

Diasporism – the Bund and beyond

To restore the Bund to its rightful place in the Jewish radical tradition is important and I hope this evening's webinar will contribute to making their history more widely known in the UK.

But, at the same time, I'm wary of saying that Jewish Voice for Labour continues the Bund's traditions or that we are, in any serious sense, Bundist. I will try to explain why by looking at two things in the brief ten minutes I've got at my disposal.

First the Bund's achievements have to be located and appreciated in the *very specific historical context* that made them possible. It is dramatically different from the world we are now live in.

Second, there is a rich Jewish radical tradition which has *its own sources of inspiration* and is far, far broader than, and often unconnected, with the Bundist world and its traditions.

So let's first look at the context in which the Bund emerged.

Of 11 million Jews worldwide, more than 5 million lived in the Russian Empire. They were hugely concentrated by government policy in the Pale of Settlement (a limited number of governorships to the West and South of the Russian Empire) and in the Congress Kingdom of Poland). Described by Alain Brossat and Sylvie Klingberg in their path-breaking early 1980s book *Revolutionary Yiddishland* as a "wretched, over-exploited populace several million strong, concentrated and very homogeneous in terms of its conditions of existence, its traditions and cultural references, its language".¹ It was also at the heart of the vast wave of industrialisation which swept over Russia from the 1880s or thereabouts, tearing apart traditional Jewish communities and settled social relationships. It was a complete social world in which the overwhelming majority could be called proletarian and came to see themselves as such.

In that book Brossat and Klingberg set out to recuperate something of the fighting spirit of that past world, interviewing survivors in 1981-82 who had been active in every kind of revolutionary organisation: some Jewish like the Bund or Poale Zion; some communist, socialist, Trotskyist. They all shared a belief, in the words of the Internationale, that "the earth shall rise on new foundations; we have been naught we shall be all!"

They participated in every upheaval from before the 1905 revolution in Russia, to the battlefields of the Russian Civil War and then later in the International Brigades in Spain, in the French, Belgian, Yugoslav and other resistance movements and many more. As Pierre Vidal-Naquet wrote: **"The Judaism of Eastern Europe really did serve as the blood bank of the proletarian revolutionary movements."**²

The Bund, as we have heard was an integral part of this vast movement. But we must always remember the choices made – and in what became the Soviet Union the Bund's choice was largely to dissolve itself into the broader Communist movement – that is to say to choose to

¹ Alain Brossat and Sylvie Kingberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland: A History of Jewish Radicalism*, Verso Books 2016 (1st published in French in 1983), p.2

² Cited in *ibid*.

fight for Jewish liberation in the broader struggle without putting Jewish self-organisation as the *raison d'être* for its existence.

In Poland things developed differently. Here the Bund continued and was to thrive because of factors related to the structure of the Jewish population and the peculiarities of Polish history: a relatively highly concentrated, socially homogenous, Yiddish-speaking, largely self-enclosed Jewish world, of sufficient weight to act as a national minority and to impose itself and resist the rampant antisemitism which existed there, sometimes working with the Polish Socialist Party against the increasingly fascist-inclined national government.

At one level you can say that the Bund was essentially a self-defence organisation with its own highly developed militias to oppose antisemitism. Its success in doing this was an important part of its strength, popularity and ability to survive as an autonomous party and to develop the values we've heard about this evening.

The argument between the Bundists and the Communists and others was not about organising amongst Jews to further the interests of a socialist transformation, nor even about using Yiddish; but to what extent it was necessary and/or desirable to organise in *autonomous* Jewish organisations to do this. The Bundists made their choices, increasingly emphasising cultural, educational, trade-union and organisational autonomy in the circumstances of their times.

There was, it has to be acknowledged, at times a certain proprietorial air to the Bund trying to keep Jewish workers within its fold, demanding, for instance, that all unions should have a separate Jewish affiliate, even when their members worked in far more ethnically-integrated workplaces. [as our chair, Nira, put it in a 1987 essay: "whereas the Bund began by arguing the socialist cause to the Jewish masses, it eventually came to argue the Jewish cause to the socialist movement."³]

What is the relevance of these disputes today? Jack Jacobs, a pre-eminent historian of the Bund has talked of the Bund having "a program that can be respected and replicated today, promoting a diaspora-oriented perspective as a nationally conscious group that is not nationalist, but rather Jewish and secular".⁴

But what does that even mean today?

The Jewish world has been overwhelmingly transformed in our lifetimes by at least 3 crucial developments:

- obviously the Holocaust, which physically liquidated the world of Yiddish;
- The social structure of Jewish communities has changed dramatically.
 - * Jews have been remarkably socially mobile and have become well integrated into the upper echelons of so many countries of which they are citizens.

³ Nira Yuval-David, *Marxism and Jewish Nationalism*, History Workshop, 24, autumn 1987, p.93

⁴ Cited in Abba Solomon, "Anti-Zionism is celebrated on a New York Jewish stage, at Yivo panel on Bundism", *Mondoweiss* 26 October 2019 at <https://mondoweiss.net/2019/10/anti-zionism-is-celebrated-on-a-new-york-jewish-stage-at-yivo-panel-on-bundism/>

* They are not overwhelmingly proletarian and *they are not generally oppressed as they once were – as Jews.*

- Coupled with this, the existence and consolidation of the state of Israel, from 1948 but particularly from 1967, also transformed Jewish identity in the US and elsewhere

It was only really from 1967 that support for Israel became a central part of American foreign policy and support for Zionism as American as apple pie. You could assimilate *and* be a loyal American – by supporting Israel. And not just in the US but in Britain and elsewhere.

That solution, I believe is now in a state of advanced decay, particularly in the US where a younger generation of Jews in most self-evidently not at home with Israel – some 38% of under 40s in a recent survey, deemed Israel an apartheid state – creating a new crisis of Jewish identity, one we are living through at this very moment and the search for new definitions.

An aside on “*doikayt*”

The truth is that was not just the Bund that focused on *doikayt*/hereness. In recent centuries, all diaspora groupings affected by modernity have *always* largely oriented on building their presence in collaboration with others where they are. The diaspora has always been about *doikayt*, living in the here and now and Jews were rightly sensitive about accusations of dual loyalty.

The West’s (the US’s) alliance with Zionism allowed a new form of ‘hereness’ to develop. You could be “here” by also being “there” – without actually going there – and still be a loyal American etc citizen. But this position is increasingly untenable as I’ve said.

Israel has the dubious distinction of having invented a new, form of *doikayt*; with a state and an army at its command, “hereness” has come to mean exclusion, discrimination, ethno-nationalism – the negation of its original meaning!

So I want to return briefly to my second theme: the rich Jewish diasporic radical tradition in the American civil rights movement, in the campaign against apartheid in South Africa, in the Spanish Civil War, in Argentina against the Junta, in the students’ and workers’ upheavals of 1968 and the post-war revival of left-wing socialist ideas of those times, to say nothing of the massive participation of Jews in the Communist movements of C20.

A few random statistics from the States:⁵ around a third to a half of committed New Left activists in the 60s were Jewish and almost 1 in 4 of Jewish students identified as being on the left compared with 1 in 25 of Protestant and 1 in 50 of Catholics students. Jews made up two-thirds of the white Freedom Riders who went south in 1961; in 1964 they represented half to two-thirds of the volunteers who went to Mississippi to register black voters. I could

⁵ These are drawn from Philp Mendes, “‘WE ARE ALL GERMAN JEWS’: EXPLORING THE PROMINENCE OF JEWS IN THE NEW LEFT” *Melilah: Manchester Journal of Jewish Studies (1759-1953)*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2011, pp. 22-38. <https://doi.org/10.31826/mji-2011-060104>

go on, in terms of key leaders in the student movement, members of left-wing magazine editorial boards and so on. And not just in the US, but also in Australia, South Africa, France, Argentina and elsewhere.

But it is interesting that memoirs and interviews with these activists after the event record that the fact of their being Jewish at all seldom came up in discussions at the time. It went largely unremarked.

Convincing explanations for this Jewish preponderance among activists are not easy to come by. True, a much higher proportion of Jews than of other groups were going to university, but not anything like the preponderance we find of Jews as a percentage of activists. A lot of Jews particularly in the States came from left-wing (often Communist) families (red diaper babies). There was also the issue of Jewish cultural values. It's a vexed one. As Michael Walzer has shown at length,⁶ there is little in the biblical texts to justify radical activism without a lot of creative reinterpretation. That is, as a result of people wanting to find justification for values they were already otherwise coming to hold rather than holding these values because of their reading of the texts to begin with.

Far more plausible, by way of explanation, are the experiences of Yiddishland, before WW2 and its dispersion, understood broadly as, in the words of Brossat and Klingberg again, "A social and cultural space, a linguistic and religious world, rather than a territory in the strict sense. Yiddishland had no frontiers..."⁷

- the solidarity of a shared experience of fighting oppression – antisemitism and economic exploitation;
- the Holocaust and a visceral anti-racist response to it;
- the experience of exile and asylum which runs deep to this day; and
- the generalised belief, born out of experiences of trauma, dislocation but also of a broader cosmopolitan perspective, that one had to make something of this world, not just take it for granted.

Some of this lives on in memory today, certainly among us and people like us, and in wider liberal Jewish communities! But the social and economic structures that gave rise to it are gone and it is not clear what – if anything – can replace them to sustain an ongoing Jewish radicalism.

None of this is to devalue the extraordinary history of Bundism which has been presented tonight and I'm very happy to be part of the move to acknowledge its rightful place in our radical traditions.

Richard Kuper
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⁶ Cited in "Jews and the Left", JVL, 2 May 2019 at <https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/article/jews-and-the-left/>. See also Michael Walzer's 2012 keynote speech at the Yivo Institute on Youtube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqSLxjMRCyo>

⁷ Brossat and Kingberg, op cit, p.29

Some Further Reading available on the JVL website

[Revolutionary Yiddishland – a review](#)

[The Soul of the Bund](#)

[The Ideals of the Jewish Labour Bund have outlived Nazi genocide](#)

[Beyond a fringe: JVL in Jewish Experience and Tradition](#)

[The forgotten history of the Jewish, anti-Zionist left](#)

[Hagode shel Peysekh \(with a Socialist Twist\)](#)

[Bundism's Influence Today](#)

[Bundism's Influence Today – 2](#)

[Jews and the left](#)

[My Great-Grandfather the Bundist](#)

[Chaim Neslen – father, devoted husband, Yiddishist, Bundist, humanist, and a true mensch](#)