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## **The Bolsheviks and Antisemitism, 1917-1927. PhD Project\***

This PhD will offer both a sociological and historical analysis of Bolshevik/Communist Party theorisation and politicisation in relation to the problem of antisemitism in Russia between 1917 and 1927. The PhD aims to make a unique contribution to not only the history of the Russian revolution, but also to the broader field of antisemitism studies.

Scholars who have studied Bolshevik/Party approaches to the 'Jewish question' have tended to concern themselves with the extent to which the politics of the Bolsheviks/Party elite articulated with antisemitism. In short, the answer appears to be "no" (for the period between 1903 and roughly 1926) and "yes" (from 1926 onwards). In other words, under Lenin the Party elite is considered to have been largely (though not entirely) free from antisemitism, and it is often asserted that the latter only became a problem in tandem with the rise of Stalinism and the campaigns against Trotsky and the United Opposition in the mid-late 1920s. Of course, pogroms were committed by sections of the Red Army during the Civil War, but there is a consensus in the literature that the higher echelons of the Party were fiercely against pogroms, and primary sources testify that they took measures to combat antisemitism within the Red Army.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, by 1926 Trotsky was complaining to Bukharin that antisemitism was developing in workers cells in Moscow and was being sanctioned by the Party leadership.<sup>2</sup>

This PhD sets out to take a slightly different approach. Rather than restricting the study to the question of whether or not the Bolsheviks/Party were antisemitic, I will instead broaden the focus to an analysis of how the state and the Bolsheviks/Party approached the issue of antisemitism at the level of theory and practice between 1917 and 1927. This shift in focus allows us to critically explore the numerous campaigns the Party undertook in relation to antisemitism during these years. Thus my principle aim in this PhD is to chart and critically evaluate Bolshevik/Party attempts to *confront* the problem of antisemitism. More specifically, I aim to explore how the Bolsheviks/Party addressed the issue of antisemitism within the *working class* in Moscow during this period.

Studies of antisemitism and the 'Jewish question' in the early years of the Soviet Union have tended to direct their attention towards the regions of the former Pale of Settlement. Attention has been focussed on these areas primarily because the vast bulk of Soviet Jewry lived there, and also because of the ferocious nature and scale of the pogroms which broke out in these regions during the Civil War. This PhD, however, aims to give particular attention to

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Lenin's recorded speech in March 1919 against pogroms in V. I. Lenin: Lenin on the Jewish Question, New York, International Publishers, 1974, p. 142. Propaganda campaigns against antisemitism within the Red Army were also carried out in May 1918. See Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsialno-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), Moscow, f. 272. op. 1. del. 71. l. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Isaak Deutscher: The Prophet Armed. Trotsky 1879-1921. London, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 258-259. See also Kevin Murphy: Revolution and Counterrevolution. Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory, London, Haymarket Books, 2007, for the claim that 1926 was a decisive year in the emergence of antisemitism within the Party.

Moscow as a regional case study. Moscow has been chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly it was, along with Petrograd, the heartland of the revolution where working class power was expressed most clearly. Secondly, after the October Revolution, the Party became increasingly concerned about the growth in antisemitic sentiments in Moscow city and the Moscow region. Indeed, during the first 10 years of Bolshevik power, a number of centralised Party campaigns and commissions were undertaken and established to address the growth of antisemitism across all areas of Soviet society, and they frequently raised concerns about the particular strength of antisemitism in Moscow.<sup>3</sup> Moscow thus represents an intriguing case whereby revolution, an advanced proletariat and antisemitism came into fusion.

My initial archival work has established that both antisemitism in Moscow, and the Party response to it, were underpinned by assumptions about the changing nature of class relations in post-October 1917 society. For example, antisemitic representations of Jews made by some workers in Moscow factories during the early years of the New Economic Policy (NEP) depicted Jews as 'shirkers' of manual labour, 'monopolisers' and 'speculators'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the transformations brought about by the shift from War Communism to the NEP may be crucial in terms of contextualisation here, as representations of the Jewish 'Nepman' and Jews as the 'profiteers' of the NEP abounded in Moscow in the early-mid 1920s.<sup>5</sup> Thus antisemitism articulated with assumptions about class relations in the outlooks of certain sections of the Moscow working class. The Party response to this antisemitism seems to also have been underpinned by assumptions about class relations. For example, official propaganda work against antisemitism from as early as 1918 stressed the importance of proving that the bulk of Jews were workers, and not 'speculators' and 'petty bourgeois exploiters'. Moreover, in the early NEP years the Party sought to 'productivise' Jews by settling them on the land as agricultural labourers so as to dispel the antisemitic representation of Jews as 'exploiters' of the peasantry. Thus during these periods of transitions, both working class antisemitism and Party attempts to tackle that antisemitism operated through competing (yet also overlapping) assumptions about the nature of class relations.

In addition to offering a case study of Moscow, this PhD will also critically explore centralised measures undertaken by the Party to address the phenomenon of antisemitism during the early years of Bolshevik power. Particular emphasis will be given to centralised propaganda work during the Civil War. I will also offer a comparative analysis by exploring the extent to which the international communist movement, in the shape of the Comintern, undertook measures to tackle antisemitism.

Very little, if any, serious research has been undertaken to trace and explain the theoretical moorings of Bolshevik thinking on antisemitism. Rather than dismissing Bolshevik/Party propaganda as mere 'ideology', this PhD aims to take Bolshevik/Party statements and slogans on antisemitism seriously. I will analytically identify 'who' and 'what' was antisemitic agency in the Bolshevik worldview(s) between 1917 and 1927. How did the Party see the

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see the Commission for the Struggle Against Antisemitism, established by the Party in early 1918. Relevant files are located in Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), Moscow, f. 2306. op. 1 d. 291; GARF f. 2306. op. 1. d. 3289 and GARF f. 2306. op. 15. d. 749. A number of pamphlets on antisemitism were also published by the State Publishing House in Moscow and Petrograd/Leningrad during the first 10 years of Bolshevik power. For documents relating to the 1926 campaign against antisemitism, see '*Materialy i fakty proiavleniia antisemitizma*', GARF, f. 374. op. 27. d. 1096. See also '*Soveshchanie o vyrabotke mer po bor'be s antisemitizmom pri Agitprope TsK VKP(b)*' in RGASPI f. 17. op. 60. d. 832 l. 26-47, and '*Stenogramma disputa ob antisemitizme*' in Oleg Budnitskii (ed.): *Arkhiv Evreiskoi Istorii*, Moskva, ROSSPEN, 2008, pp. 209-246.

<sup>4</sup> GARF, f. 374. op. 27. d. 1096 l. 4

<sup>5</sup> Salomon M. Schwarz: *The Jews in the Soviet Union*, Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 1951, p. 258. See also Iu. Larin: *Evrei i Antisemitizm v SSSR*, Moskva, Gosizdat, 1929.

nature of the relationship between class and antisemitism, and in particular, class consciousness and antisemitism? Moreover, how did the Party's positions on antisemitism relate to its wider theories about the uneven development of capitalism, and Russia's place within the world system? Can shifts be identified in these positions as Soviet society made the transition from War Communism to the NEP? In addition to these theoretical issues, this PhD will explore the political practice undertaken by the Party in relation to antisemitism during the first ten years of Bolshevik power.

This PhD begins from the premise that antisemitism within the working class has serious implications for how we understand the history of the October revolution: if antisemitism could arise in a city where working class militancy was far advanced in comparison to the rest of the country, then how far had the revolution's proclamation of internationalism actually penetrated into everyday life in Moscow? How seriously did the Party take the issue of antisemitism? What assumptions were entailed in the Party's approach to antisemitism? What representations of Jews were made in these assumptions? What does the study of Bolshevik assumptions about antisemitism tell us about the Party's wider views on the working class and its views on the nature of working class consciousness and social change? Even more broadly, can Party approaches to antisemitism be linked to wider political developments such as the failure of the European workers' movements to manifest in revolution? Can the Party's approach to antisemitism within the working class be seen to have changed or developed in line with wider political developments such as the shift from War Communism to NEP, the emergence of 'socialism in one country', or the campaign against the United Opposition and Trotskyism? These and other related questions will be explored in this PhD.

The periodisation of this PhD (1917-1927) has been chosen to contribute towards wider debates around the nature of the Russian revolution. For example, Murphy<sup>6</sup> has recently argued that counterrevolution arrived in the shape of the consolidation of Stalin's power in the last year of the NEP (1927), and that by 1928 workers had lost the political power they had achieved in October 1917. In contrast, Pirani charts the retreat of the revolution to the years 1921-1924, arguing that by 1924 the Bolsheviks had effectively pushed the working class out of political decision-making entirely.<sup>7</sup> This PhD aims to offer a potentially unique contribution to these debates: can an analysis of Bolshevik/Party responses to antisemitism tell us anything about the nature of the shifts between the period when the Bolsheviks were a revolutionary movement assuming power and when they were a Party *in* power? Moreover, can we identify any shifts and changes in Party approaches to antisemitism between the Lenin (1917-1924) and early-Stalin (1924-1927) periods?

It is therefore hoped that this thesis, with its specific and unique focus on Bolshevik/Party attempts to confront antisemitism, might contribute to wider discussion and debates around the nature of the October revolution, the society constructed in its aftermath and the emergence of Stalinism. More generally however, this PhD also aims to contribute to wider discussions about the nature of the relationships between antisemitism, racism, class struggle and revolution. As such, despite its specific focus on early twentieth century Russia, this thesis will contribute to the literature on antisemitism and racism studies.

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<sup>6</sup> Murphy, *Revolution and Counterrevolution*.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Pirani: *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-1924. Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite*. Routledge, Oxford, 2008.