

Discussion contributions:

On the Jewish Question

A. Waterman

COMRADE RAMELSON in his article in the January issue of *Marxism Today*, whilst re-discussing the Jewish issue, makes reference to the recent experiences of the Jewish people, i.e. Hitler's extermination of 6 million Jews, the setting up of the State of Israel, and the elimination of Yiddish cultural activities in the U.S.S.R. in 1948. Nonetheless he does not seem to appreciate the profound impact these experiences have had on the Jewish people.

I want to dwell primarily on the part dealing with the Socialist Solution. It is important to recapitulate, though briefly, this unprecedented historical event. Merely to state that the Soviet Union "in eliminating anti-semitism . . . had a tremendous impact on Jews all over the world" barely touches the significance of the 1917 revolution, as far as the Jews as an oppressed minority were concerned. Surely this was only one aspect of what the young Soviet Union did for the Jewish people.

(1) For the first time in history a revolutionary movement succeeded in removing, at one stroke, all forms of discrimination, economic, political and cultural, by granting the erstwhile oppressed and pogromised Jews full and complete equality.

(2) It made possible in the short period of fifteen years the complete transformation of the social, economic and cultural structure of Soviet Jewry.

(3) "Every facility given to them . . . for the development of Yiddish culture." It was not only a continuation of the old Yiddish culture, but an unprecedented renaissance, transformation and expansion of Yiddish cultural activities which became "national in form and socialist in content".

(4) Economically, it drew masses of Jewish people into the then developing industries. For those who could not be absorbed in industry, it promulgated vast land settlement schemes and brought hundreds of thousands of Jews into agriculture. Large areas of land were specially allocated for Jewish re-settlement, in the Crimea, Ukraine, White Russia and the Caucasus. Jewish administrative regions were formed, such as Kalinindorf, New Zlotopol, Stalindorf, etc., where

the official language in the schools, courts and local government was Yiddish.

This economic and social transformation had its immediate and direct effect on cultural expansion. Let me quote a report given at a conference of Jewish cultural workers in 1924 (*Yevrei v SSSR*, p. 262): "There are functioning in the U.S.S.R. fifty-two kindergartens, 439 elementary schools, fifty-six secondary schools, forty-four technical and four pedagogical institutes, all conducted in Yiddish; also four Yiddish faculties attached to Universities." At a similar conference in 1928 the above figures were almost doubled. In 1921, only 21 per cent of Jewish children went to Yiddish schools; by 1932 the figure was 64 per cent. There were at this time forty-two Yiddish newspapers and periodicals, four publishing houses, ten Yiddish state theatres and two theatrical schools. Book publishing in Yiddish experienced a fivefold increase, from seventy-three titles in 1913 to 339 in 1939. Shalom Aleichem's books in Yiddish rose from 220,000 in 1913 to 3,200,000 in 1939. Several radio stations gave many hours to Yiddish broadcasts.

On March 28th, 1928, a government decree set aside Biro-Bijan as a Jewish Autonomous Region, with the view to an eventual formation of a Jewish Socialist Republic, in order that it might "preserve a Yiddish Socialist national culture" (Kalinin).

It was all this which brought about a situation where "sympathy with the Soviet Union was general, and Socialism as a final solution to the Jewish problem was the dominant trend among Jewish workers and many of the middle class . . . whilst Zionism met . . . but with little success". It is in the light of the above-mentioned developments that one has to consider what happened to Yiddish culture in the U.S.S.R. in 1948. To mention in the same breath those who honestly and sincerely question the forced elimination of Yiddish culture in the U.S.S.R., with those who slander the U.S.S.R. and accuse her of practising anti-semitism, is a sleight of hand which encourages the slanderers and bitterly offends the friends of the U.S.S.R.

Let me say clearly and unequivocally that there can be no doubt that a process of integration is taking place in the Soviet Union, that many Jews, particularly of the younger generation, neither speak nor understand Yiddish and have adopted

Russian as their mother tongue. No Socialist should oppose such a natural process of integration. But what about the three million who flocked to the Yiddish concerts given sporadically in the U.S.S.R. in 1957 (a figure given by Danilov, Vice-Minister for Culture, to the French Jewish delegation in February, 1958)? Why should these millions, or even thousands, be denied full facilities to publish, speak, see plays, in what is still their mother tongue, namely Yiddish?

Let us analyse Comrade Ramelson's arguments in this matter.

A. *"That administrative measures were taken in 1948 to close down Jewish cultural institutions."*

I can only assume that by "administrative measures" he means the unjust and illegal acts involving the complete elimination of all Yiddish cultural activities, together with almost all their outstanding representatives. Does not the re-establishment of Socialist legality after the Twentieth Congress demand the full rehabilitation and correction of these injustices and illegalities committed during the "cult of the individual" period? Apparently that would be too simple an answer—so Comrade Ramelson must find other reasons to justify the "status quo".

B. *"Segregation in the Ghettoes . . . created a specific Yiddish culture depicting Ghetto life."*

How abysmally ignorant the above argument is. Those who have any knowledge of this literature will tell you that it was despised by the rich Jews and the Jewish clerics, who referred to it as the "skivvy" of literature, and the gutteral of the tailors, the cobblers, the carpenters, the artisans and the very poor. The rich and the educated spoke Hebrew or the country's language. This gave a special character and poignancy to Yiddish. It became a weapon of the working class and poor Jews, embraced and loved by them, sinking deep into their consciousness and daily life. Ghetto language indeed! One may as well call Negro culture in the U.S.A. a Ghetto culture.

C. *"Wherever the Ghetto walls were broken down as in Western Europe and America—Yiddish ceased to develop."*

Yet there are still three daily newspapers, three Yiddish theatres, scores of journals, amateur theatrical groups, choirs, Yiddish secondary schools and Yiddish faculties at the universities in the U.S.A. Similarly in France, the Argentine

—not to mention the New Democracies, i.e. Poland, Rumania, where one would hardly say that the "ghetto walls" had not been broken down.

D. *"With the further development of Socialism . . . Yiddish ceases to be a living tongue . . . and rapidly crumbles."*

It would appear that up to 1948 Yiddish was a living language, and that overnight it ceased to be so, by "administrative measures". To quote the President of the Zionist Organisation in support of this theory is the measure of the bankruptcy of evidence available to Comrade Ramelson. The integration which Goldman bemoans and the "survival" he is hoping for has nothing in common with socialist ideas. We do not want the survival of the "love of Zion" or of the culture of the rabbis and the clerics. This is precisely the kind of "survival" which the Yiddish-speaking workers fought against, using Yiddish cultural expression as a weapon.

E. *"The breaking-up of concentrated communities . . . brought about a speeding of the process of integration."*

There are 500,000 Jews in Moscow, 40,000 in Kiev, Odessa, Minsk, 25,000 in Vilno. Considering that there are about 3 million Jews in the U.S.S.R., one would hardly call these considerable communities a "breaking-up" of concentration.

F. *"Justification given for these measures (elimination of Yiddish) is that there was not sufficient demand for it to justify such undertakings."*

Yet further on the same page Comrade Ramelson states that "neither financial cost nor the relative smallness of the population of a nationality can be seriously considered as an obstacle to the application of this principle"—namely "the Marxist approach to national culture is not only to permit, but to *facilitate* by every possible means, the fostering and development of all national cultures".

But then Comrade Ramelson goes on to argue: "As we have seen, the Jews are not a nation"; "Yiddish therefore cannot be treated as a national culture."

How devoid this argument is of Leninist principles on the question of nations and languages. "He who does not acknowledge and defend the equality of *nations and languages*, he who does not fight against all forms of national oppression or inequality, is not Marxist or even a Democrat." (*Lenin on the Jewish Question*, p. 14).

Lenin does not speak of the equality of national languages, but of nations *and* languages. No Marxist would claim that the Jews in the Soviet Union were at any time a nation; yet if all facilities and help were extended to their culture and language between 1917 and 1948, what change has taken place in their status after 1948 to warrant the cessation and elimination of this culture? Does not the fact that 3 million flocked to Yiddish concerts, the existence of seventy-two Yiddish writers, poets, dramatists, the emergence of twenty young Yiddish writers (products of the Yiddish schools of 1936) prove that there is a demand for its continuation? Of course we should welcome the considerable translations from Yiddish into Russian of very many books. Yet I have not yet come across a coherent Marxist argument why these books, originally written in Yiddish, should never see daylight in their original tongue, nor why Yiddish Soviet writers should have their novels, stories and poems published (in Yiddish) by left-wing publications in capitalist countries (U.S.A. and France) and not in their country of origin, the U.S.S.R.

G. *"The question is raised whether Marxists attempt by artificial means to delay this historical process . . . of complete cultural integration."*

Surely this is putting the question on its head. I would rather stand it up on its feet. Should Marxists attempt by artificial means to eliminate a living language and culture, by "administrative measures", instead of allowing the historical process of cultural integration to take its natural course? Particularly when Jewish religious practice and organisation is permitted in the U.S.S.R. as of right, why should not Yiddish secular culture and Jewish communal organisations of a secular and socialist character enjoy similar rights?

Now is it true, as Comrade Ramelson states, that "some publications partly in Yiddish and partly in Russian have appeared"? To my knowledge, there has been only one book (limited edition 500 copies), Shalom Aleichem's *The Enchanted Tailor*. The Yiddish is embodied in its illustrations by the Jewish artist Tankhom Kaplan, but the text is in Russian.*

There is no doubt that the problem is being discussed and considered in the U.S.S.R. It is a problem which has been raised again and again by every Jewish progressive delegation which has visited the U.S.S.R. since 1955. Furthermore, there seems to be general support among Soviet writers

for the rehabilitation of Yiddish, its publications, theatres, newspapers etc. Of six such delegations which have visited the U.S.S.R. since 1955, almost all have had varying promises made to them:

A. That a newspaper would soon be re-started.

B. That a Yiddish Theatre would be revived.

C. That a Yiddish Almanack would be issued, and book publications resumed.

So far, these have remained promises; it is urgent and high time they were turned into reality. Let us remove this weapon from the hands of the enemies of the Soviet Union and of socialism. Let us counter the pernicious Zionist and reactionary propaganda by reaffirming our belief in socialism as a final solution to the Jewish question, and let us make it once again "the dominant trend among the Jewish workers and many of the middle class".

Solly Kaye

THE article on the Jewish problem in the January issue is, in my opinion, the first real attempt for many years to deal in a balanced way with this complex problem.

And I am rather sorry that the first contribution in the discussion, from my old friend and comrade Jack Rosenberg, should be so unhelpful.

Jack puts into Bert Ramelson's article words he didn't use, and then proceeds to knock him for six. That is not really good discussion. Did Bert Ramelson say that "since the Jews are not a nation they cannot be affected by the national question" (my emphasis)? Did Ramelson say that "anti-semitism is the main issue" regarding the Jewish problem? Has Ramelson denied that the existence of the State of Israel has played an important part in Jewish life in post-war years? These are but a few of the false bases on which Jack Rosenberg conducts his argument.

As for accusing Bert Ramelson of confusion, I think there is more confusion in Jack's half-page than in much that I have read on this subject in recent years.

We Communists have a policy on Israel and on the Jewish problem. The fact that many of us Jews have spent most of our time in the general political struggle, rather than specialising in the Jewish problem, may be the reason that our line is not well enough known. But a "line" there certainly is. It certainly is not, nor ever has been, based on a premise like that of Comrade Rosenberg, that the Jewish workers "were always generally clear-sighted politically."

There is no contradiction between the statement that the "Jews are not a nation" and the statement that "an Israeli nation is rapidly emerging". The

* We have recently received a copy of a book of selections from Shalom Aleichem's works, printed in Moscow in Yiddish, 30,000 print. *Editor.*