

The Polish Bund Between the Wars

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THE *Politics of Futility* is A CRITICAL HISTORY of the Bund in Poland between 1917, one year before Poland achieved its independence, and 1943, the year that marks the virtual end of Jewish life in Poland.

Why the politics of "futility"? Because, although the book provides a rather sketchy history of the Polish Bund between 1917 and 1943, it does more than just provide a record of the party's activities. As a political scientist (Mr. Johnpoll is Professor of Political Science at the State University of New York in Albany), Mr. Johnpoll puts forward some general theoretical conclusions concerning the Bund. Chief among these is the thesis that the Bund proved a futile organ for carrying out Jewish aims in interbellum Poland.

In the preface to the book, Mr. Johnpoll states he is, in general, interested in researching and describing democratic-socialist parties, and hopes to follow this first book with studies of "other democratic-socialist parties, particularly those of Sweden, the U.S.A., Canada, Poland, Austria, and the Zionists." Specifically, as concerns the Bund, Mr. Johnpoll sought to "investigate the basic question that confronted the Bund and the way the Bund answered these questions," and primarily to "find some answers to problems confronting political scientists. Chief among these questions is: What can be the role of a political party that is by nature precluded from actual state power." [Since the Bund was a Jewish party and since the total Polish-Jewish population of interwar Poland was about 10% (3 million out of 30 million), it was "by nature precluded from actual state power."] This last question is particularly relevant to the present struggle for Black Power. Blacks too constitute only 10% of the American population; they too are by that fact, "precluded from actual state power."

In addition, three peripheral questions were to be explored (1) how does a self-proclaimed Marxist party deal with the nationality problem, (2) what is the "driving force" of a party like the Bund (its mystique or myth), and (3) how does such a party adapt itself to the semi-illegality imposed on it by a series of authoritarian regimes.

As the title of the book suggests, Mr. Johnpoll's account of the Polish Bund is critical of the way in which the Bund confronted its problems. Nevertheless, says Mr. Johnpoll, "If I appear too harsh in my treatment of the Bund in this book, I am genuinely sorry. Had I been a Jew in interwar Poland, and even had I known then what I claim to know today, I should nevertheless have been a member of the Bund."

On what grounds does Johnpoll criticize the Bund? Chiefly from the position that "politics is the study of power and that a successful political party is one which can influence the structure and operations of the state." The trouble with this criterion is that it is too narrow a basis for judgement of the problems confronting the Bund and the Polish Jews.

* *Politics of Futility*, by Bernard K. Johnpoll. Cornell University Press, 1967.

The General Jewish Workers Bund of Russia, Poland, and Lithuania (always called the "Bund"—Yiddish for "union" or "alliance") was formed in Vilna in 1897. It was not only a socialist party, but also an organization of trade unions, and a cultural and educational force. It was organized the same year (1897) that the first convention of the World Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland was held, and it was these two rival ideologies that played an enormous part in transforming Jewish life and thought in Eastern Europe. Bertram D. Wolfe, in his *Three Who Made a Revolution*, refers to the Bund as "the powerful Jewish Bund, numerically the largest and best organized body of workmen in Russia." (p. 232) H. M. Sachar in *The Course of Modern Jewish History* describes the Bund as "the most dependable instrument of pragmatic Jewish protest on Russian soil" (p. 294) and writes that "the Bund exercised an unprecedented influence on the Jewish working population between 1900 and 1914. The daring exploits of Bundist strike organizers, their cool disdain for their own personal safety, became legend throughout the Pale . . . in the smaller Jewish cities and towns the word of the Bund became law. Its orders were obeyed without question by the devoted masses of Jewish workingmen." (p. 294)

It is interesting to note, as a measure of its importance in East European life, that Howe and Greenberg in their introduction to *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* name the Bund as one of four "major religions and intellectual currents" that "shaped and buffeted" Yiddish literature (the other three are the Haskalah, Hasidism, and Zionism). In contrast to Zionism, however, its chief rival for the hearts and minds of the East European masses, Howe and Greenberg attribute "a considerably greater influence" to the Bund upon the early Yiddish writers.

An interesting historical sidelight, also indicative of the Bund's role, is the part the Bund played in the acquisition by Lenin of the name "Bolshevik" (majorityites) for his faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Federation in 1903. In that year, the second convention of the Federation was held in Brussels (the first, in Minsk, had been organized by the Bund!). The Bund was represented by five votes out of fifty-one (an under-representation of its actual relative strength in the Russian socialist movement). When the historical debates between Lenin and his adherents, and those who followed the older socialists (Axelrod, Zasulich, Plekhanov) came to a vote, Lenin's faction was able to muster a bare majority ("bolshevik") only because the Bund, with its five votes, had walked out on the convention earlier. This the Bundist delegates had done because the convention had refused to grant the Bund its demand for autonomy within the Federation as a specifically Jewish socialist group.

But all that is covered in Johnpoll's thirteen-page first chapter titled "Prelude" and happened before 1917, before the period from 1917 to 1943 that provides the bulk of the "empirical data" for Mr. Johnpoll's study. After 1917, Mr. Johnpoll describes the steady growth of the Bund during the German occupation of Poland during the years 1915 to 1918; the role of the Bund played in the Russian revolution; the founding of an independent Bund organization in independent Poland in 1917-1918; the leftist-rightist struggle within the Bund following the Bolshevik victory in Russia; the end of the "communist romance"

that followed the revolution; the "return to democratic socialism" in the early twenties; the struggle of the Bund with the Polish nationalistic and anti-semitic parties, as well as with the Communists, during the Pilsudski era (1926-1935); and the final battle to the death from the ghettos and forests of Poland against the Nazi murderers and destroyers.

Mr. Johnpoll concludes his study with this final summary sentence: "The politics of the Bund was the politics of futility." But if the politics of the Bund were futile, *avoidably* futile (as Johnpoll implies), then, one might ask, what should the Bund, considering its position as the representative of a hated minority, what should it have done differently from what it did? Johnpoll puts forward four alternative policies the Bund could have pursued, policies that presumably would have yielded the Bund more success politically, policies that would have been less "futile." Whether that is true or not is impossible to know. But, even assuming its truth, even as Johnpoll puts forward his four alternatives, he at the same time dismisses them himself as impossibilities:

... there were alternatives available to the Bund, *alternatives it debated endlessly*. It could, for example, have merged into the Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partja Socjalistyczna, hence PPS) as a separate constituent part. Such a merger would have required the acquiescence, at least, of the Polish party. *Acquiescence was, however, not forthcoming*. (Emphasis added)

The Bund might have dissolved, recommending that its members enter the PPS. It is true that entry into the PPS would have meant the death of the Bund, a matter of great concern to most Bundists, but it would have placed the Bundists in a strong position within a major Socialist party which did have the potential for forming a government.

The Bund might also have been instrumental in forming a coalition with the PPS and the Socialist parties made up of the other minorities. This possibility, more than any other, was debated by the Bundists. *That no coalition was ever formed was as much the fault of the PPS as of the Bund*, although the latter refused until it was too late because it would not compromise its doctrines. (Emphasis added)

In the first years after the Russian Revolution, the Polish Bund might have gone into the Communist Party, as its Russian counterpart did, and as some of its members desired to do. This possibility was considered seriously by the Bundists between 1919 and 1921. *That it did not come about is attributable more to the Communists' insistence on total obedience than to the Bund's unwillingness*. (Emphasis added)

Alternative number one required the acquiescence of the Polish Socialist Party, but this acquiescence was "not forthcoming." Alternative number two would have meant weakening the Bund to the point where its Jewish aims—its aims for the Polish Jews—would have been diluted and forgotten in the PPS program. Alternative number three met head on with the same difficulty as number one—no PPS acquiescence "forthcoming." And isn't alternative number four a beauty? Johnpoll himself states elsewhere about this one: "Had the Bundists actually gone into the Communist Party in Poland, their leaders would undoubtedly have met the same fate as the Polish Communists who were liquidated by the Soviet regime in 1938." (p. 261)

Finally Johnpoll concedes the following: "The Bund did serve a function

in interwar Poland but not as a political party. That function was one concerning culture and welfare . . .” This little concession hides behind its blandness the following gigantic accomplishments of the Polish Bund:

- Organized the urban Jewish working class into effectively bargaining trade unions.
- Trained and armed *shtetl* and urban self-defense bands that successfully fought off Polish pogromists and anti-semitic hooligans.
- Built a secular primary and secondary school system in Poland in the Yiddish language—thus providing a secular education in their native language for Polish Jewish children, the vast majority of whom were denied entry into Polish schools.
- Built and ran summer camps and sanatoria in the countryside for Jewish slum inhabitants.
- Instilled pride and provided hope for the Jewish underprivileged and persecuted masses.
- Provided a focal point for a literary and cultural renaissance in the Yiddish language, the actual living language of the East European Jewish masses as well as that of the overwhelming majority of the world’s Jews before World War II.
- Built cultural and recreational facilities.
- Educated a generation of Jewish workers who otherwise had no access to Western secular culture.
- Printed books, journals, newspapers, and magazines in Yiddish, educating and galvanizing masses of Jewish workmen.
- “Lead a resistance movement and kept alive some semblance of dignity in the Polish ghettos” (Johnpoll, p. 266) during the Nazi holocaust.

These, I’m sure Mr. Johnpoll would concede, are no mean accomplishments. Is it fair to characterize such a force in modern Jewish history as having pursued politics of futility, and to speak of it in various places as having “failed”?

JOHNPOLL’S BOOK SHOWS WHAT CAN HAPPEN when a specialist undertakes to study something from his own too narrow vantage point. It’s true the Bund failed to achieve state power, it’s true it failed to influence a Polish party who already had state power or had the chance to get it. But the Bund never dreamed of achieving state power and it would have had a slim chance of influencing those who held (or had a chance to hold) state power *no matter what policies it might have pursued*. Some of the alternatives Johnpoll suggests, even if truly available, would in all likelihood have prevented the Bund from achieving even those important, if minimal (from Johnpoll’s theoretical point-of-view), accomplishments I’ve listed above. His method, if I may make a comparison, is like that of a musicologist who is so busy classifying symphonies according to their use of a certain harmonic structure, he doesn’t notice anything else about them, such as their lyrical quality or the intent and purpose of their composers.

Finally, Johnpoll’s book could be beautifully relevant, as I mentioned at the outset, to the current black revolution. But its message to the black mili-

tants (whose situation is roughly analogous to that of the Bund's in interbellum Poland) would be: dissolve your independent militant organizations, diminish your struggle for black pride and a black cultural renaissance, concentrate instead on merging with a major political force (such as the Democratic Party?) with the purpose of influencing state power, even if it involves some compromising of your fundamental principles. Further, by extending his comments to the Zionist approach to anti-semitism and Jewish civil rights ("The Zionists came to grips with this problem by insisting that Jews could never hope for equality in an alien land—and that any land would have to be alien to the Jews except Palestine, the historic homeland") to the black struggle in America, the solution would be "back-to-Africa" or the establishment of a sovereign black state here in America. The impossibility, the *futility* of the above alternative courses to the black revolution, is self-evident. It also makes even more apparent their impossibility and, yes, futility, in the case of the Polish Jews in interwar Poland.

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Book



Reviews

CONFRONTATION: THE STUDENT REBELLION AND UNIVERSITIES. Edited by Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol. Basic Books: N.Y., 1968.

DANIEL BELL AND IRVING KRISTOL HAVE MAINTAINED a consistent position over the past quarter of a century: apologists for U.S. imperialism in the name of anti-communism; apologists for domestic oppression in the name of democracy. From their editorial offices at *Fortune* and *New Leader* they attempted to influence and arouse public opinion to reject needed radical change. They argued that in the West basic problems had been solved; that "ideologies" were pernicious. For them the main struggle was against the expansion of international communism. Thus they provided a rationale for U.S. intervention and suppression of revolution abroad; on the domestic front they contributed to the sterile intellectual climate that vitiated critical social thought and prevented intellectuals from recognizing the blantly undemocratic features of American politics—products of an increasingly bureaucraticized imperial order.

Their latest production, *Confrontation: The Student Rebellion and the Universities*, is a collection of essays by a group of conservatives. Some of the contributors have been active on the side of bureaucratic authorities who have been expelling students for attempting to restructure American society. In their introduction the editors claim that the chapters are infused by a "commitment to dispassionate inquiry as the ground of understanding"; by a commitment to "the idea of rational authority"; to the view that "opinion is not knowledge."