

Exhibition at American Jewish Historical Society in New York

“1917—How One Year Changed the World”

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The American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) asserts that its current exhibition, *1917*, is the first “to demonstrate how three key events of that year—America’s entry into World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the signing of the Balfour Declaration, in which Great Britain indicated support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine—brought about political, cultural and social changes that dramatically reshaped the United States’ role in the world and directly affected everyday Americans.”

An ambitious goal, and the exhibition, on view in New York City through the end of this year, undoubtedly contains food for thought. Its collection of photographs, correspondence, books, leaflets and other memorabilia deals with seminal events of that year. It is not successful, however, in explaining either what these three events have in common other than the year of their occurrence, or how they shaped the world of the twenty-first century.

At one point the show declares, referring specifically to the Jewish population throughout the world: “From 1917’s sweeping changes three new options emerged—American freedom, Communism’s abolition of all human differences, and Jewish nationalism. ... Which offered the best future?”

The question is falsely posed. The “options” of capitalism or socialism, nationalism or internationalism, are not products to be chosen as in a supermarket. What is needed is an analysis of how the different movements and societies arose, what class forces were involved, and how the actual struggle of opposing forces created the contemporary world and the life-and-death challenges confronting humanity today.

Of course, one exhibition cannot be expected to provide these answers. The presentation in the AJHS, however, is an unbalanced and inaccurate one. It is clear where the views and sympathies of the organizers of the exhibit lie. American “freedom” and Jewish nationalism, while depicted as different, are both “positive” alternatives. Communism, on the other hand, is falsely defined as the “abolition of all human differences.” This claim is a common and vulgar complaint lodged against the struggle for socialism. In fact, the opposite is the case. A classless society would be one in which every individual human being is able to develop to the fullest and therefore most “different” extent.

Perhaps because its own archives are less voluminous on the subject, the AJHS exhibition devotes less space to the Russian Revolution than to either of the other two historic events of 1917. The October Revolution, however, was not simply one event among others. It was the most earth-shaking event of the past century. It shaped the development of the working-class movement. The existence of the Soviet Union, despite the enormous degeneration of the revolution, played a crucial role in the struggle for social reforms within the

framework of capitalism, and the specter of socialism continues to haunt contemporary capitalism, even though the Soviet Union was dissolved more than a quarter of a century ago.

The exhibit correctly points out the role of the imperialist slaughter in leading to the revolutionary events of Russia in 1917. It includes a famous photograph of Leon Trotsky addressing Red Army soldiers, and a copy of John Reed’s renowned *Ten Days That Shook the World*, the revolutionary American journalist’s account of the coming to power of the Russian working class.

Also on display is the letter that Trotsky wrote to US Ambassador David Francis several weeks after the revolution. The American diplomat was instructed by his superiors to make no reply. Instead, the US, together with other imperialist armies of intervention, attempted to isolate and overthrow the Bolshevik regime. Here as elsewhere, the exhibit whitewashes the role of US President Woodrow Wilson, claiming that he reluctantly agreed only to a “limited intervention” in the Far East. The USSR was not recognized by Washington until 1933.

The exhibition manifests its anticommunist prejudices by using the term “coup” in each reference to the October Revolution, when in reality the Bolsheviks came to power with majority support in the Soviets and at the head of hundreds of thousands of workers in Petrograd and Moscow, with the sympathy and growing support of millions of peasants in the countryside. The exhibition’s brief display provides no sense of the enormous sweep of this revolutionary struggle. Underlying this approach is the slander that Bolshevism was identical to or led inevitably to the later Stalinist degeneration of the revolution.

Trotsky is referred to as “an architect of the Bolshevik coup.” Instead of even mentioning, let alone explaining, Trotsky’s long struggle against the degeneration of the revolution and the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy, this section states simply that he “lost the struggle for succession to Joseph Stalin, who deported his rival.” Having thus suggested that these were simply two “Communist” strongmen vying for dictatorial power, the exhibition goes on to explain that Trotsky was “assassinated while living in Mexico,” with no reference to the wave of brutal murders of revolutionaries carried out by Stalin’s secret police, or to the infamous Moscow Trials.

The AJHS exhibition proceeds from what might be termed sins of omission to outright falsification in the caption to one particular photo, of the Kiev pogrom of 1919, carried out by counterrevolutionary White troops during the Civil War. The caption declares that anti-Semitic pogroms, which killed between 50,000 and 200,000 Jews during the four-year-long war, “were carried out by both sides.” In fact, research has proven that only about 6 percent of the pogroms were carried out by undisciplined Red Army supporters

during this period, and the Bolshevik government, while fighting for its life, mercilessly fought anti-Semitism and ruthlessly punished those responsible.

The real role of the Bolshevik forces in fighting anti-Semitism is reflected in the fact that the Revolution won the enthusiastic support of literally millions of Jews, both in Russia and the US.

That section of the show dealing with the period after US entry into the War in April 1917 contains some useful information and statistics. The Jewish population of the US, in the wake of decades of mass emigration from Eastern Europe, had grown to about 3.3 million. There were 250,000 Jews in the US armed forces, out of a total of 4.8 million after the institution of the draft.

The wealthy Jewish bourgeoisie, at this point mostly of German-Jewish ancestry, lined up behind the US war effort. Multimillionaires such as Louis Marshall, Jacob Schiff and Henry Morgenthau worked closely with the Wilson administration, whom the exhibition presents as having been “unwillingly” dragged into the bloodbath in Europe.

The American Jewish Historical Society show generally minimizes the strong and growing opposition to the war among native-born and especially immigrant Jews in the US. It does show Eugene Debs, Socialist Party candidate who received almost 1 million votes in both 1912 and 1920, at his famous speech in opposition to the war in Canton, Ohio, in June 1918, after which he was arrested and sent to prison under the Espionage Act.

The section of the exhibition dealing with the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, does not pretend to present a thorough history of Zionism and of American Zionism in particular. It does acknowledge, however, that one aim of the British authorities at this time was to increase Jewish support for the war, which was already in its fourth bloody year and would not end until the Armistice of November 11, 1918.

There is also a noteworthy reference to the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the notorious secret deal of 1916 through which British and French imperialism agreed in outline to a division of the Ottoman Empire into their own spheres of influence after the war. This secret treaty was among those made public by the Bolshevik government in the weeks following the victorious seizure of power.

Also of interest is a brief discussion of the differences within the upper circles of American Jewry on the question of Zionism. Jacob Schiff, the German-born banker and businessman who was already 70 years old at the time of US entry into the war, distrusted the Zionist movement in part because the majority of those emigrating to Palestine in those early years were considered dangerous socialists and left-wing radicals. The exhibition notes that Winston Churchill also sought to limit Jewish immigration because of a fear of Communism.

In briefly tracing the growth of Zionism in the years immediately after the Balfour Declaration, the show includes a significant quotation from the Jamaican-born black nationalist Marcus Garvey, whose United Negro Improvement Association became popular for a period in the 1920s, in which he compared his back-to-Africa campaign with that of the Zionists.

The exhibition concludes with the statement that “Nationalism, isolationism and xenophobia are as much a part of the American conversation in 2017 as they were in 1917. The topics that this exhibition examines...remain in many ways unchanged.”

This is weak and unhelpful. Time has not stood still. If some of the questions examined by the exhibition are still with us, that’s fundamentally because the capitalist system, which breeds, for

example, nationalism, isolationism and xenophobia, is still with us. In any event, the various “topics...remain” in a very different world and under very different conditions. The titanic, traumatic events of the twentieth century have not left society or humanity “unchanged.”

A superficial look at the world a century after 1917 shows the state of Israel preparing to celebrate its 70th anniversary next year, American capitalism having produced billionaires on a scale that could not have been imagined a century ago, and the Soviet Union, the state that issued from the 1917 revolution, no longer in existence. Of the three options referred to by the exhibition, that of socialism has officially been declared “dead.”

In fact, Zionism has led to a blind alley for the Jewish people, producing a pariah state in which the most reactionary and racist forces have steadily and inevitably come to the fore, under conditions of the unending oppression of the Palestinian people. Rather than putting an end to anti-Semitism, Zionism has been shown to lead to new and escalating threats to a peaceful future. Growing numbers of American Jews refuse to identify themselves with the Israeli claim to represent the Jewish people.

American capitalism, which emerged from the First World War as the dominant imperialist power, has experienced precipitous economic and social decline, a decline it has attempted to address through military aggression and uninterrupted war over the past quarter-century. The threat of world war is greater now than at any time since the end of the second world imperialist conflict in 1945. Donald Trump is not the cause, but rather the dangerous symptom of this crisis, which now threatens the world with war between nuclear-armed powers.

Within this context, the promise of socialism, based on the revolutionary role of the working class, is attracting growing interest among workers and young people. It remains the only progressive alternative in a world in which the contradictions between the global economy and the barriers of the nation-state system are greater and more explosive than ever before. Capitalism broke at its weakest link in 1917, and the first successful socialist revolution was strangled by imperialism and its main agency, the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy. This was not the end of socialism, however, but only the beginning of a struggle that is now reaching the point in which the alternatives of socialism or barbarism are posed more starkly than ever.

Despite its serious limitations, even the very limited material presented in the AJHS exhibition offers some idea of how twentieth century history lives today, and the true legacy of the Russian Revolution. To the extent that this exhibition provokes serious examination of these issues, it is well worth seeing.



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