

## Introduction

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As Jewish life in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries became more economically and politically precarious, various movements arose which claimed they had found the “solution” to the political dilemmas facing the Jewish people. Some were religious, some frankly assimilationist, some completely universalistic and adherents of socialist doctrines, and some, of course, were nationalistic and Zionist. One political movement, though, combined elements of two strands, Marxist universalism and Jewish nationalism. This grouping of like-minded organizations, active mainly between 1917 and 1956, we have termed the Jewish Communist movement. It had active members throughout the Jewish diaspora, in particular in the various countries of Europe and North America, as well as in Australia, Palestine, South Africa, and South America. These were later interconnected on a global level through international movements such as the World Jewish Cultural Union, or *Alveltlekker Yidisher Kultur Farband* (YKUF), founded in 1937. YKUF, which operated mainly in Yiddish, created a great variety of newspapers and theoretical and literary journals, which allowed Jewish Communists to communicate, disseminate information, and debate issues such as Jewish nationality and statehood independently of other Communists. Though officially part of the larger world Communist movement, in reality the Jewish Communists developed their own specific ideology, which was infused as much by Jewish sources—Labour Zionism, the Jewish Labour Bund, the literature of such Yiddish poets and writers as I. L. Peretz and Sholem Asch—as it was inspired by the Bolshevik revolution.

While some Jewish revolutionaries actively distanced themselves from their Jewish backgrounds, others viewed involvement in Jewish left-wing and labour groups “as the preferred means of resolving both the class and ethnic oppression of Jews.”<sup>1</sup> Their struggle to achieve a better world “overlapped with the liberation of the Jews—whether as individuals or as a people—from the thralldom of generations.”<sup>2</sup> There were many Jews who wished to retain their Yiddish-based culture, and that too proved an acceptable option—as long as they managed to blend, within strict ideological limits, their ethnic identity with their “internationalist” and class-based politics.<sup>3</sup>

When the Soviet state emerged out of the ruins of the Tsarist empire, socialists throughout the world hailed it as the beginning of a new age. For many Jewish radicals, it also heralded the approaching end of some two millennia of persecution and marginalization. The formation of a multiethnic federation of socialist republics was, they maintained, the first step in the legal, social, and economic elimination of anti-Semitism. There was initial sympathy for the Russian revolutionaries who had overthrown the oppressive and anti-Semitic Tsarist autocracy. As one Jewish Communist exclaimed, “There was a tremendous joy and a tremendous friendship between the Gentiles and the Jews. We thought that this was like the Messiah came.”<sup>4</sup> As time went on, the Jewish Communists depicted the Soviet Union as “the one country in which the Jews suffer no more,” where “antisemitism is declared a crime,” and where “Yiddish has been made one of the official state languages.”<sup>5</sup> Visitors to the USSR came back full of enthusiasm, and Jewish intellectuals were especially uncritical.<sup>6</sup> Daniel Soyer has observed that many Jewish travelers who had left the Tsarist lands before World War I saw in the new USSR “not only their old home but their new spiritual homeland as well,” an ideological fatherland as well as the “old country,” a place “nostalgically associated with their families and their own youthful years.”<sup>7</sup> For the east European immigrant generation, “Russia had very concrete personal as well as abstract symbolic meaning.” After 1917 they could identify with the state as well as with their hometowns and Jewish communities.<sup>8</sup> “Through the blur of distance, time and utopian expectations, the Soviet Union became a dreamland of freedom and equality.”<sup>9</sup> Thus was born a Jewish Communism with the Soviet Union at its center.

Jews in the Soviet Union, declared the Jewish left, were now liberated from a discriminatory economic and social system; they could cease occupying “middleman” economic positions in favor of agricultural and industrial pursuits. The transformation of “unproductive” Jews concentrated in trade, commerce, and financial “speculation” into artisans and farmers

would deflect anti-Semitism. The *luftmensh*, the Jew without a trade or skill, eking out a living by his wits in the constricted world of the *shtetl*, the little hamlet, would soon be an historical memory. Jews would become economically, socially, and politically integrated, partners with the other Soviet nations in socialist construction. Even the pre-revolutionary *maskilim*, the enlightened Jewish intelligentsia, had called for the formation of a Jewish farming class in a back-to-the-land movement. Early Soviet propaganda used many of the same themes employed by Zionists, with scenes of muscular Jewish pioneers engaged in working the land, casting off their ghetto past to create healthy new lives on collective farms. The need for Jews to reject their role as “middlemen” and adjust their economic pursuits in order to become “productive” was a concern expressed by almost all Jewish social movements, from Zionism to Communism.

### Jewish Communism as a Variant of Utopian Messianism

The world of Jewish socialism was a secular one and its discourse radical, yet its roots lay deep within the Jewish tradition, which, although far from monolithic, has always embodied a common thread, which Zvi Gitelman has called “the quest for utopia,” a search to improve the world. Jewish Communists sought “to create both a Jewish socialist state and a socialist world.”<sup>10</sup> Though there was much in Jewish life they opposed, from Orthodox Judaism to Zionism, these people did not turn to the Communist parties because they were alienated from the Jewish world, but rather because “of their urge to act for the sake of an improved society and to better the condition of the Jewish workers.”<sup>11</sup> Typical were activists such as the writer Kalman Marmor, a delegate to several of the early Zionist congresses in Europe, a founder of the socialist-Zionist Poale Zion, and the first editor of the socialist *Yidisher Kemfer*. He came to the United States in 1906 at age 27, at first joined the Socialist Party, but threw in his lot with the Communist movement in 1920. “It was neither Marx nor Engels that made me a socialist. I was drawn towards socialism by the [Jewish biblical] prophets,” he would remark many years later. “We were not simply socialists, but *Jewish socialists*.”<sup>12</sup> He became a journalist and literary critic with the Communist Yiddish daily *Morgn-Frayhayt* in New York and a pedagogue with the schools of the International Workers Order (IWO). The east London trade unionist and Communist activist Mick Mindel put it succinctly: “To me being Jewish and being a socialist was a natural thing.”<sup>13</sup> The members

of the Jewish Communist movement were thus not assimilationists, at least not subjectively, unlike some Jews who were as individuals attracted to the mainstream, non-Jewish CPs. They saw no contradiction in participating in pro-Soviet Jewish organizations that, by working for an international transformation of society, would also promote Jewish interests.

The specific strand of Jewish radical socialism called Jewish Communism only emerged, of course, following the Russian Revolution and the founding of a Soviet state guided by the ideals of Marxism-Leninism. Genealogically it was the child and outgrowth of the larger socialist and left-Zionist Jewish milieu, already well organized and in full flower by the turn of the twentieth century. The many writers on the Jewish left, from Moses Hess through Vladimir Medem to Ber Borochov, had already been theorizing and debating the key national and class issues that the Communists would inherit when they broke with the rest of the Jewish socialist world. The Jewish socialist movements, whatever their theoretical or programmatic differences, were all obsessed—that is not too strong a word for it—with trying to solve the “national [read: Jewish] question” and “normalize” the situation of the Jews as a people. Unlike assimilationist Jews who internalized the post-Christian critique of the Jews as a fossilized, provincial caste group destined to integrate into the larger society once emancipated from their parochial religion and given the rights of citizenship (a view espoused by, say, Leon Trotsky or Rosa Luxemburg), Jewish Communists did see a collective and distinctive future for the Jews—or at least for the Jewish working class. They did not hold derogatory or “self-hating” views of the Jewish people, nor were they secular apostates, who renounced their Jewishness when becoming communists.

Jewish Communists sought not to supplant “Jewishness” with socialism and support for the USSR, but rather to augment their Jewish identity via Communism. Even when its members and organizations revolved around the Communist parties, it was nevertheless a specifically Jewish left movement, which, despite major disagreements, could be viewed as one of a family of socialist movements that included, among others, the Jewish Labour Bund, with its diaspora-oriented nationalist socialism and theories of national-cultural autonomy, and the Poale Zion and other socialist Zionist movements, who hoped to build a socialist Jewish *yishuv* (community) in Palestine.

Jewish Communists differed from the Bund in having a political center.<sup>14</sup> For them, the “homeland” would be the new USSR, because of the successful Bolshevik revolution that had made anti-Semitism a crime and had

liberated Russian Jewry. It was logical to be pro-Soviet; after all, the revolution had been beneficial to the Jews of the Tsarist empire. And this conceptual framework was extended elsewhere: if socialism could liberate Jewry in Russia, the same social and political forces confronting capitalist states elsewhere would be “good for the Jews” in the same manner. Jewish Communists considered the Bolshevik Revolution a world-historical event of immense magnitude; it would usher in the realization of socialism throughout the world and thus lead to the transformation of Jewish life and society and the ultimate liberation of Jews everywhere. All of this inspired the theoreticians of the movement, who were remarkably critical of contemporary Jewish life in the diaspora, their deprecatory language exhibiting little sympathy toward the “bourgeois” milieu in which they operated. Later, during the 1930s and World War II, the benefit of being allied to a Soviet Union in the forefront of the battle against Hitlerism seemed to vindicate and make self-evident the Jewish Communist attachment to the Soviet Union.

The ideology of Jewish Communism was a combination of socialism and secular Jewish nationalism, though—and this is important to emphasize—the latter was often only a muted form of discourse, becoming more audible at critical moments such as the Second World War and the struggle for a Jewish state in Palestine. In any case, they affected one another in profound ways. Thus, proletarian Jewish culture (especially in Yiddish) for Jewish Communists constituted the most authentic expression of being Jewish, of a secular *Yidishkayt*. The Yiddish language and its literature were perceived as the primary vehicle of Jewish continuity, hence the importance given to a secular and radical Yiddish school system and to Yiddish cultural production. Indeed, poets and novelists and essayists, I. L. Peretz being an obvious example, often had pride of place over political figures. Rejecting religious and traditional Judaism, the Jewish Communists believed they could advance their cultural self-identity within a Marxist-Leninist framework. Even while being part of a larger Communist “family,” the extensive network of groups fashioned by the Jewish Communists enabled them to create what Arthur Liebman has called a “communist-oriented subculture”<sup>15</sup> that was largely independent of the Communist Party. The Jewish Communist movement created its own fraternal organizations, with active members throughout the Jewish diaspora, in particular in various countries in Europe, North and South America, Australia, Palestine (later Israel), and South Africa.

Some might call these Jewish movements “pro-Soviet” rather than “Communist,” and of course they were. But that is a distinction without a

difference, because by the 1930s the Communist parties themselves were to a large extent doing Moscow's bidding and so were also "pro-Soviet" organizations. They called themselves Communist, and while the Jewish front organizations did not use that word, often preferring "progressive," they were all part of the same communist apparatus emanating from the Kremlin.

Moreover, we define these Jewish movements as communist, even if they were not so officially, because almost all of the main figures that actually organized and led them were members of Communist parties and followed the Soviet "line" on all important issues—even condoning, as the New York Yiddish daily the *Frayhayt* did, the 1929 pogrom against Jews in Hebron and the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. These organizations all operated under the auspices of their respective Communist parties and were, in the final analysis, bureaucratically tied (sometimes in "hidden" ways) to the Soviet Union. In Canada, Jewish Communists organized the United Jewish People's Order, in the United States, the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, in Britain, branches of the Workers' Circle. They published books and journals, and operated schools and camps. They were part of a wider cradle-to-the-grave world of Yiddish secular immigrant organizations. Indeed, one could be part of this movement without formal adherence to the party. And that whole "Communist solar system" would remain firmly tied to the Soviet Union (as opposed to China or other breakaway Communist states) through much of the Cold War and beyond.

But the Jewish Communist movements were not simple extensions of Communist parties; a majority of their members were neither Communist Party members, nor even Communists. Like the other Jewish left movements, the Jewish Communists had a deep feeling for Jewish history and emerged from the same historic and economic conditions as the other Jewish socialist movements of the time. They all were products of the Jewish enlightenment or *haskala*, the growth of Yiddish as a language of culture and literature, the proletarianization and impoverishment of the Jews in the Russian Pale of Settlement before 1917, and the organization of Jews into trade unions and other resistance organizations as a response to pogroms and persecution. Jewish Communism was, as were the other leftist Jewish groups, a movement of an oppressed nationality, in a sense a movement for a people in exile who had yet to create a socialist Jewish state or even become part of a diaspora state where Jews would have internal freedom as a people. All sought in one manner or another to liberate Jews from the oppressive aspects of diasporic exile, which was felt as a dialectical antithesis to "home-land" and redemption via socialism. And all of them initially supported the

1917 Russian revolutions and the overthrow of Tsarist autocracy, which had legitimized and even legalized anti-Semitism, numerous economic, political, and residential restrictions on Jewish life, and pogroms and violence.

The perspective of the Jewish Communists was, even if not articulated in such terms, oftentimes closer to the historic Jewish narrative of exile and redemption than to so-called “scientific socialism” and class struggle and, while ostensibly concentrating on organizing on “the Jewish street” alone, it was just as much concerned with the worldwide situation of Jews, especially after the rise of fascism, the Holocaust, and the eventual formation of the state of Israel. Their historical heroes and “role-models,” and even their ideological mentors, were as likely to be Jewish radicals and literary figures in Europe or the United States as non-Jews of the left. The Jewish Communists saw themselves as part of a larger movement, active in Canada, the United States, Mexico, Argentina, Britain, France, South Africa, and even Palestine itself, all working for socialism in the interests of the Jews as a people—a very different perspective from that of the non-Jewish Communist parties. Indeed, one Jewish Communist in the United States had even been brazen enough in 1920 to broach the idea of “an alliance of Jewish Communist bodies the world over,” a Jewish section of the Communist International, or Comintern—an offer rebuffed by the Soviets as somewhat smacking of nationalism if not indeed Zionism!<sup>16</sup> More internationally minded than most other people on the left, and being especially interested in what was transpiring in what for a large number was their place of birth, their “old country,” now suddenly a “new socialist state,” they especially sought contact with Soviet Jewish bodies such as the *Evsheksiya*, the Jewish Section of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) in the 1920s, and the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFK) in the 1940s. While Jewish liberation throughout the diaspora was the long-term goal, the short-term Communist frame of reference was remarkably similar to that of Zionism: emancipation and rejuvenation, the creation of a “new” Jew, would initially occur in one country. Not, of course, in the Land of Israel, but rather in the USSR, particularly in Birobidzhan, in the Soviet Far East.

Again, it is extremely important to emphasize that the movement was a contradiction, whether its members realized it or not; it was *Jewish*, its focus was on Jews and the Jewish world, yet it tied itself to a non-Jewish ideology. It was for a long time able to overcome this dilemma by its uncritical support of those Soviet nationality policies that involved autonomous Jewish jurisdictions, at first in the Crimea, Belarus, and Ukraine, and later in the territory set aside for Soviet Jews in Birobidzhan; as well, it took at

face value Soviet opposition to anti-Semitism. Still, this tension—between the concern for Jews and the voluntary self-subjection to Communist Party discipline by the leadership—often led to major problems, in particular in relation to the Jewish *yishuv* in Palestine. Thus, the dilemma, never really resolved, that confronted Jewish Communists: how to “square the circle” between their desire to improve the life of the Jewish “masses,” while needing to conform to the dictates of the international Communist movement, as interpreted by its ideological and political leadership in the Soviet Union. As mentioned, they suffered a major setback in 1929, following the murder of Jews by Arabs in Hebron, which Moscow considered an “anti-imperialist” act. Even worse were their rationalizations around the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact. Many individual members quit at those times, while those who stayed on were often conflicted, in a sense having personally internalized their own ideological predicament. (Nor did this dilemma remain an issue with their children and grandchildren: most of those who stayed on the left became New Leftists or social liberals, while others rejoined mainstream Jewish communities. Still others, of course, left the Jewish world altogether.)

### The Birobidzhan Project

Birobidzhan, a sparsely populated area of 13,895 square miles (36,490 square kilometers) in the Amur-Ussuri district of the Far Eastern Territory of the USSR, just north of Manchuria, was set aside by the Soviets as an area for Jewish settlement in 1928, twenty years before the Zionist establishment of the state of Israel. It was, in part, the result of Vladimir Lenin’s nationality policy, which stated that each of the national groups that formed the Soviet Union would receive a territory in which to pursue cultural autonomy in a socialist framework. Jews in Birobidzhan were to possess their own administrative, educational, and judicial institutions. For the Jewish Communists, the idea was to create a new Soviet Zion, where a proletarian Jewish culture could be developed. Yiddish, rather than Hebrew, would be the national language, and a new socialist literature and arts would replace religion as the primary expression of culture. This would broaden Jewish culture and create a new Jewish spirit.<sup>17</sup>

The Birobidzhan project is probably best understood in the context of that form of Jewish nationalism known as territorialism, a proto-Zionist doctrine that preached the formation of a sovereign Jewish collective in a suitable territory anywhere in the world, and not necessarily in the Land

of Israel. From the time of the great upheavals in Russia's Pale of Settlement after 1881, these proposals addressed the lack of civil rights and political exclusion of Jews in the diaspora. The solutions included emigration to and settlement in rural, agricultural areas in Argentina, Australia, Canada, and the United States, among many other places, and even the creation of a Jewish polity in Uganda. So the proposal of a Jewish entity in Birobidzhan aroused wide interest among those who sought a solution to Jewish statelessness, especially among those enamored of the Soviet state or Communist ideology.

In much the same way as Zionist organizations considered themselves support groups for the building of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine, so did the Jewish Communists propagandize on behalf of the new Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan, forming groups such as the ICOR (Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union—*Gezelschaft far Yidische Kolonizatsye in Ratn-Farband*) in Canada and the United States, ICOS (Organization for Jewish Colonization in Soviet Russia—*Organizatsye far Yidische Kolonizatsye in Sovyet-Rusland*) in Great Britain, and GEZERD (named for the Soviet organization, Association for the Settlement of Jewish Toilers on the Land—*Alfarbandishe Gezelschaft farn Aynordenen Oyf Erd Arbetndike Yidn in F.S.S.R.*) in Australia and South Africa.

The well-regarded journalist B. Z. Goldberg of the New York Yiddish daily *Der Tog*, who favored the Birobidzhan idea, in 1928 declared it more important than the colonization ongoing in Argentina and Palestine. “[Theodor] Herzl almost took Uganda in the wilds of Africa,” he observed. What would Herzl have said had the Tsar offered him Birobidzhan, “and on such terms!” Goldberg suggested that Jews should not pass up this opportunity.<sup>18</sup>

By the mid-1930s a massive propaganda campaign was underway to induce Jewish settlers to move to Birobidzhan. Some of these efforts incorporated the standard Soviet propaganda tools of the era, and included Yiddish-language posters and novels describing a socialist utopia. Posters from the 1930s resemble Zionist literature from the same era, exhorting diaspora Jewry to help build a Jewish land—in Russia. The propaganda impact was so effective that several thousand Jews immigrated to Birobidzhan from outside of the Soviet Union in the 1930s. In 1934 it was officially elevated to the status of a Jewish Autonomous Region. During that time, the Jewish population of the region peaked at almost one-third of the total: some 41,000 Jews had relocated to Birobidzhan. Some spoke optimistically of an eventual Jewish majority of perhaps a million people. It was hoped the region would evolve into a full-fledged Soviet socialist republic, similar to,

say, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, or Ukraine. Hence, the Birobidzhan projects tapped into the subterranean but very powerful secular nationalist sentiments of the Jewish Communist movement.

This worldview, which combined socialism, Yiddishism, and secular nationalism, was part of the ideological baggage that left Eastern Europe along with the massive immigration of east European Jews, and was thus transferred to the countries discussed in this book. As Paul Buhle has recounted, “a Messianic radicalism among the immigrant Jewish workers . . . allowed Communism to appeal to some of the deepest traditions of the community.”<sup>19</sup> “Utopian and quasi-messianic visions were . . . endemic to the East European [Jewish] style of politics.”<sup>20</sup> This “messianic” aspect of the ideology, as evidenced in the rhetoric of Jewish Communists as they marshalled support for a new Zion, would replace the old Judaic ideal of a return to the Land of Israel with an idealized Soviet Russia as the new “promised land.”

### The Apogee of Jewish Communism

The period from the mid-1930s to the late 1940s proved to be the historical “moment” for the Jewish Communists. As a result of political developments in the international arena, they benefited from a favourable political climate. In 1935 the Communist International (Comintern), in an attempt to counter the growth of fascism and Nazism, decided to allow Communist parties considerable leeway in their efforts to attract wider segments of their populations, calling for a new “Popular Front” to combat fascism. One such attempt was an appeal to minorities along openly ethnic lines; Jewish Communists were encouraged to assume political and moral leadership of broad alliances within their respective communities.

In the United States especially, the new Popular Front policy initiated a major shift in the attitude of the Jewish Communists, as they began to openly embrace Jewish culture and topics of general Jewish interest that had previously been considered taboo. The pages of the Yiddish Communist press during the Popular Front era were filled with calls for unity among the Jewish masses, campaigns against anti-Semitism, and a renewed interest in secular Yiddish culture, largely absent during the previous period.<sup>21</sup> This was all part of their attempt at establishing the Communists as mainstream leaders in American Jewish life, friendly to Jewish issues. They would no longer define themselves simply as Yiddish-speaking workers, but as *Jewish* Communists, who were an integral part of the larger Jewish community.

Within the next decade, Jewish Communists would become involved in “popular front” campaigns on behalf of anti-fascist struggles in Spain and elsewhere. They called attention to the destruction of the Jews of Eastern Europe. They were in the forefront of support for the Soviet Union in its struggle against Hitler. During World War II, they took their political cue from the Moscow-based Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, and helped sponsor the 1943 tour of the Soviet Jewish emissaries Itzik Fefer and Shloime Mikhoels to Canada, the United States, Mexico, and Britain. By 1945, most were also favorably disposed toward a Jewish state, and were instrumental in moving the world Communist movement in that direction. This relatively short-lived but favorable conjuncture of ethnic and class forces, whereby their ideological tenets and Jewish interests were to a large extent congruent, enabled Jewish Communists in several countries to post a number of electoral and ideological victories in constituencies with significant Jewish populations.

In the July 1945 British general election, Phil Piratin, a Communist candidate, was elected to Parliament from the predominantly Jewish constituency of Mile End, Stepney. That autumn, the Stepney Communist Party won ten seats on the borough council, and the following spring, two seats on the London County Council. In the Cartier riding of Montreal, Fred Rose, running for the Labor-Progressive (Communist) Party, won election to the House of Commons in 1943 and 1945; two LPP candidates, including J. B. Salsberg, won seats in the 1945 Ontario provincial election. In the United States, Leo Isacson, running on behalf of the Communist-dominated American Labor Party, won election in 1948 to the House of Representatives from the largely Jewish 24th Congressional District in the Bronx, New York. And South Africa witnessed the election, in November 1948, of Sam Kahn, a leading Communist Party theoretician. (He was actually elected by Black Africans in Cape Province.) The movement was also very active in the Jewish communities of Argentina, France, Mexico, and Uruguay.<sup>22</sup>

## The Demise of Jewish Communism

Jewish Communism remained a significant force in Jewish life until the mid-1950s when its demise was swift and far-reaching with much of the Jewish Communist orbit crashing to the ground. For, unlike the other leftist Jewish movements, Jewish Communism was itself a political and ideological paradox that would doom it in the end. Although largely built around its

own autonomous institutions and operating in its own language, Yiddish, and organizing a Jewish socialist life, it remained (until 1956) voluntarily under the discipline of a non-Jewish state, and a world Communist movement, that would prove to be a major enemy of the Jewish people. In a sense, the ideological basis of the movement, Marxism-Leninism, had always required a “suspension of disbelief” on the part of Jewish Communists. Ideologically, they managed for a few decades to survive in the interstices between the Jewish and Communist worlds. After all, when it came to many of the major works of Marxist writers and political actors, from Marx himself through Lenin and Stalin, their characterizations of Jews were, to say the least, uncharitable, and their polemics often downright anti-Semitic. This vulnerability would prove to be the movement’s Achilles heel. The USSR was the pole of reference for Jewish Communists, mainly because of that new state’s supposed positive relationship to its Jewish population, and only secondarily because of its supposed economic and political accomplishments. And when that proved to have been a delusion by the mid-1950s, the vast majority of Jewish Communists, forced to choose between their *Jewish* and their *pro-Soviet* attachment to socialism, overwhelmingly chose the former. Belonging to the CP was, even if they felt deep commitment, a contingent and utilitarian, not a basic, element of their identity. It was contingent on their belief that Soviet-style socialism would solve the “Jewish question.”

In February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev, leader of the Soviet Union, delivered a speech to the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party in which he denounced the crimes committed by Joseph Stalin and his associates. Stalin’s anti-Semitic campaigns, which had intensified after 1948, were also finally acknowledged. The Warsaw Yiddish Communist newspaper *Folks-shtime* in April 1956 published articles about the extent and virulence of Stalin’s anti-Semitism. All of this came as a shock to Jewish Communists in the western countries. They were already becoming ideologically marginalized within the larger Jewish communities after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the disillusionment with the Soviet Union greatly accelerated the process. Within a matter of years, the movement virtually vanished. Apart from the failure of Jewish colonization efforts in the Soviet Far East, by the 1950s most American Jews were aware that in Russia the Jewish alliance with victorious Communism that had been entered into with great enthusiasm by some sectors of Soviet Jewry had ended in the destruction not only of traditional Jewish life, something which the Jewish left had, after all, actually desired, “but in the destruction of nearly all aspects of autonomous Jewish life.”<sup>23</sup>

For so many decades, the Jewish Communists had defended the USSR: after all, how could a state that had granted Jews national rights in Birobidzhan, allowed for the development of Yiddish-language institutions, and defeated Nazism, have betrayed the Jews? But after Stalin's death and the denunciation of his totalitarian policies by Nikita Khrushchev, when the depth of Soviet anti-Semitism and the forced assimilation policies directed at Soviet Jews under Stalin had become clear, it was too powerful a contradiction to ignore or rationalize. As well, the Birobidzhan project, as so much else, had been exposed as largely fraudulent and a complete failure. The so-called Jewish Autonomous Region was a large "Potemkin village."<sup>24</sup>

Revelations of anti-Semitism in the highest ranks of the Soviet Communist hierarchy also led to defections on the part of "fellow-travelers." The "Jewish problem" was more deep-rooted and difficult of solution than the heady propaganda of the 1930s produced by the Jewish Communist movements had ever imagined. Perhaps the coup de grace was the creation of the state of Israel, to which most overseas Jewish efforts henceforth would be directed. Internationalism seemed a harder faith to sustain after the death of six million Jews. Despite the Allied victory, it had become apparent that European Jewry had been the true losers of the war—and that none of the allied powers had been overly concerned with the crematoria. Many Jews drew the conclusion that the catastrophe was due to statelessness and lack of sovereignty, a condition Israel would at least partially rectify, but which Birobidzhan could not.

The Jewish Communist movement could thus no longer serve as a Jewish diaspora support group for a state that had not only failed to "solve the Jewish question," but had arguably made conditions worse for its Jewish citizens, certainly in terms of cultural and political freedom, a state that turned out to be one that had perpetuated the marginal and exilic condition of Jews rather than liberating them from it. This was indeed a watershed, and after 1956 the contours of Jewish and non-Jewish Communism would speedily diverge, even amongst those who did not immediately quit the Communist parties and renounce Communism altogether. Further shocks were to follow: the unconditional and uncritical Soviet support of the Arab side in the 1967 Arab-Israeli Six-Day War, and a year later the Soviet destruction of a reformist government in Czechoslovakia and the "anti-Zionist" campaigns in Poland, which drove out the remainder of Polish Jewry, including many who had remained loyal to Communism.

The remaining Jewish sympathizers in pro-Communist movements would now be forced to withdraw overt support from any Communist

Party that continued to remain loyal to the Soviet Union. In the end, their Jewish identities trumped their support for the Soviet Union. After all, the Jewish Communists had finally come to recognize that the Soviet Union had proved to be a major danger both to those Jews living under the harsh rule of Communism in the USSR and, later, in Soviet-dominated eastern European countries. As well, given Moscow's increasingly vicious anti-Zionism and support of Arab Middle Eastern countries, it was a danger to those Jews living in Israel itself.

The demise of Jewish Communism was a part of the passing of an entire era in Jewish life. As the state of Israel became the central and most important feature of post-war Jewish life, Birobidzhan receded into the mists of dim memory. The Jewish Communists, for all of their ideals, their cleverness, and their efforts, were never able to prove that a Soviet Jewish republic had actually emerged in the Far East. As Israel's star rose, so did pro-Soviet groups ossify and wither away. The Jewish Communist movement had become caught in the ambiguity, indeed contradictions, of their own ideology: a pro-Soviet internationalism combined with an interest in Jewish national regeneration; support for a Zionist-style enterprise in far-off Siberia but opposition to Zionism itself.

In any case, the Jewish community in the immediate post-war world was a very different place than it had been in the 1930s and 1940s. Jews were moving out of the old downtown neighborhoods and into the suburbs; they were leaving the workforce in the garment industries and entering business and the professions. Jewish Communists found it difficult to reestablish their institutions and gain a hearing for their ideas in these newer areas of settlement. The increasingly bourgeois socioeconomic position of Ambijan's own membership, which had prospered greatly during World War II, made it difficult for the organization to even retain the loyalty of those already in the movement. The dream of a Jewish culture grounded in Communist-inspired political values now appeared absurd.

Finally, there was a large influx of Holocaust survivors into Australia, Canada, and the United States after World War II: most were more traditionalist in culture and religion and harbored few illusions about the USSR and the new people's democracies, in which many had spent periods of time. More recent Jewish immigration from the Soviet Union and its successor states brought further waves of people who were living proof of the failure of the Bolshevik experiment. All these changes shifted the community away from the far-left politically. "The older Yiddish-socialist subculture could not survive this constellation of forces, nor . . . could Communists and other

radicals find effective ways of challenging it.”<sup>25</sup> As for the broader Jewish community, its interests by the 1960s centered around Israel; most Jews had come to see the USSR as an enemy of the Jewish people and its state.

Some of the Jewish Communists who had been involved with the various support movements would continue their pro-Soviet activities in a much-diminished Communist world; the YKUF and a few other remnants survived the 1950s. They had devoted their entire lives to the movement and remained within its self-contained walls. They belonged to a party that was stronger than any religion. But even after breaking with the international Communist movement, the Jewish Communists would never be able to shake off the stigma in the wider Jewish community of having been a pro-Soviet movement. Lamented Shirley Novick, widow of the former editor of the New York-based Yiddish Communist newspaper, the *Frayhayt*, “We believed in the party like religious Hasidim.”<sup>26</sup> Little wonder then, that by the 1960s, they had faded into an insignificant sect.

Irving Howe has remarked that many Jewish Communists were “marked by a deep ambivalence toward everything Jewish. . . . They declared themselves internationalist, even cosmopolitan, in outlook and concerned mostly with raising the class consciousness of all workers, yet they could not escape the impulse common to many immigrant Jews of building a hermetic community of their own.”<sup>27</sup> Such “aging immigrants could not give up a lifetime of psychological investment,” observed Arthur Hertzberg, and they were, as Paul Lyons wrote about Philadelphia Jewish Communists, “reluctant to abandon [their] protective if shrinking subculture.”<sup>28</sup> The Communist Party, observed Nathan Glazer, “was their entire life” and itself had become, as Maurice Isserman put it, “a comfortable retirement home.”<sup>29</sup>

To be fair, for some, Communism also retained an ethical core, the search for social justice, and it remained a noble endeavor that had become a barbarous totalitarianism for specific reasons relating to the Soviet leadership, in particular Stalin. A few began to look at other “models,” especially China and Cuba. But these countries would be of no particular interest to most Jews who had become Communists or pro-Communists specifically because they were Jewish and the USSR had “solved the Jewish question.” As an “ethno-political” movement, after 1956 “Jewish Communism” had virtually ceased to exist.

This book examines the flowering of Jewish Communism in the Anglophone countries of Australia, Canada, Great Britain, South Africa, and the United States. It places the Jewish Communist movement within the historical context of a Jewish left subculture. Other countries where the

movement flourished include Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, France, Mexico, and Uruguay, which were also nations with considerable east European Jewish immigration. That story must await another book.

In our volume, Matthew Hoffman looks at Yiddish-language Communists in the United States. Also in America, Jennifer Young provides a study of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, while Genady Estraiikh examines the career of Paul Novick, the long-time editor of the Communist *Frayhayt*.

Henry Srebrnik focuses on the work of pro-Soviet Jewish organizations in Canada, while Ester Reiter concentrates on women in the Canadian Jewish Communist movement, and on the political activities of the United Jewish People's Order. Stephen Cullen discusses the nature of Jewish involvement with Communism in Britain while Philip Mendes provides an overview of the organizations founded by Jewish Communists in Australia. Finally, David Saks describes the political work of a number of influential Jewish Communists active in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa; some lived to see it finally toppled. The concluding chapter sums up our work.

## Notes

1. Philip Mendes, "The Rise and Fall of the Jewish/Left Alliance: An Historical and Political Analysis," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 45, No. 4 (1999): 497. In his expanded study of the disproportionate historical contribution of Jews to the political Left, Mendes attributes the association of Jews with the Left to a combination of four factors: class and ethnic oppression; Jewish cultural values; Left support for Jewish equality; and the urbanization and intellectualism of Jews. See *Jews and the Left: The Rise and Fall of a Political Alliance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 5–18.

2. Anita Shapira, "'Black Night—White Snow': Attitudes of the Palestinian Labor Movement to the Russian Revolution, 1917–1929," in *Essential Papers on Jews and the Left*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 241.

3. The literature on Marxist attitudes, both positive and negative, toward the national aspirations of the Jewish people is truly enormous. See Enzo Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate (1843–1943)*, trans. Bernard Gibbons (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994). See also Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Ronaldo Munck, *The Difficult Dialogue: Marxism and Nationalism* (London: Zed Books, 1986); and Ephraim Nimni, *Marxism and Nationalism: Theoretical Origins of a Political Crisis* (London: Pluto Press, 1991) for a survey of historic Communist positions on nationality.

4. David Leviatin, *Followers of the Trail: Jewish Working-Class Radicals in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 98.

5. Matthew Hoffman, "The Red Divide: The Conflict Between Communists and their Opponents in the American Yiddish Press," *American Jewish History* 96, No. 1 (2010): 22, citing Moyshe Olgin, "The Only Way Open For Jews," *Morgn-Frayhayt*, November 3, 1936.

6. Zosa Szajkowski, *Jews, Wars, and Communism* Vol. I: *The Attitude of American Jews to World War I, the Russian Revolutions of 1917, and Communism (1914–1945)* (New York: Ktav, 1972), 408–12.

7. Daniel Soyer, "Back to the Future: American Jews Visit the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s," *Jewish Social Studies* 6, No. 3 (2000): 125–26, 130.

8. Daniel Soyer, "Soviet Travel and the Making of an American Jewish Communist: Moissaye Olgin's Trip to Russia in 1920–1921," *American Communist History* 4, No. 1 (2005): 1, 3–5, 20.

9. Gennady Estraiikh, "The Yiddish-Language Communist Press," in *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism (Studies in Contemporary Jewry 20)*, eds. Dan Diner and Jonathan Frankel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 66.

10. Zvi Gitelman, "Introduction," in *The Quest for Utopia: Jewish Political Ideas and Institutions Through the Ages*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), x–xi.

11. Bat-Ami Zucker, "The 'Jewish Bureau': The Organization of American Jewish Communists in the 1930s," in *Modern History: Bar-Ilan Studies in History III*, ed. Michael J. Cohen (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991), 146.

12. Sholem Shtern, "Bageygenishn un shmusen mit Kalman Marmor," *Yidishe Kultur* 43, No. 5 (1981): 14 (emphasis in original). For more on Marmor, see his biography, *Mayn Lebns-geshikhte*, 2 vols. (New York: YKUF, 1959).

13. Mick Mindel, "Socialist Eastenders," *Jewish Socialist* 6/7 (1986): 26.

14. *Doikayt* ("here-ness") was the Bundist principle that called for Jews "to remain in the Diaspora and fight for their national and political rights rather than waste their proletarian energy on building a Jewish state." It was anti-Zionist but was also opposed to the Communist project in the Soviet Union. Gennady Estraiikh, "Professing Leninist Yiddishkayt: The Decline of American Yiddish Communism," *American Jewish History* 96, No. 1 (2010): 56.

15. Arthur Liebman, *Jews and the Left* (New York, 1979), 305.

16. Melech Epstein, *The Jew and Communism: The Story of Early Communist Victories and Ultimate Defeats in the Jewish Community, U.S.A. 1919–1941* (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1959), 78.

17. An excellent overview of the entire project is provided by Allan Laine Kagedan, *Soviet Zion: The Quest for a Russian Jewish Homeland* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), and Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland. An Illustrated History, 1928–1996* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

18. B. Z. Goldberg, "Tsvishn 'icor'-mentsshn," *ICOR* 1, No. 1 (1928): 2–4.

19. Paul Buhle, "Jews and American Communism: The Cultural Question," *Radical History Review* 23 (Spring, 1980): 11, 14.

20. Jonathan Frankel, "Modern Jewish Politics East and West (1840–1939): Utopia, Myth, Reality," in Gitelman, *The Quest for Utopia*, 84.

21. See Bat-Ami Zucker, "American Jewish Communists and Jewish Culture in the 1930s," in *Modern Judaism* 14, No. 2 (May, 1994), 175–85, for an in-depth look at the transition from the Third Period to the Popular Front in terms of Jewish Communist approaches to Jewish culture.

22. For a detailed account of this history, see Henry Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism, 1935–1945* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1995); *Jerusalem on the Amur: Birobidzhan and the Canadian Jewish Communist Movement, 1924–1951* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008); and *Dreams of Nationhood: American Jewish Communists and the Soviet Birobidzhan Project, 1924–1951* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010).

23. Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 119.

24. Ezer Goldberg, "A Yubl vos vert nisht Gefeyert: 25 Yor fun der Birobidzhaner Autonomer Gegnt," *Unzer Tsayt* 10 (1959): 30.

25. Paul Lyons, "Philadelphia Jews and Radicalism: The American Jewish Congress Cleans House," in *Philadelphia Jewish Life, 1940–1985*, ed. Murray Friedman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 61.

26. Interview with Shirley Novick, New York, June 13, 1996.

27. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 330.

28. Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 265; Paul Lyons, *Philadelphia Communists, 1936–1956* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 165.

29. Nathan Glazer, *The Social Basis of American Communism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press edition, 1974), 165; Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer . . . : The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 24.