

Anti-Semitism and the Russian Revolution:

Part one

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Five years ago, the Berlin Metropol Verlag published a historical study by Ulrich Herbeck entitled *The Bogeyman of the “Jewish Bolshevik”*: *On the History of Russian anti-Semitism before and during the Russian Revolution* [1]. The book addresses the history of anti-Semitism in Russia from the era of the Tsarist empire until the end of the Civil War in 1922.

The study reveals the close historical relationship between anti-Semitism and the reaction against the socialist labour movement in the twentieth century. Largely ignored by the daily and specialised press, Herbeck’s study documents the history of the fascist forces on which the imperialist powers based themselves in their struggle against the Soviet government during the Civil War from 1918 to 1922. These very forces were later to collaborate with the Nazis in World War II. The US and Germany are basing their imperialist onslaught in Ukraine today on their political descendants.

Russian anti-Semitism before 1917

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, anti-Semitism in the Tsarist empire was related to the political reaction against the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The latter led to the first-ever granting of full democratic rights to Jews in France and in the territories later occupied by Napoleon. The theory that a “Judeo-Masonic conspiracy” was the driving force behind the Revolution of 1789 was enthusiastically received by Tsarist ruling circles and the Russian Orthodox Church.

State discrimination against Jews was also rooted in economic factors. Jews were barred from entry into Russia for much of the eighteenth century. In 1791, however, Catherine the Great issued a decree according to which Jews were permitted to settle in the Russian interior, but not in Moscow. This policy was primarily designed to curb competition from Jewish merchants, who were seen as a threat to Moscow traders. Henceforth, Jews were forced to live in specifically designated “pale (district) settlements”. From 1794, they were also taxed twice as heavily as the rest of the population.

The Jews came to be associated with the revolutionary movement in Russia mainly in the 1870s, as part of a larger transformation in their socio-economic position. Herbeck pays scarce attention to the social conditions behind the emergence of the stereotyping of Jews as the people’s enemy. However, they are fundamental to an understanding of anti-Semitism and its political role.

In his insightful study of the Jewish question, which Herbeck unfortunately fails to cite, the Trotskyist Abraham Léon stressed that the development of capitalism following the land reform of 1863 undermined the social position of the Jewish population in the Tsarist empire. In feudal

times, the bulk of the Jewish population had been active as merchants and craftsmen. Capitalism led to a rapid proletarianization, particularly of Jewish artisans, who soon became part of the most oppressed segment of the population.

Thousands of Jews were forced to move from their small towns and villages into the big cities. Their social descent led most notably to mass emigration to Western Europe and the US. While only about 8,000 to 10,000 Jews left their homeland in the 1870s, usually moving from the countryside to cities, the number of Jews emigrating abroad from Eastern Europe rose from about 50,000-60,000 to 150,000-160,000 per year between 1881 and 1914 [2].

From 1881, anti-Jewish pogroms occurred repeatedly. These were triggered by the rumour that “Jewish revolutionaries” were responsible for the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Jews faced restrictions on higher education from 1887. Mass expulsions from major cities such as Kiev, Moscow and Orel began at the same time.

The socialist movement in both Russia and Western Europe took an implacable stand against anti-Semitism at the time. Herbeck repeatedly emphasises that anti-Semitism spread through all levels of society in the Tsarist empire, including among workers and especially among peasant farmers, but does not explain the phenomenon. The Russian working class was still young in the 1880s and stemmed from the peasantry. Anti-Semitic prejudices from the feudal period still predominated among the lower middle classes and peasants, and Jews were often regarded as usurers and unwelcome competitors because of their social position as merchants, moneylenders and artisans.

Tsarism took advantage of these centuries-old prejudices to divert the anger of the rapidly growing and extremely oppressed working class and cruelly exploited peasantry, and focus it on the Jews. In 1903, Karl Kautsky stressed in an article on the Kishinev pogrom—“The Kishinev Massacre and the Jewish Question”—that the emancipation of the Jews depended on the success of the revolutionary workers’ movement:

But this close relation between revolutionary sentiments and the needs of the Jewish striving for emancipation hasn’t escaped the attention of the Russian, as of some other governments. It therefore hates and persecutes the Jews as much as the revolutionary tendencies, and does everything in its power to incite and intensify hatred of Jews in the population. It fans and preserves this hatred not merely by denying the masses of the people any kind of enlightenment that might fill their lives with a new meaning. It also obstructs any rapprochement between the Jewish and non-Jewish peoples, prevents their mixing and convinces the masses by its example that the Jew is outside the human community, has no rights and is fair game to all.

When the mass of the people are plunged into suffering and despair and driven to vent their desperation in outbursts of

violence, the servants of the tsar channel these outbursts onto Judaism. The Jews are used as a lightning rod for the storms gathering above the heads of the autocracy. The maltreatment, plundering and slaying of Jews is the only popular movement permitted in the Russian empire.

It is no coincidence that the stereotype of “the Jewish revolutionary” as a hate-object evolved in this period of social upheaval and became an important weapon of Tsarism in its offensive against the socialist movement. By the time of the revolution of 1905, the scape-goating of Jews had become firmly entrenched in the population. Herbeck does not point out the connection between these two occurrences, but it is one of great importance.

In 1905, the working class for the first time assumed the leading role in a revolution. The events of this year constituted a turning point in the wake of the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871. They inaugurated a period of mass strikes and revolutionary struggles throughout Europe, including Germany, Belgium and France. Leon Trotsky, the elected leader of the first soviet in Petrograd, developed in the same year the theory of Permanent Revolution, which governed the perspective of the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution of 1917.

The tsar’s regime reacted to the revolutionary movement of the workers and peasants with increasingly rabid anti-Semitic propaganda and the enlistment of extreme right-wing organisations. The infamous “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” was widely and systematically disseminated by the Tsarist government. The “Protocols”, written around the turn of the century by Sergei Nilus, propagated the theory of a “Jewish conspiracy” against Christianity and the threat of an imminent apocalypse. The book was later used by the Nazis for propaganda purposes. Tsar Nicholas II, who was to go down in history as not only one of the most reactionary but also as one of the stupidest rulers, later penned the following marginal note during his reading of the “Protocols”:

What depth of thought! What foresight! What precision in the implementation of the programme! Our 1905 has run its course as though it had been directed by these Elders. There can be no doubt about their actual existence. Everywhere, the steering and destructive hand of Judaism [3].

The tsar responded to the general strike led by the Petrograd Soviet in October 1905 by instructing his government to foment and direct an anti-Semitic wave of pogroms, later to be described by Leon Trotsky in a chapter of his work on the 1905 Revolution. Approximately 50 cities experienced riots, in which thousands of Jews were killed [4]. These pogroms marked the beginning of the counterrevolution, which claimed the lives of 48,000 people between October 1905 and April 1906 alone [5].

In the following years, the Tsarist regime specifically promoted the right-wing parties of the “Black Hundred Movement”, such as the Union of the Russian People (SRN—Soyuz Russkovo Naroda), which was involved in numerous anti-Semitic pogroms. In addition, over 14.3 million copies of anti-Semitic writings were circulated between 1905 and 1916, having been approved by government censors and partly financed by the Interior Ministry [6].

The Russian Orthodox Church was closely interwoven with the extreme right and openly propagated anti-Semitism. In 1908, the Synod explicitly approved the candidacy of clergy within the SRN; local bishops were invited by the Synod to give their blessing to the activities of the SRN [7].

On the eve of the First World War, the notorious Beilis trial took place

from 1911 to 1913. At the insistence of the Church and the Black Hundreds, the Jewish worker, Menahem Mendel Beilis, was charged with the alleged ritual murder of a 12-year-old Russian boy, even though no evidence whatsoever existed against him. Although the trial ended with Beilis’s acquittal, the court confirmed the suspicion of his involvement in the ritual murder, thus warranting one of the worst prejudices and discriminatory slanders against Jews with pseudo-legal arguments.

State anti-Semitism reached a new peak during World War I, in which 2 million Russian soldiers were killed and another 5 million wounded. The Russian army leadership pursued a deliberate policy of diverting the soldiers’ and general public’s growing opposition to the war along right-wing lines.

Herbeck notes: “Accusations of espionage and subsequent trials of Jews, the taking of hostages from the Jewish population, expulsion of Jews from areas close to the front usually with only 24 hours warning, and finally pogroms were an expression and consequence of the anti-Semitic policies of the army leadership” [8]. By 1916, a total of 3.3 million people had been forcibly evacuated from their homes by the army leadership due to allegations of spying, including 600,000 Jews [9].

At the same time, there were numerous rampages by military units, mostly comprised of Cossacks. “Pogroms were not limited to looting; the victims were often ‘punished’ for their alleged behaviour: they were ridiculed, tortured and the women raped. In many cases, the victims were also killed, but the number killed was far less than in the later Civil War pogroms,” writes Herbeck [10]. Particularly affected by these deportations and pogroms was the Jewish population in Galicia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Poland, which was also to bear the brunt of the Holocaust about a quarter of a century later.

This state anti-Semitism was brought to an end only after the overthrow of the tsar in the February Revolution of 1917. Almost 6 million Russian Jews—a large proportion of the contemporary Jewish world population—then received full civil rights for the first time.

To be continued.

Notes

1. *Das Feindbild vom „jüdischen Bolschewiken“ : Zur Geschichte des russischen Antisemitismus vor und während der Russischen Revolution*, Berlin, 2009
2. Abraham Léon: *Die jüdische Frage. Eine marxistische Darstellung*, Essen, 1995, p. 137
3. Herbeck, 2009, p. 157
4. *Ibid.*, p. 60
5. Manfred Hildermeier: *Die Russische Revolution 1905-1921*, Frankfurt am Main, 1988, p. 90
6. Herbeck, 2009, p. 62
7. *Ibid.*, p. 64
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92
9. *Ibid.*, p. 93
10. *Ibid.*, p. 96



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