The founding of the Jewish Worker's Bund marked the beginning of a revolution in Jewish life as well as placing the issue of national and cultural rights on the agenda of the Russian socialist movement, says Clive Gilbert.

In a small house in Vilna, on 7 October 1897, thirteen Jewish workers' delegates from the cities of the Pale of Settlement attended a meeting. While looking anxiously kept an eye out for the police, the meeting declared the formation of the General Union of Jewish Workers in Russia, Lithuania and Poland—the Bund. The first man socialist organization in the Russian empire was born.

The view prevailing in European socialist and marxist circles was that the Jews, though perhaps a nation under feudalism, were now merely a caste, doomed to disappear by the deepening of capitalist social relations.

The demand for Jewish national rights was seen by European Marxists as a reaction to the alienation of the Jewish masses from their Russian state. Marx had not yet come to grips with the phenomenon of national liberation struggles, let alone with the fact that there exist within capitalism society, groups whose oppression stems from historical sources other than capitalism itself.

Some socialists went so far as to welcome antisemitic pogroms as a mass phenomenon which would somehow automatically impel the masses in a general anti-capitalist direction.

The founding of the Bund marked the beginning of a conscious refusal by the Jewish workers to accept the extinction of their demands for national and cultural freedom. The Bund's definition of Russian Jewry as a nation bore no relation to Zionist or religious concepts of Jewish nationalities which were grounded in an idealist or mystical interpretations of Jewish history. The Bundist view was based on an analysis of the material reality of Jewish existence in Russia. The millions of Jews of the Pale of Settlement spoke their own language, maintained their own culture and religion and lived, for the most part, in territorially concentrated communities. The Jews had thus constituted a clearly definable national group whose national consciousness had been further intensified by antisemitism, government-inspired pogroms and discriminatory legislation.

The leaders of the Bund never intended to limit themselves to the formation of an autonomous Jewish workers' organization—a particular opportune step since the Jewish workers were proving themselves to be the most class-conscious new workers in the empire and the most willing to respond positively to socialist propaganda.

It was largely the Bund's organizational efforts which led to the founding of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (RSDRP) in Minsk in 1898. The congress was attended by three delegates from the Bund and one Russian. The only speaker present was a member of the Bund delegation. At this stage the Bund had already recruited many workers while the infant Russian Party consisted of a few hundred intellectuals.

The Bund immediately made its already active printing presses, as well as its resources and expertise, available to the Russian party and submitted itself to the latter's authority while having its autonomous status confirmed. The RSDRP grew, and by the time the 1905 revolution it had about 9,000 members. At that time the Bund's membership was about 30,000.

The Bund recruited so many people in such a short time by rooting itself firmly in the consciousness of the Jewish working class, from whom it won a loyalty much deeper than that normally given to political parties. The Bund came to be unreservedly with the aspirations of the Jewish workers for national and cultural rights as well as for social justice. It took the lead in organizing self-defence squads against the pogroms, in offering practical support to workers in struggle and in openly challenging clerical and bourgeois reaction within the Jewish community.

This article is extracted from Gilbert's recently published pamphlet, A Revolution in Jewish Life—The History of the Jewish Workers' Bund. It is available from JSG, BM 3725 London WC1N 3XK for £1.25 (+25p p&p).

On 1 May 1902, in the town of Vilna, the Russian, Polish, Lithuanian and Ukrainian Social Democratic parties, together with the Bund, held a united international May Day demonstration. Sholem Aleichem, the new governor, had been appointed. His name was von Wahl and he was a Tsarist army general and a German baron. He had already noted up quite a history. As a young officer he had taken part in suppressing the insurrection of 1863 in Poland. A Sadistic anti-semitic, his first objective was to liquidate the Bund, which he particularly hated.

On that May day, he filled the streets of the town with secret agents, police, army and Cossacks. At a given signal, the workers came out of their secret assembly places and demonstrated behind two red flags. Soon the police, army and Cossacks stormed the demonstrators, knocking them mercilessly with their rifle butts and swords,5a series of blows being driven upon the head to the gallows erect and unaided. When the noise that the hangman threw over his head got stuck on his head, his head to make it slide down to his neck. He was buried at the spot where he was hanged and then the head was picked back up and forward by the hangman. He then aggregated from all the others so that they could be flogged. He personally issued the instructions as to how, and of what material, the whips were to be made, and he also supervised the flogging. As a prelude, the day before, all the victims were forced to run between the stony, two lines of police facing one another, who beat the runners with blackjacks. The next day they were dragged, one after the other, stripped naked to the waist, and thrown onto a pile. One woman sat on the victim's head and another on his legs and they gave each of them between 20 and 25 lashed, according to the fancy of von Wahl.

The news of this monstrous deed created an uproar, not only throughout Russia, but also far beyond her borders.