

# Brendan McGeever's *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution*: Distorting history in the service of identity politics

## Part one

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*Brendan McGeever, Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 260 pp. Unless otherwise indicated, all page numbers refer to this book.*

British sociologist Brendan McGeever's book *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* pretends to offer a "history of antisemitism in the Russian Revolution." In reality, the book distorts this very history to make a case for identity politics and against a Marxist-led socialist revolution as the necessary prerequisite for putting an end to racism and anti-Semitism.

McGeever states that he wants to provide a "broader offering to the political left" (p. 219) in the struggle against racism and anti-Semitism. At the very beginning, he points to the profound impact that the Bolshevik struggle against anti-Semitism had had on the consciousness of oppressed masses throughout the world, and, in particular, African American intellectuals in the US. He quotes the leading Black artist and intellectual of the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay, who stated in 1919:

"Every Negro... should make a study of Bolshevism and explain its meaning to the coloured masses. It is the greatest and most scientific idea afloat in the world today... Bolshevism has made Russia safe for the Jew. It has liberated the Slav peasant from priest and bureaucrat who can no longer egg him on to murder Jews to bolster up their rotten institutions. It might make these United States safe for the Negro... If the Russian idea should take hold of the white masses of the western world... then the black toilers would automatically be free." (p. 1)

McGeever's "political offering" consists of a conscious undermining of this conception of a Marxist-led social revolution as the way forward in the fight against racism and anti-Semitism.

To achieve this goal, he advances two main arguments: first, he tries to depict anti-Semitism as inherent in the "social base" of Bolshevism—the working class and poor peasantry—suggesting it was the anti-Semitism within the Red Army itself that formed the central challenge to the "Soviet project."

Second, he claims that, to the extent that there was a fight against anti-Semitism by the early Soviet state, it originated politically not in the "internationalist and assimilationist currents of Marxism," but rather in the national orientation of a group of non-Bolshevik Jewish socialists.

The notions of class struggle, McGeever argues, were not only not the basis for the struggle against anti-Semitism, but, in fact, harmful to that very struggle.

Far from trying to provide an objective account of the origins and role of anti-Semitism in the revolution, McGeever picks and chooses certain facts and events, while leaving out others, to substantiate his claim that "antisemitism could find traction within revolutionary politics."

Before addressing the origins of anti-Semitism, it must be clearly stated that McGeever's decision to focus exclusively on pogroms by the Red Army, which he admits were "marginal," is historically untenable and frankly, politically dishonest. His book includes multiple harrowing depictions of pogroms by the Red Army but not a single one by the counterrevolutionary forces.

Yet the vast majority of the 50,000–200,000 people who were murdered and the 200,000 who were seriously wounded due to anti-Jewish violence in the Russian Civil War fell victim to White and Ukrainian nationalist forces. Red Army pogroms accounted for well below 10 percent of the total number of pogroms and an estimated 2.3 percent of those who died in anti-Semitic violence in the Civil War. Between 1918 and 1920, over 1,500 pogroms took place in 1,300 cities, villages and towns in Ukraine, which was the central site of anti-Jewish violence during the Civil War.

It was the Red Army and the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922 that put an end to what was the biggest massacre of Jews in history until the Nazi-led genocide of 6 million people during World War II. McGeever's account is primarily directed at diminishing this historic achievement and falsifying an understanding of its political basis. This endeavor rests on a fundamental distortion of the origins and character of modern political anti-Semitism.

Explaining his understanding of anti-Semitism, McGeever cites Moishe Postone, who stated that in moments of crisis, anti-Semitism "can appear to be anti-hegemonic" (quoted on p. 7). Postone, an adherent of the Frankfurt School, advanced this argument in 2006 based on his assessment of anti-Semitism as an "anti-capitalist" movement.

He had developed in the wake of the French general strike of 1968, as layers of the academic intelligentsia shifted dramatically to the right, engaging in ever more open attacks on Marxism and the conception of the revolutionary role of the working class. In an article from 1980, Postone explicitly rejected a focus on the working class in any discussion of the rise of Nazism and anti-Semitism, and, more generally, argued against the Marxist assessment of fascism as an outgrowth of capitalism.

He advanced the idea that anti-Semitism was, in fact, a form of anti-capitalism. This profoundly disoriented position culminated in the reactionary claim that Auschwitz was "the real German revolution," and the criminal outgrowth, not of the Nazis' defense of the capitalist system, but of revolutionary changes in social relations spearheaded by the Nazi movement. [1]

This assessment of anti-Semitism turns reality on its head. While appealing to confused and backward anti-capitalist sentiments in the middle classes, modern political anti-Semitism emerged as an ideological weapon in the struggle against the socialist workers movement and in defense of the capitalist order. In the Russian Empire, this dynamic emerged more clearly and earlier than perhaps anywhere else, and McGeever's arguments critically rely upon the omission of any serious discussion of this history.

Political anti-Semitism in the Russian Empire was considerably influenced by the reaction of the nobility and the Orthodox Church to the French Revolution of 1789, which overthrew feudal rule and granted civil rights to the Jews. The Tsarist court, the Orthodox Church and sections of the nobility began to associate the Jews with "foreign" elements and social revolution.

Discrimination against the Jewish population became state policy for both political and economic reasons. A Tsarist decree of 1791 forced the Jews of the Russian Empire to settle and remain in the so-called Pale of Settlement, a region that came to encompass until 1917 what is now Ukraine, the Baltic states, Belarus and much of Poland. This 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 emergence of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious proletariat in the Russian Empire, and of a Marxist workers movement in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, imbued official anti-Semitism with an ever more openly counterrevolutionary and anti-socialist orientation.

The Jewish population was by far the most urbanized in the Russian Empire and quickly made up a substantial portion of the emerging proletariat. By the end of the century, 52 percent of the entire urban population of Belorussia and Lithuania was Jewish, and Jewish craftsmen made up two-thirds to three-fourths of the entire artisan class, which still comprised a substantial portion of the overall proletariat within the Pale (excluding Poland). [2]

Describing the conditions facing Jewish workers at the time, the leading German Marxist of the Second International, Karl Kautsky, noted: "If the Russian people suffer more than other peoples, if the Russian proletariat is more exploited than any other proletariat, there exists yet another class of workers who are still more oppressed, exploited, and ill-treated than all the others; this pariah among pariahs is the Jewish proletariat in Russia."

A central aim of the state discrimination of Jews and the fostering of anti-Semitism was to divide the nascent working class movement and divert the growing anti-capitalist and anti-Tsarist sentiment within both the working class and the peasantry into reactionary channels. The central bogeyman of Russian anti-Semitism was the "Jewish revolutionary" or, after 1917, the "Jewish Bolshevik" and "Jewish communist."

According to the German historian Ulrich Herbeck:

"As a new revolutionary and democratic movement developed starting in the late '90s, the reaction against it was charged with anti-Semitism. By contrast, the revolutionary movement included among its demands the equality of nationalities and an end to religious discrimination. By the early 20th century, at the latest, the right-left scheme in Russian politics was established, with anti-Semitism clearly being part of the right wing... The course of the revolution of 1905 conclusively established the anti-revolutionary orientation of Russian anti-Semitism. For one thing, anti-Semitic agitation grew by leaps and bounds during the year. Moreover, antirevolutionary organizations emerged which were extremely anti-Semitic in orientation. This development culminated in the wave of anti-Jewish pogroms which functioned as a counterrevolutionary backlash to the Tsar's Manifesto of October 17, 1905..."

"The renewed growth and radicalization of anti-Semitism in 1911–2 was closely related to the growing insecurity of anti-Semites about the

survival of the Tsarist system... Thus, Markov II stated the following at the Seventh Congress of the United Nobility in February 1911: 'We are fighting and all states of the world are fighting against socialism... We are anticipating a social revolution which is again being prepared by the Jews.'" [3]

The Russian state systematically funded and promoted anti-Semitic, far-right publications and organizations. Between 1905 and 1916, 14.327 million (!) editions of 2,873 anti-Semitic books and leaflets were published. All of them passed state censorship, and many of them were funded by the Interior Ministry. [4] During the First World War, anti-Semitism was systematically promoted by the Russian Army leadership.

McGeever discusses none of this. In his account, there is virtually no mention of the political and social forces actively promoting anti-Semitism before the revolution. After a very brief and flawed overview of the position of the socialist movement on anti-Semitism, he almost immediately jumps into 1917 and the period of the Civil War, in which the largest pogroms took place in Ukraine. He argues that his material provides the basis for revealing the hitherto unknown depth of anti-Semitic sentiments in the Red Army, which, in his words, was "pervaded with anti-Semitism" (p. 105).

The existence of anti-Semitic sentiments in the Red Army, which was largely made up of peasants, and pogroms by some of its units have, in reality, been described and studied in some detail. Contemporaries—most famously in Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*—commented on these pogroms, the Bolshevik and the Red Army leadership were very well aware of them and discussed them extensively, and historians like Matthias Vetter, Ulrich Herbeck and Oleg Budnitskii have described them in considerable detail.

The fact that anti-Semitic traditions in the peasantry were particularly strong in what is now Ukraine, where they were fueled by a strong overlap of class and ethnic divisions, is also well-known. For centuries, most of the peasantry was Ukrainian and most of the nobility were Polish and Russian, with Jews often functioning as money lenders for the nobility.

Thus, since the 17th century, many peasant uprisings against the nobility often resulted in murderous anti-Jewish pogroms. The most notorious examples are the 1648–49 pogroms under the leadership of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, which entered as the "khurn" (catastrophe) into Jewish history.

As capitalism penetrated these regions, it was mostly Russians and Jews who came to make up the new working class. The Russian state and the Ukrainian nationalist movement therefore consciously sought to reinforce these anti-Semitic sentiments to sow divisions both within the working class and between the peasants and workers.

However, McGeever's account tears the pogroms by peasants and Red Army units out of the larger context of the history of anti-Semitism. This not only renders their real roots incomprehensible, it also serves to distort the character of anti-Semitism in the revolution as a whole and obscure its role as a political weapon directed *against* the Bolsheviks and Soviet power by the counterrevolution.

For the Whites (supporters of the restoration of autocracy and capitalism) and Ukrainian nationalists, anti-Semitism was the only basis for an appeal to an oppressed peasant population to which they had nothing to offer except a restoration of the hated autocracy or the establishment of a bourgeois puppet state of imperialism. Evoking the bogeyman of the "Jewish Bolshevik" whenever the counterrevolutionary forces suffered defeat at the hands of the Bolsheviks, they turned the Jewish population into a scapegoat. A historian described one such pogrom in Proskurov, Podolia (now Ukraine), in February 1919, as follows:

"[T]he Jews, which formed half of the 50,000 inhabitants of the town, were blamed for the Bolshevik insurrection. Ataman Semesenko declared that the Jews were the greatest enemy of the Ukrainian people and had to be slaughtered and destroyed until the very end. The Cossacks had to

swear an oath that they would kill the Jews, but not rob them, and indeed they did. The ensuing massacre of three and a half hours claimed 1,500 lives.” [5]

As the Red Army recruited mostly from the peasantry, large sections of which shifted their political allegiance several times during the Civil War, it was inevitable that anti-Semitic prejudices, fostered by the autocracy and bourgeois forces for decades, compounded by illiteracy and ignorance, would find some reflection in the Soviet army.

However, as the Russian historian Oleg Budnitskii has noted, “Unlike the Whites, the Reds refused to keep silent about the problem; moreover, they actively attempted to stop anti-Jewish violence, and were willing to use all means at their disposal to do so.” [6]

The fight against anti-Semitism was a matter of policy for the Soviet state and the Red Army. The Russian Soviet government and the Ukrainian Soviet Republic under Christian Rakovsky issued several decrees against anti-Semitism in 1918 and 1919. In 1919, under conditions of civil war, economic destruction and chaos, the Soviet government funded three propaganda films against anti-Semitism and a recording of a speech by Lenin.

In the Red Army, leaflets were distributed against anti-Semitism. Perpetrators of pogroms were severely punished. For instance, units involved in the pogroms of Budyonny’s First Cavalry in Poland in 1920 were dissolved and up to 400 cavalymen were executed. (See also: “Anti-Semitism and the Russian Revolution”).

By contrast, the White and Ukrainian nationalist armies, priests of the Orthodox Church, and the German and Austrian occupation authorities systematically promoted anti-Semitism—above all in the form of denunciations of the “Jewish Bolsheviks.”

Since McGeever cannot dispute these facts, he tries to downplay them and inundates his readers with harrowing depictions of pogroms that are meant to shock, rather than explain.

While no doubt horrific, most of the gruesome pogroms by Red military forces that McGeever describes at the beginning of his book were perpetrated at a time when there was little to no military discipline over these units. The fledgling workers’ state, whose power at this point went hardly beyond Petersburg and Moscow, and which was even there fighting for survival, was still struggling to gather its forces to fight against 19 invading armies of powerful imperialist and capitalist countries. The Red Army’s highest military authority, the Revolutionary Military Council (Revvoensovet), headed by Leon Trotsky, was created only on June 13, 1918.

McGeever alludes to this fact at one point, admitting that the lack of discipline in the early stages of the war among the Red Guards and the Army “perhaps goes some way towards explaining the nature and degree of anti-Semitism in the Red Army...” (p. 45).

Moreover, numerically, the vast majority of anti-Semitic violence in the Red Army was perpetrated by units that had earlier fought for the Whites or Ukrainian nationalists. As one German historian noted, “of all 106 recorded acts of anti-Jewish violence by ‘red’ troops, 72 were clearly perpetrated by former Ukrainian or White units.” [7]

McGeever further confuses his readers by citing the anti-Semitic pogroms under the leadership of the Ukrainian ataman Grigoriev in the spring of 1919 as an example of how “Bolshevik revolutionary discourse could overlap with antisemitic conceptions of Jewishness.” This statement is simply misleading.

Grigoriev had fought briefly for the Bolsheviks in 1918—as had many other atamans who would later change sides. However, as McGeever himself admits, the anti-Jewish pogroms were part of an *anti-Bolshevik* uprising in which Grigoriev called upon his followers to attack the “‘Yid’ Soviet government.”

The Bolsheviks mobilized the Red Army to suppress the uprising and were forced to delay coming to the aid of the besieged Soviet Republic in

Hungary because of it. All official documents forcefully denounced the anti-Jewish violence. Thus, the Odessa Committee of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of Ukraine issued an Appeal Against Pogroms in the summer of 1919:

“THE BLACK HUNDREDS AND THE GRIGORIEVISTS, IN UNION WITH THE WORLD BOURGEOISIE, ARE TRYING TO DROWN THE COMMUNIST REVOLUTION IN THE BLOOD OF INNOCENT VICTIMS, IN THE BLOOD OF POVERTY-STRICKEN JEWS. JEWISH POGROMS ARE THE STRAW AT WHICH THE OUTWORN WORLD IS CLUTCHING IN ORDER TO SAVE ITS CAPITAL.” [8]

Whatever the objective problems in the Red Army, its slanderous depiction by McGeever as little more than a breeding ground for backwardness and anti-Semitism is a grotesque distortion and outright falsification. The Red Army was a powerful instrument for the defense and extension of the socialist revolution, and the political and cultural education of millions of workers and peasants.

As Trotsky emphasized in September 1918, the Red Army had not only a military but also “a great cultural and moral mission.” It inherited, in the words of historian Mark von Hagen, “the vision of the army as a genuine force for the dissemination of enlightened values...” [9]

The most urgent task in the cultural realm was literacy: the vast majority of the population, and hence also the Army, was illiterate. In January 1919, the Soviet commissar for enlightenment launched a major campaign for literacy, obliging everyone aged 8 to 50 “to learn how to read and write in Russian, or in their native language, according to their choosing.” [10]

Mandatory enrollment in literacy classes for soldiers was introduced in the Red Army. The Red Army’s first emblem symbolically included a hammer, sickle, rifle and book. Despite severe paper shortages, no less than 6 million items in the second half of 1919 alone were distributed among soldiers, including booklets, posters, books and journals. This political and cultural raising of the consciousness of the masses was an indispensable component of the fight against anti-Semitism.

McGeever’s indifference to these historic efforts at political and cultural education—which he does not even mention—is rooted in his assumption that racial, ethnic and national divisions are insurmountable and determine the comportment and thought of individuals. Thus, he denies not only the class origins of anti-Semitism, but also the possibility of fighting it through a revolutionary change in social relations and systematic education of the masses. This also drives his vehement attacks on the Bolsheviks, and especially Lenin.

*To be continued.*

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[1] Moishe Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism. Notes on the German Reaction to ‘Holocaust,’” in *New German Critique*, No. 19 (Winter 1980), p. 114. It is worth mentioning that in the 2006 essay that McGeever cites, Postone used the claim that anti-Semitism was “anti-capitalist” and “anti-hegemonic” to denounce those who opposed the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 for their “fetishized ‘anti-imperialist position’” and alleged adaptation to the anti-Semitism of the Arab bourgeoisie. Moishe Postone, “History and Hopelessness. Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism,” in *Public Culture*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2006), pp. 93–110.

[2] Ezra Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale. The Formative Years of the Jewish Workers’ Movement in Tsarist Russia*, Cambridge University Press 1970, p. 5.

[3] Ulrich Herbeck, *Das Feindbild vom „jüdischen Bolschewiken“: Zur Geschichte des russischen Antisemitismus vor und während der Russischen Revolution [The bogeyman of the “Jewish Bolshevik.” On the history of Russian anti-Semitism before and during the Russian Revolution]*, Berlin 2009, p. 55. Translation from the German by this

author. Herbeck's book is the most extensive study of Russian anti-Semitism to this day. McGeever acknowledges its existence, but never quotes it.

[4] Ibid., pp. 59–62.

[5] Matthias Vetter, *Antisemiten und Bolschewiki. Zum Verhältnis von Sowjetsystem und Judenfeindschaft 1917–1939* [*Anti-Semites and Bolsheviks. On the relationship between the Soviet system and hatred of the Jews*], Metropol 1995, p. 34. Translation from the German by this author.

[6] Oleg Budnitskii, *Russian Jews Between the Reds and the Whites, 1917–1920*, University of Pennsylvania Press 2012, p. 368.

[7] Vetter, pp. 43–44.

[8] “An Appeal against Pogroms”, Summer 1919, in Rex Wade (ed.), *Documents of Soviet History*, Vol. 1, *The Triumph of Bolshevism, 1917–1919*, Academic International Press 1991, p. 384. Capitalized letters in the original.

[9] Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship. The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917–1930*, Cornell University Press 1990, p. 93.

[10] Decree “The Liquidation of Illiteracy,” in Wade, *Documents*, p. 304.



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