

Communism and the Jewish Question in Germany

The following article is an extract from a monograph on "Communism and the Jewish Problem" by a co-worker of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Germany.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE JEWISH PROBLEM

THE Jewish problem cannot be understood unless we analyze the origin of the special social and economic role of the Jews in the development of our commodity-producing society. Because of the natural conditions of production in the area where they developed from a group of tribes into a nation (Stalin defined a "nation" as the "historically developed, permanent community of language, territory, economic life, psychic unity, etc."), and because of their social conditions of production, the Jews were compelled to pursue the course of a people whose dominant social strata followed trade as an occupation. Although there were Jewish peasants at that time, the elements that determined the Jews' subsequent evolution were the traders.

This fact fixed the social and national fate of the Jews. During the course of the wars over their territory, lying as it did at the intersection of trade routes as well as necessarily at the point of contact between the political spheres of the empires of the Nile to the south and the Mesopotamian valley to the north, they were led into captivity (exile) by one of their conquerors. This was in accordance with the custom of ancient society—that is of slave labor. The more prosperous classes, especially those linked with the circulation of commodities, were carried off into captivity, while the poor peasant population remained in Palestine.

This historical event led to the dissolution of the Jewish nation and their subsequent transformation into a caste. The dispersion of the Jews really began with the Exile. As the agents of commodity circulation they became an important factor in the extension of the conquerors' rule.

AGENTS OF COMMODITY CIRCULATION

As the agents of commodity circulation the Jews fulfilled a historically conditioned, necessary social and economic function. They remained bound up with this function chiefly because of their particular monotheistic religion, which grew out of their social evolution and which was in turn a prominent factor in the preservation

of the Jews as an isolated element both in their function and their environment. At the time when those Jews who had remained in their original area, were destroyed as a nation by the Roman Empire, the majority of the Jewish people was already scattered over the known world in their particular social form. This people could not be destroyed nationally, as it offered no focus of national resistance to the Roman Empire. Nor could it disappear socially, neither by annihilation nor by assimilation, as its social existence was based upon the economic need for its function, while the function persisted in caste form as a result of their religion.

From this time on, the concept of the Jews is bound up with a particular idea, arising from their function in the evolution of the circulation of money and commodities. This origin of the Jews not only explains the special role of the Jews in subsequent social evolution; it also contains the key to the social conflicts with the Jews that occur in cycles, impressive and bloody examples of which are found in German history.

The Jews exercised a practical monopoly of their function in ancient economy, based as it was upon slave production. And in the period of natural economy that followed ancient society and preceded feudalism, the Jews were the conservators of the most primitive forms of trade. In its growth feudalism needed the Jews not only as an urban element; as the agent of trade and of money he was an important factor in the original accumulation of capital based upon usury and trade. But the conflict between society and the Jew, and Jewish persecution, begins as soon as the process of original accumulation reaches a certain stage of maturity.

There were three cycles of persecution in the feudal age. The first occurred during the period of social, and hence religious, tension in the Crusades; the second during the phase of evolution of a closed urban economy; and the third in the period of peasant wars. Persecution of the Jews was always a symptom of serious social disturbance throughout a society. The external manifestation of these tensions took on a religious form, while their social core led to a shift in the social role of the Jews. In their caste isolation they were excluded from the religious artisan guilds, and as the conflicts grew they were also forbidden to acquire land. Thus, at the close of the age of feudalism, which is marked by the beginning of the peasant revolts, they lost their original role in the towns and became minor money, grain and cattle usurers in the rural districts. This economic function of theirs became the object of bitter hatred as soon as it was recognized as an obstacle to the social continuation of the feudal system.

The peasant who was a victim of that system, also turned against

the Jews in his efforts to destroy it. But whatever role the Jewish caste played in the course of time, it was always the upper class, which anxiously tried to maintain its domination in the ghetto even by religious means and which profited by the caste's function. It was the proletarian or semi-proletarian Jewish masses that were the chief victims of the conflicts with the non-Jewish world.

In turn, these conflicts at the close of the feudal period are the basis for social and national demarcation among the Jews themselves. In a stunted form, usually clothed in a religious mask, we find severe, and often bloody, class struggles within the Jewish communities at the close of the Middle Ages; and in the Twentieth Century these class struggles grow tremendously owing to the evolution of a Jewish industrial proletariat in Eastern Europe.

The feudal structure of Eastern Europe resulted in the Jews that fled there retaining major vestiges of their nationality because of their extremely strong caste isolation; the Jews that remained in Western Europe (Germany, etc.) or returned to the West joined with the rest of society in entering upon the period of evolution of modern bourgeois, capitalist society.

THE JEWISH PROBLEM IN BOURGEOIS SOCIETY

The Jewish caste was at the very center of the rise of the German bourgeoisie. The end of the feudal period marks the return of the Jews to their function as agents of mercantile capital. The rise of modern capitalism finds them in the forefront of embryonic finance capital. Socially, the Jews were the first bourgeoisie. The liberation of the bourgeoisie from the shackles of feudal society, and the growth of society "which uninterruptedly produces the Jews itself" (Marx), and which makes the function of the Jews a function of society as a whole, has no place for the ghetto, as the latter is no longer required. The caste is absorbed in the class; the emancipation of the bourgeoisie leads to the emancipation and assimilation of the German (Western) Jews. The late date of bourgeois emancipation in Germany, compared with France and England, explains the later emancipation of the Jews, their delayed assimilation, and the persistence of anti-Semitic ideology.

This process draws the Jews into the sphere of modern class struggles. The specialized social role of the Jews in the past caused them to have practically no representation among the industrial workers, the peasantry, the military and the civil service. Their class differentiation occurred together with the disintegration and proletarianization of the middle classes and petty bourgeoisie, the small shopkeepers, independent artisans, and the white collar class. But as the former function of the Jews has become the inclusive function of all society, the non-Jewish victims of capitalist, commodity-

producing society (with the exception of proletarians who know the conditions of bourgeois class society) think that the Jews are to blame for their own injustices, since traditional concepts persist (existence changes faster than consciousness).

This illusion is aided by the fact that the Jews play a greater part in mercantile, bank and industrial capital than is socially "normal." The exclusion of the Jew from primary production, the fact that he is neither a peasant nor a worker, that he follows occupations which most resemble his former function and which he is constrained to enter because numerous occupations are closed to him even in bourgeois society owing to the persistence of old attitudes and the newer effect of the idea of Jewish competition—all this is sufficient reason for petty bourgeois elements to make the Jew an object of their erroneous class hatred.

THE SIN AGAINST THE CLASS

The ideological forms of anti-Semitism change with the ideology of society. Modern bourgeois society cannot operate with religious forms of thought alone. Scientific concepts take the place of religious ones. What used to be the sin against the Gospels is today the "sin against the blood." The profound social character of the roots of anti-Jewish hatred as well as the danger that the classes disintegrated by the crisis of capitalist society may realize the true causes of their decline and link their fortunes with those of the working class, compels the ruling class to shift the cause of this misery far beyond all social spheres. The nebulous regions of race theory, of blood and skull shape, are admirably suited to the purpose. The conscious aim is to use the role of race hatred in the period of imperialism not merely to combat the class enemy at home, but to achieve an ideological reinforcement of external imperialist tendencies. The belief that the Jew is to blame is designed to strengthen the other conviction—that "Deutschland ueber Alles" is predestined to rule the world. From this point of view race demagoguery is to mobilize middle-class youth for fascism and against the militant proletariat.

Communists recognize Jewish capital only as a part of all capital, which without distinction of origin or nationality exploits all workers and victimizes all toilers, both Gentile and Jew.

"The exploitation of man by man is not a specific Jewish occupation, but one characteristic of bourgeois society, which will end only with the downfall of bourgeois society." (Bebel)

"It is not the Jews that are the enemies of the toilers; the workers' enemies are the capitalists of all countries. There are workers and toilers among the Jews; they are the majority, they are our brothers, our comrades in the battle for Socialism, because they are oppressed by capitalism." (Lenin)