



# Contested territories

***Bundism and Zionism were both born at the turn of the last century, with opposing visions of liberation for the Jewish people. David Rosenberg explores their differing vantage points and looks at why they remain in conflict***

**T**he year 1997 marked the 100th anniversary of two movements – political Zionism and Jewish socialism – which were in bitter conflict though they addressed a common conundrum. In the late 19th century they called it ‘the Jewish question’ or ‘the Jewish problem’. Their problem was how to secure the future wellbeing of the Jewish people faced with the vulnerability of minority status, vicious antisemitism and discrimination. At a more philosophical level, both movements speculated about the future of Jewish identity in a community that was starting to question religious authority, and in an industrialising society that was challenging traditional beliefs and lifestyles.

The Zionists proposed a radical solution: to remove the Jewish people from the societies in which they had lived for generations and implant them in another country they would claim as their own where they could be secure and self-sufficient. Some Zionists were not fussy about where this might be, though others insisted that it must be a land with which the Jewish people had a deep historical bond, because this Jewish state, they believed, would and should be the centre of Jewish life.

The Jewish socialists, rooted in impoverished communities, believed that the liberation of the Jewish people could only take place where they were living. They dismissed the Zionists’ plans as dangerous fantasies. The Jewish socialists formed the first Jewish political party to fight for their ideals – the Bund. Zionism’s birth was announced too but its existence was theoretical rather than concrete; it was

some years before it functioned organisationally.

History is written by victors and at a superficial level the Zionists might claim victory. Jewish socialism exists in depleted form, betrayed by the revolution in Russia and all but destroyed by Nazism. Meanwhile, the class structure of Jewish society has changed. The number of working class Jews has greatly diminished. The Jewish intelligentsia, initially supportive of the workers’ movements has largely moved away from socialist politics. Particularly in America, many former left-wing Jewish intellectuals are now ideologues for the right, supporting the most intransigent forces in Israel. Zionism meanwhile has achieved its aim of creating a Jewish state.

But dig beneath the surface and a different picture emerges. Zionism has not solved the ‘Jewish problem’. Antisemitism continues to thrive in many parts of the world and, ironically, might even have been exacerbated in some areas by the actions of Israel itself. Nearly 50 years after the Israeli state came into existence, two thirds of the world’s Jews choose to live in the diaspora. And many diaspora communities have been swollen by Jews born in Israel who found life there intolerable. The world’s largest Jewish community today is not in Israel, but America. Far from being self sufficient the Israeli economy relies on massive aid from America. Yet many Israelis endure poverty and newer immigrants from Ethiopia and Russia encounter discrimination from other Israeli citizens. And security? Israel has been embroiled in five wars and faces a continuing rebellion from the Palestinian people who justifiably believe that they have an equal right

Opposite: Bundist self-defence group, Odessa, 1905

to the land and its resources.

If, in the late 1890s the questions facing the Jewish people as a whole could be addressed seriously by the ideology and rhetoric of nationalism (Zionism) or class politics (Bundism), the answers today must be more complex. But the issues at the end of the last century remain unresolved.

So why 1897? Above all it was the impact on Jews of the massive changes in the society in which they lived as the entire socio-economic structure began to change from pre-capitalist to capitalist. At that time there were nearly six million Jews in the Russian empire – 50% of world Jewry. Add those in adjacent territories – Austria, Hungary, Romania – and the figure rises to 70%. They had been settled for centuries in this area. Unlike the predominantly middle class Jews of western Europe, most were labouring people. Religion was starting to wane but they were unified by a common Yiddish language and culture.

The Bund marked a turning point in Jewish history. It presented the radical idea that the Jews were equal citizens and should enjoy equal rights. The rabbis continued to tell their congregants to and trust in God. Community leaders made deals with those who persecuted them. The Zionists believed that Jews could never attain equal rights, except in their own separate society. The Bund also had to struggle against the prevailing views among the oppressed. One Bundist said: 'The Jewish worker had faith in God, in the Messiah, in Rothschild. He placed all his hope in good and virtuous people. He did not believe, however, in his own strength. And the Bund bade him trust in yourself. Within yourself lies your salvation. Your redemption lies in struggle. Equality is achieved through struggle.'

One of the myths of post-War Zionism is that it created a 'new Jew'. But in fact, by the early 1900s the Bund had acknowledged the 'new Jew' on the horizon – a Jew ready to live or die not as a helpless victim of evil forces, but as a fighter against them.

In its early years the Bund won more support than the Zionists because of its work in two spheres – unionising workers and enabling them to struggle for better working conditions, and organising self-defence against antisemites. The Zionist groups believed that antisemitism could not be defeated only escaped from, although some left-Zionist groups did co-operate with the Bund in self-defence.

With the advent of the Bund, unprecedentedly Jews united with non-Jews against common enemies – antisemitism and despotism. The Zionists saw themselves working purely within the Jewish community. Relations with non-Jews were instrumental – to win support for their objectives, not to engage in common struggles. The Bund worked among the Jewish people but saw itself as part of the wider struggle of humanity for socialism and democracy, against tyranny and oppression. Throughout its existence it has worked with socialists from other communities, nations, peoples.

In the Tsarist Russian empire a range of socialist organisations temporarily pulled together in one movement, the RSDRP. In 1903 it split into the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. The Bund had a troubled relationship with both, although it drifted closer to the Mensheviks. All socialist groups took part in the revolution that overthrew the Tsar early in 1917, but Lenin's Bolsheviks seized the initiative later that

year, grabbing power in the name of the workers and peasants. Among others, the Bund warned that dictatorship would follow a minority coup. They paid the price of challenging the new authoritarians; many Bundist activists spent the first years of the Russian Revolution imprisoned by the Bolsheviks.

In 1919, Poland became an independent state again. The largest section of East European Jewry lived there. After the First World War the numerical centre of Jewish life was shifting to the USA but Poland became the cultural and spiritual reservoir of the Jewish people and provided the new stage for the struggle between Jewish ideologies. The three main elements were the Bund, Zionism and religious orthodoxy, all of which had real constituencies and bases of power. Zionists had members in the Polish Parliament. The orthodox controlled the religiously defined Jewish community institutions, and, especially through the 1930s, the Bund strengthened its influence on secular Jewish life and among the urban working class.

In the towns it had a huge youth movement, *Tsukunft*, a children's organisation, SKIF, a daily paper, a secular Yiddish school system and libraries. It worked closely with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) and socialist organisations of other minorities rather than with other Jewish parties.

In the late 1930s the struggle against antisemitism dominated Poland's Jewish community. The Zionist movement and orthodox leaders had no answers. With hindsight Zionist ideologues claim that only they could foresee the scale of the tragedy that was to befall Europe's Jews and offered the right policy – mass exodus to Palestine. In reality, even the most convinced Zionists saw this as a process that would take about 25 years. The orthodox offered little beyond faith that God would provide salvation. Both the Zionists and the orthodox were willing to make deals with the antisemitic Polish government about evacuation on the grounds of common interest. This weakened the Jewish community and strengthened antisemitism. Many of their followers gravitated towards the Bund.

Politically this was expressed most clearly in the town council elections throughout Poland in 1938. In major urban areas the Bund swept the Jewish vote. In the most densely populated Jewish areas, Warsaw and Lodz, most Jewish councillors were elected from Bund lists. On the eve of the Second World War the Bund was the leading political party in Polish Jewry. In their most perilous situation, the mass of Poland's Jews placed their faith in Jewish socialists. Pundits speculated that at the next general election in Poland the Bund would have been a significant partner in a socialist government. That election never happened. Fascism was triumphant. Poland's Jews were decimated and with them most of the movement that had expressed their hopes.

The Bund played an extraordinary role in the war-time ghettos, allying with other Jewish groups and urging maximum resistance to the Nazis. The ideological conflict that had put the Bundists and the Zionists at loggerheads for decades dissipated in the struggle for survival. Many people know of the young Zionist martyr Mordechai Anielewicz, commander of the ghetto uprising in Warsaw. Few know that the five-strong command group included two Bundists, one of whom, Marek Edelman, is the

sole survivor today. To the chagrin of Zionists, Edelman still lives in Poland. Today, Zionists claim the Warsaw ghetto revolt as the first manifestation of the spirit of resistance and struggle that created Israel. Yet, in the early years of this century we saw the Bund's first armed resistance against antisemitic forces, the precursor of the spirit that created and sustained the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and the resistance in other ghettos and in concentration camps.

With a few exceptions, the Nazi period illustrated the world's indifference to the destruction of Jews. Zionists, though, developed this into a conception of permanent distrust by Jews of the entire Gentile world. Zionists depict the Nazi genocide as the last stage of the diaspora, the consequence of having no Jewish state. But if Hitler had not been stopped at El Alamein, the Jews in Palestine would have been slaughtered too. Taking a longer historical view, Jews had suffered national disasters precisely when they had their own state (when the first and second Temples were destroyed).

In 1947 the remnants of the Bund assembled in Brussels. Zionism and the conflict in Palestine were high on the agenda. The statements that came from that conference and from another in October 1948, a few months after the State of Israel was established, make fascinating reading: 'Zionism cannot solve the problem of the great majority of the Jewish people who live, and will continue to live, outside the boundaries of Palestine.

'The state of Israel being the result of an artificial partition of Palestine and being established by a bloody struggle between Jews and Arabs, is not only far from solving the Jewish problem all over the world, but also jeopardises the great and important accomplishments of the Jewish community in Palestine, even its physical existence. Jewish socialists and democrats should work for peace with the surrounding Arab states and for co-operation with the Palestinian Arab population through the establishment of a Jewish-Arab state based on the principles of democratic federalism.'

Emanuel Scherer, a Bundist theorist writing in the 1950s, observed: 'A Jewish state has been built against the will of the majority of the population in Palestine. It will perpetuate a dangerous conflict between Jews and Arabs (and) increase the chauvinist feelings among both sectors of the population.

'The State of Israel is a fact. What seemed a dream even to many Zionists has come true but there are limitations and consequences. The armed vigilance of Israel cannot secure its position within Arab encompassment. Even if Israel had a greater absorptive capacity than it actually has it could still only take a percentage of world Jewry.

'What Zionism fought for and what it has achieved are two different things. It strove for an all-Jewish liberation but has achieved at best a risky liberation of the minority of the world's Jewish population that have become Israelis. It still leaves Jews all over the world with their own problems that have to be solved where they live.'

The tension between Israel and the diaspora, between statehood and peoplehood, is the central unresolved question in the conflict today between Zionism and Jewish socialism. Zionism has tried to transform the Jewish people into a state-nation. Professor Leibman Hersch, writing in the 1949, stated: 'The period when the entire Jewish nation was united in a truly independent state of its own was limited to 80 years (the combined reign of David and Solomon) or only about 2% of the period described in Jewish history. In the centuries before or after the Jews were dispersed, under foreign rule or in exile. So nationhood without statehood, within Jewish history, is not a unique but rather a normal development.'

Statelessness does not mean homelessness. The countries where Jews live and work are their homes. Israel is the home and state of Jews living there.

Some Zionists claim that there is no contradiction between statism in Israel and care for the Jewish majority outside Palestine, but in reality they are antagonistic. By transforming all Jews into potential residents of Israel Zionism contradicts the concept of maintaining Jewish nationality outside Palestine. The insistence on the supremacy of Israel over other Jewish issues creates a conflict between the interests of Israel and those of Jewish people throughout the world. If Zionism continues to exhaust the resources and vitality of Jewish communities and subordinate their interests to the needs of Israel, the Jewish people might pay the price through disintegration. The decay of the diaspora might be the long term result of statehood. As Emanuel Scherer wrote: 'While transforming deserts into settlements in Palestine we might transform a once flourishing cultural settlement (the diaspora) into a desert.'

The Bund believes that historical destiny has made the Jewish people a stateless, dispersed nation with a consciousness of Jewish nationality and peoplehood. The world is their border. Only within a worldwide framework can Jewish problems be solved. Despite its constructive achievements, Zionism as a set of ideas and in its practice has had a detrimental effect on Jewish life and on the lives of other peoples it has affected. The perspectives and insights of Jewish socialists on the Jewish condition retain their validity, still providing a way of understanding ourselves and offering a direction for a secure and meaningful future. In a world where groups fighting for their rights define themselves variously as people, nation states, minorities and classes, the experience and ideas of Bundism have an important contribution to make to *sholom af gantser velt* – peace throughout the world.

**Bella Shapiro speaks at a Bundist May Day celebration, Lublin 1936**

