

The Bund Revisited: II

Was Lenin Right?

By LOUIS HARAP

LENIN'S disagreement with the Bund was founded on two premises. The Bund's position on national cultural autonomy and the Social Democratic Party as a federation of national parties, thought Lenin, was antagonistic to the proletarian movement because, first, the solution of the Jewish Question lay not in the autonomy of Jewish culture but in assimilation; and second, a federation of autonomous national parties rather than one centralized party would weaken the movement.

"We must not weaken the strength of our offensive by breaking into numerous independent parties," said Lenin; "we must not introduce estrangement and isolation and then have to heal an artificially implanted disease with the aid of the notorious 'federation' plasters."

The Bund position on both issues, thought Lenin, stemmed from a "nationalistic" outlook in which the primacy of the proletarian class interest was not recognized. This did not mean that under a centralized party the national interest was ignored, for, as Lenin indicated, such a party would grant a degree of autonomy to its Jewish cadres in working relations with the Jewish community.

Was Lenin's charge that the Bund

advocated an "extra-class culture" justified? In its practice within the Jewish community—at least, in its earliest years—the Bund was instrumental in promoting a working class Jewish culture. The Bund was bitterly opposed to the culture of the rabbis, sometimes even in sectarian fashion, since the rabbis usually supported the Jewish bosses against the Jewish workers. A progressive literature in Yiddish, like the stories of Peretz in the late 1890's, was created under its influence. This working class culture was also advanced by its educational and propagandist activity in Yiddish, by its pamphlets and newspapers, its lectures, readings, cultural evenings and even agitational plays for workers.

Yet, it is true that, when the Bund referred to "national culture," the totality of cultural trends was signified, not only the proletarian. Under the Bund program of a "nation without territory" the strength of various cultural trends, as represented in the proposed national assembly, would be determined by the voting strength of their respective constituencies. There was no guarantee that working class culture would predominate. In the sense, therefore, that it was promoting a situation which was not necessarily partisan to the working class, the

Bund was promoting a non-class concept of culture.

On the other hand one may suppose that, if an overall proletarian governmental order legislated or decreed suppression of reactionary Jewish cultural trends, presumably the Bund would, according to its program of autonomy within the prevailing order, acquiesce to such an eventuality. But, the Bund advocates a "democratic socialism" under which presumably such suppression was against their principles. What would the Bund then do? These situations are speculative. What is clear, however, is that the Bund did not trust a proletarian state necessarily to respect Jewish national rights. For the Fourth Bund Congress in 1901 resolved that "the only guarantee" for "national equal rights" was "national autonomy."

Thus, Lenin's criticism of the Bund's notion of "national culture" as a non-class idea was well-founded, since the Bund did not in its programmatic statements give it a class content. However, one aspect of the Bund position has evaded the analysis here, and that is that the Bund position was an assertion of the Jewish ethnic identity, regardless of class. This identity has for centuries, and still is today, the target of oppression and discrimination. It was because of strong aggrandizing tendencies of national feeling and victimization of the Jews in this regard that the Bund saw in national autonomy the only guarantee of equal national rights.

To "autonomy" Lenin opposed what may be considered a more radical solution, in the sense that it goes to the root of the problem. National oppression is an assertion of privileged status of one nationality over another by the restriction of national and individual rights of mem-

bers of the oppressed nationality. Lenin said that the Marxist program was to enforce "equality of nations and languages, prohibitions of all *privileges* whatsoever in this respect." Thus in the Marxist state all citizens of all nationalities would be subject to the same regulations without privileges to any one group not also available to every other. Each nationality would have a chance to develop and cultivate its national life within a working class internationalism.

Before the Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin could observe two ways in which Jews were being treated. One was the Tsarist, Black Hundreds oppression of the Jews of Russia, and the other the more or less emancipated "assimilated" condition of the Jews of the bourgeois democratic countries, mainly the United States. He approved this assimilation as the socially inevitable and therefore desirable solution to the Jewish Question.

"Only Jewish reactionary philistines . . . [who] want to turn back the wheel of history," he wrote, "to compel it to go not away from the conditions prevailing in Russia and Galicia towards the conditions prevailing in Paris and New York, but the opposite way, can shout against 'assimilation.'" Lenin saw the Bundist conception as an attempt to perpetuate the separatistic ghetto mentality generated in the Pale.

At the same time, Lenin granted that language and cultural needs of the Yiddish-speaking population would be met so long as the need existed. Whatever type of social entity Lenin and other Marxists may have considered the Jews to be—a "caste," a "nationality," or whatever—social circumstances inexorably led to treatment of Jews as a nationality, and their theoretical and legal recognition as such, in the Soviet Union. We have seen how in 1903 Lenin

had envisioned autonomy within a centralized structure. Even Stalin, in *Marxism and the National Question* (1913), as well as in subsequent party documents on the National Question in the 1920's, spoke of the Jews as one of Russia's "national minorities" which would be free from oppression under "complete democracy."

In 1913, Lenin vigorously opposed the Bund's proposal for schools under autonomous Jewish control, since he believed that all schools of whatever nationality should be under the administration and control of the central government like any public school system. At the same time, he agreed that removal of all national privileges would justify in Moscow, for instance, hiring "at state expense, of special teachers of the Jewish language, Jewish history, and so forth, or the provision of state-owned premises for lectures for Jewish, Armenian, or Rumanian children, or even one Georgian child." For Lenin, then, the solution of the Jewish Question, of their oppression and persecution, lay in the absolute removal of every restriction upon their equality, the provision at state expense of all facilities for their national cultural expression and, ultimately, their assimilation into the nation in whose midst they are living.

When the Soviet state came into existence, therefore, the national policy was applied to the several millions of Yiddish-speaking Jews liberated from the ghettos and restrictive laws. Thus it was that Jewish schools, conducted in Yiddish, were established, a Yiddish periodical press and book publishing houses were set up, and Yiddish was even raised to the status of official language in some areas of Jewish concentration. There were even Jewish village Soviets in the Ukraine, Jewish courts and Jewish collective farms, while many Jews

streamed into the factories and into the cities where they had been forbidden before.

At the same time fairly rapid assimilation was taking place. But Stalin was not satisfied with the pace of assimilation, and the Jews became one of the areas of social life which were subjected to Stalin's repression. He instituted measures of "forcible" assimilation, against which Lenin had warned in 1913. Beginning in the late 1930's, Stalin began the demolition of the structure of Jewish institutions, slowly at first, with greater intensity in the post-war period, until the demolition was suddenly completed in 1948, and anti-Jewish measures were applied until Stalin's death in 1953. The post-Stalin policy toward the Jews has yielded a few concessions to Jewish national rights (the Yiddish monthly *Sovetish Heimland*, a few Yiddish books, Jewish concerts, etc.), but the basic policy remains one of forced assimilation, while the existence of a Jewish nationality is acknowledged in various ways, including its recognition on Soviet passports and emigration of Jews to Israel.

The tendency toward assimilation under democratic conditions is an unquestionable fact. Even some Bundists did not question the real possibility of ultimate assimilation of the Jews. In his early years, Vladimir Medem, leading Bund spokesman of his time, in replying to the Bund's critics on *Iskra* in 1904, asserted that the future of the Jews was not predictable, even by the Bund. He had no objection to assimilation, he said, if it came about by a social evolution without external pressures. Assimilation as such, he held, was not necessarily a bad thing. "We are not against *assimilation*," he wrote, but "we are against *assimilationism* . . .

Free from external pressure, the folk organism itself in the course of its development, determines its own fate." Medem's view, however, was a minority position in the Bund, which finally operated in complete opposition to assimilation and assimilationism. Medem also later became a passionate advocate of Yiddish.

In other words, assimilationism as a theory exerts pressure on Jews to merge with the majority people, and hence inhibits Jewish national expression from the outside. Conscious effort by Jews to assimilate is consequently exerted in the direction of sloughing off elements of Jewish culture, and of the deliberate adoption of the ethos and modes of the majority nationality. If the assimilationist believes this process is feasible, he must acknowledge that the reverse also is, that is, clinging to a positive Jewish cultural development. But "it may well be that neither voluntary procedure will be decisive in the long run—however long it may be—but that objective conditions may finally lead to assimilation and the final disappearance of the Jews as a distinct entity.

There is reason to believe, however, that Lenin did not take into account some important features of the "assimilation" that was taking place in the bourgeois democracies. It was such a welcome development that he did not scrutinize it too closely. Since his time, some necessary qualifications to the presumed voluntary nature of the process need to be made, as intervening events have shown only too clearly. We now realize that in many cases it was the persistence of anti-Semitism and discrimination in social, educational, and occupational aspects of life in the bourgeois democracies that brought many Jews to the decision that they could gain eligibility in

these phases of life if they discarded all elements of Jewishness in themselves. In most cases there was a strong element of aspiration toward higher social status.

To be sure, this process was "voluntary" in the sense that the subject "chose" to undergo the change. But can a Marxist—or anyone—say that rejection of national origin and features for the purpose of acceptance into the middle class of the majority nationality is preferable to retention of national identity, even at the cost of reduced class status? And that this choice is totally lacking in social pressures? Can there be any doubt that an extremely important element in the assimilation of second and third generation American Jews was the conscious rejection of Jewish culture of any kind, whether progressive or reactionary, based on the anti-Semitic, WASP, racist denigration of an oppressed Jewish working class culture? But it is also true that the tendency to assimilation of the American Jew had a certain inevitability under conditions of relative democratic freedoms.

Another serious modification of Lenin's view of assimilation has emerged with agonizing acuteness in the past four decades. Recent experience has demonstrated that assimilation does not necessarily constitute a solution of the Jewish Question. Lenin only ignored or at least underestimated the persistence of anti-Semitism and discrimination in the bourgeois democracies; they never dreamed that the most assimilated of western Jewries, the German, would be the victim of genocide. There is bitter irony in looking back on Stalin's statement of 1913, in his polemic with the Bund, that "Germany . . . has a greater or less degree of political freedom. It is not surprising that in

Germany the policy of 'attempts' never takes the form of pogroms."

Nor did Lenin contemplate even the possibility of a recrudescence of anti-Semitism under socialism—in the Soviet Union under Stalin, in the forced assimilation under Stalin, and, in somewhat less draconic form, in the post-Stalin period, or in the unbelievable outcropping of blatant, intense, overt anti-Semitism in Poland in 1967, 25 years after the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism in the socialist countries reached out not only to adherents of Jewish identity and culture, but even to totally assimilated Jews and to some who had given a lifetime to the communist cause.

But what happened to Lenin's theories about the Jews after the Bolshevik Revolution, when he had to grapple in practice with the problem of hitherto oppressed nations and nationalities in Russia, and of the Jews in particular? The theorizing of the pre-World War I period is replaced by a more practical approach, one that would meet stark actualities.

In 1913 Lenin had written about the objective tendency in advanced capitalism, which would presumably continue under socialism, towards an assimilation which was "like a mill which grinds up national distinctions." In the face of the actual problems in the new socialist society, his approach was quite different. In his essay on infantile leftism, he warns that "national and state differences . . . will continue to exist for a very long time even after the dictatorship of the proletariat has been established on a world scale."

About the "abolition of national differences," he wrote that it is "a foolish dream at the present moment." What was primary for Lenin at that time was rather the abolition of national privilege and the raising of the hitherto oppressed nationalities to

equality. In the draft program to the Eighth Party Congress in 1919, Lenin enjoined "particular care . . . in regard to the national feelings of oppressed nations;" he went on to specify, "for example, on the part of the Great Russians, Ukrainians, Poles to the Jews, on the part of the Tartars to the Bakshirs, etc." More than "collaboration . . . to achieve actual equality," he urged more positive action "for the development of the language, the literature of the working masses of the formerly oppressed nations . . . in order to remove all the traces of the lack of confidence and alienation inherited from the epoch of capitalism."

This was the principle that was applied to the Jews in the early years of the Soviet Union. How intensely Lenin felt about anti-Semitism was expressed in a speech in 1919 recorded on the phonograph. "Disgrace and infamy," he cried, "to the damnable Tsarism which tortured and persecuted the Jews! Disgrace and infamy to whoever sows enmity against Jews and hatred of other nations. Long live brotherly faith and unity in the struggle of all nations for the overthrow of capitalism!"

By 1922 Lenin was disturbed by the callous anti-national activities of Stalin and others in relation to the eastern socialist nations of the Soviet Union. He warned against the dangers to "proletarian class solidarity" of "national injustice" and against "the infringement of national equality." Hence, he continued, it is "necessary to lay down the strictest rules regarding the use of national languages in republics of different nationalities belonging to the union." There can be no doubt that, had Lenin lived, the crass violation of these principles in relation to the Jews during the Stalin era would

never have taken place. And one can only speculate what modifications Lenin would have introduced to his thinking about the Jews if he had experienced the Nazi reality.

Since Lenin's time events have imposed modifications in the theory of the imminence and desirability of assimilation. Lenin thought of assimilation as primarily linguistic, while the experience in the United States has shown that there can be a high degree of linguistic assimilation accompanied by a high degree of Jewish consciousness and organization.

As the American Jewish community became acculturated, Jewish organized life spread out in all directions, a Jewish press in English proliferated, and the Jewish community became perhaps the most highly organized ethnic group in the country. These developments made clear the distinction between integration and assimilation, one which was not contemplated in Lenin's pre-1917 theory. Integration of Jews into American life signified relatively free and full participation in most aspects of American economic and social life. At the same time, integration did not imply assimilation, that is, obliteration of Jewish identity. On the contrary, this identification tended to become more pronounced in the third and fourth than in the second generation.

Assimilation—as distinguished from integration—under democratic conditions is now as far away as ever. In the past few years, many decades after Lenin and others had pronounced assimilation as inevitable under advanced capitalism, not to mention socialism, awareness of ethnicity among the various nationalities from which Americans stem has been strongly renewed. How inadequate the theory was can be judged from Kautsky's assertion that the "disap-

pearance of the American Indians" was an exemplary argument of its validity; even the "disappeared" Indians are today asserting new identity, culture, and group rights. The assimilation theory, it turns out, was a simplistic generalization of a complex social reality.

When the pros and cons of the Lenin-Bund polemics are re-examined today with hindsight in the perspective of the momentous events that have occurred in the interim, can we say that the Bund position has been vindicated? This question can be entertained only when it is realized that we are concerned not only with a cultural issue, but with one that is basic to the organization of the revolutionary movement: should the revolutionary party be centralized or be a federation of national parties? If the Bund's position for federation had been followed, would there have been a socialist revolution in 1917? If not, what would have been the consequences? These questions are fruitless to speculate about.

What is clear, however, no matter under what theory one operates, is that, as Stalin said in his 1913 essay on the national question, institutions (and national cultural autonomy means creation of institutions) cannot as such "guarantee the free development of nations"—or nationalities, one may add.

The proof is Stalin's own murderous, repressive course against Jewish culture and Jewish cultural figures. He thereby demonstrated the truth of his own proposition in that same essay that the only guarantee lies in "the general regime prevailing in the country." Thus, he said, "if there is no democracy in the country there can be no guarantee of 'the complete freedom of cultural development' of

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virtues and accomplishments why don't you simply say so? Why the slick double-negative? Can't you bring yourself to say *positively and proudly* that Israel does, indeed, possess virtues and accomplishments—magnificent virtues and accomplishments of which we can all be proud? Why the hedging double-negative, the doubt-casting phraseology? It is almost as though you cannot *argue* Israel's stunning achievements and must refer to them not positively and with justified pride, but negatively, after, of course, you first stress its "failings and shortcomings"!

As for me, I am impelled to shout Israel's successes from the rooftops and it infuriates me to see its "supporters," like Rabbi Goldberg, grudgingly refer to them as "not without virtues and accomplishments." If that's the kind of "support" Israel gets from its friends, what, good Lord, can it expect from its enemies? The closest Rabbi Goldberg gets to condemning the Arab attack is the statement, "nor can anything justify the military attack on its statehood," and "nothing can justify an aggression to correct wrongs, real or alleged." Again, the focus is not on Arab aggression or on Arab refusal to come to the peace table since 1948, or on Arab terror, or in fact on anything wrong about the Arabs, but on "Israeli wrongs"—a stance that is hardly designed to win support and rally world opinion behind us at this crucial and decisive moment.

The point is not that Israeli policy is perfect, or should be immune from criticism, but that for some strange, psychological (probably masochistic) reason, some Jews feel impelled to demand 100% virtue of Israel and of all Israelis before giving them the passionate support they require, and that simple justice demands—a position these same Jews never take when

supporting blacks, Vietnamese, Cambodians, the Chilean people, the Palestinian Arabs and the Arabic people in general, all of whom are embraced equally with the Israelis, but far less critically, by Rabbi Goldberg.

Israel, today, is fighting for its life. It is also fighting in the deepest sense for decency, morality and justice in a world that has all but lost the moral sense.

It needs passionate defenders who are not afraid of justifiable pride, who are capable of rising above previous ideological bias, and who can forego internecine theoretical differences, and negative and destructive in-fighting, at this moment of crisis and decision.

MEYER RANGELL

New York, Jan. 3

Not "All"

Harry Martel of Tarpon Springs, Fla., in a letter Jan. 13 too long to print, notes one error in my article in the Dec. issue, p. 8, "UN Res. 242—What It Says, What It Means." Martel points out that the French language does permit the definite article, "de," for "the." I stand corrected, but the correction does not in any way affect my central point, that when the Security Council acted Nov. 22, 1967, all participants knew that resolutions calling for Israeli withdrawal from "all territories" or "the territories" had been considered and withdrawn without being put to a vote which would have defeated them, while the only resolution that could get unanimity without abstention was the one that was passed, referring to "withdrawal from territories." Thus all those who to this day call for Israeli withdrawal from "all" territories are misquoting and misrepresenting the resolution.

MORRIS U. SCHAPPES

New York, Jan. 14

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nationalities." When Stalin deprived the Soviet Union of any semblance of democracy, he became free to deal with the Jews as he considered necessary for his political purposes.

Similar considerations apply to the bourgeois democracies. Jews enjoyed relative freedom. Cultural activity and the building of cultural institutions took place in accordance with the preferences of the various classes and groups of Jews without interference or obstruction. The national cultural autonomy advocated by the Bund was out of tune with the bourgeois democratic governmental structure, which on principle refrained from any interference in internal affairs of nationalities. The sort of autonomy advanced by the Bund was not necessary or relevant because no national groups enjoyed special privileges, at least under law. The oppression of Blacks, Chicanos and Indians calls for removal of their less privileged status, or, more precisely, the removal of white privilege in relation to them. The problems of our oppressed nationalities would be solved by an extension to them of full democratic and group rights.

Thus, recent years of heightened civil rights struggle have seen the recognition of group rights extend not only to jobs and housing, but also to ethnic studies. There is a movement to obtain recognition of the proper place in history, hitherto neglected, of Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Indians, Jews, and other ethnic groups as part of the movement to eliminate group privilege. Cultural pluralism, the right of ethnic groups to expression of their ethnic character within democratic participation in general life, has supplanted the Melting Pot,

in which national features were to be obliterated.

Thus it is democracy, not autonomy, that is called for in matters of cultural nationality. As Lenin said in 1913, "there is only one solution of the national question (in so far as it can be solved at all in the world of capitalism [and, we must now add, under socialism as well—L.H.] in the world of profit, bickering and exploitation), and that solution is—consistent democracy." No matter whether Jewish institutions exist as wholly voluntary organizations, as in bourgeois democracy, or under a system of relative cultural autonomy, as in the early days of the Soviet Union, the decisive element is the democratic freedom of national development.

The issue for socialists is whether such freedom can best be achieved through a centralized revolutionary effort of all nationality groups, as Lenin held, or by the separate activities of nationalities in coordination. The Bundist solution involves a focus on local national interests which in effect diffuses the forward thrust or even sets up barriers to united action. For the time being, we leave the problem at this point to resume our historical sketch.

(To be continued)

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