Jewish revolutionaries, revolutionary Jews

By Daniel Randall

This article is adapted from a talk first given at Nottingham Liberal Synagogue in November 2013, and in different versions since at meetings of the Jewish Socialist Group (JSG) and Workers’ Liberty, as well as at the Jewish educational and cultural conference Limmud in December 2014. A transcript of the original talk was published by the radical Jewish community organisation Jewdas in April 2014.

It is intended as a broad sketch of the topic, a brief introduction to key characters and episodes from the period discussed. It owes much to Bill Fishman’s East End Jewish Radicals, Janine Booth’s writing and talks on Minnie Glassman, Irving Howe’s World of Our Fathers, Tony Michel’s A Fire In Their Hearts, and the writing and walking tours of David Rosenberg of the JSG.

“From the days of [...] Karl Marx, and down to Trotsky (Russia), Bela Kun (Hungary), Rosa Luxemburg (Germany), and Emma Goldman (United States), this world-wide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality, has been steadily growing [...] There is no need to exaggerate the part played in the creation of Bolshevism and in the actual bringing about of the Russian Revolution, by these international and for the most part atheistical Jews, it is certainly a very great one; it probably outweighs all others. With the notable exception of Lenin, the majority of the leading figures are Jews. Moreover, the principal inspiration and driving power comes from the Jewish leaders.”

The above quote is from Winston Churchill. It appeared in a 1920 Illustrated Sunday Herald article, entitled “Zionism Versus Bolshevism: A Struggle for the Soul of the Jewish People”. It neatly expresses one of the recurrent tropes of 20th century anti-Semitism: that Bolshevism, or revolutionary anti-capitalist politics more widely, is a Jewish conspiracy, animated predominately by Jews, with the aim of undermining and overthrowing gentile civilisation.

The reality was, of course, a little more complex — of the Bolshevik party’s 10,000 members in February 1917, less than 4% were Jewish.

However, it is an undeniable fact that, throughout a particular period of European history, hundreds of thousands of mainly working-class Jewish people were involved in revolutionary politics — as activists, as organisers, as thinkers, and as theorists. Thriving and diverse traditions of revolutionary politics existed in the Jewish communities of Europe and America, from the mid-1800s up until the Second World War.

This article focuses on that period, and almost exclusively on Eastern European (“Ashkenazi”) Jews, in the period before much of the infrastructure of European Jewish life, including distinct Jewish revolutionary political organisation, is smashed to pieces by Nazism. It’s also a period of labour movement recomposition and renewal, and of revolutionary upheaval, climaxing with the conquest of power by Russian workers in 1917. Jewish revolutionaries played a central role in that revolution, and in the defeated German revolution of 1919, and other key working-class upsurges of the period.

From beginning of the 19th century, a mass of Jewish people were thrown together by Russian imperialism in what came to be called the “Pale of Settlement”. That mass numbered five million at its height, and living conditions were characterised by extreme poverty. Jews were harassed by pogroms, and being rapidly proletarianised by developing industrial capitalism — but in an uneven way that left much artisanal labour on the fringes of capitalist production intact. That historical moment, and those experiences, of a people forced onto the fringes of developing society, in some senses excluded from but also convulsed by its economic development, are the key contextual points of departure for any attempt to understand what compelled so many Jews in the direction of revolutionary working-class politics, and enabled them to contribute to and shape revolutionary movements so richly.

What was the real extent of Jewish involvement in revolutionary politics in this period? The Bolshevik Central Committee of 1918 was one third Jewish, and 13% of the delegates to its 1921 Congress were Jewish. There was significant involvement pre-dating and beyond the Bolsheviks, too. The General Jewish Labour Bund (of which more later), claimed 3,500 members upon its founding in 1897, a figure which exploded to nearly 40,000 less than 10 years later. Those are just two examples amongst a great many.

There are, I think, two fairly reductionist ways of explaining all of this. One is the argument that there is something inherent in Judaism, either in terms of its theology, its religious doctrine, or what we might call its religio-philosophical principles, that inclines Jews towards radical, democratic, social-justice-based, and collectivist politics. Or, less metaphysically, that the recurrence in Jewish religious narratives of slavery in Egypt, the Maccabees’ nationalist guerilla insurgency against the Assyrians, etc.) predisposes Jews to rebel politics.

The other view is that the direct material historical experience of Jews, as a people which has experienced systematic brutalisation and oppression throughout much of our history, particularly compels Jews towards radical and revolutionary politics as a response, and resistance, to that experience of oppression.

Neither argument can tell us the whole story. Both are ultimately limited, although there is also something of value in both.
How to understand the Jews as a people was a matter of significant debate and discussion on the left in this period. Revolutionarybials of all backgrounds in this period, and later, wrote and debated extensively on "the Jewish question" — how to make sense of this mass of people not just a nation, and whether to advocate various forms of national or cultural autonomy, assimilation, or some combination of both. The peculiar specificity of the Jews as an ethno-national-religious grouping (one, several, or all of these, perhaps), and their particular position and experience in relation to the development of industrial capitalism, is key to understanding why so many Jews became revolutionaries.

KARL MARX

In a sense, Karl Marx isn’t a particularly interesting or illuminating figure to begin with, because his milieu was not a particularly “Jewish” one. It was the milieu of the European university and, later, the German, French, and British labour movements of the 1850s, 60s, and 70s. Marx is a “Jewish revolutionary” only in the sense of his ethnic origin.

His forebears were the rabbis of Trier right up until his grandfather, Meier Halevi Marx. But his father, Herschel, broke from his family, became an avowed secularist, changing his name to Heinrich, and converting to Protestantism to escape anti-Jewish repression and legal discrimination.

But Marx is a necessary starting point because he is the most significant pioneer of revolutionary politics as we understand it today, and also because his own writing on “the Jewish question” are the source of great controversy.

His 1843 work “On the Jewish Question” recycles, it has been argued, anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jewish usurers and Jewish financiers, and Jew as a financial-economic functionary. Its language is problematic, and somewhat reflective of Marx’s occasional accommodations to the default casual bigotry of his period and his milieu, but it is nonetheless a valuable work that tells us something about Jewish experience and which can help us work towards answering the question of what it is in that experience which compelled so many Jews to break with their own community.

The “economic-Jew” stereotype stems from the forced duality of Jewish experience in relation to the rise of capitalism. Jews were at once liminal and integral to it. Jews represented an important mercantile-commercial element under feudalism, but were kept on the edges of the social and economic development by discrimination and oppression. Our position placed us almost automatically in tension and latent conflict with the developing social relations. Marx is himself a product of that position and experience, if only in origin.

ELEANOR MARX

Karl Marx’s daughter Eleanor is a key figure in British labour and socialist history, and very often overlooked (something that Rachel Holmes’s recent biography has hopefully begun to argue against). She was central in the creation of “New Unionism”, a period of struggles in the late 1880s that reinvigorated and reshaped the British labour movement, and to which modern unions like Unite and GMB trace their origins. Eleanor in fact taught Will Thorne, a gas worker who helped found the GMB, to read.

In many ways she was a great deal more “Jewish” than her father. She was an explicit advocate for the rights of migrant workers and helped win some of the British workers’ leaders to a more supportive attitude to Jewish workers’ organisations. She emphasised the identity of the Jewish working class, and broadened her heritage, in part to confront and shake up anti-Jewish, anti-immigration sentiment that existed in the British labour movement.

The German revisionist socialist Eduard Bernstein wrote of her in the social democratic paper Der Neue Zeit (“The New Times”) in 1898: “At every opportunity she declared her descent with a certain defiance. ‘I am a Jewess’ — how often I heard her, who was neither religiously nor in any contact whatsoever with the official representatives of Jewry, shout this with pride to the crowd from the rostrum. She felt herself drawn to the Jewish proletariat of the East End with all the greater sympathy.”

Eleanor was key to developing a greater intersection and mutual support between the 1889 dock strike, in which Irish migrants and workers were central, and the Jewish tailors’ strike, which happened in parallel. She was elected to the Executive of the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers, which went on to become what is now the GMB, and formed its first women’s branch.

She was a pioneer for both Jewish workers’ self-organisation, assisting the strikes and organisation of Jewish workers’ unions in industries like tailoring, and for the integration of Jewish migrant workers into the indigenous British labour movement.

In the context of the debate on “the Jewish question”, she can perhaps be understood as a revolutionary internationalist. Neither a Jewish nationalist nor a cultural autonomist, she favoured Jewish workers’ integration into the wider labour movement — but not on the basis of migrant workers abandoning their distinct identities, or even, necessarily, a degree of organisational autonomy, but rather through the development of mutual solidarity between local and migrant labour.

According to Bernstein, she saw “the Jewish question” as a “theoretical”, rather than “practical”, issue, but was clear that Jewish struggle against anti-Semitism should be fought on its own terms: “Where Jew as Jew was oppressed, she did not allow herself to be misled by the feelings of the proletarian class which lay deeply stumped on her soul, and took a lively interest in the oppressed without regard to class position.”

This should not be read as an indication that Eleanor separated her class politics from her anti-racism, but rather that she saw it necessary to organise against specific oppressions (racial or gender-based) in the here-and-now. If she were alive today, she would undoubtedly be an opponent of those on the left who denounce the autonomous organisation of oppressed groups within the movement as “divisive”, or those who imply that struggles against specific oppressions “distract” from the general working-class struggle against capitalism.

Along with the anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin, Eleanor was the keynote speaker at the 1895 launch meetings of A Voice from the Aliens, a pamphlet produced by Jewish workers’ organisations polemising against immigration controls (the first immigration control, in the modern sense, was the “Aliens Act”, eventually introduced in 1905 with the express aim of stopping Jewish immigration from Central and Eastern Europe).

Her pioneering work, in agitating against immigration controls, and both in aiding Jewish (and other migrant) workers’ self-organisation and helping it to engage with the local labour movement, would still be profoundly radical on today’s left, where Stalinist-influenced politics on Europe have left some left-wing groups and left-led unions into shamefully protectionist and objectively anti-migrant positions (the “No2EU” project, which denounces “the social dumping of migrant labour”, and advocated that the free movement between EU member states be ended, is perhaps the worst example).

MINNIE LANSBURY (GLASSMAN)

Born in 1869, the year of the great strike wave, to Jewish parents in Stepney, Minnie Glassman became a teacher before marrying Edgar Lansbury in 1914. She was active on the extreme working-class left of the suffragette movement, as a member of Sylvia Pankhurst’s East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS).

In contrast to the “Votes for Ladies” campaigns of the mainstream of the movement, ELFS organised working-class women (and men, not only around the demand for suffrage, but economic and social issues. In 1918, ELFS became the Workers’ Socialist Federation, and Minnie was elected its Assistant Secretary.

She was also a workplace organiser, helping build what is now the East London Teachers Association, a division of the National Union of Teachers. Its minutes record Minnie as an outspoken opponent of what she saw as the labour movement as well as a dedicated trade unionist.

In 1919, she was part of a Labour takeover of Poplar Borough Council. The Poplar Labour Party at the time was led by the far left, and while still a Labour Party member and borough councillor, Minnie helped found the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920. In 1921, she played a key role in the Poplar Rates Rebellion (comprehensively documented in Janine Booth’s book Guilty And Proud Of It, Merlin Press, 2009), in which she and 29 of her fellow councillors went to jail after they refused to raise council rates.

The Tory-led central government eventually backed down, but the struggle probably cost Minnie her life; she died of pneumonia in January 1922, almost certainly exacerbated by her six weeks in prison just months before.

Minnie was a revolutionary socialist-feminist before such a term existed. Both she and Eleanor Marx were advocates of women’s autonomous self-organisation within the labour movement — but not on the basis of migrant workers abandoning their distinct identities, or even, necessarily, a degree of organisational autonomy, but rather through the development of mutual solidarity between local and migrant labour.

Minnie particularly is emblematic of working-class Jewish women’s involvement in the women’s suffrage movement, and in particular in its radical left wing. Eleanor, by contrast, was somewhat secured by her more famous relative, in her case her father-in-law George Lansbury (editor of the labour-movement newspaper that eventually became the Labour Party). She is memorialised by a small decorative clock on Bow Road in East London, but deserves to be better known.

RUDOLPH ROCKER AND MILLY WITKOP

Rudolph Rocker is an odd calling point for this tour, because he was not, in fact, Jewish. A German anarchist who arrived in London in 1895, Rocker had met Jewish revolutionaries on his journey. When he came to England, he totally immersed himself in London’s Eastern European Jewish community, learning Yiddish and forming a network of members in the East End.

In 1900 there were around 135,000 Jews in London, a figure that had trebled over the previous two decades. In response, the British government introduced the first immigration control, in the modern sense, was the “Aliens Act, the first ever “modern” immigration control in British history. Much of the agitation of Jewish revolutionaries concerned opposition to immigration controls, and agitation within the indigenous labour movements to see migrant Jewish workers as class brothers and sisters rather than hostile aliens.

The Jewish labour movement was, like the work its participants did, often precarious and unstable. But it was also vibrant and dynamic. Similar movements existed in other centres of Jewish population in Britain, including Manchester and Leeds, but the Jewish labour movement of East London was the largest and most vibrant.

The location itself is significant. East London, the site of successive waves of mass working-class immigration, was made up of dense communities, undoubtedly a part of growing urban sprawl and certainly industrially and economically integral to it, and yet, at least to some extent, elbowed to one side, condemned into a corner. That relationship, parallel in New York by the concentrations of Jewish population in Manhattan’s Lower East Side and Brownsville in Brooklyn, mirrored the particularity of Jewish experience in Europe: simultaneously liminal and integral to capitalist development.
There was a Jewish anarchist left; the Socialist Party of America — the party of Eugene Debs — had significant sections amongst Jewish immigrants; and many of the founding leaders of the Communist Party of America in 1919 (Ben Gitlow, Jacob Liebstein aka Jay Lovestone, and Alexander Bitelman) were Jewish immigrants. It is from New York’s 19th century revolutionary Jew left that Forverts (Forward), one of the few surviving Yiddish daily newspapers, originates. It was founded in 1897 by supporters of the Socialist Labor Party, including Abe Cahan, who came from a rabbinical family in Lithuania but who studied Russian language and secular politics in secret.

That dynamic is recurrent throughout the experience of many Jewish revolutionaries; just as both subjective and objective factors placed Jewish communities in tension and conflict with capitalist development, so the Jews who developed the most advanced critiques of capitalism found themselves in tension and conflict with (at the very least, aspects of) their own Jewishness. Herschel (Heinrich) Marx and Abe Cahan’s acts of rebellion against their family’s rabbinical traditions represent Jewish radicals whose engagement with their own Jewish experience propelled them beyond their Jewishness into international politics.

Activists emerging from New York’s Yiddish socialist milieu took divergent paths. David Dubinsky (born David Dobniyevski in Bresl-Litovsk in 1892) arrived in New York in 1917, having already been elected as a trade union official at the age of 14 in a bakers’ union led by Bundists. He joined the Socialist Party, but by the end of the decade he had begun what would be lifelong work in the public administration and bureaucracy of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU), of which he was the president from 1932 to 1966. The ILGWU is a key organisation both in the history of Jewish workers’ organisation in New York and elsewhere, and the wider organisational and political history of the American labour movement. Dubinsky fought dissent from both Stalinist and anti-Stalinist lefts within his union. He ended his life firmly in the political mainstream, and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1969.

In his radical youth, Dubinsky, like many other immigrant Jewish workers, was profoundly affected by the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, in which 113 (mostly Jewish) women workers died in what was, until 9/11, the worst workplace disaster in American history.

One of the key organisers of women sweatshop workers in the Triangle Factory, and others like it, both before and after the fire, was Rose Schneiderman. Rose was born in Poland in 1882 and emigrated to the Lower East Side with her family in 1890. Along with others such as Clara Lemlich, she was a key organiser of the 1909 strike wave amongst garment workers, known as the “Uprising of the 20,000.” She joined the Communist Party, and later became prominent in mainstream politics under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration, sitting on the Labor Advisory Board of the National Recovery Administration, the main agency body of Roosevelt’s “New Deal.”

She is credited with first using the phrase “bread and roses” to describe the need for cultural and social enrichment as well as mere sustenance. The phrase, and the concept of a working-class self-organisation outside the labour movement, was a feature of radical Jewish life in both London and New York, and there are stories (possibly apocryphal, although I almost hope not) of Jewish anarchists organising “ham sandwich parades” outside synagogues to mock and deride the piety and dogma of the faithful.

One of the best episodes in the entire history of revolution- ary-anarchist, anti-religious element of Jewish revolutionary milieus, and the most extravagant in their anti-religious agitation and atheistic propaganda. The anarchist Johann Most (not himself Jewish but a key influence on Goldman and Berkman) was described by his biographer, Frederic Trautmann as “a mili- tant atheist with the zeal of a religious fanatic.”

Yomp Kippur Balls, irrelevant parties on the Day of Atonement, the most significant day in the Jewish religious year, were a feature of radical Jewish life in both London and New York, and there are stories (possibly apocryphal, although I almost hope not) of Jewish anarchists organising “ham sandwich parades” outside synagogues to mock and deride the piety and dogma of the faithful.

One of the best episodes in the entire history of revolution- ary-anarchist, anti-religious agitation occurred on Yom Kippur in 1889, in Christ Church Hall on Hanbury Street, off Brick Lane in East London. Benjamin Feigenbaum, the Polish-born son of Hassidic family who had become a revolution- ary and regular contributor to Rocker’s Arbeiter Fraydn newspaper, gave a speech on the topic, “Is there a God?” After speaking for around an hour, he stopped, took out his watch, and proclaimed: “If there is a god, and if he is as laughable as the clergy claims he is, I give him just two minutes’ time to kill me on the spot, so that he may prove his ex- istence!” Two minutes passed. Feigenbaum proclaimed that there was, indeed, no god, and the band struck up the Mayseilweis.

The episode is recounted in rich detail, through contempo- rary sources, in the late, great, Professor Bill Fishman’s East End Jewish Radicals. Fishman’s book gives an excellent acount of the anti-religious agitation of Feigenbaum and others, who pursued a course of anti-theist and secular propa- ganda that they knew would cause offence. Fishman describes much of their agitation as “counter-productive”, but he notes that particularly in the early years, such revolu- tionary acts could undoubtedly be quibbled with and may well have been better left unwritten, undrawn, or undone. I think Feigenbaum represents a richly irreverent spirit towards or- ganised religion that the far left lost.

The role of the synagogues and the official Jewish estab- lishment in relation to revolutionary politics is not an honourable one. In 1936, the Jewish Chronicle and the Board of Deputies counselled Jews to stay at home when Mosley’s fascists planned to march through the Jewish East End. Fortu- nately, a rather large number of people ignored them. That aspect of Jewish revolutionary life, of being contemptuously, profoundly Jewish — in terms of one’s ethnic and cultural identity, milieu, and experience — but also entirely hostile to, and to the cross-class politics of the religious estab- lishment, is another of the fascinating dualities, or tensions, within this history.

By no means all of those involved in these movements were given other, even more contradictory dimensions, by Jews who were involved in political activism alongside the likes of Feigenbaum but were themselves synagogue-going belev- ers.

ROSA LUXEMBURG
Struggles within and against religion loom large in the formative childhood and familiar experiences of Rosa Luxemburg, one of the key leaders of the revolutionary German workers’ movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Like Marx, the process of her engagement with revolution- ary politics was a process of breaking from Jewishness rather than consciously taking her own Jewish experience as a point-of-departure or foundation stone in their politics. But, just like Marx, her Jewishness did shape his experience and thought in ways we’ve discussed, so too for Luxemburg.

She was born in Zamość, which has interesting Renaiss- ance connections to Jewishness. The factory of the few surviving Yiddish daily newspapers, originates. It is from New York’s 19th century revolutionary Jewish left that...
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and responses to Zionism. Trotsky, and Jewish Trotskyists in the 1940s, such as Karl Kautsky and Ernst Bloch, saw in different ways, clearly "anti-Zionist", but their critiques of Zionism have little in common with the all-consuming, ahistorical "anti-Zionism" of much of the contemporary far left, which draws on the Zio-negations, syndicalist and inter- changeable with "racism" or even "fascism".

Trotsky's experience is also a particularly Jewish one in that his Jewishness became one of the major motifs of the Stalinists' slanderous against him, as Stalinists hardened up into a more-or-less explicitly anti-Semitic ideology, at least at the level of state power in Russia.

BUNDISTS AND SOCIALIST-ZIONISTS

Two other important revolutionary traditions existed in parallel with the ones discussed so far (broadly, Marxian revolutionary socialism and class-struggle anarchism), often intersecting with them, but as distinct tendencies. In a sense I've done a disservice by arriving at them relatively near the conclusion of this article, because they are the two traditions of revolutionary politics which are specifically, explicitly "Jewish" — Bundism, socialist Jewish cultural auton- omism, and socialist-Zionism.

Ber Borochov, who founded Poale Zion, is the leading member of historical Jewish Zionism. He saw the Zionist project not in religious terms but as a necessary response to capitalism, which he saw as keeping Jews in a permanent state of transience and migration. He advocated that Jewish workers, and should be considered from an anti-semitic ideological force, a whole variety of levels, and these individuals illustrate Jewish involvement in the attempt to rescue a radically-democratic, internationalist conception of Marxism from the muck heaped on it by Stalinism.

These Jewish revolutionaries are also significant in general terms. In different ways they were all involved in America's civil rights movement and the New Left of the 1960s, and although a discrete, Yiddish-speaking, Jewish revolu- tionary culture was then much diminished, people like Shachtman, Draper, and Phyllis Jacobson (along with her partner Julius) represented a living link to it. They had marked different political journeys, with Shachtman be- coming a Cold War liberal and apologists for US imperialism, while Draper and the Jacobsons remained revolutionaries.

"NON-JEWISH JEWS?"

We've met a handful of individuals here. I chose them be- cause I think they are representative either of particular traditions within Jewish revolutionary politics, or because they are representative of a specific historical moment in terms of Jewish political experience and organisation, or both.

These lives and experiences, are all very different. For many of them, the process of their becoming revolutionaries was about explicitly breaking from Judaism, and what they saw as reactionary and backwards in Jewish religion and cul- ture, and a belief that to break from, and thus to define their Jewishness, if such a thing is possible, varies, and all were involved in debates about assimilation, autonomy, na- tionalism, and so on. For Bundists and Ber Borochov's Marx- ist-Zionists, their epochal task was to develop revolutionary conception of Jewish nationalism, expressed either as cultural autonomism or as nationalist aspiration.

They express the diversity and plurality of the history of Jewish engagement with and production of revolutionaries, and I think it would be unjust and reductionist to try and collapse them all into an undifferentiated, homogeneous "Jewish" experience.

But I think we can tease out from their varying experiences some common threads, and I want to leave you with these as socially and politically active individuals, or both.

Jewish revolutionaries and revolutionary movements have shared an intensely literary character. There have been many heated debates within the movements discussed on the topic of Jewishness, but our focus here will be on the role of Jewish literature — in the form of newspapers, pamphlets, and books — themselves. I think that emphasis on the literary, on writing, is crucial in order to understand Jewish politics as an integral element of Jewish cultural history. It's something which Jewish enlightenment philosophers brought to their period and something which is picked up again by 19th and 20th century Jewish revolutionaries. For me, however, the relationship between Jews and revolu- tionary politics does have its essential roots in material his- torical experience. However, that's not merely because Jews are amongst history's most put-upon, subjected, and bru- talised peoples. It would be vulgar determinism to suggest an equating of Jewish national political strategy and immi- gration and the development of revolutionary conscious- ness. If anything, history rather suggests the opposite.

Rather, I think the roots of the great traditions of Jewish revolutionaries is something one can identify with the political and economic functioning of the development of European capitalism. Forced into being an incipient mercantile element in feudal society, Jews were at one in the same time integral and liminal. We were then the working classes represented in the era, and therefore inferior to the authentic, original Jewish lan- guage of Hebrew.

Our world, like the world of the Jewish proletarians and the Bundists, a priori exceptional in that they were representative of a specific historical "anti-Jewishness". Rather, I think the roots of the great traditions of Jewish revolutionaries is something one can identify with the political and economic functioning of the development of European capitalism. Forced into being an incipient mercantile element in feudal society, Jews were at one in the same time integral and liminal. We were then the working classes represented in the era, and therefore inferior to the authentic, original Jewish language of Hebrew.