

## Communist Mobilization Of Russian Jews

The Bolshevik Revolution created new opportunities for Jewish social advancement.

How?

- Soviet leadership fired, deported, displaced and killed members of the old elite
- Modernization: state urgently needed people to set up and manage the legal system, schools, businesses, factories, etc.
- Non-Jewish proletarians rarely up to the job
- Jews were able and willing to make use of the opportunities

Ideological principles of Bolshevik Revolution

- Advance interests of the world revolution (until Soviet defeat in the Battle of Warsaw in 1920) and the Soviet state
- Create new socialist man who would be above petty nationalist divisions
- Create a new form of universalism that rejected any form of separateness and particularism
- Lenin rejected the idea of Jewish nationalism: “The idea of a Jewish nation was essentially totally false and reactionary”.

Was Lenin Anti-Semitic?

No evidence that he was. In the fourth duma (1912-1917) Lenin led the Bolshevik initiative to annul

all restrictive measures against Jews. On the other hand, Lenin viewed all forms of Jewish nationalism and separatism as "reactionary" phenomena that deflect the Jewish workers away from revolutionary solidarity with their non-Jewish comrades and from the struggle for the future revolution to overthrow all class barriers and finally solve the Jewish problem”.

Thus early on, under Leninist nationality politics, the goal was to “re-socialize the Jewish population so that it would become politically Bolshevized and sociologically Sovietized”. Jews should consider themselves part of the Soviet family of nations rather than part of the world-wide Jewish community

Before you can create this wholly new, historically unique Jewish community, you have to:

- Destroy the old order within the Jewish community
- Revolutionize the Jewish community
- Reconstruct (Bolshevize) the Jews into the new Soviet order

Beginning in 1918, two organizational forms shared power to achieve these goals:

- The Jewish Sections
- A Commissariat for Jewish National Affairs (Evkom)-envisioned as a temporary administrative organ to reconstruct Jewish national life on a proletarian-socialist basis-most of their attempts to spread Bolshevik propaganda failed due to lack of knowledge of Yiddish and the Russian Jewish community

## Jewish Sections of the Communist Party (Evreiskie Sektsii or the Evsektsiia)

Created in 1918 to “reconstruct Jewish national life on a proletarian-socialist basis”. To integrate the Jews economically, socially and politically into Soviet society.

How to begin? Weaken primordial attachments:

- Disbanded Kehillah structures
- Closed down synagogues
- Halted all Zionist activities and outlawed Hebrew
- Helped halt all private enterprise; ended many traditional Jewish occupations and caused massive population shift to urban locations

By 1921, all political parties except the Bolsheviks were either liquidated or rendered ineffective (including the Bund).

Outcome: Evsektsia now had a political near monopoly on the Jewish street

- As the old community began to disintegrate, Evsektsia entrusted with the task of the new social mobilization of community
- Monies and inventories of local kehillas forced by law to be turned over to local Evkomy
- Offices of all Zionist organizations raided and closed. Leaders arrested, questioned and released. Records turned over to Liquidation Committee
- Jewish clerical, political, economic, educational and cultural societies and organizations ordered to cease operations (this included adult education classes)
- All Hebrew schools closed (Evsektsia identified Hebrew language with an enemy class, the bourgeoisie and Zionist political persuasion)

## **The Campaign Against Hebrew**

According to historian Zvi Gitelman, the campaign against Hebrew was initiated by the Evsektia, not the Soviet government or Communist Party

Why? Partly because of traditional animosity of parts of Jewish left to Zionism, partly because Zionism opposed Communist ideology.

Bialik and other leading Hebrew writers constantly harassed by Evsektia. Maxim Gorky tried to secure permission for 18 prominent Hebrew writers to leave Russia but the Evsektia blocked his attempt. The Cheka Chief finally intervened and the leading lights of the Hebrew literary world were allowed to leave Russia in June 1921.

**TEXT:** Hebraist Yaakov Niepomniashchi in a 1925 letter:

“I will say in Gordon’s words, ‘I am a slave to Hebrew forever’. No one will be able to uproot Chumash and Rashi from my sou. I gave the best years of my life to these old writings. But here I stop and go no further. I return the Torah to Mount Sinai even though I know we remain naked without it...

“But how long can one be a tyrant over oneself. Ach, it is indeed bitter”.

## **Attack On the Jewish Religion**

Most tenacious resistance to the revolution was from the religious community. Evsektia was anti-religious

and anti-clerical. As part of a totalitarian organization, could not tolerate the existence of any competing, dissenting or different ideology.

- Press mobilized. Constant stream of articles and vicious cartoons which would have been branded anti-Semitic were it not for the fact they were published by Jews
- Show trials. Pageants in which characters made charges against Judaism and Jewish religion found guilty and sentenced to death
- All religious associations required to register with authorities and submit membership lists. Rabbis deprived of the vote. Religious instruction for those under 18 made illegal.
- In 1922-23, over 1,000 cheders were closed. Religious instruction went underground

In 1924, the Communist Party began a program of “nativization”: all Communist cultural and political organizations will conduct their work in the local language. Although the Jews did not have their own republic, use of Yiddish language was promoted. Result=increase in publication of Yiddish newspapers and books. However, Soviet Yiddish press failed to strike a large audience.

Huge growth in Yiddish schools: from 366 in 1923-24 to 1100 in 1929-30. Jewish history, religion and other subjects of Jewish content excluded (“Communism in content, Yiddish in form”).

## **Two Soviet Approaches To National Issues Emerge**

Rapid attainment of maximum goals (Stalin)-strengthening ethnic identity and promoting parochial cultures would slow the process of history. National integration would be achieved by assimilation

Gradualist (Bukarin)-modernization of Soviet Jewry as a gradual process. Economic rehabilitation could be accomplished by starting with agricultural colonization instead of large scale industrialization

The Evseksia tried to steer a middle course. Industrialization remained the main road to Socialism but land settlement was also a legitimate path.

What land: should be settled: Biro-Bidzhan or Crimea?

Biro-Bidzhan chosen as the area of Jewish colonization

- Program NOT initiated by any Jewish organization
- Developing the area militarily and politically the main reason for approval of the project
- No preparation for settlement. First colonists faced overwhelming situation: no machinery, horses had to be brought in. No protection from rains, biting insects, disease that killed majority of horses. Of the 654 settlers who arrived in the spring, 325 remained by October.

### **Stalin Becomes Supreme Leader in 1927**

Stalinist totalitarianism was taking shape; one very strong unified firmly centralized ruling party that could not abide pluralistic allegiances and competing loyalties.

In the 1920's, the Soviet system could tolerate multiple and divided ethnic, institutional and even ideological loyalties. By 1930, all competing or autonomist tendencies were viewed as unacceptable expressions of dissent from the system.

The Evseksia was accused of "right deviation": including toleration of "petit bourgeois moods" and motifs in literature, opposition to collectivization, denigrating the role of the Party and State in agricultural colonization and Jewish chauvinism.

CP's Central Committee dissolved Evseksia in 1930.

According to Yuri Slezkine's "The Jewish Century", by 1939, although 1.8% of the Soviet population, Jews owned 32% of Moscow's shops, accounted for 15.5% of all Soviet citizens with a higher education, were 20% of the doctors, 31% of all the writers and journalists, 30% of retail branch managers, and so on.

Upward social mobility was usually accompanied by a process of assimilation. Hundreds of thousands abandoned their religion and traditions. One-third of Jewish men married gentile women. Some 55% listed Russian, not Yiddish, as their native language. Less than 15% said they were religious (compared to 47% of total population). In short, many no longer saw themselves as Jews but as Soviet citizens.