

not been completed already, Africans, Indians, Coloureds and Europeans are being fast assimilated into a South African nation which is already in existence. The process is being accelerated precisely because the full cultural and linguistic expression of some sections is being impeded in South Africa. Those disintegrating tribal communities which have not yet attained separate national consciousness will only do so as South Africans.

It is not surprising that there is little demand for secession and self-determination—indeed, the label “National Liberation Movement” is a complete misnomer—for in a single national state the demand is for equal democratic rights. This does not spring from the fact that there are no nations in South Africa, but that the arising South African nation is oppressed by a reactionary government. The ideology which animates the Nationalist Party is an example of the contradiction between political superstructure and economic basis in a changing capitalist state. It corresponds to an earlier phase of capitalist development in South Africa, a semi-colonial phase based largely on the formation of absolute surplus

value extracted from the exploitation of primary resources. Although this continues, the basis has changed to modern industrial capitalism based largely on the formation of relative surplus value. The bourgeois superstructure will one day conform better to this economic basis, provided the more fundamental clash between capitalism and socialism is not resolved meanwhile, despite the attempts of the Apartheid doctrinaires. Comrade Forman need not align himself with them by identifying himself with the specific national aspirations of each nationality. He should do no more than respect such feelings.

No wonder then that when Forman looks at the Afrikaans and sees only policemen, at the English and sees only supervisors, at Africans and sees only workers, he can complain that each section fails to qualify as a nation. He is looking at components of a single arising nation where class divisions for good historical reasons happen to correspond to some extent with racial differences. He does not see classes only colours, hence misinterpreting the evidence of the single national market he cannot pass over in silence.

Reply to the discussion

On the Jewish problem

Bert Ramelson

WITH the exception of Comrade Rosenberg (*Marxism Today*, March 1959), there has been no disagreement with those sections of my article dealing with all aspects of the problem other than the nature and prospects of Yiddish culture. Of this last section Comrade Waterman is sharply critical.

What about Comrade Rosenberg's criticism?

His main contentions (apart from setting up Aunt Sallies and “destroying” arguments I never used, as Solly Kaye so clearly pointed out in his contribution in the April issue) are:

- i. That since an Israeli nation is rapidly emerging as “Ramelson himself states”, then it must follow that the nature of the Jewish problem is national in character and we must therefore have a policy in line with this “new Jewish consciousness”.
- ii. That whereas anti-Semitism was the core of the problem before the war, it is no longer so.

Are these arguments tenable? Firstly, millions of people from scores of different countries, due to intolerance at home, left their native lands in

the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for the U.S.A. In the course of time a new nation—the American nation—was formed out of a variety of peoples of different national origin. What is happening in Israel is not very different from what happened earlier in the United States. Surely, it wouldn't occur to anyone to argue that the emergence of an American nation was somehow the result of a common *national* problem affecting the immigrants who formed the core of this new nation. Why then should Comrade Rosenberg assume that the emergence of a new nation—the Israeli nation—must be proof that a common *national* problem affected the immigrants to Israel?

Nor do we get anywhere by the use of such phrases as “Jewish consciousness”. Surely no Marxist should adopt the idealist subjective criterion in evaluating the existence or otherwise of nationality. Bebel, long ago, warned against this subjective approach to the national question. Objective material circumstances, and not abstract factors such as “consciousness”, determine nationality.

What about the second criticism? It seems to me that Comrade Rosenberg, in stating that anti-Semitism is no longer the major problem, is something like the Reformists, who in a period of capitalist boom theorise that unemployment and economic crisis are no longer the key problems for the working class. It is their failure to understand the nature of capitalism that leads them to see a temporary period of capitalist stability as proof of the permanent solution of the problem—and by doing so, they create harmful illusions and divert the struggle. Similarly, only those who fail to understand that class society is the basic cause of anti-Semitism can argue, as Comrade Rosenberg does, that anti-Semitism has ceased to be the central problem, while the majority of Jews still live in those two-thirds of the world in which class society continues to exist. So long as a class-divided society exists, just so long will anti-Semitism remain the main problem affecting Jews. Its intensity will vary from time to time and place to place, dependent on a whole number of factors. But it is there all the time, and remains a potential danger to the very existence of the Jews.

I am extremely sorry that Comrade Waterman, in expressing his sharp disagreement with my views on the nature and future (or rather no future) of Yiddish as a language or medium for the further development of a specific culture, found it necessary to distort what I said.

There was no need at all, for example, to cast doubt on my attitude to the “administrative measures taken in 1948” as he does in writing “I can only *assume* . . . he means the unjust and illegal acts. . . .” I made my meaning perfectly clear when I wrote: “In 1948, *during the period of abuse of Soviet democracy and legality*, administrative measures were taken. . . .” (January 1959, p. 26). Or another example. In my article I listed a series of facts as a basis for discussion. One of those listed facts was that the justification *given* for closing down Yiddish institutions was lack of demand. The statement of this unchallenged fact is distorted by Comrade Waterman into an implication that I said that there was no demand, or that *in my opinion*, such lack of demand is sufficient justification for such actions. Having ascribed to me what I never said or implied, it is then easy, of course, for him to “quote” me against myself.

Now I want to say a few words about Comrade Waterman’s general position. The tragedy for him is the conflict within himself, so patently demonstrated in his contribution. The conflict, which affects also other comrades, is one between objective Marxist understanding and emotional subjective love for the mother tongue. Thus on page 123 (April) he argues: “Let me say clearly and unequivocally that there can be no doubt that the

process of integration is taking place . . . particularly the younger generation neither speak nor understand Yiddish . . . no Socialist should oppose such a natural process”. Thus speaks Comrade Waterman, the Marxist, and in this one sentence, whether he realises it or not, he accepts the essence of my argument. But no sooner does he utter this, than Comrade Waterman, the emotional Yiddish enthusiast, emerges to contradict him, and produces arguments hardly worthy of him.

Similarly, Comrade Waterman, the Marxist, staunchly declares on page 125 (April): “No Marxist would claim that the Jews in the Soviet Union were at any time a nation.” But Comrade Waterman, the Yiddish enthusiast, ignoring his other self, declares equally staunchly on page 123 (April) that after 1917, Yiddish culture became “*national in form and Socialist in content*”.

Comrade Waterman, the Marxist, is on much firmer ground, and when he forgets his Marxism, he becomes confused and is compelled to fall back on very naive arguments indeed!

He quotes a number of Yiddish publications still being published in a number of countries; but having deserted his Marxist objectivity for the moment, he fails to inform us that they are only a fraction of the number that were published a decade ago, or that not a single Yiddish daily is published in Britain. I am glad that Comrades Zaidman and Falber filled in his omissions.

The fact that 3 million people attended Jewish concerts in the U.S.S.R. is proof that concerts are being performed there (thus showing rectification of the wrong measures of 1948), but it is no proof at all of a revival and development of Yiddish culture. No more so than the packed audiences to which the Moscow Art Theatre played in London is proof of the emergence of Russian culture in Britain.

The danger of allowing oneself to succumb to subjectivism is shown by Comrade Waterman’s attack on me for saying: “Segregation in the ghettos . . . created a specific culture depicting ghetto life”.

It is no accident that all the works of the great names in Yiddish literature—Mendele Mocher Seforim, Perez, Sholem Aleichem—depicted ghetto life and the people’s revolt against its misery, poverty and intolerance. It is equally not accidental that Sholem Asch, the last in that tradition, once removed from the ghetto, was compelled to go back 2,000 years in search of subject matter for his later novels in the last decade of his life, e.g. *The Nazarene*. However, there is no need for me to develop this further, as Comrades Gallacher and Zaidman (May and June issues) have done so.

Comrade Waterman writes: “To quote the President of the Zionist Organisation in support

of his theory is the measure of the bankruptcy of evidence available to Comrade Ramelson", page 124 (April). In the first place Nahum Goldman, whom I quoted, was speaking in his capacity of President of the World Jewish Congress, an organisation including Zionists, non-Zionists and anti-Zionists. Secondly, the quotation I used was to back up not only my views but also those held by Comrade Waterman himself as expressed by him on page 123 quoted earlier. Surely evidence supporting one's point of view given by a hostile witness is the strongest possible and most desirable evidence to submit.

Comrade Waterman himself quotes from Kalinin on page 123 (April): "On March 28th, 1928, a Government decree set aside Biro-Bijan as a Jewish Autonomous Region, with the view to an eventual formation of a Jewish Socialist Republic, in order that it might 'preserve a Yiddish Socialist national culture' (Kalinin)." Comrade Kalinin was

absolutely right. To preserve a Yiddish national culture, it was essential for the Jews to develop and become a nation. The Soviet Union set aside Biro-Bijan to provide the opportunity for just this. But, unfortunately for Comrade Waterman, the Jews in the Soviet Union voted with their feet against this project. They chose integration instead, with the inevitable consequences foreseen by Kalinin—the decay of Yiddish culture.

I agree with Comrade Waterman's closing sentence: "Let us counter the pernicious Zionist and reactionary propaganda by reaffirming our belief in Socialism, and let us make it once again 'the dominant trend among Jewish workers and many of the middle class.'" I don't think this can be achieved, however, by indulging in wishful thinking or sentimental hankering after a past which has disappeared forever. Only by facing life as it is and by combating wrong views, no matter how honestly they are held, can this aim be realised.