



# Jewish revolutionaries, revolutionary Jews

By Daniel Randall

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**It is intended as a broad sketch of the topic, a brief introduction to key characters and episodes from the period discussed. It owes much to Bill Fishman's *East End Jewish Radicals*, Janine Booth's writing and talks on Minnie Glassman, Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers*, Tony Michel's *A Fire In Their Hearts*, and the writing and walking tours of David Rosenberg of the JSG.**

"From the days of [...] Karl Marx, and down to Trotsky (Russia), Bela Kun (Hungary), Rosa Luxemburg (Germany), and Emma Goldman (United States), this worldwide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality, has been steadily growing [...] There is no need to exaggerate the part played in the creation of Bolshevism and in the actual bringing about of the Russian Revolution, by these international and for the most part atheistical Jews, it is certainly a very great one; it probably outweighs all others. With the notable exception of Lenin, the majority of the leading figures are Jews. Moreover, the principal inspiration and driving power comes from the Jewish leaders."

The above quote is from Winston Churchill. It appeared in a 1920 *Illustrated Sunday Herald* article, entitled "Zionism Versus Bolshevism: A Struggle for the Soul of the Jewish People". It neatly expresses one of the recurrent tropes of 20th century anti-Semitism: that Bolshevism, or revolutionary anti-capitalist politics more widely, is a Jewish conspiracy, animated predominantly by Jews, with the aim of undermining and overthrowing gentile civilisation.

The reality was, of course, a little more complex — of the Bolshevik party's 10,000 members in February 1917, less than 4% were Jewish.

However, it is an undeniable fact that, throughout a particular period of European history, hundreds of thousands of mainly working-class Jewish people were involved in revolutionary politics — as activists, as organisers, as thinkers, and as theorists. Thriving and diverse traditions of revolutionary politics existed in the Jewish communities of Europe and America, from the mid-1800s up until the Second World War.

This article focuses on that period, and almost exclusively on Eastern European ("Ashkenazi") Jews, in the period before much of the infrastructure of European Jewish life, including distinct Jewish revolutionary political organisation, is smashed to pieces by Nazism. It's also a period of labour



A Yiddish cartoon celebrating the Russian Revolution

movement recomposition and renewal, and of revolutionary upheaval, climaxing with the conquest of power by Russian workers in 1917. Jewish revolutionaries played a central role in that revolution, and in the defeated German revolution of 1919, and other key working-class upsurges of the period.

From beginning of the 19th century, a mass of Jewish people were thrown together by Russian imperialism in what came to be called the "Pale of Settlement". That mass numbered five million at its height, and living conditions were characterised by extreme poverty. Jews were harried by pogroms, and being rapidly proletarianised by developing in-

dustrial capitalism — but in an uneven way that left much artisanal labour on the fringes of capitalist production intact. That historical moment, and those experiences, of a people forced onto the fringes of developing society, in some senses excluded from but also convulsed by its economic development, are the key contextual points of departure for any attempt to understand what compelled so many Jews in the direction of revolutionary working-class politics, and enabled them to contribute to and shape revolutionary movements so richly.

What was the real extent of Jewish involvement in revolutionary politics in this period? The Bolshevik Central Committee of 1918 was one third Jewish, and 13% of the delegates to its 1921 Congress were Jewish. There was significant involvement pre-dating and beyond the Bolsheviks, too. The General Jewish Labour Bund (of which more later), claimed 3,500 members upon its founding in 1897, a figure which exploded to nearly 40,000 less than 10 years later. Those are just two examples amongst a great many.

There are, I think, two fairly reductionist ways of explaining all of this. One is the argument that there is something inherent in Judaism, either in terms of its theology, its religious doctrine, or what we might call its religio-philosophical principles, that inclines Jews towards radical, democratic, social-justice-based, and collectivist politics. Or, less metaphysically, that the recurrence in Jewish religious narratives of what are essentially struggles against oppression (the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, the Maccabees' nationalist guerilla insurgency against the Assyrians, etc.) predisposes Jews to rebel politics.

The other view is that the direct material historical experience of Jews, as a people which has experienced systematic brutalisation and oppression throughout much of our history, particularly compels Jews towards radical and revolutionary politics as a response, and resistance, to that experience of oppression.

Neither argument can tell us the whole story. Both are ultimately limited, although there is also something of value in both.

# Jewish revolutionaries, revolutionary Jews

How to understand the Jews as a people was a matter of significant debate and discussion on the left in this period. Revolutionaries of all backgrounds in this period, and later, wrote and debated extensively on “the Jewish question” — how to make sense of this mass of people, a nation but not a nation, and whether to advocate various forms of national or cultural autonomy, assimilation, or some combination of both. The peculiar specificity of the Jews as an ethno-national-cultural-religious grouping (one, several, or all of these, perhaps), and their particular position and experience in relation to the development of industrial capitalism, is key to understanding why so many Jews became revolutionaries.

## KARL MARX

**In a sense, Karl Marx isn't a particularly interesting or illuminating figure to begin with, because his milieu was not a particularly “Jewish” one. It was the milieu of the European university and, later, the German, French, and British labour movements of the 1850s, 60s, and 70s. Marx is a “Jewish revolutionary” only in the sense of his ethnic origin.**

His forebears were the rabbis of Trier right up until his grandfather, Meier Halevi Marx. But his father, Herschel, broke from his family, becoming an avowed secularist, changing his name to Heinrich, and converting to Protestantism to escape anti-Jewish repression and legal discrimination.

But Marx is a necessary starting point because he is the most significant pioneer of revolutionary politics as we understand them today, and also because his own writing on “the Jewish question” are the source of great controversy.

His 1843 work “On the Jewish Question” recycles, it has been argued, anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jewish usurers and Jewish financiers, and Jew as a financial-economic functionary. Its language is problematic, and somewhat reflective of Marx's occasional accommodations to the default casual bigotry of his period and his milieu, but it is nonetheless a valuable work that tells us something about Jewish experience and which can help us work towards answering the question of what it is in that experience which compelled so many Jews to draw revolutionary conclusions.

The “economic-Jew” stereotype stems from the forced duality of Jewish experience in relation to the rise of capitalism. Jews were at once liminal and integral to it. Jews represented an incipient mercantile-commercial element under feudalism, but were kept on the edges of social and economic development by discrimination and oppression. Our position placed us almost automatically in tension and latent conflict with the developing social relations. Marx is himself a product of that position and experience, if only in origin.

## ELEANOR MARX

**Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor is a key figure in British labour and socialist history, and very often overlooked (something that Rachel Holmes's recent biography has hopefully begun to change). She was centrally involved in “New Unionism”, a period of struggles in the late 1880s that reinvented and reshaped the British labour movement, and to which modern unions like Unite and GMB trace their origins. Eleanor in fact taught Will Thorne, a gas worker who helped found the GMB, to read.**

In many ways she was a great deal more “Jewish” than her father. She was an explicit advocate for the rights of migrant workers and helped win some of the British workers' leaders to a more supportive attitude to Jewish workers' organisation. She engaged with, and broadcast, her Jewish heritage, in part to confront and shake up anti-Jewish, anti-immigration sentiment that existed in the British labour movement.

The German revisionist socialist Eduard Bernstein wrote of her in the social democratic paper *Die Neue Zeit* (“The New Times”) in 1898: “At every opportunity she declared her descent with a certain defiance. ‘I am a Jewess’ — how often I heard her, who was neither Jewishly religious nor in any contact whatsoever with the official representatives of Jewry, shout this with pride to the crowd from the rostrum. She felt herself drawn to the Jewish proletarians of the East End with all the greater sympathy.”

Eleanor was key to developing a greater intersection and mutual support between the 1889 dock strike, in which Irish migrant workers were central, and the Jewish tailors' strike which happened in parallel. She was elected to the Executive of the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers,



Eleanor Marx

which went on to become what is now the GMB, and formed its first women's branch.

She was a pioneer for both Jewish workers' self-organisation, assisting the strikes and organisation of Jewish workers' unions in industries like tailoring, and for the integration of Jewish migrant workers into the indigenous British labour movement.

In the context of the debate on “the Jewish question”, she can perhaps be understood as a revolutionary integrationist. Neither a Jewish nationalist nor a cultural autonomist, she favoured Jewish workers' integration into the wider labour movement — but not on the basis of migrant workers abandoning their distinct identities, or even, necessarily, a degree of organisational autonomy, but rather through the development of mutual solidarity between local and migrant labour.

According to Bernstein, she saw “the Jewish question” as a “theoretical”, rather than “practical”, issue, but was clear that Jewish struggle against anti-Semitism should be fought on its own terms: “Where Jew as Jew was oppressed, she did not allow herself to be misled by the feelings of the proletarian class which lay deeply stamped on her soul, and took a lively interest in the oppressed without regard to class position.”

This should not be read as an indication that Eleanor separated her class politics from her anti-racism, but rather that she saw it necessary to organise against specific oppressions (racial or gender-based) in the here-and-now. If she were alive today, she would undoubtedly be an opponent of those on the left who denounce the autonomous organisation of oppressed groups within the movement as “divisive”, or those who imply that struggles against specific oppressions “distract” from the general working-class struggle against capitalism.

Along with the anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin, Eleanor was the keynote speaker at the 1895 launch meetings of *A Voice from the Aliens*, a pamphlet produced by Jewish workers' organisations polemicising against immigration controls (the first immigration control, in the modern sense, was the “Aliens Act”, eventually introduced in 1905 with the express aim of stopping Jewish immigration from Central and Eastern Europe).

Her pioneering work, in agitating against immigration controls, and both in aiding Jewish (and other migrant) workers' self-organisation and helping it to engage with the local labour movement, would still be profoundly radical on today's left, where Stalinist-influenced politics on Europe have led some left-wing groups and left-led unions into shamefully protectionist and objectively anti-migrant positions (the “No2EU” project, which denounced “the social dumping of migrant labour”, and advocated that the free movement between EU member states be ended, is perhaps the worst example).

## MINNIE LANSBURY (GLASSMAN)

**Born in 1889, the year of the great strike wave, to Jewish parents in Stepney, Minnie Glassman became a teacher before marrying Edgar Lansbury in 1914. She was active on the extreme working-class left of the suffragette movement, as a member of Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS).**

In contrast to the “Votes for Ladies” campaigns of the mainstream of the movement, ELFS organised working-class women (and men), not only around the demand for suffrage but economic and social issues. In 1918, ELFS became the Workers' Socialist Federation, and Minnie was elected its As-

sistant Secretary.

She was also a workplace organiser, helping build what is now the East London Teachers Association, a division of the National Union of Teachers. Its minutes record Minnie as an outspoken opponent of sexism within the labour movement as well as a dedicated trade unionist.

In 1919, she was part of a Labour takeover of Poplar Borough Council. The Poplar Labour Party at the time was led by the far left, and while still a Labour Party member and borough councillor, Minnie helped found the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920. In 1921, she played a key role in the Poplar Rates Rebellion (comprehensively documented in Janine Booth's book *Guilty And Proud Of It*, Merlin Press, 2009), in which she and 29 of her fellow councillors went to jail after they refused to raise council rates.

The Tory-led central government eventually backed down, but the struggle probably cost Minnie her life; she died of pneumonia in January 1922, almost certainly exacerbated by her six weeks in prison just months before.

Minnie was a revolutionary socialist-feminist before such a term existed. Both she and Eleanor Marx were advocates of women's autonomous self-organisation within the labour movement (again, something that remains controversial in some sections of the movement). Minnie particularly is emblematic of working-class Jewish women's involvement in the women's suffrage movement, and in particular in its radical left. Like Eleanor, Minnie's memory is somewhat obscured by her more famous relative, in her case her father-in-law George Lansbury (editor of the labour-movement daily newspaper the *Daily Herald* and, later, the leader of the Labour Party). She is memorialised by a small decorative clock on Bow Road in East London, but deserves to be better known.

## RUDOLPH ROCKER AND MILLY WITKOP

**Rudolph Rocker is an odd calling point for this tour, because he was not, in fact, Jewish. A German anarchist who arrived in London in 1895, Rocker had met Jewish revolutionaries during a stay in France.**

When he came to England, he totally immersed himself in London's Eastern European Jewish community, learning Yiddish and living entirely as part of it. His partner, Milly Witkop, was a Ukrainian Jewish immigrant and a syndicalist activist and writer. In 1884, London's first Yiddish socialist newspaper was founded, followed the year after by the second — *Arbeiter Fraynd*, Workers' Friend. Rudolf Rocker took over editorship in 1889.

Like Eleanor Marx and Minnie Lansbury, Rudolf and Milly are key representatives of the incredibly febrile Jewish working-class movement that existed in London in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Working in industries somewhat on the fringes of major capitalist production, Jewish bakers, tailors, and other workers formed unions and revolutionary political organisations.

In 1900 there were around 135,000 Jews in London, a figure that had trebled over the previous two decades. In response, the British government introduced the aforementioned 1905 Aliens Act, the first ever “modern” immigration control in British history. Much of the agitation of Jewish revolutionaries concerned opposition to immigration controls, and agitation within the indigenous labour movements to see migrant Jewish workers as class brothers and sisters rather than hostile aliens.

The Jewish labour movement was, like the work its participants did, often precarious and unstable. But it was also vibrant and dynamic. Similar movements existed in other centres of migrant Jewish population in Britain, including Manchester and Leeds, but the Jewish labour movement of East London was the largest and most vibrant.

The location itself is significant. East London, the site of successive waves of mass working-class immigration, was made up of dense communities, undoubtedly a part of growing urban sprawl and certainly industrially and economically integral to it, and yet, at least to some extent, elbowed to one side, or crammed into a corner. That relationship, paralleled in New York by the concentrations of Jewish population in Manhattan's Lower East Side and Brownsville in Brooklyn, mirrored the duality of Jewish experience in Europe: simultaneously liminal and integral to capitalist development.

## NEW YORK'S YIDDISH SOCIALISTS

**By 1890, there were 21 Jewish workers' unions in New York. 9,000 Jewish workers marched on May Day in 1880, many under specifically revolutionary banners calling for the abolition of wage labour.**

# Jewish revolutionaries, revolutionary Jews

There was a Jewish anarchist left; the Socialist Party of America — the party of Eugene Debs — had significant sections amongst Jewish immigrants; and many of the founding leaders of the Communist Party of America in 1919 (Ben Gitlow, Jacob Liebstein aka Jay Lovestone, and Alexander Bittelman) were Jewish immigrants. It is from New York's 19th century revolutionary Jewish left that *Forverts* (*Forward*), one of the few surviving Yiddish daily newspapers, originates. It was founded in 1897 by supporters of the Socialist Labor Party, including Abe Cahan, who came from a rabbinical family in Lithuania but who studied Russian language and secular politics in secret.

That dynamic is recurrent throughout the experience of many Jewish revolutionaries; just as both subjective and objective factors placed Jewish communities in tension and conflict with capitalist development, so the Jews who developed the most advanced critiques of capitalism found themselves in tension and conflict with (at the very least, aspects of) their own Jewishness. Herschel (Heinrich) Marx and Abe Cahan's acts of rebellion against their family's rabbinical traditions represent Jewish radicals whose engagement with their own Jewish experience propelled them beyond their Jewishness into universal politics.

Activists emerging from New York's Yiddish socialist milieu took divergent paths. David Dubinsky (born David Dobniewski in Brest-Litovsk in 1892) arrived in New York in 1911, having already been elected as a trade union official at the age of 14 in a bakers' union led by Bundists. He joined the Socialist Party, but by the end of the decade he had begun what would be a lifelong career in the officialdom and bureaucracy of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), of which he was the president from 1932 to 1966. The ILGWU is a key organisation both in the history of Jewish workers' organisation in New York and elsewhere, and the wider organisational and political history of the American labour movement. Dubinsky fought dissent from both Stalinist and anti-Stalinist lefts within his union. He ended his life firmly in the political mainstream, and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1969.

In his radical youth, Dubinsky, like many other immigrant Jewish workers, was profoundly affected by the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, in which 113 (mostly Jewish, women) workers died in what was, until 9/11, the worst workplace disaster in American history.

One of the key organisers of women sweatshop workers in the Triangle Factory, and others like it, both before and after the fire, was Rose Schneidermann. Rose was born in Poland in 1882 and emigrated to the Lower East Side with her family in 1890. Along with others such as Clara Lemlich, she was a key organiser of the 1909 strike wave amongst garment workers, known as the "Uprising of the 20,000". She joined the Communist Party, and later became prominent in mainstream politics under Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, sitting on the Labor Advisory Board of the National Recovery Administration, the main agency body of Roosevelt's "New Deal".

She is credited with first using the phrase "bread and roses" to describe the need for cultural and social enrichment as well as mere sustenance. Like Eleanor Marx, she was also a pioneer of working-class women's self-organisation within the labour movement. Rose, Clara Lemlich, and others were also militant suffrage campaigners.

Significantly, even when New York's Yiddish socialists were operating in effective ghettos, almost exclusively amongst first- and second-generation immigrants, their political culture retained a strong emphasis on and aspiration towards universalism. In *A Walker In The City*, Alfred Kazin's stunning psychogeographical account of his 1930s youth in Brownsville, Brooklyn, the author writes of "the Yiddish folk-songs and socialist hymns" his radical parents, his cousin, and her friends sing: "'Let's Now Forgive Each Other'; 'Tsuzamen, tsuzamen [Together], All Together Brothers!'"

"Those Friday evenings", Kazin writes, noting how left-wing immigrant Jews re-purposed the religious sabbath as a time not for prayer but for strengthening their bonds of social solidarity through socialist discussion and culture, "I suddenly found myself enveloped in some old, primary socialist idea that men [sic] could go beyond every barrier of race and nation, even of class! Into some potential loving union of the whole human race. I was suddenly glad to be a Jew, as these women were Jews."

## JEWISH ANARCHISTS

Jews were prominent in the leadership of Europe's class-struggle anarchist movements, including anarcho-syndicalists like Rocker and the arguably more famous



Milly Witkop

## Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman.

Berkman's father was a successful and aspiring businessman who, because of his success and his connections, was granted the right to move from the Pale of Settlement, so Berkman actually grew up in Saint Petersburg. That experience is obviously exceptional, but in a sense is quite an accelerated, or perhaps distilled, version of that dynamic of duality referred to earlier.

He emigrated to America in 1888, and joined Pionire der Frayhayt (Pioneers of Freedom), a Jewish anarchist circle. Like their counterparts in London, the Pioneers were involved in workplace organisation in the garment industry, helping to establish Jewish workers' unions. He met Goldman, who had come to America in 1885, the following year. In 1892 the couple planned to assassinate the industrialist Henry Clay Frick. Frick survived, and Berkman served 14 years in jail as punishment.

Goldman was born into an Orthodox family in Kaunas, in what is now Lithuania. Over a long career in activism and organising, she wrote extensively on a wide variety of topics, including militarism, atheism, the state, gender, and sexuality.

Berkman and Goldman (who had also served various jail spells) were deported to Russia in 1917. They were initially supportive of the Revolution, but became disillusioned following the Kronstadt Rebellion.

Jewish anarchists were also often the most explicitly anti-religious, anti-theist element of Jewish revolutionary milieus, and the most extravagant in their anti-religious agitation and atheist propaganda. The anarchist Johann Most (not himself Jewish but a key influence on Goldman and Berkman) was described by his biographer, Frederic Trautmann as "a militant atheist with the zeal of a religious fanatic."

Yom Kippur Balls, irreverent parties on the Day of Atonement, the most significant day in the Jewish religious year, were a feature of radical Jewish life in both London and New York, and there are stories (possibly apocryphal, although I almost hope not) of Jewish anarchists organising "ham sandwich parades" outside synagogues to mock and deride the piety and dogma of the faithful.

One of the best episodes in the entire history of revolutionary-secularist, anti-theist religious agitation occurred on Yom Kippur in 1889, in Christ Church Hall on Hanbury Street, off Brick Lane in East London. Benjamin Feigenbaum, the Polish-born son of Hassidic family who had become a revolutionary and regular contributor to Rocker's *Arbeiter Fraynd* newspaper, gave a speech on the topic, "Is there a God?" After speaking for around an hour, he stopped, took out his watch, and proclaimed: "If there is a god, and if he is almighty as the clergy claims he is, I give him just two minutes' time to kill me on the spot, so that he may prove his existence!" Two minutes passed, Feigenbaum proclaimed that there was, indeed, no god, and the band struck up the *Marseillaise*.

The episode is recounted in rich detail, through contemporary sources, in the late, great, Professor Bill Fishman's *East End Jewish Radicals*. Fishman's book gives an excellent ac-

count of the anti-religious agitation of Feigenbaum and others, who pursued a course of anti-theist and secularist propaganda that they knew would cause offence. Fishman describes much of their agitation as "counter-productive", but while this or that particular article, cartoon, or provocative act could undoubtedly be quibbled with and may well have been better left unwritten, undrawn, or undone, I think Feigenbaum represents a richly irreverent spirit towards organised religion that the far left has largely lost.

The role of the synagogues and the official Jewish establishment in relation to revolutionary politics is not an honourable one. In 1936, the *Jewish Chronicle* and the Board of Deputies counselled Jews to stay at home when Mosley's fascists planned to march through the Jewish East End. Fortunately, a rather large number of people ignored them.

That aspect of Jewish revolutionary life, of being entirely, profoundly Jewish — in terms of one's ethnic and cultural identity, milieu, and experience — but also entirely hostile to religion, and to the cross-class politics of the religious establishment, is another of the fascinating dualities, or tensions, within this history.

By no means all of those involved in these movements were irreligious, however. Sometimes those tensions were given other, even more contradictory dimensions, by Jews who were involved in political activism alongside the likes of Feigenbaum but were themselves synagogue-going believers.

## ROSA LUXEMBURG

Struggles within and against religion loom large in the formative childhood and familiar experiences of Rosa Luxemburg, one of the key leaders of the revolutionary German workers' movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Like Marx, the process of her engagement with revolutionary politics was a process of breaking from Jewishness rather than consciously taking her own Jewish experience as a point-of-departure or foundation stone in their politics. But, just as Marx's Jewishness did shape his experience and thought in ways we've discussed, so too for Luxemburg.

She was born in Zamość, which has interesting Renaissance origins but had been part of the Pale of Settlement, but moved to Warsaw where she was educated. Her grandfather, like Marx's father, had broken a long tradition of Orthodox Judaism in the family and was a pro-enlightenment secularist. Her grandfather and her father were involved in reform movements with Zamość's Jewish community. They were assimilationists who encouraged their children to think of themselves as Polish rather than Jewish. Rosa's early experiences were of struggle within the Jewish community, but against Jewish orthodoxies and Jewish separatism. I recommend the excellent essay "You Alone Will Make Our Family's Name Famous", by Luxemburg scholar Rory Castle, which discusses precisely this question of Luxemburg's Jewish identity.

## LEON TROTSKY

Trotsky's relationship to his own Jewishness is also an essay-worthy subject.

His family was well-off, so his day-to-day life as a young man was not that of the Jewish proletarian in the Pale. Trotsky was an opponent of Zionism, and of left-wing Jewish cultural autonomism (Bundism), but his views on this question shifted and changed throughout his life. Towards the end of his life he reconciled to the view that Jewish autonomy or nationhood in some form was, if not desirable, probably inevitable, but that under capitalism any such autonomy or nation would be unstable and prey to reactionary manipulation by imperialist powers.

In his last recorded comment on the question, in 1940, he said: "The socialist revolution is the only realistic solution of the Jewish question. If the Jewish workers and peasants asked for an independent state, good — but they didn't get it under Great Britain. But if they want it, the proletariat will give it. We are not in favour, but only the victorious working class can give it to them".

Common to both his earlier view and his later reappraisal was an acceptance that the Jews of Europe represented something sufficiently like a nation (in Marxist terms) to countenance the idea of them constituting themselves, or demanding the right to constitute themselves, as a distinct nation state, even if Trotsky and other Marxists didn't much like the demand.

The widely-acknowledged national, or semi-national, status of the Jews informed "first generation" Marxist critiques of

# Jewish revolutionaries, revolutionary Jews

and responses to Zionism. Trotsky, and Jewish Trotskyists in the 1940s such as Abram Leon and Ernest Mandel, were, in different ways, clearly “anti-Zionist”, but their critiques of Zionism have little in common with the all-consuming, ahistorical “anti-Zionism” of much of the contemporary far left, which sees Zionism as something synonymous and interchangeable with “racism” or even “fascism”.

Trotsky’s experience is also a particularly Jewish one in that his Jewishness became one of the major motifs of the Stalinists’ slanders against him, as Stalinist hardened up into a more-or-less explicitly anti-Semitic ideology, at least at the level of state power in Russia.

## BUNDISTS AND SOCIALIST-ZIONISTS

**Two other important revolutionary traditions existed in parallel with the ones discussed so far (broadly, Marxian revolutionary socialism and class-struggle anarchism), often intersecting with them, but as distinct tendencies.**

In a sense I’ve done a disservice by arriving at them relatively near the conclusion of this article, because they are the two traditions of revolutionary politics which are specifically, explicitly “Jewish” — Bundism, socialist Jewish cultural autonomism, and socialist-Zionism.

Ber Borochov, who founded Poale Zion, represents the left-wing extremity of historical Zionism. He saw the Zionist project not in religious terms but as a necessary response to capitalism, which he saw as keeping Jews in a permanent state of transience and migration. He advocated that Jewish workers should emigrate to Palestine, unite in common organisations and struggle with the Arab workers, and construct a socialist state. Borochov supported the 1917 revolution, and a Zionist detachment fought for the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War.

Although left-wing or at least collectivist variants of Zionism remained fairly prominent, Borochov’s explicitly revolutionary, Marxist Zionism was sidelined fairly early on. He’s also somewhat idiosyncratic in that he was an advocate of Yiddish, which most Zionists regarded as innately diasporic and therefore inferior to the authentic, original Jewish language of Hebrew.

His Zionism was undoubtedly a nationalist project, with all that implies in terms of inevitable hostility to “other” nations. Although he aspired to common struggle with Arab workers, he also believed that this was not a prerequisite for the construction of a socialist-Zionist Jewish order in Palestine.

Leftist Zionists clashed with assimilationists who advocated that Jews should simply integrate into the workers’ movement of whichever country they found themselves in. But there was another tendency, which rejected both the nationalism of Zionism and absolute assimilation — the General Jewish Labour Bund, founded in Vilnius in 1897.

The Bund was Marxist, but advocated Jewish cultural autonomy within the countries and movements where they found themselves, united by the transnational Bundist party.

Bundism was a mass force in Europe, representing tens of thousands of Jewish workers, and its history is a profoundly rich one. It is internally politically diverse, evolving left and right wings divided over questions such as what attitude to take to the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik government.

Vladimir Medem, the founding theorist of Bundism, was an opponent of Lenin within the international socialist movement. Many Bundists supported the Mensheviks, the Russian revolutionary left’s more conservative party (whose outstanding and perhaps most honourable leader, Julius Martov, was himself a Sephardic Jew, born in Turkey), but some, like Khaye Malka-Lifshits, also known as Esther Frumkin, were pro-Bolshevik.

Frumkin is a heroic figure, who was imprisoned for her revolutionary activity and who, in 1920, was involved in a left-wing split from the Bund, involving Bundists who wanted to affiliate to the Bolsheviks’ newly-founded Communist International, known as the “Third International”. The organisation she founded, the Kombund, did affiliate to the Third International and retained an autonomous identity as the Central Jewish Bureau within the Communist Party of Poland.

She was a passionate Yiddishist and wrote extensively about Yiddish. She was arrested by the Stalinist regime in 1938 and died in 1943 in a Stalinist labour camp in Karaganda, in what is now Kazakhstan. The Stalinist regime denounced “unreconstructed Bundists” as “counterrevolutionary nationalists”.

Contemporary organisations like the Jewish Socialist

Group identify with the Bundist tradition. Bundists were also particularly active in pioneering the Workmen’s Circles, the Arbeiter Rings, founded in 1900, as mutual aid societies and cultural committees which became forums, and indeed terrains of ideological struggle, for Jewish revolutionaries from a range of backgrounds. The official Arbeiter Ring organisation still exists today, although in a much depoliticised form.

## MAX SHACHTMAN, HAL DRAPER, AND PHYLLIS JACOBSON

**I’ve included these as a bit of a footnote, and from personal bias.**

These are three key figures in the particular political tradition with which Workers’ Liberty identifies, sometimes called “third camp” socialism which originated in the 1940s as a radically anti-Stalinist tendency that pioneered the slogan “neither Washington nor Moscow”. Max Shachtman, Hal Draper, and Phyllis Jacobson were all veterans of the American far-left and all emerged from New York’s Yiddish-speaking, Jewish immigrant left — in Shachtman’s case as a first generation immigrant.

Shachtman was, in 1929, one of the founding fathers of American Trotskyism, and was particularly active in opposing Stalinist anti-Semitism. When the great fissure between Stalinist and anti-Stalinist Marxism occurred in the mid-1920s, many Jews, both in the Soviet Union itself and internationally, remained “loyal” to the Russian regime and became Stalinist. But I think the historical record shows clearly that Stalinism was an anti-Semitic ideological force on a whole variety of levels, and these individuals illustrate Jewish involvement in the attempt to rescue a radically-democratic, internationalist conception of Marxism from the muck heaped on it by Stalinism.

These Jewish revolutionaries are also significant in generational terms. In different ways they were all involved in America’s civil rights movement and the New Left of the 1960s, and although a discrete, Yiddish-speaking, Jewish revolutionary culture was then much diminished, people like Shachtman, Draper, and Phyllis Jacobson (along with her partner Julius) represented a living link to it. They had markedly different political journeys, with Shachtman becoming a Cold War liberal and apologist for US imperialism, while Draper and the Jacobsons remained revolutionaries.

## “NON-JEWISH JEWS”?

**We’ve met a handful of individuals here. I chose them because I think they are representative either of particular traditions within Jewish revolutionary politics, or because they are representative of a specific historical moment in terms of Jewish political experience and organisation, or both.**

Their views, and experiences, are all very different. For many of them, the process of their becoming revolutionaries was about explicitly breaking from Judaism, and what they saw as reactionary and backwards in Jewish religion and cultural. The extent to which they broke from, or abandoned, their Jewishness, if such a thing is possible, varies, and all were involved in debates about assimilation, autonomy, nationalism, and so on. For Bundists and Ber Borochov’s Marxist-Zionists, their epochal task was to develop revolutionary conception of Jewish nationhood, expressed either as cultural autonomism or as nationalist aspiration.

They express the diversity and plurality of the history of Jewish engagement with and production of revolutionary ideas, and I think it would be unjust and reductionist to try and collapse them all into an undifferentiated, homogeneous “Jewish” experience.

But I think we can tease out from their varying experiences some common threads, and I want to leave you with these are concluding thoughts.

Jewish revolutionaries and revolutionary movements have shared an intensely literary character. There have been many heated debates within the movements discussed on the topic of language, and all the movements were great producers of literature — in the form of newspapers, pamphlets, and books — themselves. I think that emphasis on the literary, on written exchange and debate, is something which has been an integral element of Jewish culture historically. It’s something which Jewish enlightenment philosophers brought to their period and something which is picked up again by 19th and 20th century Jewish revolutionaries.

For me, however, the relationship between Jews and revolutionary politics does have its essential roots in material historical experience. However, that’s not merely because Jews are amongst history’s most put-upon, subjected, and bru-

talised peoples. It would be vulgar determinism to suggest an automatic, causal link between brutalisation and immiseration and the development of revolutionary consciousness. If anything, history rather suggests the opposite.

Rather, I think the roots of the great traditions of Jewish revolutionary culture lie in the quite specific role we have played in the development of European capitalism. Forced into being an incipient mercantile element in feudal society, Jews were at one in the same time integral and liminal. We were essential to commercial and economic functioning, and hence the development of capitalism, but also excluded from it — socially and ideologically, because of racism and oppression, by quota laws, by pogroms; and geographically, often living in communities literally on the edge of developing settlements that grew into capitalist towns, or effectively exiled and hemmed-in altogether in the Pale of Settlement. The dialectical character of historical Jewish experience, simultaneously inside and outside the development of modern capitalism, is an experience of societies in motion and transition, and creates the potential for a universal-historical perspective, which is the essence of any genuinely revolutionary politics.

I give the last word to Isaac Deutscher — a thing I am loth to do, because I think the totality of Deutscher’s political legacy is a negative rather than positive one. However on this topic he is a genuine source of light. In his book on this subject, he posits the concept of “the non-Jewish Jew” — the individual whose experience is shaped fundamentally by their Jewishness, but who uses that experience to aspire to a universal, rather than a solely “Jewish”, world view, a world view which may in part be shaped by kicking back against, critiquing, and breaking from what they perceive as reactionary religious or cultural dogmas within their Jewishness.

Deutscher writes:

“Have they [Jewish revolutionaries] anything in common with one another? Have they perhaps impressed mankind’s thought so greatly because of their special ‘Jewish genius’? I do not believe in the exclusive genius of any race. Yet I think that in some ways they were very Jewish indeed. They had in themselves something of the quintessence of Jewish life and of the Jewish intellect. They were a priori exceptional in that as Jews they dwelt on the borderlines of various civilizations, religions, and national cultures.

“They were born and brought up on the borderlines of various epochs. Their minds matured where the most diverse cultural influences crossed and fertilized each other. They lived on the margins or in the nooks and crannies of their respective nations. They were each in society and yet not in it, of it and yet not of it. It was this that enabled them to rise in thought above their societies, above their nations, above their times and generations, and to strike out mentally into wide new horizons and far into the future.”

The “quintessence of Jewish life” is, on the whole, very different now. The experience and impact of the Holocaust, the propulsion it gave to the growth of straightforwardly separatist Jewish nationalism (Zionism), and the accomplishment of the immediate Zionist project with the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, have changed the terms of the debate, and to a large extent diffused the potential “raw material” for a mass revolutionary movement that is in any sense specifically “Jewish”. (The one society which does have a mass Jewish proletariat is, of course, Israel: the potential there for a more direct and explicit rediscovery of some of the political cultures and traditions discussed in this article is, perhaps, a topic for another time.)

Nevertheless, we can still learn a great deal from the lives and experiences of these revolutionary Jews, and the movements they animated: their commitment to developing a discursive, literary culture; the pioneering work of Eleanor Marx in developing cultures of autonomous organisation within the labour movement; the trailblazing of Marx, Rocker, and others in their agitation against immigration controls; the models of working-class self- and mutual-education, and community solidarity, developed by Bundists and others in the “Workers’ Circles”; all of these can have direct, practical significance for the work of socialists today.

**Our world, like the world of the Jewish proletarians and proto-proletarians of the Pale, is still a world racked by exploitation and oppression. Picking up the thread of revolutionary universalism which runs through the traditions of these revolutionary Jews, it is towards the totalising, universal, systemic change for which they worked to which I believe we (as Jews, but, “beyond” our Jewishness, as working-class and human citizens of the world) should still struggle and aspire.**