

Trotsky and the 'Jewish question'

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In his autobiography, written in 1929, Trotsky stated that the national question, even if it was important in Russian society, for him personally had 'virtually no importance'. [1] Despite the fact that he was of Jewish origin – like a large number of Russian and Polish revolutionaries of his time such as Zinoyiev (Radomilsky), Kamenev (Rosenfeld), Martov (Tsederbaum), Axelrod, Radek (Sobelsohn) and Rosa Luxemburg – he never learned to read Yiddish and never devoted an important work to the Jewish question.

It should be remembered that, unlike the vast majority of the Jews in the Tsarist empire, the Bronstein family did not live in a large city or in a shetl in the Pale of Settlement, but instead in the Ukrainian countryside where influence from a Jewish milieu was very weak. The young Lyova never received any religious education, and probably never, or almost never, went to the synagogue. Moreover, as Isaac Deutscher pointed out, Trotsky was partly educated in a Russian-German gymnasium in Odessa, which undoubtedly contributed to his assimilation. [2] Such an intellectual itinerary was quite exceptional in an era in which the large majority of Russian Jews spoke Yiddish. The Ukrainian Jew became a Russian revolutionary.

However, throughout his whole life he had to experience the consequences of his Jewishness. In his childhood he was excluded from a school in Gromokley, an Ukrainian village, because of the numerous clausus for Jews that the Tsarist regime had established in the early 1880s. [3]

In Saint Petersburg, during the revolution of 1905, he participated in the organisation of self-defence groups against the pogroms of the Black Hundreds. In this, he collaborated with the Jewish workers movement (the Bund and the Poale-Zion). [4] During the civil war, the counter-revolution's propaganda against the soviet power and the Jewish leader of the Red Army was heavily anti-Semitic. [5] After 1917, during the coalition government of the Bolsheviks with Left Social-Revolutionaries, Lenin proposed Trotsky to be the People's Commissar for interior affairs – but he refused. With Sverdlov's support, he argued that the Bolsheviks should not give their enemies 'such an additional weapon', referring to his Jewishness. [6] Finally, during the Moscow trials between 1936 and 1939, the Stalinist bureaucracy did not hesitate to use anti-Semitism in its fight against the Left Opposition.

Trotsky can therefore, as Isaac Deutscher wrote, be considered a paradigmatic figure of the non-Jewish Jew. He abandoned Judaism to adopt a cosmopolitan and internationalist world-view, but history forced him to remember his ethnic and cultural origins. Joseph Roth, author of the novel *Der Stumme Prophet* (The Mute Prophet) saw Trotsky as the incarnation of the Jewish dimension of the revolution while for the German critic Hans Mayer he was always a kind of 'comrade Shylock' (Genosse Shylock) – even though he was never conscious of it. [7]

The first time Trotsky was confronted with the Jewish question was during the second congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) in 1903 in Brussels and London. The young Russian revolutionary participated as a delegate of the Siberian section, which he had joined during his first deportation. One on the points of the agenda of the congress, which would become famous as the one during which Bolsheviks and Mensheviks split, was the position of the Bund in the party. The General Workers Union of Poland, Lithuania and Russia (Bund) was born in 1897 in Vilnius and

had become one of the main forces in the socialist movement in the Russian empire.

Among the nine delegates that participated in the founding congress of the RSDLP in Minsk in 1898, three had been members of the Bund. Born as a revolutionary Marxist organisation of the Jewish proletariat, the Bund quickly expanded its political influence. Opposed to Zionism, which it considered a form of reactionary nationalism, the Bund acted as an organisation of Russian Social Democracy specifically devoted to agitation and propaganda among the Jewish working class. However, in a few years time, the party changed character. In the Pale of Settlement, where Jews lived as an homogeneous community, the Bund became a national party. It contributed to the development of Yiddish language and literature and its activity more and more marked it as a movement for national liberation. [8] This turn was finalized at the fourth national congress of the Bund in 1900. First, the party now recognized the existence of a 'Jewish nation', a notion it had hitherto rejected, second, it proposed reforming the RSDLP in a federation of national parties, and therefore third, it started to see itself as an independent party.

It is easy to understand the influence on the Bund from the Austro-Marxists who at the Brunn congress in 1899 had drawn up a program on the demand for national cultural autonomy for all peoples in the Habsburgian Monarchy. It is striking to see the Bund borrow this formula from the Austrian socialists when a few years later in his book *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy* (1907) Otto Bauer applied it to all nations - with the exception of the Jews. In 1903, probably shocked by the Kishinev pogrom, the Bund openly declared its demands: national cultural autonomy for the Jews in the Russian Empire and a separate organisation for the Jewish proletariat, of which the Bund declared itself the exclusive representative.

The crisis between the Bundists and Russian Social Democracy broke out at the London congress. This congress was marked by the split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks as a result of their different conceptions of the nature of a revolutionary party, but Lenin and Martov reached agreement on the question of the Bund. They rejected all the demands of the Bund whose five delegates left the congress embittered and disappointed. Martov and Trotsky, two Jewish leaders of Russian socialism, committed themselves to answering the arguments of the Bund. They rejected the demand for national autonomy by counter-posing to it the assimilation of the Jews in different countries of the diaspora. They also opposed federalism, which in their eyes would divide and weaken the forces of the workers movement in the whole Russian Empire. [9]

Throughout his whole life, Trotsky would criticize the idea of a separate organisation of the Jewish proletariat. He affirmed this position in 1930 in a letter to the Jewish section of the Left Opposition in Paris, and in 1933 in a letter to *Unzer Kampf*, a Yiddish Marxist journal from New York. There he wrote that one had to unconditionally reject 'the old Bundist principle of a federated national organisation.' [10]

This hostility regarding Jewish national autonomy had its roots in an assimilationist orientation which he shared with all the leaders of the Second International, from Kautsky to Bauer, from Plekhanov to Lenin. Based on an evolutionary perspective, this theory of assimilation transformed the Jewish emancipation process in Western Europe during the nineteenth century into a universal model. Capitalist development would automatically push the Jews out of the ghetto, and their economic emancipation (the end of the Jewish concentration in commerce) would produce their assimilation. In the opinion of Lenin and Kautsky, the demand for national autonomy was opposed to the progress of history and would have contributed to perpetuating their condition as a 'caste'. For Lenin, this demand was 'the slogan of the rabbis and the bourgeoisie, the slogan of our enemies'. [11] For Kautsky, the 'Jewish nation' was nothing but a residue, a leftover from the Middle Ages. [12] Trotsky had not made a thorough study of the issue, but implicitly shared this view.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, socialists saw Zionism as a 'reactionary utopia', or even as a nationalist project of the Jewish middle-class, and as completely unfeasible. In 1904, Trotsky wrote an article for *Iskra* against Theodor Herzl, in which he declared the 'decomposition' of Zionism and defined its founder as a 'repulsive figure and a shameful adventurer'. [13] After the October revolution, the negative attitude towards Zionism was integrated into the political platform of the Third International, which rejected the application for membership from the left current of the Poale-Zion. During the Civil War, several 'national' units of this party joined the Red Army to fight pogroms and win support for the soviet power among the Jewish masses but this did not change the position of Trotsky and the Bolsheviks. [14] It should be emphasized that before the First World War, despite his criticisms of the Bund and his failure to understand the national aspect of the Jewish question in the Russian empire, Trotsky showed himself to be sensitive towards the problem of anti-Semitism. We already mentioned his role as leader of the Petrograd soviet in organizing workers against pogroms during the first Russian revolution.

In his much praised work 1905, Trotsky gives an impressive description of the unfolding of a pogrom in Odessa. The explosion of violence against the Jews was carefully prepared. The police circulated the rumour that the Jews were preparing to attack the Orthodox church in the village and that socialists were going to destroy the sacred icons. The population was incited to hate the Jews. When the patriotic march began, with the national flags and the military band playing the hymn of the pogroms, 'God protects the Tsar,' the Black Hundreds came into action, destroying, pillaging, and killing. Trotsky concluded his description by writing that, in comparison with 'this black October bacchanalia', 'St. Bartholomew's night looks like the most innocent piece of theatre'. [15]

In 1913, exiled to Vienna, Trotsky wrote a long article for *Die Neue Zeit*, the German Social-Democratic review led by Karl Kautsky. The article dealt with the Beilis case, which had broken out the previous year in Kiev, Ukraine. This was the last great trial of the twentieth century based on the accusation of ritual murder, and provoked a wave of protest and indignation among the intelligentsia and a large part of Western public opinion. It is interesting to note that Trotsky was the only prominent Marxist leader to intervene on this question: Otto Bauer, Karl Kautsky, Victor Adler, Georgy Plekhanov and Lenin did not break the silence of the socialist movement on anti-Semitism. Trotsky strongly denounced the 'middle-age process' provoked by Tsarist reaction, which exhumed the ancient myth of a Jewish conspiracy against the Christian order.

Trotsky compared the Beilis and Dreyfus affairs to explain the different natures of anti-Semitism in Russia and France. From his point of view, the two affairs showed, despite some formal analogies, the difference between 'the aristocratic anti-Semitism of the French Jesuits and the violence of the Russian pogroms'. [16] One should also keep in mind that in the thirties the exiled revolutionary mentioned the cases of Beilis and of Dreyfus as two historical precedents for the Moscow processes. [17] Still in 1913, during his travels through the Balkans as a war correspondent for a liberal newspaper from Kiev, Trotsky wrote a number of articles on the Jewish question in Romania. There, as well as in Russia, anti-Semitism was a 'state religion' needed to give an ideological identity to the ruling class of a feudal society in crisis. [18] He wrote these articles from Odessa, the capital of Haskalah, the intellectual movement of Russian language Jewish Enlightenment.

These articles from 1913 present anti-Semitism as an Eastern-European, medieval vestige. In the West, where the bourgeois revolution had brought democracy and the emancipation of the Jews, anti-Semitism had, according to Trotsky, practically disappeared (or was only cultivated by small 'obscurantist' circles like the Jesuits). This bipolar vision – the West against the East – was based on real elements but was developed in a very one-sided manner. As a consequence, Trotsky did not grasp the diffusion of modern anti-Semitism in western Europe. It is quite extraordinary that during his exile in Vienna – during the times when the Social-Christian and anti-Semite Karl Lueger was mayor and Georg von Schönerer was leader of the racist pan-German movement in Austria – Trotsky

could consider the Jewish question as an aspect of Russian backwardness. However, the attitude of Trotsky towards the Jewish question would radically change after 1933.

The rise to power of National Socialism in Germany forced Trotsky to look at Jewish history and culture in a different light. Notably, it forced him to revise his opinion on the existence of a Jewish question in the advanced capitalist countries of western Europe. The writings of Trotsky on German fascism do not contain many references to Hitlerian anti-Semitism, but gradually, during the thirties, he started to develop a new theoretical approach.

In an article written in 1933, 'What is National-Socialism?', he still analyses anti-Semitism as a form of demagoguery, tactically used by Nazism to turn the anti-capitalist revolt of the petty bourgeoisie against the Jews. Trotsky writes: 'Bowing down before capitalism as a whole, the petty bourgeois declares war against the evil spirit of gain in the guise of the Polish Jew in a long-skirted caftan and usually without a cent in his pocket. The pogrom becomes the supreme evidence of racial superiority'. [19] In other words, for Trotsky anti-Semitism was nothing but a form of political scapegoating and not a central element of the Hitlerian *Weltanschauung*.

The victory of Nazism was a tragedy for the German and international proletariat, but even more so for the Jews. In an interview with Anita Brenner, who asked him his opinion on the roots of Hitlerian anti-Semitism, Trotsky answered by saying this was the only way in which Hitler could hide the real causes of the crisis in Germany. Specifying that because he was 'defending capitalism which he has promised to destroy', Trotsky said Hitler was 'forced to distract the attention of the masses from social questions to national and race problems'. [20] This approach was typical for the Marxist literature of the thirties. The most important works on fascism from those years (Alfred Rosenberg, August Thalheimer, Daniel Guérin, Otto Bauer, Franz Neumann) presented different analyses of the economic structure and political forms of the fascist dictatorship, but they all developed a similar interpretation of the Jewish question.

A few years later, anti-Semitism took on a larger and more symbolic meaning in the writings of Trotsky. Now, he saw the hatred against Jews in Germany as a typical expression of the crisis of capitalism. In 1938 he defined anti-Semitism as 'one of the most malignant convulsions of capitalism's death agony'. [21] Two years later, during the Second World War, he wrote that in its expansive phase, capitalism had brought Jews out of the ghetto while imperialism prosecuted them. The Jewish question led the Russian revolutionary, now exiled in Mexico, to reconsider modern capitalist civilization as a new form of barbarism: twentieth-century society did not use technology so much to emancipate the Jews but instead to oppress them.

Trotsky observed that the Jewish people, who formed less than one per cent of the worldwide population, could not find room on the planet and followed with the words; 'amid the vast expanses of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison'. [22] This new consciousness of the profound roots of the racism of capitalist society and of the enormous dangers posed by modern anti-Semitism gave Trotsky a great clarity regarding the future of the Jews in Hitler's Germany. During the inter-war period, Trotsky was one of the few people who was capable of foreseeing the 'Final Solution'. On the 22nd of December, 1938, he wrote: 'It is possible to imagine without difficulty what awaits the Jews at the mere outbreak of the future world war. But even without war the next development of world reaction signifies with certainty the physical extermination of the Jews'. [23]

The rise to power of fascism in Germany also forced Trotsky to change his point of view on assimilation. With lucidity, he drew a critical balance-sheet of the classical Marxist approach towards the Jewish question. In a way he sounded as if he was admitting the value and the rightness

of the old Bundist criticisms of Russian socialism. In a interview given in 1937 to a Yiddish daily in Mexico, *Der Weg*, he stated:

‘During my youth I rather leaned towards the prognosis that the Jews of different countries would be assimilated and that the Jewish question would thus disappear, as it were, automatically. The historical development of the last quarter of a century has not confirmed this view. Decaying capitalism has everywhere swung over to an intensified nationalism, one aspect of which is anti-Semitism. The Jewish question has loomed largest in the most highly developed capitalist country of Europe, Germany.’ [24]

At the same time, he revised his earlier negative attitude towards Jewish national life and culture. Recognizing that Yiddish had become a language of modern culture in which flourished important literature, Trotsky affirmed the necessity of a ‘national solution’ to the Jewish question.

However, in the apocalyptic climate of the Second World War, Trotsky had a tendency to pose the issue of the future of the Jews in the form of a too neat choice: either national self-determination in a socialist society, or genocide under capitalist reaction. The struggle of the Jews for their survival in the world dominated by racism and oppression would transform in a struggle against capitalism. In a letter from 1934 to the New York journalist Lazare Kling, Trotsky wrote ‘the Jewish question has become more than ever a part of the global proletarian revolution’. [25] Trotsky did not exclude a priori Palestine as location for a new Jewish state but he never became a Zionist. In contrast to Ber Borokhov, the foremost Zionist-Marxist theoretician of the early twentieth century, who conceived of self-determination of Jews in Palestine as a necessary stage before being able to fight for socialism, for Trotsky a national solution of the Jewish question would only be possible in a society transitioning from capitalism to socialism.

This conception, formulated first in 1934, was developed in the interview with *Der Weg* cited above. Because of the diaspora, the formation of a Jewish state in a particular territory implied large scale emigration. Of course Trotsky rejected any kind of forced emigration, which would have led to new ghettos. Trotsky considered this process of Jewish concentration in a national home as the product of a voluntary choice. Socialism would dispose of the technical and material means necessary for accomplishing such a project. Basically, Trotsky considered national self-determination as connected to the enormous potentialities of an international planned economy.

In this framework, Trotsky did not necessary reject without consideration the solution of the region of Birobidzhan. In 1928, in this region bordering Manchuria, the Soviet regime decreed, in authoritarian fashion, an autonomous Jewish region to which thousands of Jews from all parts of the USSR would be transferred. This initiative was inspired by strategic goals (the necessity to settle and reinforce the Siberian regions against Japanese expansionism in Asia) and took place without consulting the Soviet Jews. In 1934, Birobidzhan appeared to Trotsky to be a ‘bureaucratic farce.’ Nevertheless, despite its bureaucratic aspects and its links with certain anti-Semitic tendencies of Stalinist rule, Trotsky in principle defended the idea of Birobidzhan. In his eyes would be able to develop it in the framework of an authentic workers state. In 1937, he expressed his thinking in the following terms:

‘Under a regime of Soviet democracy, Birobidzhan could undoubtedly play a serious role in regards as the national culture of Soviet Judaism. Under a Bonapartist regime which nourishes anti-Semitic tendencies, Birobidzhan threatens to degenerate into a sort of Soviet ghetto.’ [26]

After decades of pogroms, after tsarism, Russian anti-Semitism would not automatically disappear after the revolution. The Soviet government could proclaim the emancipation of the Jews, promote Yiddish language and culture, and conduct a relentless struggle against anti-Semitism, but it was

impossible to root it out completely in just a few years. Anti-Jewish prejudices survived in large parts of the population, notably among the peasantry, for whom the Jews had only changed their social status. Now, the peasantry no longer hated the usurer and the merchant, but they hated Jewish intellectuals who in large numbers had entered the state apparatus after the revolution of 1917.

After having consolidated its power at the end of the twenties, the Stalinist bureaucracy stopped fighting prejudices. Instead, it rather exploited them. During his struggle against the Left Opposition, of which multiple members were Jewish, Stalin did not hesitate to use anti-Semitic arguments. For example, *Pravda* and other Soviet journals always called the leaders of the Opposition by their Jewish names (they did not speak of Trotsky, but only of Bronstein). Exiled in Mexico, the organizer of the Red Army wrote in 1937 that the Moscow process, in which he was accused of killing workers and poisoning Russian rivers, reminded him of the Christian myths of Jews committing ritual murders. [27]

A testimony of Trotsky's growing interest in the Jewish question during the thirties was given to us by the Palestinian socialist-Zionist leader Beba Idelson. He visited Trotsky in Mexico, in 1937, and had a long conversation with him. He informed him about Jewish life in Palestine in general and Trotsky asked multiple questions about the nature of the kibbutz, the relations between Jews and Arabs, the economic situation in the country, the Jewish library and university in Jerusalem et cetera. Beba Idelson wrote about this conversation: 'I did not speak with him as with a stranger. I had the feeling of speaking with a Jew, a wandering Jew without a fatherland. This made me feel close to him and gave me the confidence of speaking to a man who could understand me'. [28] Trotsky never became a Zionist, but he was not indifferent to the idea of a Jewish nation. He no longer considered the sentiments, the culture and the traditions of the Jews to be incompatible with socialist internationalism. His opposition to Zionism expressed his criticism of a colonial project, against the Arab population and under British control, but not the rejection of the concept of a Jewish nation.

To conclude, the rediscovery of the Jewish question by Trotsky in the years between the World Wars was essentially brought on by German fascism. This led Trotsky to abandon the idea of an automatic historical progress which included the illusion of a natural assimilation of the Jews in the modern world. It was not a discovery of his own Jewishness. Trotsky considered himself always to be Russian, or better, internationalist, but now the Jewish question appeared to him as a crucial problem of the twentieth century.

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Footnotes

[1] Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (New York, 1970), p. 340.

[2] Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed. Trotsky, 1879-1921* (New York, 1965), p. 13.

[3] Pierre Broué, *Trotsky* (Paris, 1988), p. 31.

[4] Joseph Nedava, *Trotsky and the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1971), p 60 - 61.

- [5] A well-known poster produced by the White Guards shows Trotsky as a caricature of the evil Jew. F. Wyndham, D. King, *Trotsky. A Documentary* (Penguin Books, 1972), p. 56.
- [6] Trotsky, *My Life*, p. 340.
- [7] On the concept of the 'non-Jewish Jew', see Isaac Deutscher, *The non-Jewish Jew and other essays* (London, 1968), pp. 25 – 41. See also Claudio Magris, *Lontano da dove. Joseph Roth e la tradizione ebraico-orientale* (Turin, 1971), p. 22.
- [8] The literature on the history of the Bund and more in general the Jewish workers movement in the Tsarist empire is very extensive. We can mention here only Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics. Socialism, Nationalism and the Russian Jews 1862-1917* (Cambridge, 1981), and Nathan Weinstock, *Le Pain de Misère. Histoire du Mouvement Juif en Europe* (Paris, 1984-1986), 3 volumes.
- [9] Weinstock, *Le Pain de Misère*, vol 1, p. 18 – 198.
- [10] Leon Trotsky, *Sur la question juive et le sionisme* (Paris, 1974), p. 20 – 28.
- [11] V.I. Lenin, 'Critical remarks on the national question', *Collected Works*, vol. 20 (London, 1972), pp. 17-51, p. 26
- [12] Karl Kautsky, *Rasse und Judentum* (Stuttgart, 1921), p. 108.
- [13] Cited in: J. Nedava, *Trotsky and the Jews*, p. 197.
- [14] Ibid., p. 112.
- [15] Leon Trotsky, *1905* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 152.
- [16] L. Trotsky, 'Die Beilis Affäre', *Die Neue Zeit*, XXXII, 1913-1914, Bd. 1, no. 9, p. 316.
- [17] L. Trotsky, 'Les procès, la bureaucratie et l'antisémitisme', *Œuvres*, vol. 12 (Paris, 1982), pp. 116-122, p. 116.
- [18] L. Trotsky, 'The Jewish Question', *The Balkan Wars, 1912-1913* (New York, 1980), pp. 412-421, p. 414.
- [19] L. Trotsky, 'What is National-Socialism?', 1933, *The Struggle against Nazism in Germany* (New York, 1971), p. 405.
- [20] L. Trotsky, 'Answers to questions by Anita Brenner', 1933, *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933 – 1934* (New York, 1975), pp. 142-144, p. 143.
- [21] L. Trotsky, 'The Transitional Program. The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International', *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York, 1974), pp. 72 – 161, p. 93.
- [22] L. Trotsky, 'Manifesto of the Fourth International on the Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution', *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939 – 1940* (New York, 1973), pp. 183 – 222, p. 14.

[23] L. Trotsky, 'La bourgeoisie juive et la lutte contre l'antisémitisme', *Œuvres*, vol. 19, pp. 272-273, p. 273. (One can not but regret that the editors of the collected works chose such a title for this fundamental text by Trotsky).

[24] L. Trotsky, 'La question juive', *Œuvres*, vol. 12, pp. 111 - 113, p. 111. Also see Irving Howe, Trotsky (Glasgow, 1978), p. 156.

[25] L. Trotsky, 'Sur le problème juif', *Œuvres*, vol. 3. pp. 217 - 218, p. 218.

[26] L. Trotsky, 'Answers to the Jewish daily Forward, 1937', *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936 - 1937* (New York, 1978), pp. 280 - 283, p. 282.

[27] Ibidem, p. 177.

[28] Quoted in J. Nedava, *Trotsky and the Jews*, pp. 206-207; also see Irving Howe, *Trotsky* (Glasgow, 1978), pp. 155-157.