

In a house in Vilna

The founding of the Jewish Worker's Bund marked the beginning of a revolution in Jewish life as well as placing the issue of national and cultural rights on the agenda of the Russian socialist movement, says Clive Gilbert

In a small house in Vilna, on 7 October 1897, thirteen Jewish workers' delegates from the cities of the Pale of Settlement 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 Russia, Lithuania and Poland—the Bund. The first mass socialist organisation in the Russian empire was born.

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 demand for Jewish national rights was seen by European Marxists as 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.

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. 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. The Jews of Russia thus constituted a clearly definable national group whose national consciousness had been further intensified by antisemitism, 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. The Bundist leaders saw the establishment of a Jewish social-democratic organisation as an important step along the road to forming an all-Russian socialist party—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 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.

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.

This article is an extract from Clive Gilbert's recently published pamphlet, A Revolution in Jewish Life—The History of the Jewish Workers' Bund. It is available from JSJ, BM 3725 London WC1N 3XX for £1.25 (+25p p&sp).

1987 • ״נינציק יאר, בונד״ • 1897

THE BUND

by Vladimir Medem, 1919

Listen carefully to the word "Bund". It comes from the word to bind. Bind together into one complete entity all separate things with a tie. To join feeble energies into one huge power. Put your ear to the chest of the Jewish worker and listen; his heartbeat is strong and steady. Look into the eyes of the comrade; they are wide open and clear. Take his hand; it is strong and hardened. How come? How is it that a single person, a grain of sand in this huge desert of a world, a tiny drop in the turbulent sea of life which surrounds you with thousands of brutal enemies, which destroys a whole world, grinding countries and states into dust, drowning in its depths countless human existences, how is it that in the middle of this enormous whirlwind stands a person with sparkling eyes, undaunted by the storm? Look, comrade, into your own soul. There you will read the answer: you have a home, a family, a basis to stand on; you can feel that around you, above you and within you there is a great force that supports, embraces and carries you, makes you strong and does not let you fall. Do you know, comrade, the name of this enormous force? Do you know what is the name of your home, your family, your existence, your hope? Stand up comrade! lift up your head and sing the old *Shvueh*! This is the Bund!

An act of resistance

Hirsh Lekert, a young Bundist shoemaker, became a legend and a symbol of Jewish resistance to Tsarist oppression when he attempted to assassinate a viciously antisemitic army general. Majer Bogdanski tells his story.

On 1 May 1902, in the town of Vilna, the Russian, Polish and Lithuanian Socialist parties, together with the Bund, held a united international May Day demonstration. Shortly before then, a new governor had been appointed. His name was von Wahl and he was a Tsarist army general and a German baron. He had already notched up quite a history. As a young officer he took part in suppressing the insurrection of 1863 in Poland. A sadistic antisemite, his first objective was to liquidate the Bund, which he particularly hated.

On that May Day, he filled the streets of the town with secret agents, police, army and Cossacks. At a given signal, the workers came out of their secret assembly places and demonstrated behind two red flags. Soon the police, army and Cossacks stormed the demonstrators, knocking them mercilessly with their rifle butts and swords, severely injuring many of them. They also arrested many people, including Jews.

When von Wahl heard that there were Jews among those who had been arrested, he fell into a rage and decided to teach them a particular lesson; he had them segregated from all the others so they could be flogged. He personally issued the instructions as to how, and of what material, the whips were to be made, and he also supervised the flogging. As a prelude, the day before, all the victims were forced to run between the *stroy*, two lines of police facing one another, who beat the runners with black-jacks. The next day they were dragged, one after the other, stripped naked to the waist, and thrown onto a plank. One guard sat on the victim's head and another on his legs and they gave each of them between 20 and 25 lashes, according to the fancy of von Wahl.

The news of this monstrous deed created an uproar, not only throughout Russia, but also far beyond her borders.

A 20-year-old shoemaker called Hirsh Lekert, a member of the Bund, whose wife was expecting their first baby, on his own initiative, acquired a gun. One evening when von Wahl went to the circus to watch a performance, he waited for him outside. When von Wahl appeared at the exit, Lekert shot him. He only managed to wound him slightly, but Lekert himself was apprehended on the spot and brought to trial before a military court. He was sentenced to death and hanged on 10 June 1902 at 2.10am in a field outside Vilna. The place where he was executed was cordoned off for miles around. The only witnesses were the military doctor, the military rabbi and four battalions of soldiers. When the rabbi asked him to repent for the "murder" he had attempted, Lekert answered that a murder was being committed then — on him.

He walked to the gallows erect and unaided. When the noose that the hangman threw over his head got stuck on his nose, he jerked his head to make it slide down to his neck. He was buried at the spot where he was hanged and then the soldiers marched backwards and forwards until the ground was completely flattened and no one could tell where the grave was. Several attempts were made to find where the body lay, but to no avail.

The effect of Lekert's deed was enormous on both the Jews and the Tsarists. It demonstrated to every one of them that Jewish workers could no longer be despised. Although the Bund was always opposed to individual terror, Hirsh Lekert was recognised as a martyr and was immediately admitted into the pantheon of martyrs of the Bund. He became a national hero and songs were sung about him. Numerous poets wrote about him — and indeed, poems are still being written about him to this day. In Poland, countless youth groups of the Bund wore badges bearing the name of Hirsh Lekert.