The left wing called for immediate seizure of power, like the Bolshevik revolution:

> The issue that splits us is not whether or not to make a revolution. It is how the revolution is to be effectuated; democracy or dictatorship of the proletariat . . . . Democracy represents the will of the capitalist class and gives it the possibility to exploit the masses . . . . No revolution—not even a bourgeois revolution—has ever succeeded without a period of dictatorship.[10]

The right wing, led by Medem, argued that the workers are a majority—so why be afraid of democracy:

> The Soviet system is based on seizure of power by an autocracy . . . . It creates a self-anointed power. The Soviet constitution gives power to the Communist Party alone . . . . Instead of power deriving from the people, it derives from the party. Party rule is not controlled from below—it is run from the top.[11]

Relation to the Communists

In 1920 the Russian Bund congress voted to become an autonomous part of the Communist Party like the Georgian, Ukrainian, and Byelorussian branches. The Bundists asked for a guarantee of autonomy from the party. A commission was set up of three Bundists, three persons from the Jewish section of the CP,

and one from the Communist International. The four non-Bundists then voted to dissolve the Bund. Fearing repression, the Bund agreed to the vote. Left Bundists joined the CP while pro-Menshevik Bundists refused. They were later arrested, driven into exile, or dropped out of politics.

At the same time, the Polish Bund was entertaining the idea of joining the Communist International (Comintern). The left Bundists favored joining, but the majority of the organization could not agree to the twenty-one points issued by the Bolsheviks. Although nineteen of the points were acceptable, two of them would have ended the Bund's autonomy. They felt that these points

> meant that the party would have to split, and that leaders who disagreed with any decisions of the Comintern, no matter how ridiculous it might appear in view of local conditions, would be ousted.[12]

An Electoral Party

The Bund in Poland experienced a small decline during the early 1920's. Yet between 1921 and 1924 the Bund sponsored more than 1,100 rallies and distributed 1,650,000 handbills. At the same time the Bund established and expanded a Yiddish school system.

In 1928 the Bund and PPS cooperated in the Polish elections; as the Jewish socialist vote increased in Jewish areas, the Zionist and Jewish National Bloc votes declined proportionately.

Despite its success in the joint election campaign, the Bund was not about to merge with the PPS. They wanted a federation of organizations, not just one party.

> The working class of every nationality must have its own organization, which will be attuned to the language and other national characteristics of its specific culture.[13]

Meanwhile with the growth of the Right, repression of Jews and the Bund increased in Poland. Hitler had risen to power in Germany in 1933, and fascist groups maneuvered for power in Poland. The authoritarian Pilsudski regime allowed economic and physical anti-semitism to run rampant.

In response to the anti-semitism, the Bund called for a general strike; it was a total success. The Jewish sections of Poland's cities closed down for a day. The PPS supported the strike against anti-semitism and this drew the two groups closer together.

During this period the Bund worked to democratize the Kehillas (self-governing councils). They pushed for elections and self-rule over other than religious affairs. They were able to force elections, and took part in the elections of 1936. The elections showed great strength for the Bund in Vilna, Lublin, Grodno, Piotrkov, and Warsaw.

Throughout Poland, socialist and Bundist strength continued to grow until the last election in an independent Poland showed the Bund as the strongest party among the Jewish people. In the municipal elections of 1938 the Bund won seventeen of twenty Jewish seats in Warsaw and eleven of seventeen seats in Lodz. Electoral success in a socialist coalition was anticipated at the next national elections, but Poland was invaded by the Nazis, and the election never took place.

World War II marked the end of the Polish Bund, and with it the end of Eastern European Bundism. The Nazis exterminated the Bund's leadership and base. During the war, the Bund took the lead in organizing food and services for the people, and then joined the armed resistance to the Nazis.

The Jewish Bund represented the greatest break with Jewish tradition up to its time, advocating a complete revolution within the community as well as a revolution in the larger society.

NOTES

1. Tobias, Henry, *The Jewish Bund in Russia*, Stanford Press, 1972, p. 55.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 309.
9. Johnpoll, Bernard, *Politics of Futility*, Cornell University Press, 1967, p. 65.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 158.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159.