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THE JEWISH BUND (THE GENERAL JEWISH WORKERS' UNION OF LITHUANIA, POLAND AND RUSSIA, *DER ALGEMEYNER YIDISHER ARBETER BUND IN LITE, POYLN UN RUSLAND*)

The Jewish Bund, known in full as the General Jewish Workers' Union of Lithuania, Poland and Russia, was a mass movement of Jewish workers which played an essential role in the birth of the Russian Revolutionary movement. A secular organization, it opposed Czarism and capitalism, and fought both to remedy universal inequality and to defend Jewish cultural and political rights. With 30,000 active members on the eve of the Russian Revolution of 1905, the Bund comprised one of the largest socialist organizations in the Russian empire.

As a founding organization of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDWP), the Bund saw its mission as strengthening and promoting the RSDWP by bringing its message to the Jewish working class. However, as the views of the Bund and the RSDWP's dominant Iskra faction diverged irreconcilably on party structure, the status of Jews, the role of workers and the relationship of theory to practice, the Bund established itself as an independent party, cooperating with others where possible to advance Social Democracy and revolution. After folding in Russia in 1921, it found renewed vibrancy in Poland, but was forced by World War II to martial all of its resources for armed resistance to the Holocaust.

The Bund was founded in October of 1897 by a coalition of Jewish activist-intellectuals who, after early political education in Russian Populism, had embraced Marxism. In March of 1898, it helped to convene the first congress of the new Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDWP), out of which Iskra, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks would soon emerge.

The Bund's early leaders were soon joined by many of the workers they served. These new leaders were intimately familiar with the pressures faced by Jews, who for a century had been confined to a "Pale of Settlement" in the empire's western border region. Ninety percent lived in or near poverty, compounded by heavy discriminatory taxes, quotas restricting education and exclusion from many trades. Periodic *pogroms* unleashed mass popular violence on Jewish towns, and generations had suffered under

Czarist military policies, which, aiming to undo Jewish cultural identity, enabled the regular kidnapping of children for decades of forced military service and conversion.

The Bund understood Russia's five million Jews to be not simply a religion but a 'nationality': a distinct ethnic culture, which had developed its own forms of expression over centuries together, and among whom 97% spoke their native Yiddish. The Bund's rejection of contemporary views of nationhood, which defined a nationality by its natural link to geographic territory, brought it into stark conflict with both fellow socialists and the emerging Zionist movement.

Beginning in 1897, the Bund dedicated itself to recruiting and educating workers, organizing strikes, boycotts and political protests, producing and distributing political literature, agitating within the military, and carrying on relationships with the empire's major Social Democratic and socialist organizations. The successes of Bund organizing gave it a membership which dwarfed that of other parties. In many cities, it was recognized as the only party with an actual mass base. Fellow revolutionaries observed its advanced level of organization with a mixture of praise and resentment, as when Vera Zasulich declared in a letter to Plekhanov, "The Jewish Bund is a marvel of pure balance... It is annoying that it is they who are so businesslike and not the Russians; all the same one must do them justice." (Tobias 1972: 92)

By 1901, Bund strikes drew consistent victories, demonstrations were formidable in size, and physical conflicts with police were increasing. In 1902-1903, faced with a horrific wave of anti-Jewish pogroms at Kishinev and Czestochowa, the Bund took the lead in organizing the first Jewish mass self-defense units. The success of these units deterred pogromist violence and served as revolutionary preparation, providing Jewish workers with their first experience of fighting Czarist military forces.

By mid-1901, pressures were mounting for the Bund to develop a revolutionary approach to Jewish identity. Bund leaders had long hesitated to advocate for preserving Jewish culture, having been inculcated by both Czarist schools and socialist theory to see the eventual disappearance of Jews through assimilation as inevitable and welcome. But Zionism now threatened to draw followers away from the Bund, by offering Jewish workers an affirmation of their culture that they craved. The Bund determined to formulate a vision of how minority cultures could thrive within a classless socialist society that transcended national boundaries.

Drawing on the writings of Karl Kautsky, the Bund developed a platform of "national cultural autonomy" for Jews which would eventually be endorsed at its sixth congress (1905). Unlike Zionism, the Bund's solution sought no geographic territory. Instead, it saw liberation for Jews, and for all national minorities, in the creation of a new, multinational society where socialist ideals and education would lead dominant cultures to reject ethnic hatreds, and smaller nationalities would be supported to

develop their cultures. Its stance was met with strong criticism from other Social Democrats, who denied Jewish nationality and accused the Bund of being poisoned by nationalism.

Simultaneously, Lenin sought to centralize the RSDWP under Iskra's control. In July 1903, at the RSDWP's 2nd congress, criticism of the Bund's national thought expanded into attempts to limit Bund activities and question the organization's long-term usefulness. Led by Iskra, delegates roundly rejected proposals that would decentralize RSDWP structure and affirm the Bund's ability to continue operating on its own terms. Foreseeing a future as the debilitated appendage of a new, highly centralized RSDWP, the Bund resigned from RSDWP membership. In September 1904, it was recognized as the first independent Jewish party of the Socialist International.

Despite these troubles, external Bund activities continued to increase. By the revolutionary days of May 1905, it had risen to the level of a counter-institution among Jews, with Bund groups formally implementing communal taxes on Jews to fund strikes, establishing food distribution centers and hospitals for those wounded during actions, and in some instances replacing local rabbis as the destination for Jewish individuals, families and businesses seeking to settle disputes.

In January 1905, when the "Bloody Sunday" massacre unleashed massive strikes, the Bund sounded the call for workers to drop their tasks, arm themselves and begin the work of revolution. The coming months led to major successes in Bund-influenced areas, where as early as January, Czarist advisors observed "far more serious conditions" than in major Russian cities (Tobias 1972: 299). It was not until October that strikes in St. Petersburg and Moscow led the regime to convene a democratically-elected parliament and grant broad new political freedoms. The Social Democratic movement cautiously accepted partial victory.

The repression that followed, including a surge in police-supported antisemitic violence by the "Black Hundreds," left the Bund badly damaged. Hundreds of thousands of Jews escaped via immigration to the United States. Bund members who stayed were weakened and depressed. Throughout the next decade, the organization gradually rebuilt itself through an increased focus on proletarian Jewish cultural life. In 1917, the Bund participated actively in the February revolution. However, it opposed the Bolshevik seizure of power, and after several years of struggle was dissolved in 1921.

Operations now shifted irrevocably to Poland, where Bund activities had been allowed semi-independence since 1914. There, Bundists founded a proliferation of cultural institutions, from secular Yiddish schools and a youth sports movement to an organization for Jewish working women and a children's sanitarium. The Bund fought Jewish exclusion from trades, shut down major sectors of Poland in a general strike

against pogroms, and began to organize among the conservative, religious Jewish workers whom they had previously never reached.

The Bund's continuing struggle against political isolation in the increasingly antisemitic climate of the 1920s and 1930s led it to cooperate with reformists and moderates. It participated in elections, joined the Labor and Socialist International after being rejected by the Comintern, and partnered with the Polish Socialist Party, which it had long criticized.

By 1939, Polish popular support for the Bund had reached unprecedented levels. But with the German invasion of Poland in 1939, Bund activities were forced underground. In secret, members organized education and cultural activities for youth, published newspapers and played a leading role in organizing the network of armed Jewish resistance to the Nazis, including the massive Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April 1943. Though a handful of Bundists survived the war, the organization shut down under Soviet pressure in 1949.

Even after the Holocaust, the Bund remained fierce opponents of Zionism, advocating instead the concept of *do-ikayt* ("hereness"), which affirmed that wherever Jews lived, there was their homeland; there they should build permanent Jewish culture, and fight to improve conditions for all people.

The Bund's influence extended beyond Europe, particularly in early 20th century mass Jewish immigration to the United States, where Bundists rose to leadership in the American Labor Party, the Communist Party, the socialist *Forverts* (Forward) and communist *Frayhayt* (Freedom) newspapers, the Workmen's Circle, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, and helped to found the Jewish Labor Committee and Jewish Socialist Federation. In the theoretical realm, the Bund proposed a postmodern understanding of nationality at a time when Russia had scarcely emerged from medieval structures. In practical terms, the organization contributed a relatively unique example of revolutionary organizing that addressed with equal seriousness both Jewish needs for safety and self-determination and the mandate to work towards universal liberation.

Though the Bund officially still exists, drawing a small membership primarily from Jews who once took part in its European chapters, its impact is more strongly felt in the progressive movements around the world that its members joined, founded or influenced indirectly. The Bund today remains a source of influence and inspiration for radical and progressive Jewish activists, non- and anti-Zionists, intentionally secular Jewish communities, and the Yiddish revival movement.

SEE ALSO: Bolsheviks, Jewish resistance to Nazism, Jews and revolution in Europe, 1789-1919, Kautsky, Karl (1854-1938), Marxism, Polish Revolution, 1905-1907, Russia, Revolution of 1905-1907, Socialism, Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, 1943, Zionists.

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