

Discussion contributions:

# On the Jewish Question

A. Waterman

COMRADE RAMELSON in his article in the January issue of *Marxism Today*, whilst re-discussing the Jewish issue, makes reference to the recent experiences of the Jewish people, i.e. Hitler's extermination of 6 million Jews, the setting up of the State of Israel, and the elimination of Yiddish cultural activities in the U.S.S.R. in 1948. Nonetheless he does not seem to appreciate the profound impact these experiences have had on the Jewish people.

I want to dwell primarily on the part dealing with the Socialist Solution. It is important to recapitulate, though briefly, this unprecedented historical event. Merely to state that the Soviet Union "in eliminating anti-semitism . . . had a tremendous impact on Jews all over the world" barely touches the significance of the 1917 revolution, as far as the Jews as an oppressed minority were concerned. Surely this was only one aspect of what the young Soviet Union did for the Jewish people.

(1) For the first time in history a revolutionary movement succeeded in removing, at one stroke, all forms of discrimination, economic, political and cultural, by granting the erstwhile oppressed and pogromised Jews full and complete equality.

(2) It made possible in the short period of fifteen years the complete transformation of the social, economic and cultural structure of Soviet Jewry.

(3) "Every facility given to them . . . for the development of Yiddish culture." It was not only a continuation of the old Yiddish culture, but an unprecedented renaissance, transformation and expansion of Yiddish cultural activities which became "national in form and socialist in content".

(4) Economically, it drew masses of Jewish people into the then developing industries. For those who could not be absorbed in industry, it promulgated vast land settlement schemes and brought hundreds of thousands of Jews into agriculture. Large areas of land were specially allocated for Jewish re-settlement, in the Crimea, Ukraine, White Russia and the Caucasus. Jewish administrative regions were formed, such as Kalinindorf, New Zlotopol, Stalindorf, etc., where

the official language in the schools, courts and local government was Yiddish.

This economic and social transformation had its immediate and direct effect on cultural expansion. Let me quote a report given at a conference of Jewish cultural workers in 1924 (*Yevrei v SSSR*, p. 262): "There are functioning in the U.S.S.R. fifty-two kindergartens, 439 elementary schools, fifty-six secondary schools, forty-four technical and four pedagogical institutes, all conducted in Yiddish; also four Yiddish faculties attached to Universities." At a similar conference in 1928 the above figures were almost doubled. In 1921, only 21 per cent of Jewish children went to Yiddish schools; by 1932 the figure was 64 per cent. There were at this time forty-two Yiddish newspapers and periodicals, four publishing houses, ten Yiddish state theatres and two theatrical schools. Book publishing in Yiddish experienced a fivefold increase, from seventy-three titles in 1913 to 339 in 1939. Shalom Aleichem's books in Yiddish rose from 220,000 in 1913 to 3,200,000 in 1939. Several radio stations gave many hours to Yiddish broadcasts.

On March 28th, 1928, a government decree set aside Biro-Bijan as a Jewish Autonomous Region, with the view to an eventual formation of a Jewish Socialist Republic, in order that it might "preserve a Yiddish Socialist national culture" (Kalinin).

It was all this which brought about a situation where "sympathy with the Soviet Union was general, and Socialism as a final solution to the Jewish problem was the dominant trend among Jewish workers and many of the middle class . . . whilst Zionism met . . . but with little success". It is in the light of the above-mentioned developments that one has to consider what happened to Yiddish culture in the U.S.S.R. in 1948. To mention in the same breath those who honestly and sincerely question the forced elimination of Yiddish culture in the U.S.S.R., with those who slander the U.S.S.R. and accuse her of practising anti-semitism, is a sleight of hand which encourages the slanderers and bitterly offends the friends of the U.S.S.R.

Let me say clearly and unequivocally that there can be no doubt that a process of integration is taking place in the Soviet Union, that many Jews, particularly of the younger generation, neither speak nor understand Yiddish and have adopted

Russian as their mother tongue. No Socialist should oppose such a natural process of integration. But what about the three million who flocked to the Yiddish concerts given sporadically in the U.S.S.R. in 1957 (a figure given by Danilov, Vice-Minister for Culture, to the French Jewish delegation in February, 1958)? Why should these millions, or even thousands, be denied full facilities to publish, speak, see plays, in what is still their mother tongue, namely Yiddish?

Let us analyse Comrade Ramelson's arguments in this matter.

A. *"That administrative measures were taken in 1948 to close down Jewish cultural institutions."*

I can only assume that by "administrative measures" he means the unjust and illegal acts involving the complete elimination of all Yiddish cultural activities, together with almost all their outstanding representatives. Does not the re-establishment of Socialist legality after the Twentieth Congress demand the full rehabilitation and correction of these injustices and illegalities committed during the "cult of the individual" period? Apparently that would be too simple an answer—so Comrade Ramelson must find other reasons to justify the "status quo".

B. *"Segregation in the Ghettoes . . . created a specific Yiddish culture depicting Ghetto life."*

How abysmally ignorant the above argument is. Those who have any knowledge of this literature will tell you that it was despised by the rich Jews and the Jewish clerics, who referred to it as the "skivvy" of literature, and the gutteral of the tailors, the cobblers, the carpenters, the artisans and the very poor. The rich and the educated spoke Hebrew or the country's language. This gave a special character and poignancy to Yiddish. It became a weapon of the working class and poor Jews, embraced and loved by them, sinking deep into their consciousness and daily life. Ghetto language indeed! One may as well call Negro culture in the U.S.A. a Ghetto culture.

C. *"Wherever the Ghetto walls were broken down as in Western Europe and America—Yiddish ceased to develop."*

Yet there are still three daily newspapers, three Yiddish theatres, scores of journals, amateur theatrical groups, choirs, Yiddish secondary schools and Yiddish faculties at the universities in the U.S.A. Similarly in France, the Argentine

—not to mention the New Democracies, i.e. Poland, Rumania, where one would hardly say that the "ghetto walls" had not been broken down.

D. *"With the further development of Socialism . . . Yiddish ceases to be a living tongue . . . and rapidly crumbles."*

It would appear that up to 1948 Yiddish was a living language, and that overnight it ceased to be so, by "administrative measures". To quote the President of the Zionist Organisation in support of this theory is the measure of the bankruptcy of evidence available to Comrade Ramelson. The integration which Goldman bemoans and the "survival" he is hoping for has nothing in common with socialist ideas. We do not want the survival of the "love of Zion" or of the culture of the rabbis and the clerics. This is precisely the kind of "survival" which the Yiddish-speaking workers fought against, using Yiddish cultural expression as a weapon.

E. *"The breaking-up of concentrated communities . . . brought about a speeding of the process of integration."*

There are 500,000 Jews in Moscow, 40,000 in Kiev, Odessa, Minsk, 25,000 in Vilno. Considering that there are about 3 million Jews in the U.S.S.R., one would hardly call these considerable communities a "breaking-up" of concentration.

F. *"Justification given for these measures (elimination of Yiddish) is that there was not sufficient demand for it to justify such undertakings."*

Yet further on the same page Comrade Ramelson states that "neither financial cost nor the relative smallness of the population of a nationality can be seriously considered as an obstacle to the application of this principle"—namely "the Marxist approach to national culture is not only to permit, but to *facilitate* by every possible means, the fostering and development of all national cultures".

But then Comrade Ramelson goes on to argue: "As we have seen, the Jews are not a nation"; "Yiddish therefore cannot be treated as a national culture."

How devoid this argument is of Leninist principles on the question of nations and languages. "He who does not acknowledge and defend the equality of *nations and languages*, he who does not fight against all forms of national oppression or inequality, is not Marxist or even a Democrat." (*Lenin on the Jewish Question*, p. 14).

Lenin does not speak of the equality of national languages, but of nations *and* languages. No Marxist would claim that the Jews in the Soviet Union were at any time a nation; yet if all facilities and help were extended to their culture and language between 1917 and 1948, what change has taken place in their status after 1948 to warrant the cessation and elimination of this culture? Does not the fact that 3 million flocked to Yiddish concerts, the existence of seventy-two Yiddish writers, poets, dramatists, the emergence of twenty young Yiddish writers (products of the Yiddish schools of 1936) prove that there is a demand for its continuation? Of course we should welcome the considerable translations from Yiddish into Russian of very many books. Yet I have not yet come across a coherent Marxist argument why these books, originally written in Yiddish, should never see daylight in their original tongue, nor why Yiddish Soviet writers should have their novels, stories and poems published (in Yiddish) by left-wing publications in capitalist countries (U.S.A. and France) and not in their country of origin, the U.S.S.R.

G. *"The question is raised whether Marxists attempt by artificial means to delay this historical process . . . of complete cultural integration."*

Surely this is putting the question on its head. I would rather stand it up on its feet. Should Marxists attempt by artificial means to eliminate a living language and culture, by "administrative measures", instead of allowing the historical process of cultural integration to take its natural course? Particularly when Jewish religious practice and organisation is permitted in the U.S.S.R. as of right, why should not Yiddish secular culture and Jewish communal organisations of a secular and socialist character enjoy similar rights?

Now is it true, as Comrade Ramelson states, that "some publications partly in Yiddish and partly in Russian have appeared"? To my knowledge, there has been only one book (limited edition 500 copies), Shalom Aleichem's *The Enchanted Tailor*. The Yiddish is embodied in its illustrations by the Jewish artist Tankhom Kaplan, but the text is in Russian.\*

There is no doubt that the problem is being discussed and considered in the U.S.S.R. It is a problem which has been raised again and again by every Jewish progressive delegation which has visited the U.S.S.R. since 1955. Furthermore, there seems to be general support among Soviet writers

for the rehabilitation of Yiddish, its publications, theatres, newspapers etc. Of six such delegations which have visited the U.S.S.R. since 1955, almost all have had varying promises made to them:

A. That a newspaper would soon be re-started.

B. That a Yiddish Theatre would be revived.

C. That a Yiddish Almanack would be issued, and book publications resumed.

So far, these have remained promises; it is urgent and high time they were turned into reality. Let us remove this weapon from the hands of the enemies of the Soviet Union and of socialism. Let us counter the pernicious Zionist and reactionary propaganda by reaffirming our belief in socialism as a final solution to the Jewish question, and let us make it once again "the dominant trend among the Jewish workers and many of the middle class".

### Solly Kaye

THE article on the Jewish problem in the January issue is, in my opinion, the first real attempt for many years to deal in a balanced way with this complex problem.

And I am rather sorry that the first contribution in the discussion, from my old friend and comrade Jack Rosenberg, should be so unhelpful.

Jack puts into Bert Ramelson's article words he didn't use, and then proceeds to knock him for six. That is not really good discussion. Did Bert Ramelson say that "since the Jews are not a nation they cannot be affected by the national question" (my emphasis)? Did Ramelson say that "anti-semitism is the main issue" regarding the Jewish problem? Has Ramelson denied that the existence of the State of Israel has played an important part in Jewish life in post-war years? These are but a few of the false bases on which Jack Rosenberg conducts his argument.

As for accusing Bert Ramelson of confusion, I think there is more confusion in Jack's half-page than in much that I have read on this subject in recent years.

We Communists have a policy on Israel and on the Jewish problem. The fact that many of us Jews have spent most of our time in the general political struggle, rather than specialising in the Jewish problem, may be the reason that our line is not well enough known. But a "line" there certainly is. It certainly is not, nor ever has been, based on a premise like that of Comrade Rosenberg, that the Jewish workers "were always generally clear-sighted politically."

There is no contradiction between the statement that the "Jews are not a nation" and the statement that "an Israeli nation is rapidly emerging". The

\* We have recently received a copy of a book of selections from Shalom Aleichem's works, printed in Moscow in Yiddish, 30,000 print. *Editor.*

first statement takes the Communist view that Jews are citizens of the country in which they are born and bred. The second, takes the Communist view that if a large number of people have a common territory, economic base, language, culture and way of life, the basis for nationhood exists and will develop. The Zionists take the view that all Jews are citizens of Israel as well as citizens of the countries in which they are born and brought up. That might be convenient for the Zionists and for the wealthy Jews who can travel between Israel and "their" other country, but no Communist can hold this point of view, surely?

I wish comrades like Rosenberg would say what they think our attitude to Israel should be, instead of saying "we must have a positive line". *We have one.* It is that Israel will only develop if it recognises the rights of all its citizens to full equality, that racial discrimination is not acceptable when practised by a German or American, nor is it acceptable when practised by an Israeli Jew. Our line is that Israel must work for the victory of the anti-imperialist forces of the Middle East rather than see itself as a weapon of imperialism against the peoples of the Middle East, hoping to get some scrapings out of the imperialist barrel for doing its dirty work.

Comrade Rosenberg must understand that it is far harder to win British Jews for this view, than it was to win them for action against fascism. For fascism was on their doorstep, murdering their relatives and friends and threatening to murder them, and it didn't take "clearsightedness" to understand that.

But one has to be clearsighted to understand how to combat bourgeois nationalism. British Jews have been fed on it from childhood just as other British workers have. They too have caught the disease that affects *all* British workers to a larger or smaller degree; that considers the Arabs or the Africans unfit to rule themselves. The most common expression one hears from Zionists who try to justify the taking of land from the Arabs is that "they have huge areas and we only want this little strip". A complete disregard for the land, the homes, the history, the background of the Arabs of Palestine who have lived and worked this land for generations.

And when one has relatives and friends in Israel who are flung into a storm centre of world conflict, how easy it is for them to blindly follow Ben Gurion with the jingo parrot cry common to all capitalist countries: "We must support the Government when danger threatens from outside . . . don't rock the boat . . . rely on strength . . . etc. etc."

Jewish workers brought up in imperialist Britain have just as many illusions as other workers. Indeed it could be argued that if there is a higher proportion of Jews in business and petty production

than other sections there will be a higher degree of confusion and political backwardness among them than among the workers generally.

There is much room for discussion arising from Bert Ramelson's article. It is interesting to note that it is not only Communists who are rediscussing this problem, though most Communists are agreed on fundamentals. The leading Jewish religious authorities have for months been at loggerheads with the Government of Israel in defining "What is a Jew?" Yet many of these are foremost critics of the Soviet Union for its refusal to develop "Jewish Culture". If they can't agree what is a Jew, how can they know precisely what is Jewish culture. I am sure that as time goes on, and providing we can maintain peace, a specific *Israeli* culture will develop. But it is clear that in countries like Britain, America and France there is less and less distinction between the culture of Jews and that of the rest of the peoples of that country. Religious distinction, yes. Cultural distinction, no.

Many Jews, and others, fall for a vague, sentimental, mystical approach to the Jewish question. Because of this they refuse to accept facts and search for some mystical line. Even a man as brilliant as Einstein spoke about Jews having "a common love of social justice" giving Marx, Spinoza and Heine as examples of Jews in different historical periods with these qualities. But are they typical? Einstein went wrong because he had no class approach to the Jewish problem. "A common love of social justice" when the banker millionaire Bernard Baruch is one of the major backers of the anti-democratic policies of the U.S. Government? When the scientist Edward Teller perverts his science to the making of more horrible H-bombs to forward U.S. foreign policy? When the Jewish Judge Kauffman can sentence the heroic Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to a horrible death for upholding the principles of honesty, decency and peace?

It is a phoney science that tries to find a common bond between all Jews in class society. There can be a common bond for limited objectives as there was during the war against Hitler. But that common bond existed not only between Jews of all classes but between other peoples of different classes too.

I was particularly interested in the sections of Bert Ramelson's article dealing with the nationalist trend and Israel, for as I have said above there is greater confusion on this among Jews than on any other subject.

Today Israel is one of the greatest testing grounds exposing the falseness of the "common ideology" theory. Here the classes are as bitterly divided as in any capitalist country in spite of the fact that the workers are subject to as great a barrage of chauvinist propaganda as anywhere else in the world.

Where is "the fair play and love of justice" when the Government of Israel can blatantly support the policies of Eisenhower, join in an aggression by the side of British and French imperialism, deny the rights of Israeli Arabs not only to their land, their homes, a job and a future, but even to the elementary right in the land of their birth to move from one town to another without official passes? Do we condemn apartheid in Africa but not in Israel?

How many Jews in Britain today—yes, even many who boast of being Socialist, of their love of justice, of their desire to see a Jewish Socialist State in Israel—have raised a finger against the anti-Arab discrimination that takes place there? How many protested at the murder of forty-nine Arab citizens, men and women, old and young, in Kfar Qassem by the border police (judgment was long delayed and in the course of it Judge Halevi read "Segen Dehan shot them in cold blood deliberately and without any justification"). A common love of social justice?

In Israel today huge new taxes have been imposed upon the people to pay for what the Government chooses to call "the Sinai Campaign" and for the future military adventures that Israel's ruling circles look forward to. This is leading to an increasing number of strikes and growing hardship among the people.

Railway workers recently worked to rule demanding a general rise in pay and won. Tel Aviv port workers struck in order to win the same pay as workers at Haifa. Thousands in the Israeli diamond polishing industry struck for a cost-of-living allowance and won. Jerusalem transport workers struck against so-called "efficiency dismissals" and won the

reinstatement of their mates. Even secondary school teachers throughout the country struck during the whole month of October and gained part of their demand for wage increases.

These examples show that the class struggle continues, whether in Britain, America or Israel, while capitalism is the system under which we live. For those Jews who really do love social justice there are some urgent and immediate tasks.

There *is* indeed a clear line, a positive line that Jack Rosenberg and others ask for. To win working class and progressive Jews away from blind loyalty and support of the present Government of Israel. To show our desire for Israeli prosperity by demanding that it pursue a policy of peace and non-discrimination against non-Jewish Israelis. To demand that Israel plays its part as one of the growing number of nations struggling for peace, rather than allow itself to be used as a base for imperialist war and against the independence of the peoples of the Middle East. This is the way to assure security and safety for Israel.

And in Britain the test of whether a Jew is a lover of social justice and progress will be the degree to which he joins in the general fight for peace, for the liberation of the colonial peoples and for socialism. The threat of the H-bomb is in every way a danger to world Jewry as great or greater than was fascism. But this is not easily understood by many Jews, or they would not have so easily joined the war whoops over Suez. That is what makes the work of the Communist Party so important and the responsibility of Communist Jews in particular, so great.

## On Higher Education

**R**ARELY has an article on higher education been so concise, so much needed, and above all so exclusively revealing as to what the future has in store, as the one by Sam Lilley in *Marxism Today* (January 1959). The ground covered was so very extensive that it might appear almost absurd to attempt to add to it. Nevertheless that is my intention, for though I entirely agree with what has already been written, I noticed that the author introduced certain questions such as the role of television in popularising educational propaganda, and in a slightly different manner a point questioning various present-day trends concerning specialisation in the universities. The purpose behind raising these issues was, I feel, to develop more discussion around them. Might I strongly recommend that the article by Sam Lilley be read in conjunction with the pamph-

let on education issued by the Communist Party in 1958!

In both cases stress was laid on many identical factors. That the money needed in order to develop our educational system existed, at present, in the form of expenditure on a vast and totally unnecessary scale on armaments. The class bias of the present educational system in Britain was brought out, and does not I feel have to be reiterated here. Above all it was emphasised that a socialist policy regarding education is concerned precisely with the expansion of educational opportunity at all levels.

More and more the "11-plus" examination is being challenged. It seems that selection starts very much earlier, more often than not. I myself would rate the "11-plus" as low as a fraud. The purpose here is to artificially select the "types" who could