



## **The Promise and Perils of Revolution: Jewish Life in the Soviet Union After 1917**

***Dr. David Fishman***

David E. Fishman is a professor of Jewish History at The Jewish Theological Seminary, teaching courses in modern Jewish history. Dr. Fishman also serves as director of [Project Judaica](#), JTS's program in the Former Soviet Union (FSU).

Dr. Fishman is the author of numerous books and articles on the history and culture of East European Jewry. His most recent book, *The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis* (ForeEdge, 2017) was the recipient of the Jewish Book Council's 2017 National Jewish Book Award. *The Book Smugglers* has been hailed as "Monuments Men for book lovers" and "first rate scholarship that pulses with the beat of a most human heart."

Dr. Fishman is a dynamic and engaging teacher and has taught in diverse Jewish communities across North America.

SPEECHES ON GRAMOPHONE RECORDS<sup>60</sup>

ANTI-JEWISH POGROMS

Anti-Semitism means spreading enmity towards the Jews. When the accursed tsarist monarchy was living its last days it tried to incite ignorant workers and peasants against the Jews. The tsarist police, in alliance with the landowners and the capitalists, organized pogroms against the Jews. The landowners and capitalists tried to divert the hatred of the workers and peasants who were tortured by want against the Jews. In other countries, too, we often see the capitalists fomenting hatred against the Jews in order to blind the workers, to divert their attention from the real enemy of the working people, capital. Hatred towards the Jews persists only in those countries where slavery to the landowners and capitalists has created abysmal ignorance among the workers and peasants. Only the most ignorant and downtrodden people can believe the lies and slander that are spread about the Jews. This is a survival of ancient feudal times, when the priests burned heretics at the stake, when the peasants lived in slavery, and when the people were crushed and inarticulate. This ancient, feudal ignorance is passing away; the eyes of the people are being opened.

It is not the Jews who are the enemies of the working people. The enemies of the workers are the capitalists of all countries. Among the Jews there are working people, and they form the majority. They are our brothers, who, like us, are oppressed by capital; they are our comrades in the struggle for socialism. Among the Jews there are kulaks, exploiters and capitalists, just as there are among the Russians, and among people of all nations. The capitalists strive to sow and foment hatred between workers of different faiths, different nations and different races. Those who do not work are kept in power by the power and strength of capital.

Rich Jews, like rich Russians, and the rich in all countries, are in alliance to oppress, crush, rob and disunite the workers.

Shame on accursed tsarism which tortured and persecuted the Jews. Shame on those who foment hatred towards the Jews, who foment hatred towards other nations.

Long live the fraternal trust and fighting alliance of the workers of all nations in the struggle to overthrow capital.

Recording made at the  
end of March, 1919

Published according to  
the gramophone record

RESOLUTION OF THE COUNCIL OF PEOPLE'S COMMISSARS  
ON THE UPROOTING OF THE ANTI-SEMITIC MOVEMENT

According to reports received by the Council of People's Commissars, the counter-revolutionaries are carrying on agitation for pogroms in many cities especially in the frontier zone, as a result of which there have been sporadic outrages against the toiling Jewish population. The bourgeois counter-revolution has taken up the weapon which has slipped from the hands of the Tsar.

The absolutist government, each time when the need arose, turned the wrath of the peoples directed at itself against the Jews, at the same time telling the uneducated masses that all their misery comes from the Jews. The rich Jews, however, always found a way to protect themselves; only the Jewish poor always suffered and perished from instigation and violence.

The counter-revolutionaries have now renewed hatred against the Jews, using hunger, exhaustion and also the backwardness of the most retarded masses as well as the remnants of that hatred against the Jews which was planted among the people by absolutism.

In the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic, where the principle of self-determination of the toiling masses of all peoples has been proclaimed, there is no room for national oppression. The Jewish bourgeois are our enemies, not as Jews but as bourgeois. The Jewish worker is our brother.

Any kind of hatred against any nation is inadmissible and shameful.

The Council of People's Commissars declares that the anti-Semitic movement and pogroms against the Jews are fatal to the interests of the workers' and peasants' revolution and calls upon the toiling people of Socialist Russia to fight this evil with all the means at their disposal.

National hostility weakens the ranks of our revolutionaries, dis-

rupts the united front of the toilers without distinctions of nationality and helps only our enemies.

The Council of People's Commissars instructs all Soviet deputies to take uncompromising measures to tear the anti-Semitic movement out by the roots. Pogromists and pogrom-agitators are to be placed outside the law.

*Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, ULYANOV (LENIN); Administrator of Affairs of the Council of People's Commissars, BONCHE-BUREVICH; Secretary of the Council, N. GORBUNOV.*

*July 27, 1918.*

YEVSSEKTSIYA

38. The Liquidation of Bourgeois Jewish Institutions  
(October 1918)<sup>1</sup>

Our Cultural Tasks: Education has always been a powerful means in the hands of the ruling classes. The bourgeoisie claims that schooling and education are beyond class interests and politics. At the same time, however, it makes sure that the broad masses will obtain neither knowledge nor enlightenment.

The Jewish community has hitherto been dominated by the members of the proper-

ty class who want to keep the masses in the dark by superimposing a Hebrew culture upon them. While the upper classes have been sending their own children to public schools, they have provided only dark primary schools [*hadarim*] and synagogues [*shuls*] for the offspring of the proletariat, in which nothing but nonsense is taught.

Only the proletariat, defending the interests of their class, and thus defending the

Source: S. Agurskii, ed., *Di yidishe komisariatn un di yidishe komunistishe sektsies: protokoln, rezolutsies un dokumentn, 1918-1921* (Minsk, 1928), pp. 58-60, 178-81. Trans. by J. Hessing.

137

interests of all mankind, will be able to open the treasures of human culture to the broad masses.

Only the proletariat is strong enough to forge the golden chain of human culture, freeing it from the bloody hands of the decadent bourgeoisie.

From now on, the Jewish proletariat will assume the reigns of power in the Jewish community.

Only the Jewish worker and the Jewish laboring masses will create a free Jewish culture for themselves and arm themselves with the strong weaponry of knowledge.

Our Relations with the [Jewish] Community and Other Bourgeois Societies: The First Conference of Jewish Communists and Communist *Yeosektsiya* declares that the various institutions which have so far ruled the traditional communal organization, the so-called *kehile* . . . have no further function in our life.

In the struggle against the organized Jewish community [*kehile*], no compromise can be made with the bourgeoisie. All its institutions are harmful to the interests of the Jewish masses, who are seduced by sweet lullabies of alleged democracy.

Following the proletarian victory in the October Revolution, the Jewish workers have assumed power and have established the dictatorship of the proletariat in the Jewish community. They now call upon the Jewish masses to unite around the Jewish commissariat in order to strengthen its rule.

The first all-Russian conference of Jewish Communists authorizes the members of the Central Commissariat for Jewish Affairs to take steps toward a systematic liquidation of the institutions of the Jewish bourgeoisie. . . .

The Liquidation of the Zionist Party—A Memorandum [Submitted July 4, 1919]: The General Council of the Jewish Communist Union in the Ukraine, in full agreement with the resolution adopted by the conference of Jewish Communist sections of the Russian Communist party in Moscow, has decided to suspend immediately all activities of the Zionist party and its affiliated institutions and organizations.

This decision has been taken for the following reasons: Proclaiming the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Soviet has suspended the activities of all bourgeois parties and organizations and discontinued the publication of all their printed periodicals. The free existence of these organs and institutions would merely have interfered with the creative activity of the proletarian power, for they surely would have been used to support the counter-revolution which aims at the reestablishment of the old order. Only a misunderstanding deriving from the incomplete organization of the Soviets can explain, but not justify, the exception that is being made of the Zionists. They are still allowed to publish their official organ, *Khronik fun yidishen lebn* [Chronicle of Jewish life], and to employ their entire party organization.<sup>2</sup> [But we must not forget that] by its political and social structure, the Zionist party is a Jewish version of the General Russian Cadet party.<sup>3</sup> By forging together the representatives of big and small capital with the Jewish petty bourgeoisie and cementing their union with a nationalistic ideology, this party—in close cooperation with clerical groups—constitutes a natural political center for all Jews who support the counter-revolution and wish to regain their freedom of exploitation and speculation. The pogroms that recently took place in the Ukraine and in Poland<sup>4</sup> have stirred nationalistic tendencies among reactionary Jews and are now being exploited by the Zionist party to strengthen its position. It is natural that in its most recent circular, the central committee of the Zionists in the Ukraine has reported a major increase of its organization, in spite of numerous cases in which local authorities have tried to interfere with this development.

The Zionists often protest their loyalty and pretend to be interested only in their work concerning Palestine. But in reality, their Palestinian agitation is nothing but a nationalistic response to the political events of the day. At the present time when the authorities and the Communist party are trying with all their might to mobilize the laboring masses for the struggle against local and

138  
 Polish gangs, when they are committing themselves to liberating thousands of Jewish workers from the ideological influence of the petty bourgeoisie and to enlisting them in the revolutionary Red Army—at this time the Zionist agitation, even where it is performed by the Zionist left, is harmful because it hinders the mobilization of the workers just as it had previously interfered with the attempts to make the Jewish masses a part of the revolutionary movement.

It must further be noted that the Palestinian ideal of the Zionists is in its very content a bourgeois one. Moreover, the current international situation has firmly established the Zionist party in the camp of the international imperialistic counter-revolution.

The Zionist party has linked its fate with the powers of the Entente who, upon dividing the Turkish empire, have made certain promises to the Zionists which force them to support their coalition. The Peace of Versailles, forging chains for the enslavement of the proletariat and for entire peoples, is welcomed by the Zionists. This is a logical consequence of their bourgeois nature. Furthermore, the Zionists are directly interested in a victory of the Entente in Eastern Europe. Only a victory of these powers will get them a little closer to the practical realization of their hopes. Under these circumstances, the continued activity of the Zionist party would be harmful to the interests of the Soviet Union and her international policies. Any protestation on the part of the Zionists that they are not interested in the victory of the reactionary forces cannot be taken seriously if one remembers that the Jewish bourgeoisie, and the Zionists among them, were able to accept even Plehve's regime.<sup>5</sup>

Simultaneously with its political activity,

the Zionist party is also engaged in cultural and economic activities which interfere with the cultural and economic policies of the Soviet Union. The Zionists endeavor to defend the vested interests of the petty bourgeoisie, of the middle class, and even of the patri- cians. . . .

The Zionist party puts special emphasis on its cultural and educational institutions. . . . The Zionist cultural and educational programs, however, do not even pretend to share the liberalism adopted by the Cadet party. All they endeavor to achieve is the strengthening of the clerical spirit in the Jewish *shul*. Furthermore, they support the religious instruction in the [traditional Jewish] schools as the mainstay of their nationalistic education. Their energies are directed toward an artificial revival of the Hebrew language, thereby endangering the daily language of the Jewish laboring masses. The cultural and educational activities of the Zionist party persistently undermine—too often successfully—the budding culture of socialism which has been emerging from within the Jewish proletarian movement throughout the last few decades. In this respect, positive action has already been undertaken in Greater Russia where Hebrew schools are now forbidden. . . .

That is why we must urgently proceed to suspend all activities of the Zionist party, not only where its central and local committees are concerned, but also the economic, cultural and professional organizations centered around the party. In doing so we shall only be taking the steps necessary for the propagation of communistic ideas among the Jewish working class and the younger generation of the Jewish petty bourgeoisie.

## NOTES

1. *Yevseksiya* (plural, *Yevseksii*) was the Jewish section of the propaganda department of the Russian Communist party from 1918 to 1930 (the singular, *Yevseksiya*, is commonly used even in reference to many sections). Upon taking power in November 1917 the Communist party was faced

with the need to integrate the numerous nationalities and distinct ethnic groups of the Russian Empire into the revolution and ideological structure of the new state. In a radical reversal of Bolshevik policy, special "national" sections were established within the party for this purpose. In

139

January 1918 a Jewish Commissariat was created and Jewish sections (*Yevseksii*) were formed in order to organize within the revolution the millions of Jews in Russia who spoke their own language and maintained their own social and cultural institutions. The first conference of the Jewish *Yevseksii*, which were established throughout the Soviet Union, took place in Moscow in October 1918. Some of the resolutions of the conference are presented above. At this conference it was repeatedly emphasized that the *Yevseksiya* had no other goal than to integrate the Yiddish-speaking masses of the Soviet Union into the revolution; the *Yevseksiya* was on no account to serve national goals. With the full cooperation of the police and other government agencies, the *Yevseksiya* dismantled the traditional Jewish communal organization, the *kehilot*, expropriated synagogue buildings, closed yeshivot and other educational institutions and exercised strict control on the publication of books of Jewish interest. At the same time the *Yevseksiya* attempted to create a Jewish Communist culture: a Communist Yiddish press, publishing houses, a network of primary and secondary schools, Yiddish theaters and other cultural projects. The *Yevseksiya* even sponsored Jewish settlement projects, the most significant being the proclamation in 1928 of an autonomous Jewish region in Birobidzhan on the Manchurian border (see document 43 in this chapter). The *Yevseksiya* seemed increasingly committed to preserving the identity of Soviet Jewry. "The Communist party [however] saw the Jewish sections as a transient instrument through which the Jewish masses could be socialized, transformed, and integrated into the society as a whole, and if that integration meant the loss of separate ethnic identity so be it, or even, some argued, so much the better" (Zvi Y. Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU 1917-1930* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972], p. 11). In 1930 the party de-

cidied to liquidate all national sections, including the *Yevseksiya*. Gradually, the institutions created by the *Yevseksiya*, along with many of the section's activities, were liquidated, a process that was completed by the late 1940s.

2. For several years after the revolution the Soviets authorized, for tactical reasons, restricted activities of the Zionists and then only in certain regions of the country; by 1928 Zionism was absolutely banned in the Soviet Union. Many leaders of the movement were imprisoned and sent to labor camps, or exiled to outlying districts of Soviet Asia.

3. Popular name of the Constitutional Democratic party, founded in October 1905; it was the principal middle-class party in tsarist Russia.

4. Between 1917 and 1920 (a period of protracted revolutions and civil wars), Eastern Europe, especially Poland and Ukraine, was blighted by devastating pogroms. It has been estimated that 530 communities had been subjected to more than a thousand separate pogroms, in which more than 60,000 Jews were killed and several times that number were wounded. During the pogroms, the Red Army, which adopted strict measures against antisemitism, was generally regarded by the Jews as their protector. Nonetheless, the pogroms strengthened the national consciousness of the Jews and the desire for an independent Jewish homeland.

5. Vyacheslav K. Plehve (1846-1904), Russian politician and leader of reactionary circles during the regimes of Alexander III and Nicholas II. In his post as minister of the interior, he was widely suspected of orchestrating the Kishinev pogroms of April 1903. In August of that year, Herzl met with Plehve and other Russian officials, soliciting their support for the Zionist idea of an organized emigration and resettlement of the Jews in a territory of their own.