

# Anti-Semitism and the Russian Revolution:

## Part three

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*We are publishing here the final part of a three-part review of a historical study by Ulrich Herbeck on the history of anti-Semitism in Russia from the tsarist empire until the end of the Civil War in 1922. The first part was posted April 29. The second part was posted April 30.*

### The Bolsheviks' struggle against anti-Semitism

The struggle against anti-Semitism was not only a fundamental aspect of proletarian internationalism for the socialist movement in Russia, it was also a central feature of the political struggle against the counterrevolutions that followed the events of 1905 and 1917. The anti-Semitic agitation carried out by the counterrevolutionary armies in the Civil War drew little support from proletarian workers, but it was one of the most effective political tactics employed by the Whites to incite rural populations against the Soviet power.

Despite sporadic pogroms carried out by members of the Red Army, who were subsequently harshly punished, the Bolsheviks were the only political force in the Civil War that consistently fought against anti-Semitism in their own army and sought to educate the population against such prejudices.

In their fight against anti-Semitism, the Bolsheviks focused on the dissemination of material for the political education of the people. Already widespread prior to the October Revolution were propaganda leaflets attacking anti-Semitism, published mostly by the left-wing Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks.

In 1918, the Soviet government published its first brochures opposing anti-Jewish sentiment. It also established in January 1918 the Evkom, the Jewish Commissariat, under the Nationality Commissariat. Evkom played a decisive role in the fight against anti-Semitism in the early days of Soviet power.

On July 27, 1918, the Russian Soviet government issued a decree against "anti-Semitic incitement." A similar decree was issued by Christian Rakovsky, government head of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, in February 1919. In the same year, the Soviet government produced three propaganda films on the subject, despite the extreme material hardship that prevailed at the time.

With respect to the White Army's pogroms of 1919, Ulrich Herbeck criticises the Bolsheviks in several parts of his book for not sufficiently combating anti-Semitism and downplaying anti-Jewish sentiment in the population. Such criticism appears unmerited when

considered in the context of the historical situation in which the Bolshevik government found itself in 1919, which was the most difficult year of the Civil War.

Herbeck also states that there were differences between Lenin and Trotsky regarding the struggle against anti-Semitism. Herbeck argues that Lenin emphasised combating the illiteracy of the masses, while Trotsky exclusively stressed the social roots of anti-Semitism. But Lenin, like Trotsky, realised that the cause of the people's illiteracy and ignorance lay in the centuries of political oppression under the tsarist regime. Although Trotsky's speeches and writings stressed the social roots of anti-Semitism and always insisted that only the social emancipation of the working class and peasantry could staunch hatred of the Jews, the divergence between the two views was more a matter of emphasis than basic assessment.

In a speech about anti-Semitism, recorded on vinyl and disseminated in 1919, Lenin declared: "Hostility against Jews appears permanently ingrained only where landlords and capitalists have exploited serfdom and thereby kept workers and peasants in utter ignorance. Only very ignorant, extremely oppressed people can believe the lies and slander that are spread about the Jews ... But the old blight of serfdom is disappearing. The people's eyes are opening" [1].

Both Lenin and Trotsky emphasised the counterrevolutionary function of anti-Semitism. Herbeck's study shows that in the struggle against anti-Semitism, the two revolutionary leaders played the decisive role.

The causes of anti-Semitism in the Red Army were both social and political in nature. The Red Army was partly recruited from peasant farmers, who were traditionally affected by anti-Semitism. Many peasant army units changed sides several times during the civil war, sometimes fighting for the Reds, sometimes for the Whites, and sometimes for the anarchists. In order to achieve military success, as discussed in part one of this series, the Bolsheviks were also forced to conscript numerous high-ranking tsarist army officers who had been touting anti-Semitism for years. Herbeck gives several examples of Red Army officers who had previously fought for the tsar and deliberately incited sentiments against "Jewish Bolsheviks" among their troops.

Given these significant objective obstacles, it is notable that the extent of pogroms emanating from the Red Army was relatively small. From a total of 1,236 documented Civil War pogroms, only a very small proportion (some 106 cases, or 8 percent) is attributable to the Red Army. Former White and Ukrainian nationalist units were responsible for 72 of these pogroms [2].

The worst Red Army pogroms were perpetrated by the First Cavalry Army under Semyon Budyonny—later to become an important ally of

Stalin—during its retreat from Poland in 1920. Isaac Babel, who accompanied the army as a war correspondent, described them later in his literary masterpiece, *The Red Cavalry*. The soldiers of this army were mainly Kuban Cossacks, among whom anti-Semitism was traditionally widespread. Moreover, many of them had previously served under the command of Anton Denikin and other counterrevolutionary military leaders.

After a series of lootings and killings of civilians, including Jews, in southern Russia in 1919, a report by Red Army political department deputy head Zhilinsky urgently drew attention to the lack of political consciousness and widespread anti-communism and anti-Semitism in the troops. Zhilinsky claimed that the slogan “Beat the Jews, beat the Communists” was heard again and again among the cavalymen. He also warned that the cavalry’s looting and rape were playing into the hands of the counterrevolution. Entire communities and villages that had previously welcomed the Reds with open arms had now switched sides to the Whites.

The looting and Zhilinsky’s report led to serious conflicts within the army leadership in 1920. As head of the *Revvoensovet* (Revolutionary Military Council), the highest body of the Red Army, Trotsky pressed for harsh punishment of offenders in order to discourage repetition of the crime.

However, Budyonny was concealing the crimes of his troops, having gained the support of Voroshilov, Minin and Vardin, who comprised the southern front’s military leadership, and Stalin, who then held office in the Politburo. Budyonny and Voroshilov were to be among Stalin’s closest allies in the coming decades. They were also two of the very few “old Bolsheviks” to survive the terror of the 1930s.

The leadership of the First Cavalry Army eventually effected the dismissal of Zhilinsky. Although the party leadership gave Zhilinsky its backing, their efforts to punish those involved were continually undermined by opposition from the local army command over the following months.

After the devastating pogroms committed by the Red Army Cavalry during its retreat from Poland in late September and early October 1920, the military leadership immediately dispatched a commission of inquiry, which nevertheless proved ineffectual. On October 9, the *Revvoensovet* then resolved to immediately dismantle all units involved in the pogroms.

According to historian Oleg Budnitskiy, probably up to 400 cavalymen were executed [3]. The operation against the pogromists was monitored by the highest level of the party. Both the Politburo and the Central Committee, as well as the army leadership, were kept up to date. In addition, the leadership sent high-ranking Bolsheviks to the front to superintend propaganda events.

The behaviour of the Red Army leadership differed dramatically from that of the Ukrainian nationalists and the Whites, who either implicitly supported the pogroms or blamed the Jewish population itself for the outrages.

Despite all the problems the Bolsheviks confronted in their struggle against anti-Semitism, there can be no doubt that their victory in the Civil War averted the establishment of a right-wing regime on the territory of the Great Russian Empire, which would have had terrible consequences for the Jewish population.

Herbeck’s book is a sober and comprehensive historical study that contributes to a scientific understanding of not only the tsarist empire, the Russian Revolution and anti-Semitism, but also Nazism and the Holocaust. It is indicative of the character of today’s political and intellectual climate that this study has been virtually ignored, while

the works of Robert Service and Jorg Baberowski, representing the Bolsheviks as bloodthirsty, violent offenders and largely ignoring the pogroms of the Whites, are praised by the media.

This is not an accident. The historical material in Herbeck’s study is political dynamite for all those wishing to malign the October Revolution as a criminal coup and rehabilitate National Socialism and its war of annihilation against the Soviet Union.

The anti-Semitism of the tsarist empire and the Civil War, as well as the Bolshevik Party’s struggle against it, show that the fate of the Jews in the twentieth century was intimately bound up with the fate of the world revolution. Conversely, it was the betrayal of the 1917 Revolution by the Stalinists that facilitated Hitler’s assumption of power in 1933 and set in motion the process leading to the near-total annihilation of the Jewish population in Eastern Europe.

In the Soviet Union itself, anti-Semitism once again became part of state policy as a result of Stalin’s nationalist policy of “socialism in one country”, which was directed against the international revolutionary programme pursued by the Bolsheviks during the October Revolution and the Civil War.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, these reactionary tendencies have again come to the fore. Today, extreme right-wing and anti-Semitic forces constitute an important pillar of imperialism’s encroachment on the territory of the former Soviet Union, as demonstrated by recent developments in Ukraine.

The anti-Semitic and fascist Svoboda and Right Sector parties, which organised the coup in Kiev with the support of Washington and Berlin, see themselves in the tradition of Stepan Bandera and the Ukrainian fascists who collaborated with the Nazis. They also revere the role of the Ukrainian national movement in the Russian Civil War and its leader, Symon Petliura, under whose rule numerous pogroms were perpetrated. Another figure highly esteemed by Svoboda is Yevhen Konovalts, who led the infamous Sich Riflemen against the “Jewish Bolsheviks” in Kiev in 1918 and later founded the extreme right-wing Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists.

*Concluded*

## Notes

1. Ulrich Herbeck: *Das Feindbild vom „jüdischen Bolschewiken“: Zur Geschichte des russischen Antisemitismus vor und während der Russischen Revolution*, Berlin, 2009, p. 326
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 374 and 397
3. Oleg Budnitskii: *Russian Jews Between the Reds and the Whites, 1917-1920*, Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 402



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