

Lenin on the Jewish Question: the Theoretical Setting

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Western scholars studying Lenin's writings on the Jewish question tend to view them as reflecting no more than the tactical needs of the struggles he conducted against the Jewish Bund. This article examines these writings in the context not of Lenin's political quarrels with the Bund but of his theoretical conception of the relationship between modernization and ethnic conflict. Underlying Lenin's views on the Jewish question and the positions he took *vis-à-vis* the Bund was a carefully considered theory of nationality grounded in a clearly defined Marxist outlook on history. That theory of nationality, however, happened to be erroneous in that it stipulated the gradual elimination of ethnic conflict as a by-product of modernization. In reality, as theorists of ethnicity have shown in the last 15 years, modernization may have the exactly opposite effect. For the benefits of modernity, whether economic or political, accrue in unequal measures to members of different ethnic groups, thus intensifying ethnic solidarity and the friction between ethnic communities. Lenin's over-optimistic view of the effect of economic development on inter-ethnic relations caused him to judge the Jewish problem in Russia in an unrealistic way, and gave his comments on that problem the appearance of *ad hoc* tactical pronouncements.

Introduction

The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP, now the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) was founded at a meeting of revolutionary activists in the Belorussian city of Minsk in March of 1898. The meeting was convened by the Kiev Union of Struggle for the Liberation of the Working Class and by the General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, known (after the word 'union' in Yiddish) as the *Bund*. The Bund had been established as a fully-fledged party a few months earlier, in October 1897, and it entered the RSDLP 'as an autonomous organization, independent only in

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A Note on Terminology: The term 'ethnic group' is used in this paper to connote a human group sharing certain physical and/or cultural traits and a sense of community based on these traits. A 'nation' is a politically organized and/or mobilized ethnic group. This distinction parallels Lenin's distinction between a 'nationality' and a 'nation', although, in his case, the distinction is not always consistently maintained. The terms 'modernization', 'industrialization', 'economic development' and 'capitalist development' are used here, as in Lenin's writing, as synonyms.

questions which specifically concern the Jewish proletariat'.¹ By 1901, however, at its Fourth Congress, the Bund resolved that, as Jews were a nation, they should be entitled to 'national-cultural autonomy' within the future Russian democratic republic, and that the RSDLP should be reconstituted as a federated body, composed of national social democratic parties. The Bund, representing the Jewish workers, was to become a constituent element of the restructured RSDLP. It was the rejection of these demands, particularly the one relating to the structure of the RSDLP, by the Second Party Congress in 1903, which caused the Bund to leave the Russian party. In later years, the Bund came to be closely allied with the Mensheviks who, by 1912, adopted its position on national-cultural autonomy as the preferred solution to Russia's ethnic problems.²

The debates between the RSDLP (and later the Bolsheviks) and the Bund, in 1903 and in 1913–14, were the occasion for Lenin's writings on the Jewish question and for many of his writings on the national question in general. When commenting on these writings, Western scholars have tended to focus on Lenin's rôle as the major tactician of *Iskra's* and the Bolsheviks' struggle with the Bund, and to consider his theoretical pronouncements as reflecting no more than the expediencies of that struggle at any given moment. Even serious writers, such as Frankel, Tobias, Shukman, Pipes, and Maor, to mention only a few, have shown little or no interest in considering Lenin's thoughts on the national and Jewish questions from a theoretical point of view. Lenin, according to Pipes, 'looked upon the national movement mainly as a force suitable for *exploitation* in the struggle for power'.³ The slogan of self-determination was for him, says Shukman, a 'tactical weapon'.⁴ His attitude towards the Bund, like that of other Russian social democrats, was based, according to Frankel, primarily on their resentment of the fact that 'a provincial and non-Russian group had attained such a key position in the emergent Social Democratic camp'.⁵ Lenin's plans *vis-à-vis* the Bund, claims Tobias, while 'perhaps not consciously based on the importance of the Great Russian nationality, . . . implicitly assumed it'.⁶ And Maor contends, in the same vein, that the reason for Lenin's opposition to Jewish nationalism was 'the ancient tradition of hostility towards the Jews prevalent among the Russian people, which had affected (*unconsciously*, in all likelihood) the leaders of [Russian] Social Democracy as well'.⁷

The purpose of this article is to examine Lenin's writings on the Jewish

¹ H. J. Tobias, *The Jewish Bund in Russia* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1972), p. 80.

² H. J. Tobias, *The Jewish Bund*, pp. 163–5; R. Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 34.

³ Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union*, p. 36. Emphasis, here and throughout the article, is in the original, unless noted otherwise.

⁴ H. Shukman, 'Lenin's nationalities policy and the Jewish question', *Bulletin on East European Jewish Affairs*, 5 (1970), p. 48.

⁵ J. Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 204.

⁶ Tobias, *The Jewish Bund*, p. 357.

⁷ I. Maor, *Sheelat ha-yehudim ba-tenua ha-liberalit ve-ha-mahapechanit be-russia (1890–1914)* (Jerusalem, The Bialyk Institute, 1964), p. 179. This view of Lenin is consistent, of course, with the way Lenin is viewed by western scholarship in general, that is, as 'pre-eminently a practitioner, not a theorist of revolution'. N. Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought* (London, Macmillan, 1977), Vol. 1, pp. 1–4, 8.

question prior to the First World War and to argue that these writings reflect a carefully thought-out position on the national question, on the nature of the Jewish problem in Russia, and on the rôle that Lenin believed Jewish workers should play in the Russian revolution. While presenting this general argument, however, the article also suggests that Lenin's position was indeed articulated in an actual political debate, and that his arguments were therefore couched in practical political rather than in abstract theoretical terms.

Furthermore, although he analysed the political consequences, for the Russian proletarian movement as a whole and for the Russian Jewish workers in particular, of what he conceived of as the nationalist tendencies of the Bund, Lenin failed to explain the origins of these tendencies themselves. Such an explanation would have required a deeper and wider-ranging analysis of the Jewish problem in Russia than Lenin was ready to undertake at the time, and its absence was what gave his arguments the appearance of *ad hoc* tactical pronouncements. Still, the very limited nature of Lenin's discussion of the Jewish problem was in itself a consequence of his *theoretical* conception of the relationship between modernization and ethnic conflict. That conception, it will be argued, was too optimistic, but was firmly grounded in the tradition of Marxist (and not only Marxist) theories of modernization.

The following three sections will present three separate claims. First, Lenin's views on the Jewish question were shaped by his understanding of the problem of inter-ethnic relations in multi-ethnic modernizing societies, and were firmly rooted in the tradition of Marxist scholarship in these areas. Secondly, the positions taken by Lenin *vis-à-vis* the Bund were derived from his understanding of the Jewish question and from his views on the proper organization of the revolutionary party. The latter, in turn, were based on his general theory of revolution. Thirdly, the greatest shortcoming of Lenin's polemics against the Bund was his failure to appreciate the degree to which the evolution of Bundist ideology was influenced by the social and economic processes affecting Jewish workers. These processes ran counter to Lenin's assimilationist views on the relationship between economic development and the maintenance of ethnic boundaries.

'Assimilation or Isolation': the National and Jewish Questions

Developing capitalism knows two historical tendencies in the national question. The first is the awakening of national life and national movements, the struggle against all national oppression, and the creation of national states. The second is the development and growing frequency of international intercourse in every form, the break-down of national barriers, the creation of the international unity of capital, of economic life in general, of politics, science, etc. Both tendencies are a universal law of capitalism. The former predominates in the beginning of its development, the latter characterises a mature capitalism that is moving towards its transformation into socialist society.⁸

⁸ V. I. Lenin, 'Critical remarks on the national question', *Collected Works* (henceforward *CW*) (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1964), Vol. 20, p. 27.

This observation formed the basis for Lenin's analysis of the national question in Russia and for the measures he proposed for its solution. Russia, he believed, was going through the early phase of capitalist development, the phase of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, and was experiencing, therefore, the 'awakening of a *whole series* of bourgeois-democratic national movements which strive to create nationally independent and nationally uniform states'.⁹ This period of national awakening, however, was a passing phenomenon, a characteristic of early capitalism. Ultimately, he believed, all national cultures, or rather the progressive elements within each national culture, would merge into an international socialist culture.

This assimilationist view had been an important element in the tradition of Marxist thinking on the national question since the days of Marx and Engels. As they phrased it in the *Manifesto*:

National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto. The supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster.¹⁰

After 1848, Marx developed a more realistic assessment of the complexities of the national question, but his basic view of capitalism as the great agent homogenizing peoples remained an essential feature of his thought and of that of many of his followers. Among leaders of the Second International, Lenin occupied an intermediary position on the national question, between the radical anti-nationalism of Rosa Luxemburg and the attempt of the Austro-Marxists to present socialism as a prerequisite for the flowering of national life. This intermediary position did not result simply from Lenin's 'tactical wisdom,' as is frequently suggested,¹¹ but was a principled position based on theoretical considerations. Since, as Lenin believed, 'the principle of nationality is historically inevitable in bourgeois society', it would be foolish for Marxists to ignore its historical legitimacy.¹² In the Russian context, moreover, bourgeois national movements were indeed playing a progressive rôle, in the same way as capitalism itself was playing a progressive rôle: they were agents of fermentation helping to undermine the antiquated social and political system of the Empire. As such, they were *objectively* allied with the proletariat, and were entitled to its support, up to a point.

The point at which the proletariat should part ways with the advocates of nationalism came when fulfilling of the nationalists' demands would come into conflict with the requirements of *capitalist* development. In general, Lenin, like most other Marxists, believed that 'capitalism requires for its development the

⁹ V. I. Lenin, 'The right of nations to self-determination', *CW*, Vol. 20, p. 406.

¹⁰ D. McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 235-6.

¹¹ E. G. W. Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 30; A. B. Ulam, *The Bolsheviks* (Toronto, Collier-Macmillan, 1968), pp. 292-3; L. Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (2nd edition) (New York, Vintage Books, 1971), p. 151; Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London, NLB, 1977), p. 351.

¹² Lenin, 'Critical remarks', p. 34.

largest and most centralised possible states. *Other conditions being equal*, the class-conscious proletariat will always stand for the larger state'.¹³ However, 'other conditions being equal' was an important qualification. For capitalism required not only large, centralized states, it also required, as much as possible, nationally homogeneous ones:

For the complete victory of commodity production, the bourgeoisie must capture the home market and there must be politically unified territories whose population speak a single language, with all obstacles to the development of that language and to its consolidation in literature eliminated. [Therefore] the national state is the rule and the 'norm' of capitalism; the multinational state represents backwardness or is an exception.¹⁴

The proletariat must support nationalist demands which contribute to the consolidation of national states, primarily the right of national self-determination, and must oppose those which would contribute to the maintenance of national distinctions within a single state, such as federation or national-cultural autonomy.

On the right of national self-determination Lenin made a distinction between supporting that right in *principle*, and supporting its actual exercise in *practice*. The rationale for this distinction (which is often used as evidence of Lenin's hypocritical stand on this issue) must be sought for in the meaning which the right of self-determination had for Lenin. That meaning was clear and unequivocal: the right of self-determination could mean only one thing—secession and the formation of an independent state.¹⁵ But if that was the case, then clearly one would not need to be an expert on the complexities of the national question, particularly in eastern Europe, to realize that immense practical problems would be involved in carrying the right of secession from principle to practice.

Out of the plethora of such problems—defining a 'nation' as opposed to an 'ethnic group', determining national boundaries, deciding on the fate of groups who would become minorities within the new nation-state—Lenin chose to focus on the economic issues. The interest of capitalist development in nationally homogeneous states overrode its interest in large, centralized ones, he argued, only when the 'oppression and friction of national "coexistence" *disrupt* and ruin economic bonds'.¹⁶ In such cases, the secession of the subject nation would not only reduce national animosity and friction, but might result in closer economic ties between the two nations, and thus contribute to their economic development. In these cases, and in these cases only, would the practical benefits of secession outweigh its costs, and the exercise of the right of self-determination should be supported.

As for ethnic groups for whom secession was not a practicable solution, these, Lenin believed, were bound to be assimilated into the majority population. Assimilation, he thought, was both desirable and inevitable, and should

¹³ Lenin, 'Critical remarks', p. 45.

¹⁴ Lenin, 'The right of nations', pp. 396, 400.

¹⁵ Lenin, *CW*, Vol. 19, pp. 243, 428; Vol. 20, p. 400. But cf. Connor, *The National Question*, pp. 33–4.

¹⁶ Lenin, 'A letter to S. G. Shaumyan', *CW*, Vol. 19, p. 500.

be encouraged. At the same time, however, assimilation had to be a voluntary process and, while it was taking its course, the civil and political rights of minority groups, including the right to conduct cultural and educational activities in their own language, should be safeguarded. The safeguards proposed by Lenin were: complete equality of rights between the various nationalities (to the point of abolishing the status of Russian as the official state language); regional autonomy, with the boundaries of the autonomous regions determined as much as possible by ethnic boundaries; and a law forbidding national discrimination of any kind, to protect the rights of minorities within the autonomous regions.¹⁷ These, he thought, would ensure that the process of assimilation would proceed freely and without coercion, but would not place any obstacles in its course. By the same token, he completely rejected two other measures which were proposed for the solution of the national problem in Russia—national-cultural autonomy and federation—as obstructing the process of national amalgamation.

National-cultural autonomy was the programme called for by the Bund, by some of the Austro-Marxists, and, later on, by other national social democratic parties in Russia and by the Mensheviks. The essence of that programme was a non-territorial definition of a 'nation' on the basis of personal cultural affiliation, and the removal of all cultural and educational functions from the jurisdiction of the state and their assignment to autonomous institutions of these non-territorial nations. Lenin objected to national-cultural autonomy on many grounds, both theoretical and practical, but his main objection was that the establishment of autonomous national school systems would create artificial barriers to assimilation. The separation of education, 'the most highly ideological sphere of social life', from the economy, 'which unites the nations', he argued, would give a free hand in these schools to "'pure" national culture or the national cultivation of clericalism and chauvinism'.¹⁸

Lenin's views on the Jewish question were an application of his views on the national question to this particular case. Territorially scattered, and lacking their own language, Jews, Lenin argued, had been subject to the process of assimilation earlier than most nations, as was demonstrated by the Jews of Western Europe. Moreover, the extent of Jewish assimilation was an accurate yardstick for measuring the general level of development of a society. For, everywhere, 'the decline of medievalism and the development of political liberty went hand in hand with the political emancipation of the Jews . . . [with] their undeniable progressive assimilation with the surrounding population'. At the moment,

Of the ten and a half million Jews in the world, somewhat over a half live in Galicia and Russia, backward and semi-barbarous countries, where the Jews are *forcibly* kept in the status of a caste. The other half lives in the civilised world, and there the Jews do not live as a segregated caste. There the great world-progressive features of Jewish culture stand clearly revealed: its internationalism, its identity with the advanced movements of the epoch

¹⁷ Connor, *The National Question*, pp. 36–7.

¹⁸ Lenin, 'Critical remarks', pp. 36–7.

(the percentage of Jews in the democratic and proletarian movements is everywhere higher than the percentage of Jews among the population).¹⁹

Therefore, 'the idea that Jews form a separate nation', and that their separateness should be preserved and developed, is not only 'untenable scientifically', it is also 'reactionary politically'.²⁰

In his views on the Jewish question Lenin was a faithful and conscious follower of a long line of Marxist thinkers, beginning with Marx himself. In his famous and controversial essay 'On the Jewish Question', Marx had sought to establish the parameters for a materialist analysis of the Jewish question. Such an analysis, he argued, must 'consider the real Jew: not the *Sabbath Jew* . . . but the *everyday Jew*'. It must 'not seek the secret of the Jew in his religion, but . . . the secret of the religion in the real Jew'. The secret of the preservation of Judaism, Marx argued, must be sought *in* history, not outside of history, that is, in the actual rôle played by the Jews in European society through the ages. Their rôle, as Marx saw it, was to embody the spirit of 'practical need', of 'egoism', in medieval society by performing the limited monetary functions which were needed by that society, but which no other group could perform. ('The *chimerical* nationality of the Jew is the nationality of the trader, and above all of the financier.') Once practical need and egoism had become the general principles of society, with the emergence of civil (i.e. bourgeois) society, whose god, like 'the jealous God of Israel', is money, the Jew lost his distinctiveness, Christianity had 'been reabsorbed into Judaism'. This development expressed itself, in the truly 'political states', in the political emancipation of the Jews, the equalization of their civil status with that of the non-Jews. The final emancipation of the Jews, their social emancipation, would come, like the social emancipation of the Christians, with 'the *emancipation of society from Judaism*', that is, with the abolition of 'huckstering and its conditions', or, as Marx would later call it, of capitalism.²¹

Marx's theoretical formulations were translated into concrete historical terms by two of his followers, Karl Kautsky and Otto Bauer. According to Kautsky, Jewry had ceased, with its eradication in its ancestral land, to be a nation (for a nation without a territory was, in his view, inconceivable), and had become a 'caste,' an occupational group distinguished from the rest of society by its urban character and by the financial, commercial, and intellectual nature of its economic pursuits. At present, the development of capitalism in Western Europe was fast eroding the distinctiveness of this Jewish caste and allowing the Jews to integrate into the surrounding societies. In Eastern Europe, however, where capitalist development was retarded, Jews still remained a caste, although a caste in which there was a growing number of workers, especially handicraft workers. This was the root cause of the Jewish problem in Russia, and its solution would come only when Russian Jews were able to follow their western brethren and merge into the general society. The end of Jewish suffering required, then, the disappearance of Judaism, but this,

¹⁹ Lenin, 'Critical remarks', p. 26.

²⁰ Lenin, 'The position of the Bund in the Party', *CW*, Vol. 7, p. 100.

²¹ K. Marx, 'On the Jewish question', in T. B. Bottomore (ed.), *Karl Marx: Early Writings* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 34-40.

Kautsky argued, should not be of concern to ‘the friends of human progress’. For

we cannot say we have completely emerged from the Middle Ages as long as Judaism still exists among us. The sooner it disappears, the better it will be, not only for society, but also for the Jews themselves.²²

Unlike Kautsky, Bauer did not consider a common territory to be an essential characteristic of nationality; he was, in fact, one of the most important advocates of national-cultural autonomy. Nevertheless, he also denied that Jews were a nation, claiming that their assimilation into the surrounding societies was an inevitable consequence of the development of capitalism. Even where Jews still constituted a nation, as in Eastern Europe, they were a ‘non-historical’ nation, that is, a nation which had lost its educated classes. And while it was true that other non-historical nations, like the Czechs, did experience national revival in the 19th century, Jews, being an urban population lacking an agrarian hinterland, had too much intercourse with non-Jewish society to be able to preserve their national identity and were therefore destined for assimilation. Their assimilation was both inevitable and desirable, for the interests of the Jews, and especially of Jewish workers, required that they integrate as fully and as quickly as possible into their respective societies.²³

‘March With Us’: the Question of Party Organization

The main bone of contention between Lenin and the Bund leadership in the period preceding the Second Congress of 1903 was the demand, adopted at the Fourth Bund Congress in 1901, that the RSDLP be reorganized as a federation of social-democratic parties. This demand flew in the face not only of Lenin’s ideas on the national question but, more importantly perhaps, of his conception of party organization and of his efforts to forge the RSDLP into a unified, centralized, all-Russian revolutionary party.

Lenin’s first comment on the resolutions of the Bund Congress came rather late, in February of 1903. (*Iskra*’s first reaction to them had appeared in 1901, and was written by Martov.) In an article titled ‘Concerning the Statement of the Bund’, Lenin declared that ‘the present Bund leaders are committing a grave political error, which will undoubtedly be corrected by time, experience, and the growth of the movement’. He then went on to summarize *Iskra*’s previous disagreements with the Bund, his first airing of these issues in public:

²² K. Kautsky, *Are the Jews a Race?* (New York, International Publishers, 1926), pp. 113–17, 130, 144, 146–7, 159–160, 242–4, 246; ‘Das Massaker von Kischenev und die Jundenfrage’, *Die Neue Zeit*, XXXI(2) (1902–1903).

²³ O. Bauer, *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die Sozialdemokratie* (2nd edition) (Vienna, Wiener Volksbuchhandlung, 1924), pp. 366–81. Bauer’s position on the Jews, Lenin remarked, ‘proves . . . how inconsistent [he] is and how little he believes in his own idea, for he excludes the *only* extra-territorial nation from his plan for extra-territorial national autonomy. Lenin, “‘Cultural-national’ autonomy”, *CW*, Vol. 19, p. 506. Lenin, however, based his views on the Jewish question on those of Bauer and Kautsky. See, for example, ‘The position of the Bund in the Party’, *CW*, Vol. 7, pp. 92–103; ‘Draft platform for the Fourth Congress of Social-Democrats of the Latvian area’, *CW*, Vol. 19, pp. 110–18; ‘Theses on the national question’, *CW*, Vol. 19, pp. 243–51.

At one time the Bund supported 'economism', . . . and adopted resolutions stating that the economic struggle is the *best* means of political agitation. We rose up against it and fought it. And the fight helped to rectify the old mistakes, of which very likely not even a trace has remained. We fought against the urge towards terrorism, which to all appearances vanished even more rapidly. As for the future, we are convinced that the nationalist passion will vanish too. In the end the Jewish proletariat will understand that its own vital interests demand the *closest* unity with the Russian proletariat in one party . . . that the Bund ought not to go beyond the demand . . . for the complete autonomy in matters concerning the Jewish proletariat, which was fully recognized by the 1898 Congress and which has never been denied by anyone.²⁴

Restated, Lenin's argument was that the interests of the Jewish proletariat, just like the interests of the Russian proletariat as a whole, demanded the closest unity of all revolutionary forces. Such unity could be achieved only within the structure of a centralized party and would be seriously undermined if the party was organized on a federated basis. While the particular needs of the Jewish proletariat could be satisfied through the autonomous status granted the Bund in 1898, the present leadership of the Bund (unlike that of 1898), was imbued with 'nationalist passion' which manifested itself organizationally in the demand for the restructuring of the Party along federal lines. This nationalist passion did not reflect a correct understanding of the interests of the Jewish proletariat, since 'it is the height of folly to decide in advance whether the evolution of the Jewish people in free Russia will differ from its evolution in free Europe' (that is, assimilation).²⁵ The Jewish proletariat 'in the end' will understand this and (presumably, although this is not stated explicitly) will replace its present leadership.

The Bund's demand to reorganize the party on a federal basis violated, Lenin felt, the principle which was the keystone of his thinking on the question of party organization, the principle of centralism:

We must act as a single and centralised militant organisation, have behind us the whole of the proletariat without distinction of language or nationality . . . we must not set up organisations that would march separately, each along its own track; we must not weaken the force of our offensive by breaking up into numerous independent political parties; we must not introduce estrangement and isolation and then have to heal an artificially implanted disease with the aid of these notorious 'federation' plasters.²⁶

In later statements Lenin modified his claim that the 'estrangement and isolation' prevailing in the party in general, and between the Russian and Jewish movements in particular, were 'artificially implanted'. Rather, he argued, they were the result of the 'period of disunity, which aggravated wavering among the Russian Social-Democrats, and the isolation of the various

²⁴ Lenin, 'Concerning the statement of the Bund', *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 322.

²⁵ Lenin, 'Concerning the statement of the Bund', p. 322.

²⁶ Lenin, 'Does the Jewish proletariat need an "Independent Political Party"?', *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 335.

organisations'.²⁷ This period had particularly affected the Bund which, for certain historical reasons, had developed in isolation from the Russian movement. The question, however, was whether this 'historically evolved isolation . . . [is] to be legitimised, or is it to be rejected on principle . . . Is this isolation to be preserved or a turn made towards fusion?'²⁸ The choice for Lenin was clear: 'If you do not want to move towards fusion', he said to the Bund, 'you will stand for federation'.²⁹ For federation '*sanctions* segregation and alienation, elevates them to a principle, to a law'. It does that by setting up *obligatory* organizational partitions between the various sections of the party, preventing the centre from communicating directly with each section and with individual party members. This is a gross violation of the principle of centralism (as the Bund itself would be first to recognize if anybody suggested implementing it within its own organization) and 'that is why we reject federation in principle'.³⁰

The Bund's rejection of autonomy and its insistence on federation could be justified theoretically, Lenin argued, 'only on the basis of nationalist ideas'.³¹ It was no accident, he pointed out, that the demand for federation was adopted at the same Fourth Congress which declared Jews to be a nation. But in calling for 'the Zionist *idea* of a Jewish nation, [and] for the federal *principle* of party organization' the Bund was, in effect, endorsing the 'complete separation and demarcation of the Jewish and non-Jewish proletariat of Russia'. This, if carried out in practice, would mean '*reducing to nil* the great call for the rallying and unity of the proletarians of all nations, all races and all languages'.³²

In obstructing the drive for the unity and solidarity of the entire Russian working class, Lenin argued, the Bund was doing a disservice not only to the revolution, but also to the cause it was most interested in promoting—the fight against anti-Semitism. To fight effectively against anti-Semitism, and, most crucially, against the pogroms, all socialist forces would have to be consolidated in the all-Russian social-democratic organization. This, for Lenin, was not merely a matter of numbers or of effective organization. The pogroms, he argued, were only one aspect of the campaign launched by the forces of reaction against the revolution. In this campaign, the reactionary forces utilized the ignorance and backwardness of certain strata of the population in order to incite them against the Jews (but also against students and revolutionary workers as well). The more the social democrats could organize the proletariat, and the more they could extend their influence over the population, the harder would it be for the pogrom movement to spread. In addition, only if the Russian and Jewish workers would stand together against the pogromists, would the true character of the pogroms as *political* rather than racial be revealed. Lastly, in terms of physical power alone, it was only the

²⁷ Lenin, 'The position of the Bund in the Party', *CW*, Vol. 7, p. 102.

²⁸ Lenin, 'Maximum brazenness and minimum logic', *CW*, Vol. 7, p. 63.

²⁹ Lenin, 'Maximum brazenness and minimum logic', p. 63.

³⁰ Lenin, 'Speech on the place of the Bund in the RSDLP', *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 486–7.

³¹ Lenin, 'Maximum brazenness and minimum logic', p. 63.

³² Lenin, 'The latest word in Bundist nationalism', *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 519–21.

Russian proletariat that could bring the pogroms to a halt.³³

The Bund, according to Lenin, while paying lip service to the idea that only the joint struggle of the proletarians of all nationalities could prevent the pogroms from taking place, was actually using the pogroms for its own organizationally separatist propaganda and was proposing (at the Second Congress) rules which ‘not only keep the joint fighters *far apart*, but strengthen this separation and alienation through organisational means’.³⁴ The Russian social democrats, on the other hand, in asking the Bund to work for the All-Russian cause, were not asking it to stop working for the development of the class consciousness of the Jewish proletariat. On the contrary, they recognized the importance of this work for the cause of the revolution, and only asked that the Bund conduct this work with the interests of the general movement in mind. This meant that the Bund should discard the reactionary idea of an ‘independent national workers’ party’, which divided the proletariat on the basis of nationality.³⁵

Underlying Lenin’s ire at the Bund in 1903 were traces of an earlier debate in which the Bund had played an influential, if indirect rôle. That was the debate over tactics in 1898–1901, better known as the ‘economist controversy’, in the context of which Lenin had developed his conception of the revolutionary party. At issue was the relative weight that should be given in propaganda and agitation to the workers’ immediate economic needs, as against ‘political’ issues having to do with the struggle to overthrow the autocracy. Since 1895 the movement had been guided by the formula provided in *On Agitation*, the pamphlet written by Alexander Kremer of the Jewish social democrats in Vilna (precursors of the Bund). According to that formula, it was through the practical experience gained in the struggle over economic needs, rather than through abstract theorizing, that the workers could acquire proletarian class consciousness. The development of their consciousness, moreover, would occur in a number of stages, and the social-democratic *intelligenti*, aside from agitating on the basis of the workers’ economic needs, could do no more than summarize the lessons learned from experience in each particular stage and point out the moment of transition from one stage to another.

On Agitation was accepted, albeit with some criticism, by the bastion of Russian orthodox Marxism—Plekhanov’s Group for the Liberation of Labour—which published it in 1897. Lenin himself mentioned it favourably in *What is to Be Done?* and, according to Harding, had been deeply influenced by it in developing his own thinking since the mid-1890s.³⁶ But Lenin’s understanding

³³ Lenin, ‘Di mobilizatsie fun di reaktionere koyches un unzere oifgaben’, in *Nationale un Yiddische Frage* (biz der Imperialistisher Milchome), *Lenin Bibliotek, Serie 1: Oisegeveilte Verk* (Moscow, *Tsentraler felker farlag fun FSSR*, 1927), Vol. 8, Part 1, pp. 21, 24–5, 27–8.

³⁴ Lenin, ‘The latest word in Bundist nationalism’, p. 521.

³⁵ Lenin, ‘Di mobilizatsie fun di reaktionere koyches’, pp. 27–8.

³⁶ A. Kremer, *Ob Agitatsii* (with an afterword by P. B. Akselrod) [Geneva, 1897 (dated 1896)]. For an English translation see N. Harding and R. Taylor (eds), *Marxism in Russia: Key Documents 1879–1905* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 192–205. On the ‘economist’ controversy see N. Harding, *Lenin’s Political Thought*, Vol. 1, pp. 110–12, 155–66; ‘Introduction’, in J. Frankel (ed.), *Vladimir Akimov on the Dilemmas of Russian Marxism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969); A. K. Wildman, *The Making of a Workers’ Revolution* (Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1967).

of the progression of the workers' consciousness through the various stages was different from that of some other Russian Marxists. Just as it was the most modern industrial sector that determined the pace of development in the economy, and just as it was the industrial proletariat that was most capable of leading the struggle for democracy, so, he believed, it was the ideologically most advanced workers who should be considered in determining the transition from one stage to another. In other words, the social-democratic intellectuals should aim their propaganda and agitation at the most advanced section of the working class, rather than directing it towards the average or backward workers. What this meant, in effect, was that the intellectuals should constantly try to lead the development of the workers' consciousness and drive it towards a broader and more political understanding of the historical tasks of the proletariat.³⁷

The alternative view of the proper relationship between workers and intellectuals, between spontaneity and consciousness, was what Lenin called, in general, 'tailism' and in the context of the debate over tactics, 'economism'. According to that view, the social democrats should confine their propaganda and agitation to the level of consciousness spontaneously arrived at by the average workers, and should not try to impose their own ideas on the labour movement. Since the liberation of the working class could only be the task of the workers themselves, it was not up to the intelligentsia to determine the pace or the direction of the development of the workers' consciousness. If the workers were concerned primarily with the struggle over economic issues, and over political issues directly related to factory life, then it was the *intelligenti's* duty to aid them in that struggle, and not to try to use them as foot soldiers for their own revolutionary designs.³⁸

The danger in this approach of 'cringing to spontaneity', Lenin argued, was that, with all their concern for the workers' independence, the 'economists' were bound to deliver the workers into the arms of the bourgeoisie. Since no practical activity could be conducted without being guided by theory (or, as Lenin called it, 'consciousness'), and since the workers, because of their particular conditions of life, were not capable of developing their own theory, the choice was not really between 'spontaneity' and 'consciousness', but rather between bourgeois and social-democratic consciousness. Allowing the workers' movement to develop along the path of least resistance, he argued, would inevitably result in trade unionism, in the adoption of bourgeois ideology.³⁹

In his polemics against the 'economists', which culminated in 1902 in *What is to be Done?*, Lenin did not accuse the Bund of having practised that particular

³⁷ Lenin, 'The tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats', *CW*, Vol. 2, p. 330; 'The urgent tasks of our movement', *CW*, Vol. 4, Book I (New York, International Publishers, 1929), p. 54; 'What is to be done?', *CW*, Vol. 4, Book II, pp. 153n, 158, 206, 208; 'One step forward, two steps back', *CW*, Vol. 7, pp. 260–1. See also J. Ehrenberg, 'Communists and proletarians: Lenin on consciousness and spontaneity', *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 25 (1983), 285–306.

³⁸ T. Dan, *The Origins of Bolshevism* (edited and translated by Joel Carmichael) (New York, Schocken, 1970), pp. 209–20; J. L. H. Keep, *The Rise of Social Democracy in Russia* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 49, 54–66, 84–91; D. W. Treadgold, *Lenin and His Rivals* (New York, Praeger, 1955), Ch. 8.

³⁹ Lenin, 'What is to be done?', pp. 122–3. See also Ehrenberg, 'Communists and proletarians', p. 295.

brand of 'tailism', except in passing. But in 1903 he presented the Bund's national and organizational views as the latest links in a long chain of 'tailist' errors, going back to the issue of 'economism.' Regardless of the validity of these charges, the fact that Lenin chose to accuse the Bund leaders of 'tailism', rather than, for example, of willfully perverting the workers' consciousness, accorded a certain degree of legitimacy to their positions. For 'tailism' implies following the authentic, even if misguided, feelings of the workers, and these feelings must have some basis in social reality. The question that arises, therefore, from Lenin's charge of 'tailism', is what were the social-historical processes which caused the Jewish workers to develop nationalist leanings? This was a question which Lenin was unable to pose, let alone answer, because his conception of the relationship between economic development and the maintenance of ethnic identity was grounded in a 'diffusionist', 'assimilationist' theory of modernization. This theme is developed in the following section.

Modernization and the Split Labour Market: a Critique of Lenin's Views

Lenin viewed the process of capitalist development as essentially integrative with respect to ethnic, and other ascriptive differences:

Large-scale machine industry, which concentrates masses of workers, who often come from various parts of the country, absolutely refuses to tolerate survivals of particularism and personal dependence, and is marked by a truly 'contemptuous attitude to the past'.⁴⁰

Even the 'awakening of nations' which he saw occurring in the early phases of capitalism, was, for Lenin, a result of this integrative process, which crystallized market-based, national societies out of the amorphous mass of isolated local communities characteristic of the middle ages. This process, Lenin predicted, would lead to the disintegration of the large multinational empires and to the creation of nationally homogeneous states.

Not every ethnic group, however, could go through the process of integration and emerge as a fully-fledged national entity. To be able to do this, a group needed to possess a number of objective characteristics which would ensure its cohesiveness as an actual or potential 'nation'. While Lenin himself explicitly mentioned only two characteristics of this kind—a common language and territory—he is generally believed to have been in agreement with the views expressed by Stalin in his *Marxism and the National Question*.⁴¹ In that pamphlet, essentially a polemic against the Bund and against other advocates of national-cultural autonomy, Stalin enumerated his famous four criteria of a nation: 'a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture'. Moreover, Stalin emphasized, '*it is only when all these characteristics are present that we have a nation*'.⁴²

⁴⁰ Lenin, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1977), p. 552.

⁴¹ J. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* (Calcutta, New Book Centre, 1975). For Lenin's attitude toward Stalin's essay see Lenin, 'The National Programme of the RSDLP', *CW*, Vol. 19, p. 539; Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union*, pp. 37–41.

⁴² Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, pp. 11–12.

Lenin's and Stalin's purpose in listing these characteristics was not, as sometimes suggested, to determine which ethnic group 'deserved' to be granted the right of national self-determination. It was, rather, to establish the likelihood of a particular group experiencing 'national awakening' with the emergence of capitalist society. For capitalist development, they believed, could pull an ethnic group apart as much as it could pull it together, depending on the resources the group had at its disposal when it came into contact with modernity. The crucial point, in their view, was whether an ethnic group could create its own 'home market', which would serve as a unifying force, or whether it would have to participate in another national market, or markets, which would result in more frequent intercourse with people of different ethnic backgrounds. A group forming a compact mass in a particular territory, speaking its own language, and already possessing a common culture and shared economic system, was likely to develop its own national market and become a cohesive nation, while a group lacking one or several of these features was more likely to be pulled into a larger market and lose its identity in a larger national whole.⁴³

The idea that the survival chances of an ethnic group were affected by the existence of various common characteristics among its members, was not, of course, unique to Lenin, Stalin, or the Marxist tradition. It was, until quite recently, the conventional wisdom of modern western sociology as well, expressing itself in both diffusionist, functionalist theories of modernization, and in 'primordialist' explanations of why in certain areas modernization has not taken place or has not resulted in the elimination of ethnic conflict.⁴⁴ Only the revival, in the last 15 years, of 'ethno-nationalism' in Western Europe, where the process of national amalgamation, it was assumed, had been completed for a long time, has given rise to new theories which have challenged that conventional wisdom. These recently developed theories, while differing from one another in many ways, share at least two assumptions. The first is that, because of the unequal distribution of benefits, whether economic or political, among members of different ethnic groups, modernization often results in the hardening of ethnic boundaries and in an increase in the importance of ethnicity as a basis of political mobilization. The second is that successful mobilization of an ethnic group for economic or political struggles may have very little to do with the 'objective' existence of common cultural or other ethnic characteristics, beyond the shared feeling of deprivation.⁴⁵

When applied to the Jews of Russia, and especially to Russian Jewish

⁴³ Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, pp. 41–2, 47–8, 73.

⁴⁴ Examples of diffusionist theories of modernization are D. Apter, *The Politics of Modernization* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966) and K. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press, 1966). Examples of primordialist theories are C. Geertz, 'The integrative revolution: primordial sentiments and civil politics in new states', in C. Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States* (New York, Free Press of Glencoe, 1963) and E. A. Shils, 'Primordial, personal, sacred, and civil-ties', in E. A. Shils, *Center and Periphery* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1975).

⁴⁵ See J. Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1981); S. Olzak, 'Contemporary ethnic mobilization', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 9 (1983); E. Bonachich, 'Class approaches to ethnicity and race', *The Insurgent Sociologist*, 2 (1980). The latter two are review articles which survey the current literature.

workers, the new theories of ethnicity can explain why Bundist ideology evolved in an increasingly nationalist direction, and can serve as a powerful critique of Lenin's views on the subject. The theories which are most useful for this purpose are Bonacich's 'split labour market' theory, and Hechter's theory of 'internal colonialism'.⁴⁶

Bonacich's theory seeks to locate a major source of ethnic antagonism in a tripartite conflict in the labour market between employers, highly priced workers who belong to the relatively modern sector of society and share the employers' ethnic background, and lower-priced workers belonging to a different, more traditional ethnic group. According to the theory, employers seek, for obvious economic reasons, to replace higher-priced with lower-priced workers. The higher-priced workers react either by attempting to exclude the lower-priced ones from the labour market altogether, or attempting to turn them into a 'caste', by confining them to lower-paid, less desirable jobs. The result in both cases is a labour market split along ethnic lines.

In Russia, Jewish workers were indeed compelled to operate in a labour market strictly divided along ethnic lines. Like all Jews, they were prevented by law from residing outside the Pale of Jewish Settlement and were thus excluded from the major industrial centres of the Russian interior.⁴⁷ Within the Pale, they were barred almost completely from the capital goods sector and from the most advanced industries owned by non-Jews (in some cases by the government). Lastly, in the secondary industries owned by Jewish industrialists in the Pale, Jewish workers were confined to the smaller, more primitive plants, and to unskilled and auxiliary occupations, while non-Jews operated the machines. This ethnic division of labour in Jewish-owned enterprises resulted, moreover, from a deliberate hiring policy adopted by Jewish owners, who would replace their higher-cost Jewish workers with lower-cost non-Jewish ones as soon as their plants were mechanized. This policy caused frequent conflict, sometimes even violence, between Jewish and non-Jewish workers.⁴⁸

The outcome of the tripartite struggle in this case was in contradiction to the predictions of split labour market theory. Here higher-priced Jewish workers were defeated, and were turned into a lower 'caste', confined largely to handicraft and manufacture and excluded almost completely from modern industrial production. The reasons for this divergence from the model have to do with the peculiarities of the Jewish condition and with a certain bias which was

⁴⁶ E. Bonacich, 'A theory of ethnic antagonism: the split labor market', *American Sociological Review*, 37 (1972); 'The past, present, and future of split labor market theory', *Research in Race and Ethnic Relations*, 1 (1979); M. Hechter, *Internal Colonialism* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

⁴⁷ The Pale of Jewish Settlement, a segregated area on the western border of the Russian Empire where Jews were allowed to reside, included the territories taken from Poland since 1772, with some additions.

⁴⁸ The most accessible works in English on the economic conditions of Russian Jews around the turn of the century are I. Rubinow, *Economic Conditions of Jews in Russia* (New York, Arno Press, 1975 [a reprint of a report originally published in *Bulletin of US Bureau of Labor*, 15 (1907)], E. Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970) and A. Kahan, 'The impact of industrialization in Tsarist Russia on the socioeconomic conditions of the Jewish population', in A. Kahan, *Essays in Jewish Social and Economic History* (edited by Roger Weiss) (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 1-69.

built into the theory itself.⁴⁹ This, however, does not detract from the value of split labour market theory as an analysis of the detrimental effects modernization may have on the integration of minority ethnic groups into the mainstream of multi-ethnic societies. In our particular case, the modernization of Russian society clearly had a negative effect on the position of Jews in that society, at least from an economic point of view. For, while prior to the beginning of industrialization around the middle of the 19th century, Jews had been able to function as a 'middleman minority'⁵⁰ within the manorial economy, the transformation of that economy, which made their traditional occupations obsolete, left them few options, other than sweated labour in secondary and declining industries, unemployment, or emigration. As a result, the Russian Jewish community had experienced devastating pauperization and had sent over two million of its members to the west.

The confinement of Jewish workers to their own secondary labour market, coupled with the territorial segregation imposed on all Jews by the Tzarist government, constituted an example of what Hechter has called 'cultural division of labour'. Such division of labour, he argued, 'contributes to the development of distinctive ethnic identification in the two groups' involved. For the group which is on the 'periphery' of society, 'cultural maintenance . . . can be regarded as a weapon in that it provides the possibility of socialization, as well as political mobilization, contrary to state ends'. This, moreover, gives a decisive advantage to the development of ethnic rather than class solidarity:

Since the concept of social class seeks to deny the salience of cultural and residential differences among members of similar occupational groups, to the extent that such differences actually exist, class is ultimately more abstracted from the reality of everyday social life than is ethnicity.⁵¹

Especially, one may add, when cultural division of labour is affected by an inter-class alliance between employers and lower-priced workers. (The fact that the alliance between Jewish employers and non-Jewish workers was also an inter-ethnic alliance could have been responsible for the Jewish workers' reluctance to adopt a supra-class national ideology, such as Zionism.)

Hechter's and Bonacich's theories can help us understand why industrialization resulted in more rather than less segregation of Russian Jews from the mainstream of Russian society. Because of this segregation, Jewish workers were increasingly experiencing their lives as defined by their being Jews rather than by their being workers. They responded to this experience by developing national consciousness, regardless of the fact that, objectively speaking, they lacked several of the characteristics considered essential for being a nation.

The Bund leaders who, as Lenin argued, were more concerned to express the consciousness of Jewish workers than to shape it, responded to this reality by gradually modifying their appeal, shifting its emphasis from class to national

⁴⁹ This issue is discussed in some detail in Y. Peled and G. Shafir, 'From caste to exclusion: the dynamics of modernization in the Russian Pale of Settlement', *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, 3 (1987).

⁵⁰ I use 'middleman minority' to connote a minority ethnic group which performs proto-capitalist economic functions in an otherwise traditional economy. See E. Bonacich, 'A theory of middlemen minorities', *American Sociological Review*, 38 (1973) and W. Zenner, *Middleman Minority Theories and the Jews* (New York, YIVO, 1978).

⁵¹ Hechter, *Internal Colonialism*, pp. 9–10, 37, 42.

interests. Lenin, while accurately diagnosing this shift, failed to understand the social-historical processes underlying it. His failure was caused not by lack of theoretical interest or by insensitivity to the Jewish predicament, but by the fact that he viewed the effects of modernization on ethnicity through the prism of an erroneous, though widely held, linear theory. That theory prevented him from realizing that the process of capitalist development could have the effect of enhancing ethnic identity and exacerbating ethnic conflict, irrespective of the degree to which the groups involved conformed to an abstract model of a 'nation'.

Conclusion

Lenin's views on the national and Jewish questions were shaped by his general historical outlook. Until the First World War he believed that Western Europe provided the model for the future development of Russia and that, therefore, Russia was bound to go through a capitalist period and through a bourgeois-democratic revolution. During the capitalist period, Lenin believed, the Empire's nations and nationalities would experience a process of national amalgamation which would result in the creation of a number of nation states, on the Western European model, and the assimilation of the nationalities which would remain within the Russian state into the Great Russian nation. (Little did he know that, 50 years later, most Western European states would themselves face nationalist challenges to their legitimacy.) One of the nationalities to be assimilated, indeed, the one leading the process of assimilation, was to be the Jewish nationality, which had already lost most of the characteristics of a nation.

Lenin's understanding of the Jewish question, and his prognosis for the evolution of the Russian Jewish community, were influenced by the conception of the Jewish problem which had prevailed in the Marxist movement since its inception. That conception, however, was based on the experience of Western European Jewry and could not be applied mechanically to the Jews of Eastern Europe. To paraphrase Lenin himself, it was the height of folly to decide in advance that the evolution of the Jewish people in free Russia would be *the same* as the evolution of the Jewish people in free Europe. For in Russia, Jewish workers (a class virtually unknown in Western Europe before the beginning of mass migration from the East) had to compete for industrial employment with a vast peasant population which was being expelled from the countryside at a rate faster than the development of the absorptive capacity of Russian industry. These peasants were cheaper to employ and more suitable for industrial occupations than Jewish workers, with their commercial and artisan backgrounds, and were preferred, therefore, even by Jewish employers. The result was an ethnically divided labour market within the Pale of Settlement itself and the crystallization of nationally coloured class consciousness among the Jewish workers, as reflected in the national ideology of the Bund.

Lenin's failure to understand these processes was a failure to follow Marx's dictum to study the 'real Jew'. For, in Lenin's case, the 'real Jew' was not the rapidly assimilating, middle-class Jew of Western Europe, but the increasingly segregated, working-class Jew of Eastern Europe. Lenin's inability to comprehend this difference was caused, this article has argued, not by an innate

hostility towards Jews, but by his general Western European-centred outlook. How he would have reacted to the Bund's national demands had he been aware of the real-life processes affecting Jewish workers is a question which cannot, of course, be answered. Some clues may be found in the policies adopted by the Soviet government after the seizure of power, but that subject lies beyond the scope of this essay.