

The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Labor Bund

Nazism and Stalinism Delivered the Blows; Ideology Did the Rest

The Jewish Labor Bund was one of the most important leftwing Jewish political organizations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It played a key role in the formation of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party well before its split into Menshevik and Bolshevik factions, and was influentially active in the 1905 Russian Revolution while emerging as a leader of Jewish self-defense against Tsarist pogroms. While the Russian wing of the Bund was destroyed by the Bolsheviks, the Polish Bund remained influential between the two world wars, and Bundist ideas travelled with Jewish immigrants to influence socialist movements throughout the world.

Of course, the Holocaust eliminated the mass Jewish labor movement in Poland, and then the post-war Communist takeover destroyed the Bund politically. While the organization later regrouped as a world federation, it survives today as only a marginal movement in Jewish cultural and political life. Even its historical and political significance

is recognized by only small numbers of Jews and progressives.

Yet the Bund's experience as an ethnic and class-based organization arguably encapsulates both the strengths and limitations of the historical, once-prominent Jewish engagement with socialist ideas and movements. The Bund was an internationalist organization that shared the core belief of all Marxist groups in a common class struggle aimed at achieving the liberation of all workers, whatever their national or religious origin. The Bund nevertheless insisted that Jews were a distinct national group, and that while Jewish workers should prioritize alliances with other socialists to advance the revolutionary cause, a separate Jewish socialist organization was required to adequately represent the national, cultural needs of working-class Jews in Eastern Europe.

The Bund opposed assimilation, defended Jewish civil and cultural rights, and campaigned actively against anti-Semitism. However, the Bund's socialist universalism precluded support for the notion of Jewish national unity (*klal yisrael*) or for the narrow advancement of Jewish sectional interests. It eschewed any automatic solidarity with middle- or upper-class Jews and generally rejected political collaboration with Jewish groups representing religious, Zionist or conservative viewpoints. The Bund's famous anthem, known as "The Oath" (*di*



Jewish Labor Bund election poster

Philip Mendes is associate professor at Monash University and the author or co-author of seven books, including *Jews and Australian Politics* (Sussex Academic Press, 2004). He is currently preparing *Jews and the Left: The Rise and Fall of a Political Alliance* for publication by Palgrave MacMillan in late 2013.

shvue in Yiddish), composed by the Yiddish poet Salomon Rappaport in 1902, made no specific reference to Jews or Jewish suffering.

The Bund's determination to be both militantly socialist and Jewish often left it politically isolated, accused of being ideologically purist and sectarian and unwilling to engage in pragmatic alliances with either moderate socialists or non-socialist Jews to achieve political power. Still, the Bund's perspective arguably reflected the real experiences of its working-class constituency. Jews in Tsarist Russia and Poland, between the wars, were heavily divided by economic and social factors, with Jewish workers employed almost exclusively by Jewish employers, due to the anti-Semitism of their neighbors. As a result, the class struggle of Jewish workers was principally an internal Jewish class war. There was no united Jewish nation, and the Bund could not help but see many Jews as the class enemy.

The Bund was disappointed by the failure of broader socialist groups to display active solidarity with persecuted Jewish workers or with the Bund's consistent internationalist values. Tensions between the Bund and the Polish Socialist Party as well as the Bolsheviks/Communists (under their various titles in Russia and Poland) reflected the Bund's concern that the specific rights of Jewish workers were either being subordinated to Polish nationalist concerns, or alternatively to wider socialist agendas. This was why the Bund remained organizationally independent of these larger movements.

The Bund formed in Lithuania, Poland and Russia in 1897 — the same year as the first Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland — and initially demanded only equal civil rights for Jewish workers as individuals and an end to anti-Jewish discrimination. Over time, however, the Bund also sought recognition of Jewish national rights, though it remained unalterably opposed to Zionism. “[B]etween Zionist activity and Socialist activity,” declared Vladimir Medem, one of the Bund's foremost ideological leaders, in 1920, “there is a fundamental and profound chasm. . . . A national home in Palestine would not end the Jewish exile.



Ukrainian Bundists mourning members of their self-defense group who were killed in a 1905 anti-Tsarist uprising.

. . . All that would change would be the belief of Jewry in its future — the hope of the Jews in exile — the struggle for a better life would be snuffed out.”

Indeed, the Bund articulated the principle of *doykayt* (“hereness”) — that is, the preservation of Jewish life and the struggle for liberation wherever Jews live — and advocated national-cultural autonomy for Jews within a multi-national state. This perspective was concisely summarized as “nationhood without statehood,” and differed sharply from the Zionist concept.

The Bund achieved considerable success in its early years, and attracted an estimated 30,000 members by 1903 and 40,000 supporters by 1906, which made it the largest socialist group in the Russian Empire. The organization arguably reached the peak of its influence during the 1905 Russian revolution, when it demanded an improvement in living standards, a more democratic political system, and the introduction of equal rights for Jews. The organization was active in initiating mass strikes and demonstrations in cities with large Jewish populations such as Lodz, Riga, Vilna, Warsaw, Odessa, and Bialystok.

The Bund also played a lead role in organizing and hosting the 1898 founding Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP). However, the Bund's relationship with the broader socialist movement collapsed five years later over

the question of Jewish nationalism. At the 1903 RSDLP congress, the Bund sought formal recognition as the sole representative of the Jewish proletariat without geographical limits, and also proposed a federated party based on the multinational model of the Austrian Socialists. The Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin vehemently rejected the notion of Jewish national culture, arguing that the concept was inherently reactionary and that the only solution to anti-Semitism was the progressive assimilation of Jews into the broader population.

Ultimately, the Bund was forced to leave the RSDLP. Although Lenin agreed, for tactical reasons, to permit the re-entry of the Bund into the party in 1906 and to accept their claim to exclusive representation of Jewish workers, the Bolsheviks continued to reject the notion of Jewish national culture (as reflected in Joseph Stalin's 1913 report, "Marxism and the National Question") and to accuse the Bund of fomenting separatist tendencies.

During the February, 1917 revolution, the Bund played an active part as allies of the Mensheviks. Leading Bundists such as Mark Liber, Raphael Abramovich and Henryk Erlich held prominent positions in the various workers and soldiers' councils known as soviets, and large numbers of Bundists were elected to local city councils. Following the Bolshevik takeover in October, a Bundist minority led by Vladimir Medem rejected Lenin's rule as undemocratic and antipathetic to Jewish national rights, but the majority agreed to join the Communist Party. The Bund was then formally dissolved by the Bolsheviks in 1921, with remaining members either fleeing abroad or facing persecution by the Bolshevik regime. Mark Liber and many other Jewish Bundists would be executed in the Stalinist purges.

In Poland, on the other hand, the Bund voted in 1920 against accepting the twenty-one conditions for affiliation with the international communist body, the Comintern, which the Bund called, in a resolution, "ideologically bankrupt" and playing "a deleterious role in the labor movement." Instead, the Bund affiliated with the Socialist or Second International, and established its own version of Jewish national-cultural autonomy in Poland, form-

ing a large social, cultural and political Yiddish infrastructure that included trade unions, secular Jewish day schools, sporting associations, libraries, newspapers, youth and women's groups, and health centres such as the famous Medem Sanatorium for children with tuberculosis.

By the mid-to-late 1930s, the Bund was the strongest Jewish political organization in Poland and secured major victories in Jewish communal and Polish municipal elections. One of the key reasons for the Bund's strength was its active opposition to anti-Semitism, with public rallies, strikes and self-defense groups that repositioned the Bund as representing the concerns of the broad Polish Jewish population rather than only a narrower swath of Jewish workers. To be sure, the Bund still rejected formal alliances with other Jewish political forces, Zionist or religious, but it joined with other progressive groups within Polish society to oppose anti-Semitism and seek the establishment of socialism. There would be "no end to persecution [of Jews]," wrote the Bundist leader Victor Alter wrote in 1937, "unless there is a simultaneous freeing of the Polish masses from social oppression. . . . Your liberation can only be a by-product of the universal freeing of oppressed people."

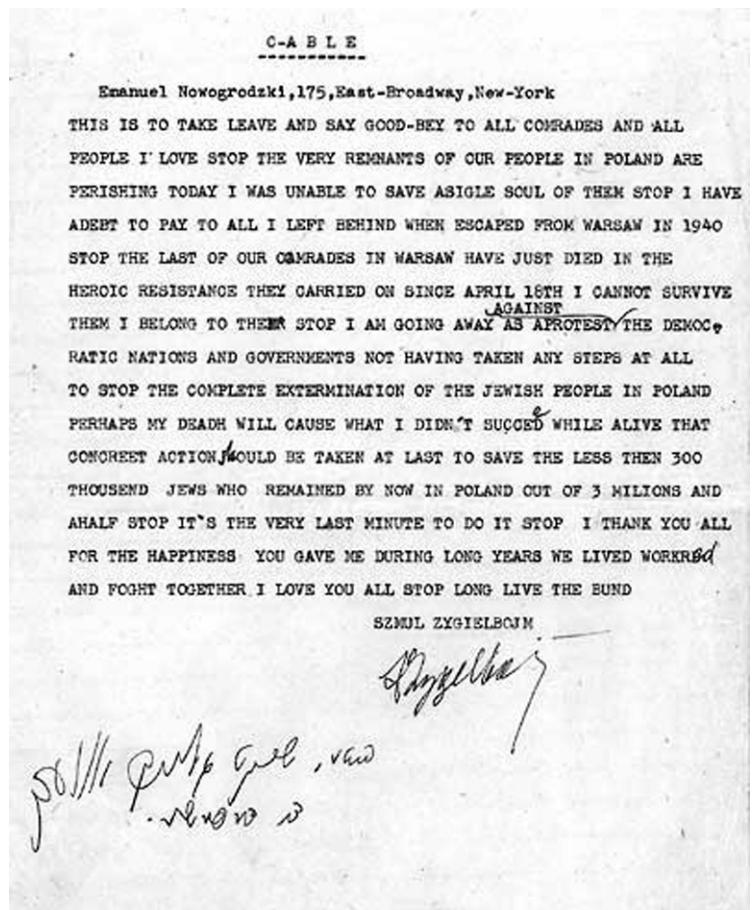
During the Holocaust, the Bund remained reluctant to form specifically Jewish rather than broader socialist political alliances. Bundists also preferred to avoid any unified action with Communists. However, these principles clashed with political reality, given that the Nazis were uniquely targeting *all* Jews for genocide. With the Polish Socialist Party unable or unwilling to provide significant military assistance, the Bund eventually joined with Zionists, Communists and other Jews to lead anti-Nazi resistance in a number of ghettos, including Warsaw, Vilna and Bialystok.

The Bund lost most of its members and supporters in the Holocaust. The Bundist member of the Polish Government-in-exile in London, Szmul Zygielbojm, committed suicide to protest the world's passivity about the extermination of the Jewish people. Surviving Bundists attempted to regroup in post-war Poland, but were suppressed by the Communist government. Most Bund leaders emigrated to other countries by early 1949

The largest Bundist presence outside Eastern Europe was in the United States. The first Bund branch in America was established in 1900, and by 1904 a Central Union of Bund Organizations was formed to raise funds and organize lecture tours. During the 1905 Russian revolution, American Bundists raised \$5,000 a week for several months to assist their colleagues in Russia. Bundists also played a major role in forming key American Jewish labor-movement parties, organizations and Yiddish-language publications, including the still extant Workmen's Circle and the *Forward* newspaper. Significant American labor leaders such as Sidney Hillman and David Dubinsky were Bundists. American Bundists also contributed significantly to the funding of Polish Bundist institutions; it has been estimated that American Bundists forwarded \$91,000 to the Polish Bund between 1934 and 1939.

Bundists played a lead role in forming the Jewish Labor Committee in 1934, to defend Jewish rights and counter the growth of Nazism. Headed by Baruch Charney Vladeck, the Committee provided emergency visas to European socialists (mainly Jews, including many prominent Bundists who had found temporary refuge in Lithuania) to enable them to flee the Nazis. After World War II, the Committee helped Holocaust survivors rebuild their lives.

It should be noted, however, that prior to World War II the Bund never constituted itself as an international Jewish socialist organization per se. Rather, the many Bund groups worldwide viewed themselves first and foremost as off-shoots of the Russian and later Polish Bund. It was only in 1947, following the Holocaust and the imminent dissolution of the Polish Bund, that Bund leaders in New York elected to form a World Coordinating Committee of Bundist Organizations. This new body vowed to defend Jewish economic and cultural concerns including the right to national identity. Even then, a significant minority opposed the decision to internationalize on the grounds of *doiykayt*.



The suicide note of Szymul Zygielbojm, in protest of the Holocaust.

The Bund's ideological hostility towards all forms of Zionism lasted much longer than the anti-Zionism of many other socialist (and mainstream Jewish) groupings. One of the main reasons for this antipathy was that Bundists and Zionists competed for the same constituency in Russia and Poland. The Zionist movement's advocacy of large-scale Jewish emigration to a proposed homeland in Palestine also clashed directly with the Bund's insistence that anti-Semitism should be fought and defeated within all the countries in which Jews lived. More generally, the Bund's universalist emphasis on the joint struggle of Jewish and non-Jewish workers could not be reconciled with the Zionist nationalist perspective in favor of the unity of all Jews.

The Bund vigorously rejected large-scale Jewish emigration to Palestine and accused Zionists of failing to defend Jewish rights in Europe. They even argued that Zionists were collaborating with Polish anti-Semites who wished to force Jews to leave Poland. Palestine, they argued, was too small

to accommodate large numbers of new emigrants — and it was not fair to impose a Jewish state on large numbers of Palestinian Arabs.

Even after the Holocaust (albeit with some internal dissent), Bundists continued to campaign against Zionism. A Bundist conference held in 1948 shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel rejected that state as a solution to the problems of Jews worldwide, and instead called for a binational Jewish-Arab state in Palestine. Further Bundist statements castigated Zionism for its negation of Jewish communities outside Israel, and its rejection of Yiddish language and culture.

However, the third world Bund conference, held in Montreal in 1955, adopted a more positive approach to Israel's existence. Influenced by the development of an active Bundist movement inside Israel, the conference affirmed the significance of Israel while still rejecting the Zionist identification of Israel as the homeland of all Jews and the “center” of Jewish life worldwide. Subsequent Bund statements supported the security and well-being of Israel while expressing criticisms of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians, criticisms similar to those adopted by the Israeli peace movement.

After World War II, the Bund attempted to rebuild itself in the key Jewish population centers of the U.S. and Western Europe, plus other outposts such as Australia, Mexico, Argentina and ironically Israel. The full story of this renewal is told in the recently released book by Australian scholar David Slucki, *The International Jewish Labor Bund After 1945* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press). This rebuilding, however, did not involve any significant revision of pre-war Bundist ideas and culture. Essentially the Bund attempted to impose Russian and Polish Jewish models on other Jewish communities, including those of Sephardi origin, rather than developing new ideas that reflected the social, political and cultural experience of those communities.

It is easy to argue that the Bund's post-war marginalization was the inevitable result of the Holocaust and the subsequent Communist takeover of Poland. Additionally, the Bund was sidelined by the same post-war developments that undermined

support for the Jewish Left more generally: the creation and consolidation of Israel as a central site for Jewish identity; the overwhelming growth into the middle class of Jews, at least in the Western countries; the rapid shift in the Jewish vernacular from Yiddish to English, Hebrew and other local languages; the increasing Western tolerance towards Jews and the associated integration of most Jews into non-Jewish life and culture; and the rise of Soviet and broader anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism on the left.

Yet the Bund's fate also arguably confirmed the limitations of applying political ideals to only one specific state or territory. The Bund was never an internationalist movement of Jewish workers, but an organization tied closely to the specific language and political culture of Russia and Poland. Bundist organizations elsewhere served primarily as émigré groups offering a base of support for the movement in the “home” countries. In simple terms, this meant that the death of the Jewish working class and the associated Yiddish cultural infrastructure in Poland inevitably signalled the end of the Bund as a significant political actor.

In principle, the Bund could have reinvented itself as a world Jewish socialist body addressing specific Jewish living conditions and class issues in each country. A reformed Bund could have provided significant representation for working-class and other progressive Jews who did not conform to the new Jewish political consensus in favour of capitalist and Zionist values. This revision did not happen, however, in the post-war period — for the same reason that it did not happen after the earlier dissolution of the Russian Bund in 1920. It would have required a radical change in Bundist ideology from universal to nationalist, and a perspective of solidarity with Jews everywhere, including the large Jewish population living in Palestine and later Israel.