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# Revolution and Antisemitism: The Bolsheviks in 1917

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## ABSTRACT

This essay offers an analysis of the Bolshevik encounter with antisemitism in 1917. Antisemitism was the dominant modality of racialized othering in late-imperial Russia. Yet 1917 transformed Jewish life, setting in motion a sudden and intense period of emancipation. In Russian society more generally, the dramatic escalation of working class mobilisation resulted not only in the toppling of the tsar in February, but the coming to power of the Bolsheviks just eight months later. Running alongside these revolutionary transformations, however, was the re-emergence of anti-Jewish violence and the returning spectre of pogroms. Russia in 1917, then, presents an excellent case study to explore how a socialist movement responded to rising antisemitism in a moment of political crisis and escalating class conflict. The article does two things. First, it charts how the Bolsheviks understood antisemitism, and how they responded to it during Russia's year of revolution. In doing so, it finds that Bolsheviks participated in a wide-ranging set of campaigns organised by the socialist left, the hub of which was the soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies. Second, the essay argues that antisemitism traversed the political divide in revolutionary Russia, finding traction across all social groups and political projects. As the political crisis deepened in the course of 1917, the Bolsheviks increasingly had to contend with antisemitism within the movement. In traditional Marxist accounts, racism and radicalism are often framed in contestation. This article, however, offers a more complex picture in which antisemitism and revolutionary politics could be overlapping, as well as competing worldviews.

## KEYWORDS

Antisemitism, Russian Revolution, Bolsheviks, socialism, Jews, workers, revolution, Russia

This article examines the Bolshevik response to antisemitism in Russia between the two revolutions of February and October 1917. The February Revolution of 1917 transformed Russian Jewish life. Just days after the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and the formation of the Provisional Government, all legal

restrictions on Russian Jewry were lifted. More than 140 anti-Jewish statutes, totalling some 1,000 pages, were removed overnight. To mark this historic moment of abolition, a special meeting was convened by the Petrograd Soviet. It was the eve of Passover, March 24, 1917. The Jewish delegate who addressed the meeting immediately made the connection: the February Revolution, he said, was comparable with the liberation of Jews from slavery in Egypt<sup>1</sup>. Formal emancipation, however, was not accompanied by the disappearance of antisemitism. In 1917, the spectre of pogroms once again returned to Russia, prefiguring the dramatic escalation of antisemitic violence that would erupt during the Civil War in 1918 and 1919.

Despite the vast literature on the 1917 revolutions, there has been comparatively little scholarly interest in the specific question of antisemitism during this period. Indeed, 1917 represents the least analysed chapter in the history of the waves of antisemitic violence that spanned the late imperial and revolutionary years (1871–1922).<sup>2</sup> A century on, there exists only a handful of serious works on the subject.<sup>3</sup> While the scale of anti-Jewish violence between February and October in 1917 in no way matched that of, say, the 1903–6 or 1918–22 pogrom waves, Russian society in 1917 bore witness to a sharp increase in antisemitism. Newspaper reports, for example, indicate that at least 235 attacks against Jews were carried out in 1917. Although totalling just 4.5 per cent of the population, Jews were victims of around a third of all acts of physical violence against national minorities during Russia's year of revolution.<sup>4</sup> Just as in 1905, violent antisemitism in 1917 was closely connected to the ebb and flow of revolution. Although levels of antisemitism were comparatively low during the February Revolution, antisemitism would escalate later in the year at precisely those moments of revolutionary upheaval: the July Days, the Kornilov Affair in August and the October Revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Gal'perina, B. D., Znamenskii, O. N., and Startsev, V. I. (eds), *Petrogradskii Sovet Rabochikh i Soldatskikh Deputatov v 1917 godu, dokumenty i materialy*. vol. 1. (Leningrad: Nauka Leningradskoe Otdelenie) 1991, 84, 132, 176, 190, 494

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir P. Buldakov, 'Freedom, shortages, violence: the origins of the "Revolutionary Anti-Jewish Pogrom" in Russia, 1917–1918', in Jonathon Dekel-Chen, David Gaunt, Natan M. Meir and Israel Bartal (eds), *Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2010), 74–91 (87).

<sup>3</sup> Ilias Cherikover, *Antisemitizm i pogromy na Ukraine, 1917–1918* (Berlin: Osjudisches Historisches Archiv 1923); Vladimir P. Buldakov, 'Rossiiskoe evreistvo i Bol'shevistskii Perevorot v Petrograde, Oktriabr' 1917–Ianvar' 1918 goda', in Oleg Budnitskii (ed.), *Arkhiv Evreiskoi Istorii*, vol. 4 (Moscow: ROSSPEN 2007), 92–124; Vladimir P. Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos: Etnicheskie konflikty v Rossii, 1917–1918 gg.: usloviia vzniknoveniia, khronika, kommentarii, analiz* (Moscow: Novyi khronograf 2010); Michael Beizer, 'Antisemitism in Petrograd/Leningrad, 1917–1930', *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 29, no. 1–2, 1999, 5–28 (5–14); and Oleg Budnitskii, *Rossiiskie evrei mezhdu Krasnymi i Belymi, 1917–1920* (Moscow ROSSPEN 2005), 52–93.

<sup>4</sup> Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos*, 1019.

This article has two main objectives. First, it examines the Bolshevik response to antisemitism between February and October 1917. It finds that the Bolsheviks took part in helping to elaborate a broad cross-party strategy against antisemitism comprising all socialist forces. The political expression of this united front was the soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies. As the article shows, the soviets took a number of concrete measures throughout 1917, both locally and nationally, to confront the rising antisemitism in Russian society.

Second, the article demonstrates that antisemitism traversed the political divide in revolutionary Russia, finding traction across all social groups and within all political projects. From June 1917 onwards, the Bolsheviks increasingly faced accusations from their socialist rivals that sections of the working class embracing the Bolshevik project were doing so by fusing revolutionary discourse with antisemitism. Whereas radicalism and racism are often framed in contestation, the critical analysis of 1917 offered here reveals a more complex picture in which antisemitism and revolutionary politics were overlapping as well as competing worldviews.

### **The socialist conceptualization of antisemitism in 1917: the centrality of the 'bourgeois revolution'**

The Bolshevik response to antisemitism in 1917 was part of a broader, cross-party strategic alliance stretching back to 1905, comprising revolutionaries, reformist socialists and liberals<sup>5</sup>. Within this milieu, antisemitism was understood from 'the standpoint of the bourgeois revolution': that is, the belief that the founding of a bourgeois, capitalist democratic republic would create the conditions for the eradication of antisemitism and indeed all forms of national oppression.<sup>6</sup> Ever since the 1905 Revolution, most Russian socialists (Jewish and non-Jewish alike) had identified antisemitism with tsarism. Following the February 1917 Revolution, antisemitism now came to be seen as the most reactionary form of restorationist counter-revolution. This was a perspective shared not just by socialists, but by many non-socialists in Jewish political life. For example, an editorial in the liberal Jewish newspaper *Evreiskaia Nedelia* (The Jewish Week) in September 1917 asked:

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<sup>5</sup> On socialist responses to antisemitism in Russia prior to 1917, see Surh (this volume); Igor' V. Bobrov 'Evreiskii Vopros v Ideologii i Politicheskoi Deiatel'nosti Rossiiskikh Marksistov (konets XIX v. – fevral' 1917 g.)', Ph.D Dissertation, Tiimenskii gosudarstvenyi universitet 2003; and Brendan McGeever 'The Bolshevik Confrontation with Antisemitism in the Russian Revolution, 1917–1919', D.Phil. dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2015, 23-30.

<sup>6</sup> Brendan McGeever, 'Bolshevik Responses to Antisemitism during the Civil War: Spatiality, Temporality, and Agency', in Adele Lindenmeyr, Christopher Read and Peter Waldron (eds), *Russia's Home Front in War and Revolution, 1914–1922. Book 4: The Struggle for the State* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers 2017). For a broader discussion of this theme, see also Enzo Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate 1843–1943*, trans. from the French by Bernard Gibbons (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press 1994).

Who needs this [pogromist] agitation? A priori, it is those elements who seek a return to the old regime. If, before [February 1917], pogromist agitation supported the old regime by turning the masses away from revolutionary propaganda, then now it carried those elements who want to return the old regime to power.<sup>7</sup>

As we shall see later in this article, however, such neat distinctions between ‘revolutionaries’ and ‘counter-revolutionaries’ became increasingly difficult to sustain as antisemitism asserted itself across the political divide. Nevertheless, this perspective had a significant mobilizing capacity. Despite their deep-rooted differences, almost all socialists had an entrenched interest in defending the gains of the February revolution.<sup>8</sup> In so far as antisemitism could be seen to threaten those gains by bringing back the detested tsarist regime, then there was significant scope for building a united front against it. This is precisely what happened: rooted in their commitment to the bourgeois revolution, socialists set aside their party differences and confronted antisemitism and pogromist violence.

### **The socialist response to antisemitism in 1917: the soviets and the strategy of the united front**

The institutional hub of the socialist response to antisemitism in 1917 was the soviets of workers’ and soldiers’ deputies. Conceived during the 1905 Revolution, the Petrograd soviet was re-established in the Russian capital following the February Revolution of 1917. By March 1917 there were more than 600 soviets in various regions and, by the summer, they had been established across the whole of Russia, a process bringing about the unique phenomenon of *dual power*: the balance of forces between the ostensibly ruling Provisional Government and the increasingly powerful soviets.<sup>9</sup> The soviets were non-party institutions that engaged in broad cross-class, cross-party campaigns. Despite bitter inter-party fighting in 1917, cross-party alliances were the defining characteristic of the soviet model, as was shown in August when the threat of counter-revolution in the shape of the Kornilov Affair was swiftly put down by an alliance of all formations left of the Kadets.<sup>10</sup> The politics of the soviets were, in effect,

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Pogromist Danger and the Means of Self-Defence’ (*Pogromnaia Opastnost’ i mery samozashchity*) *Evreiskaia Nedelia*, no. 36–7, 12 September 1917, 1. Translations from the Russian, unless other stated, are by the author.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*, trans. from the Russian by John G. Wright and Brian Pearce (London: New Park Publications 1971), 163.

<sup>9</sup> Nikolai N. Smirnov, ‘The soviets’, in Edward Acton, Vladimir Cherniaev and William G. Rosenberg (eds), *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution, 1914–1921* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1997), 429–37 (429–30).

<sup>10</sup> Diane Koenker, ‘The evolution of party consciousness in 1917: the case of the Moscow workers’, *Soviet Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1978, 38–62 (61). The Kornilov Affair was an attempted military coup led by General Kornilov against the Provisional Government; the Kadets were members of the liberal democratic Konstitutsionno-Demokraticeskaiia Partiiia (Constitutional Democratic Party).

the politics of the *united front*,<sup>11</sup> and the socialist confrontation with antisemitism was also rooted in this strategy.

Soviets responded to antisemitism immediately following the February Revolution. Just five days after its formation, on March 3, the Petrograd Soviet established a Commission headed by the Bundist Moishe Rafes, whose task it was to stop ‘black hundreds’ from trying to ‘sew national hatred among the population’. Three days later, on March 6, the Commission sent representatives to the north-west of Petrograd to respond to an increase in ‘antisemitic agitation’. Later that week, reports came in of ‘pogrom literature’ being distributed in the capital.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, just days after it was established, the Moscow soviet immediately began to monitor instances of antisemitism.<sup>13</sup> In mid-June, the Petrograd soviet sent a special commission to the Ukrainian city of Elisavetgrad and its neighbouring towns in an attempt to ensure a local soviet response in the event of an outbreak of anti-Jewish violence.<sup>14</sup> By the third week of June, crowds of workers were reportedly gathering in Petrograd to welcome pogromist speeches purporting to reveal the ‘real’ names of the Jewish members of the Petrograd soviet.<sup>15</sup> Bolshevik leaders sometimes came face-to-face with such antisemitism. When walking through the streets of the capital in early July, the Bolshevik Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич – Lenin’s future secretary - encountered various groups of people openly calling for anti-Jewish pogroms.<sup>16</sup> Around the same time, the Jewish historian Simon Dubnov noted in his diary that he too had heard people calling for pogroms, at the Aleksandr Market in Petrograd<sup>17</sup>. More and more reports came in of similar gatherings. At some

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<sup>11</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Fascism, Stalinism and the United Front*, trans. from the German (London: Bookmarks 1989), 132–8.

<sup>12</sup> Gal’perina, *Petrogradskii Sovet* 84, 132, 176, 190, 342. The Commission continued to take measures to combat antisemitism throughout 1917. On May 22, for example, it instructed the Ministry of Military Affairs to take action against reported antisemitism within the Russian Army. See Gal’perina, B. D. and Startsev, V. I. (eds), *Petrogradskii Sovet Rabochikh i Soldatskikh Deputatov v 1917 godu, dokumenty i materialy*. vol. 3. (Moscow: ROSSPEN) 2002, 132.

<sup>13</sup> See the documents in Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv moskovskoi oblasti, Moscow (Central State Archive of the Moscow Region), hereafter TsGAMO, f. 66 o.25 d.45 l.1–45. The folder containing these files is titled ‘Black Hundred material (pogromist agitation against Jews, attacked on the Moscow Soviet 31/31917-1/11/1917).

<sup>14</sup> Hans Rogger, ‘Conclusions and overview’, in John D. Klier and Shlomo Lambroza (eds), *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne and Sydney: Cambridge University Press 1992), 314–72 (350).

<sup>15</sup> Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos*, 317.

<sup>16</sup> These recollections were included in a speech delivered by Bonch-Bruевич on 28 October 1917. The speech was reprinted in Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич, *Krovavyi Navet na Khristian* (Moscow 1919), 11. A copy of this title is held in Bonch-Bruевич’s personal files in the manuscripts department of the Rossiiskaia gosudarstvennaia biblioteka, Moscow (Russian State Library), Fond rukopisei, f. 369 o. 49 d. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Simon Dubnov *Kniga Zhizni: Materialy dlia istorii moego vremeni. Vospominaniia i razmyshleniia* (Moscow: Ierusalim Gesharim 2004) 417.

of them, class resentment and antisemitic representations of Jewishness overlapped: in late-July, speakers at a street-corner rally in the city centre called on the crowd to ‘smash the Jews and the bourgeoisie!’<sup>18</sup> As the socialist newspaper *Izvestiia* put it: “Lately, on the streets of Petrograd and other cities, pogrom-like persecution of the Jews goes on almost before our very eyes”<sup>19</sup>. Whereas, in the immediate context after the February Revolution, such speeches had failed to have any real traction on the streets of Petrograd, they now were drawing large audiences.<sup>20</sup> It was in this context that the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies gathered in Petrograd.

This First Congress of Soviets was composed of 1,090 delegates from all socialist parties and represented more than 336 local soviets, scores of military units and more than 20 million Russian citizens.<sup>21</sup> This was, without question, a historic gathering of the revolutionary movement. Throughout the month of June, the Congress met daily to discuss a range of political issues, including the convocation of a constituent assembly, the ongoing war, the land question and many others matters. On 22 June, however, as reports continued to flood in of yet more antisemitic incidents, the Congress produced the most authoritative statement on antisemitism by the socialist movement yet.

On the morning of the 22nd, a meeting of the Congress’s special Commission on the National Question was held to draft a special resolution ‘On the Struggle against Antisemitism’.<sup>22</sup> This task was allocated to the Bolshevik Evgenii Preobrazhenskii,<sup>23</sup> who just two days previously had openly condemned the Provisional Government for delaying its decision to take measures to protect ‘oppressed national minorities’.<sup>24</sup> Preobrazhenskii’s resolution on antisemitism was passed unanimously by the Commission on the National Question, and was then immediately put to the Congress delegates later that same day. Prior to reading out his resolution before the assembled delegates, Preobrazhenskii began with an impassioned speech:

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<sup>18</sup> Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York: W. W. Norton 1978), 43.

<sup>19</sup> Beizer, ‘Antisemitism in Petrograd/Leningrad’, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Beizer, ‘Antisemitism in Petrograd/Leningrad’, 7; Budnitskii, *Rossiiskie evrei mezhdru Krasnymi i Belymi*, 83–4.

<sup>21</sup> Vasilii L’vov-Rogachevskii, *Goniteli evreiskogo naroda v Rossii: Istoricheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Moskovskii Sovet Rabochikh Deputatov, Otdel Izdatel’stva i Knizhnogo Sklada 1917), 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Preobrazhenskii would again return to the question of antisemitism two years later, in 1919, when he included a special subchapter dedicated specifically to antisemitism in *ABC of Communism*; see Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhenskii, *The ABC of Communism* [1919] (London: Merlin Press 2006), 199–200.

<sup>24</sup> M. F. Vladimirkii, A. S. Enukidze, M. N. Pokrovskii and Iakovleva (eds), *Pervyi Vserossiiskii S’ezd Sovetov Rabochikh i Soldatskikh Deputatov*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Gosizdat 1931), 182. See also Robert Paul Browder and Alexandr F. Kerensky (eds), *The Russian Provisional Government 1917: Documents*, 3 vols (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1961), 318–19.

Congress cannot let this issue pass without making a special appeal to the whole *demokratiia* [socialist movement], it cannot let this pass without proposing a series of measures to ensure its duty to the Jewish people and show to the masses that this anti-Jewish demagoguery is carried out in order to restore tsarism and destroy the freedoms won by the revolution.<sup>25</sup>

Preobrazhenskii identified antisemitism as an attempt to enact a counter-revolution against February and restore tsarism, a perspective firmly in keeping with ‘the standpoint of the bourgeois revolution’ discussed above. It is also worth noting that, despite the deepening split between the soviet leadership and the increasingly radicalized and bolshevized cadres, Preobrazhenskii continued to appeal to the *whole* socialist movement, without party distinction. In other words, for the Bolshevik Preobrazhenskii, the campaign against antisemitism was an issue that could forge alliances across the socialist left, and, indeed, it was something that *required* such unity.

The resolution itself had two important things to say about antisemitism. First, Preobrazhenskii instructed ‘all local soviets . . . to carry out relentless propaganda and educational work among the masses in order to combat anti-Jewish persecution’.<sup>26</sup> This underscored the profoundly educative role of the soviets. Second, the resolution warned of the ‘great danger’ posed by the ‘tendency for antisemitism to disguise itself under radical slogans’. This admission that antisemitism and radical leftist politics could articulate with one another was relatively new territory for revolutionaries, who until then, had tended to frame antisemitism as the preserve of the counterrevolutionary right. Within the coming weeks, the Bolsheviks would discover the extent to which antisemitic and revolutionary discourse could overlap. For now, however, the message of the resolution was clear: the appearance of antisemitism under revolutionary slogans represented ‘an enormous threat to the Jewish people and the whole revolutionary movement, since it threatens to drown the liberation of the people in the blood of our brothers, and cover in disgrace the entire revolutionary movement’. When Preobrazhenskii finished reading aloud the resolution, a Jewish delegate rose to state his wholehearted agreement with it, before adding that, although it would not bring back his fellow-Jews murdered in the pogroms of 1905, it would nevertheless help heal some of the wounds that continued to cause so much pain in the Jewish community. The resolution was passed unanimously by the Congress.<sup>27</sup>

What were the consequences of this historic meeting? Writing in September 1917, the veteran Menshevik Vasili L’vov-Rogachevskii lamented that the soviets had not taken antisemitism seriously following the Congress, pointing out that the promised educational campaigns had not materialized and

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<sup>25</sup> Vladimirskii, Erukidze, Pokrovskii and Iakovleva (eds), *Pervyi Vserossiiskii S’ezd Sovetov Rabochikh i Soldatskikh Deputatov*, 241.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 239–41.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.



that the soviets had generally failed to publish literature on antisemitism.<sup>28</sup> Whilst the soviets may well have failed to respond to the growth of antisemitism in late June and July, newspaper sources from August and September indicate that a campaign was indeed eventually set in motion by various regional soviets. For example, in response to growing reports of antisemitic agitation, the Moscow Soviet undertook a series of measures, including organizing lectures and talks in Moscow factories on antisemitism.<sup>29</sup> On 20 August the Moscow soviet also convened a meeting to debate the sharp increase in antisemitic propaganda, and a special commission was formed to campaign locally against antisemitism. The following day, on 21 August, the commission organized another meeting, this time one that included not only the deputies from the local Moscow district soviets, but trade unionists and representatives of the regional Duma as well.<sup>30</sup> In the former Pale of Settlement, local soviets were instrumental in preventing antisemitic pogroms. For example, in Chernigov (Ukraine) in mid-August, Black Hundred accusations that Jews were stocking up bread led to a series of violent anti-Jewish disturbances. Crucially, it took a delegation from the Kiev soviet to organize a group of local troops to put down the unrest.<sup>31</sup> Other small-scale interventions occurred in places further afield: in late August the local soviet in Slutsk—a city south of Minsk—issued a special resolution against antisemitism in light of pogromist agitation by a group of monks at a local monastery.<sup>32</sup>

Soviet attempts to combat antisemitism continued throughout September. Early in the month, the Moscow soviet again issued a special proclamation against pogroms, calling on meetings to be set up for workers to discuss antisemitism.<sup>33</sup> On 17 September the aforementioned L'vov-Rogachevskii delivered a lecture to the Moscow branch of the Menshevik party on the topic 'The Jews in Russia and Their Role in the Revolutionary Movement'. Other lectures on similar themes continued to be delivered in workplaces and soviets throughout September.<sup>34</sup> On 13 September, yet another commission was established to confront pogroms, this time by the Kiev soviet, and its work included arranging meetings for 'various democratic organizations' on the topic of antisemitism.<sup>35</sup> This again points to the centrality of cross-party and cross-class alliances in the campaigns against antisemitism. Despite the growing bolshevization of the soviets, the fight against antisemitism was something that continued to require the participation of all socialist parties.

Moderate socialists in the Provisional Government, we should note, attempted to initiate their own response to antisemitism. On 14 September, at a meeting of the government, the Menshevik A. M.

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<sup>28</sup> L'vov-Rogachevskii, *Goniteli evreiskogo naroda v Rossii*, 102.

<sup>29</sup> *Evreiskaia Zhizn'* (Jewish Life), no. 38–9, 29 September 1917, 20.

<sup>30</sup> *Razsvet* (Dawn), no. 8, 30 August 1917, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos*, 389–99.

<sup>32</sup> *Razsvet*, no. 8, 30 August 1917, 33.

<sup>33</sup> Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos*, 429.

<sup>34</sup> *Evreiskaia Zhizn'*, 38–9, 29 September 1917, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos*, 432.

Nikitin explicitly raised the issue of pogroms. Government representatives responded by passing a resolution that promised to take ‘the most drastic measures against all pogromists’.<sup>36</sup> At another meeting, on 29 September, government ministers were given ‘all powers at their disposal’ to put down pogroms.<sup>37</sup> In the government’s own words, stopping pogroms was to be achieved by strengthening ‘military and civil authorities’ and ‘local organs of government’.<sup>38</sup> Despite these and other related initiatives, however, the Provisional Government’s power had virtually disintegrated: with its ideological and repressive state apparatuses almost completely paralysed by mid-late 1917,<sup>39</sup> it was in no position to respond adequately to outbreaks of antisemitism.<sup>40</sup> An editorial in the pro-government newspaper *Russkie Vedomosti* on 1 October captured the situation in stark terms: ‘the wave of pogroms grows and expands . . . mountains of telegrams arrive daily . . . [yet] the Provisional Government is snowed under . . . the local administration is powerless to do anything . . . *the means of coercion are completely exhausted*’.<sup>41</sup>

Not so with the soviets. As the political crisis deepened in October, scores of provincial soviets established their own repressive state apparatuses for combatting antisemitism. For example, on 7 October in Vitebsk, a city 350 miles west of Moscow, the local soviet formed a military unit to protect the city from pogromists.<sup>42</sup> The following week, the Orel soviet passed a resolution to take up arms against all forms of antisemitic violence.<sup>43</sup> By the middle of the month, ‘soviet anti-antisemitism’ had even spread to the Russian Far East, where a meeting of the All-Siberian soviet issued a resolution protesting against pogroms, declaring that the local revolutionary army was prepared to take ‘all measures necessary’ to prevent them.<sup>44</sup> This remarkable display of solidarity shows how deeply ingrained the fight against antisemitism was within sections of the organized socialist movement. Even in places in the Far East where there were comparatively few Jews and even fewer pogroms,<sup>45</sup> local

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 423.

<sup>37</sup> Cherikover, *Antisemitizm i pogromy na Ukraine*, 207; Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos*, 423.

<sup>38</sup> Browder and Kerensky (eds), *The Russian Provisional Government*, 1644.

<sup>39</sup> The concepts ‘repressive’ and ‘ideological’ state apparatuses are used here in the Althusserian sense to identify and distinguish between two spheres of state activity: the ‘repressive state apparatuses’ that predominantly function through coercion (the army, police and courts); and the ‘ideological state apparatuses’ that function through ideology and persuasion. See Louis Althusser, *On The Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: Verso 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Buldakov *Khaos i etnos*, 318; Buldakov, ‘Freedom, shortages, violence’, 74.

<sup>41</sup> Browder and Kerensky (eds), *The Russian Provisional Government*, 1646 (emphasis added).

<sup>42</sup> Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos*, 446.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 454.

<sup>44</sup> *Izvestiia VTsIK*, 21 October 1917, 2. Article titled ‘Protest Against Jewish Pogroms’.

<sup>45</sup> Although see Lilia Kalmina ‘The possibility of the impossible: pogroms in Eastern Siberia’, in Dekel-Chen, Gaunt, Meir and Bartal (eds), *Anti-Jewish Violence*, 131–44.

soviets identified with the Jews on the Western Front who were suffering at the hands of pogromists and antisemites.

That the soviets had become, by mid-late 1917, the principle source of socialist opposition to antisemitism seems beyond doubt. In mid-September, even the highly critical liberal Jewish newspaper *Evreiskaia Nedelia* admitted in an editorial: ‘It must be said, and we must give them their dues, the soviets . . . have carried out an energetic struggle against [pogroms] . . . and in many places it has only been thanks to their strength that peace has been restored.’<sup>46</sup> However, we should also note that the fight against antisemitism was unevenly developed at the local level. In mid-October in Tambov (a city 300 miles south of Moscow), the local soviet met to discuss measures to stop the recent outbreak of pogromist violence. During the discussion, members of the soviet reportedly shouted ‘Why stop the pogrom? Let’s join in (*idem podsobliat*’)!’<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the overall picture that emerges from even the critical Jewish press in 1917 is one that points to the soviets playing a leading role in combatting antisemitic violence.

Such opposition to antisemitism from below was replicated from above by the All-Russian Executive Committee (Vserossiiskii Tsentral’nyi Iсполnitel’nyi Komitet, VTsIK)—the head organization of the soviets—when it wrote to all soviet deputies on 7 October demanding that a commission consisting of all soviet parties and trade unions be formed in every city to fight antisemitism. The commissions were also instructed to issue leaflets and brochures denouncing anti-Jewish violence.<sup>48</sup> Three days later, on 10 October, the VTsIK met again to outline further measures against antisemitism, with the Bundist Abramovich leading the discussions.<sup>49</sup> Most symbolic of all, however, was the resolution passed against antisemitism by the 2nd All-Russian Congress of Soviets on 26 October: ‘The honour . . . of the revolution demands that no such pogroms take place . . . the whole of revolutionary Russia and the world is watching you.’<sup>50</sup> The timing could not have been more dramatic: the resolution was issued at the very moment that Red Guards seized the Winter Palace. The wording of this resolution appeared to reveal a concern on behalf of the Congress that a revolutionary insurrection might enlarge the scope for pogroms. This fear that revolution—and in particular a

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<sup>46</sup> *Evreiskaia Nedelia*, no. 36–7, 12 September 1917, 1. ‘Pogromist Danger and the Means of Self-Defence’.

<sup>47</sup> *Evreiskaia Nedelia*, no. 41, 15 October 1917, 1. Editorial titled ‘The Soviet of the Russian Republic’.

<sup>48</sup> Telegram sent to all soviets from the Moscow Soviet from the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, instructing them to form commissions to combat pogroms. Dated October 7 1917. TsGAMO, f. 66 o.3 d.865 l.1–2.

<sup>49</sup> Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos*, 446.

<sup>50</sup> Iu. A. Akhupkin, M. P. Iroshnikov and A. V. Gogolevskii (eds), *Dekrety Sovetskoi Vlasti o Petrograde: 25 oktiabria (7 noiabria) 1917 g—29 dekabria 1918 g.* (Leningrad: Lenizdat 1986), 14. This decree was also published in the Bolshevik newspapers *Soldatskaia Pravda* (Soldiers’ Truth) and *Derevenskaia Bednota* (The Village Poor) on 28 October 1917 and, again, in the Zionist weekly *Razsvet*, in no. 17–18, 22 November 1917, 50.

*Bolshevik* revolution—would exacerbate the threat of the pogroms was something that was felt across the socialist left.

### **Antisemitism within the Revolutionary Movement**

The sociologist Goran Therborn once noted that ideologies do not exist in a pure form or as something possessed or not possessed. On the contrary, they ‘coexist, compete, and clash . . . affect, and contaminate one another’. The task, then, of the sociologist is to try to show ‘the patterning of the relationships between given ideologies’.<sup>51</sup> For the Bolshevik leadership, revolutionary politics were simply incompatible with antisemitism; they were at opposite ends of the political spectrum. As a front page headline in the party’s main newspaper *Pravda* would later put it: ‘To be against the Jews is to be for the Tsar!’<sup>52</sup> Yet, when it came to the party rank and file, the overlap between revolutionary Bolshevism and counter-revolutionary antisemitism in 1917 appears to have been real. Revolution and antisemitism existed not only in conflict, but in articulation as well.

For all that the Bolsheviks played an unquestionably crucial role in the broad socialist response to antisemitism in 1917, newspaper reports from the summer and autumn of that year show that they were frequently accused by other socialists of perpetuating antisemitism and even harbouring antisemites within the party’s social base. For example, in June, Georgii Plekhanov’s anti-Bolshevik newspaper *Edinstvo* reported that, when Menshevik agitators spoke at the Moscow barracks in the Vyborg region of Petrograd during the regional Duma elections, soldiers, apparently egged on by Bolsheviks, shouted ‘Down with them! They’re all Yids!’<sup>53</sup> According to the Bundist Mark Liber, when hundreds of thousands of workers protested in Petrograd on 18 June, Bolsheviks reportedly tore down Bundist banners and shouted antisemitic slogans. When Liber raised this at a session of the Petrograd Soviet on June 20, he went so far as to accuse the Bolsheviks of being pro-pogromist.<sup>54</sup> The Menshevik newspaper *Vpered* also reported in June that, at an open meeting in the Mar’ina Roshcha district of Moscow, Bolsheviks shouted down Mensheviks, accusing them of being ‘Yids’ who ‘exploit the

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<sup>51</sup> Goran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso 1980), vii, 31–2, 79.

<sup>52</sup> *Pravda*, 14 May 1919, 1. Newspaper article by the Bolshevik Il’ia Vardin titled ‘To be Against the Jews is to be For the Tsar’.

<sup>53</sup> *Evreiskaia Nedelia*, no. 25, 25 June 1917, 25. An overview of the Russian press titled ‘Antisemitism and Demagogy’. Plekhanov, we should note, was vehemently anti-Bolshevik by mid-1917, so this source ought to be treated with some caution. Also, we should further note that in 1917 radicalized soldiers regularly took liberty to speak at political meetings ‘as Bolsheviks’, even when they had no party credentials. This sometimes led the Bolshevik leaders to demand party credentials to be shown before rank and file members could speak at rallies. See Vatslav Sol’skii *1917 god v Zapadnoi Obslati i Zapadnom Fronte* (Minsk: Tesei 2004) 141. I thank Gleb Albert for bringing this source to my attention.

<sup>54</sup> Gal’perina and Startsev *Petrogradskii Sovet* vol. 3. 348, 352. See also Beizer, ‘Antisemitism in Petrograd/Leningrad’, 8.

proletariat'.<sup>55</sup> Reports of Bolshevik antisemitism aimed at Mensheviks in Moscow continued throughout the July Days,<sup>56</sup> and were replicated in other cities too. In Odessa, for example, reports reached the Zionist press that Bolshevik agitation among soldiers had an explicitly antisemitic character. In response, the local Odessa soviet closed down Jewish shops in an attempt to prevent a pogrom.<sup>57</sup> Such reports became even more frequent during the critical weeks in October and November. Ilia Ehrenburg, who would go on to be one of the most prolific and well-known Jewish writers in the Soviet Union, wrote the following letter to his friend M. A. Voloshin a few days after the October insurrection. It stands as perhaps the most vivid description of the articulation between antisemitism and the revolutionary process in 1917:

Yesterday I was standing in line, waiting to vote for the Constituent Assembly. People were saying 'Whoever's against the Yids, vote for number 5! [the Bolsheviks]', 'Whoever's for world-wide revolution, vote for number 5!' The patriarch rode by, sprinkling holy water; everyone removed their hats. A group of soldiers passing by started to belt out the *Internationale* in his direction. Where am I? Or is this truly hell?<sup>58</sup>

In this startling account, the apparently obvious distinction between revolutionary Bolshevism and counter-revolutionary antisemitism is blurred. Around the same time, in the Okhta region of Petrograd, the writer Solomon Lur'e similarly observed Bolsheviks assuring voters queuing up to vote in the Constituent Assembly elections that the head of the Provisional Government, Alexander Kerensky, was in fact a Jew and that, for this reason, they should choose to support the Bolsheviks.<sup>59</sup> Kerensky, of course, was not Jewish but such antisemitism did not operate according to logic or verifiable empirical observation. Indeed, the Provisional Government was frequently labelled by antisemites as 'Jewish', despite the fact that there were no Jews in the government. One arresting illustration of the extraordinary degree to which antisemitism could take flight from reality is captured when Kerensky, leaving the Winter Palace by car on the night of the Bolshevik insurrection, noticed that someone had painted in huge letters across the palace wall: 'Down with the Jew Kerensky, Long Live Trotsky!'<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Evreiskaia Nedelia*, no. 25, 25 June 1917, 26. An overview of the Russian press titled 'Antisemitism and Demagogy'.

<sup>56</sup> Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos*, 340. The 'July Days' (3–7 July 1917) refer to a uprising of workers and soldiers in Petrograd against the Provisional Government.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 341, 344.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Budnitskii, *Rossiiskie evrei mezhdru Krasnymi i Belymi*, 88.

<sup>59</sup> Bogdana Iakovlevna Koprzhiva-Lur'e, *Istoriia odnoi zhizni* (Paris: Atheneum 1987), 79.

<sup>60</sup> Marc Ferro, *October 1917: A Social History of the Russian Revolution*, trans. from the French by Norman Stone (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1980), 238.

These examples prefigured Isaac Babel's haunting question in *Red Cavalry*: 'which is the Revolution and which the counterrevolution?'<sup>61</sup> Despite Bolshevik insistence that antisemitism was a purely 'counter-revolutionary' phenomenon,<sup>62</sup> it clearly eluded such neat categorization, and could be found across the political divide, in highly complex and unexpected forms.

What constituted the social basis of this apparent antisemitism on the revolutionary left? In a Jewish newspaper issued shortly after the October Revolution, it was claimed that antisemitic 'Black Hundreds' were 'filling up the ranks of the Bolsheviks' across the whole country.<sup>63</sup> Such claims certainly ought to be treated with a strong degree of caution. Nevertheless, the notion that Bolshevism could be appealing to far-right antisemites was not entirely without substance: in some far-right circles the October Revolution was *welcomed* in the hours immediately following the seizure of power. For example, an astonishing editorial in the antisemitic paper *Groza* (Thunderstorm) on 29 October declared:

The Bolsheviks have seized power. The Jew Kerensky, lackey to the British and the world's bankers, having brazenly assumed the title of commander-in-chief of the armed forces and having appointed himself Prime Minister of the Orthodox Russian Tsardom, will be swept out of the Winter Palace, where he had desecrated the remains of the Peace-Maker Alexander III with his presence. On October 25th, the Bolsheviks united all the regiments who refused to submit to a government composed of Jew bankers, treasonous generals, traitorous land-owners, and thieving merchants.<sup>64</sup>

It is abundantly clear that the Bolshevik leadership sought to arrest this articulation between the antisemitism of the far right and the radicalism of the Bolshevik project (the *Groza* newspaper, for example, was immediately closed down after the revolution). Moreover, we certainly ought to treat with caution accusations from the Bolsheviks' socialist adversaries that the party was full of antisemites, since there was evidently a lot of political capital to be gained by associating the Bolsheviks with 'counter-revolutionaries'. Nevertheless, the frequency with which such reports appeared (and the above

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<sup>61</sup> Isaac Babel, 'Gedali', in Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry* (New York: W. W. Norton 2003), 63–6 (65).

<sup>62</sup> When an editorial published in the Kronstadt soviet newspaper *Izvestiia* claimed that 'antisemitism and counter-revolution are one and the same thing' (*Razsvet*, no. 2, 16 July 1917, 35), it was expressing a longstanding and oft-repeated tenet of the socialist understanding of antisemitism.

<sup>63</sup> *Evreiskaia Nedelia*, no. 43–4, 29 October 1917, 4. Article on the growth of antisemitism following the Bolshevik Revolution titled 'A New Wave'.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Budnitskii, *Rossiiskie evrei mezhdru Krasnymi i Belymi*, 87. The apparently 'pro-Bolshevik' antisemitism of the newspaper *Groza* was discussed at a session of the Petrograd Soviet on October 16. See Gal'perina, B. D. and Startsev, V. I. (eds), *Petrogradskii Sovet Rabochikh i Soldatskikh Deputatov v 1917 godu, dokumenty i materialy*. vol. 4. (Moscow: ROSSPEN) 2003, 524, 530.

account is by no means exceptional) does suggest that such articulations were indeed at play, even if they were overstated.<sup>65</sup>

In mid-late 1917, Lenin's prerevolutionary conception of a small conspiratorial party was discarded as the doors were opened wide to tens of thousands of new members, many of whom were becoming politicized for the first time.<sup>66</sup> With many more non-members subscribing to the party's radical anti-bourgeois critique, the Bolsheviks had truly become a mass party. It is not difficult to imagine that the Bolshevik project unwittingly attracted racist and antisemitic elements of society, including among the working class. In such circumstances, statements by the party leadership on antisemitism were clearly not always going to be representative of the thoughts and feelings of the party rank and file as a whole. Events in 1918 and 1919 would reveal just how acute this problem was when, in many regions of the former Pale of Settlement, the Red Army suddenly found swathes of pogromists in their midst marching behind the slogan 'Smash the Yids, long live Soviet Power!'<sup>67</sup>

### **Revolution and antisemitism? Socialist intellectuals and the critique of the October insurrection**

Concern about the overlap between antisemitism and Bolshevism in late-1917 was most commonly expressed by moderate socialist intellectuals. What underscored their anxiety was a fear that Lenin's insistence on insurrection would produce a series of unintended consequences, including anti-Jewish violence. Attempts to overthrow the Provisional Government and to construct (prematurely) a socialist society would necessarily lead to 'pogroms',<sup>68</sup> so they argued. For the Menshevik L'vov-Rogachevskii, the 'tragedy' of the Russian revolution lay in the apparent fact that the 'the dark masses (*temnota*) are unable to distinguish the provocateur from the revolutionary, or the Jewish pogrom from a social revolution'.<sup>69</sup> Maxim Gorky epitomized this strand of thinking in his *Novaia Zhizn*' writings throughout

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<sup>65</sup> Beizer, 'Antisemitism in Petrograd/Leningrad', 8.

<sup>66</sup> Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, xxi.

<sup>67</sup> See Brendan McGeever, *The Bolsheviks and Antisemitism in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), 2018. See also Brendan McGeever 'The Bolshevik Confrontation', 99–115, 149–75.

<sup>68</sup> The Russian word *pogrom* went through something of a transformation in 1917 and began to take on a much broader signification. Throughout October and November, for example, the front pages of soviet and Bolshevik newspapers carried headlines warning of pogromist violence, and it is clear that the term was deployed to mean disorder in general, not just antisemitic violence per se. See, for example, *Izvestiia VTsIK*, no. 187, 3 October 1917, 1–2; no. 193, 10 October 1917, 4; no. 201, 19 October 1917, 2; no. 204, 22 October 1917, 1; *Izvestiia Moskovskogo Soveta Rabochikh Deputatov*, no. 201, 1 November 1917, 2; no. 202, 2 November 1917, 2; and *Soldatskaia Pravda*, no. 98, 7 December 1917, 1. We should note, therefore, that when socialists and leftists warned of 'pogroms' (as they frequently did) they often had this more generalized conception in mind, and when referring specifically to antisemitic pogroms, they would often insert the adjective *evreiskie* (Jewish) to denote '[anti-]Jewish pogroms' (*evreiskie pogromy*).

<sup>69</sup> L'vov-Rogachevskii, *Goniteli evreiskogo naroda v Rossii*, 108.

1917.<sup>70</sup> On 18 October, for example, he warned that an insurrection would see an ‘unorganized mob pour out into the streets, not knowing what it wants and [it] . . . will begin to “make the history of the Russian revolution”’. If the Bolsheviks took power, he predicted that ‘this time events will assume an even bloodier pogrom character’.<sup>71</sup> Two days earlier, at a session of the Petrograd Soviet on October 18, the Menshevik-Internationalist Isaak Astrov gave a detailed description of how “pogrom agitation” was finding traction within sections of the working class. Pogromists, he said, were awaiting a Bolshevik insurrection with anticipation<sup>72</sup>. On 24 October, on the eve of revolution, the Menshevik Fedor Dan pleaded with the radicalized Petrograd soviet to step back from revolution, warning that ‘counter-revolutionists are waiting with the Bolsheviks to begin riots and massacres’.<sup>73</sup> In Vitebsk, the Socialist Revolutionary newspaper *Vlast’ Naroda* reported that Black Hundreds would try to start an anti-Jewish pogrom in the event of any Bolshevik attempt to take power.<sup>74</sup> As late as 28 October, the Mensheviks’ Petrograd Electoral Committee issued yet another desperate appeal to workers in the capital, warning that all forms of protest would *necessarily* lead to pogroms: the Bolsheviks have seduced ‘the ignorant workers and soldiers’, and the cry of “All power to the Soviets!” will all too easily turn into “Beat the Jews, beat the shopkeepers””.<sup>75</sup> That same day, the Bolshevik Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич also issued an appeal against antisemitism. Though he laid the blame squarely with Black Hundreds, and not the Bolsheviks or their working-class supporters, the timing of his intervention reflected a widely held anxiety about the relationship between revolution and antisemitism.<sup>76</sup>

These fears were replicated in the Jewish press. For example, a lead article in the liberal newspaper *Evreiskaia Nedelia* on 15 October claimed that

comrade Lenin and his fellow Bolsheviks call in their speeches and articles on the proletariat to ‘turn their words into action’ (*pereiti ot slovo k delu*), but . . . wherever

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<sup>70</sup> *Novaia Zhizn’* was a newspaper established by Maxim Gorky after the February Revolution. Politically orientating itself towards the Menshevik Internationalists (a number of whom sat on the editorial board), it was sharply critical of revolutionary Bolshevism in late 1917. Gorky himself wrote a series of articles denouncing the Bolshevik attempt to seize power. See Maxim Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts: Essays on Revolution, Culture and the Bolsheviks, 1917–1918*, trans. from the Russian by Herman Ermolaev (London: Garnstone Press 1968).

<sup>71</sup> Browder and Kerensky (eds), *The Russian Provisional Government*, 1766.

<sup>72</sup> Gal’perina and Startsev *Petrogradskii Sovet* vol. 4., 524. The Menshevik-Internationalists were a faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party that took an anti-war position in 1914.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (London and New York: Penguin 1977), 84.

<sup>74</sup> Buldakov, *Khaos i etnos*, 488.

<sup>75</sup> Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, 289.

<sup>76</sup> Bonch-Bruевич, *Krovavyyi Navet na Khristian*.



Slavic crowds gather, the turning of ‘words into action’ means, in reality, ‘striking out at the Yids’.<sup>77</sup>

The following week, the same publication warned on its front page that ‘social revolution in the minds of the Petrograd masses has become synonymous with “Jewish pogrom”’.<sup>78</sup>

Contrary to these alarmist predictions, in the hours and days immediately following the Bolshevik seizure of power, there were no mass pogroms in the Russian interior. In the immediate sense, then, the revolution did not translate into antisemitic violence, as had been predicted. The warnings cited above reveal just how deeply ingrained the fear of the ‘dark masses’ was among sections of the socialist left who claimed to speak in their name. This was especially true of the intelligentsia, who generally approached the notion of a proletarian uprising with horror due to the violence and barbarity they believed would inevitably flow as a result. In contrast, and as confirmed in Nikolai Sukhanov’s classic memoirs,<sup>79</sup> what defined the Bolsheviks during this period was precisely their closeness to the Petrograd masses so greatly feared by the intelligentsia.<sup>80</sup> However, just six months later, in the spring of 1918 in the former Pale of Settlement, the warnings from the previous year began to ring true: in towns and cities of northeast Ukraine, such as Glukhov, Bolshevik power was consolidated through anti-Jewish violence on the part of the local cadres of the party and Red Guards.<sup>81</sup> At the party’s congress in mid-May 1918, the Bund leadership pointed out in no uncertain terms that the pogroms were ‘principally a consequence of the presence of dark elements (*temnykh elementov*) who have attached themselves to the Bolshevik movement’.<sup>82</sup> These pogroms, of course, occurred not in Petrograd but in the quite different context of Ukraine. Nevertheless, they showed that the exhortations of the anti-Bolshevik socialist left in late 1917 were not entirely without substance.

## Beyond 1917

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<sup>77</sup> *Evreiskaia Nedelia*, no. 41, 15 October 1917, 1. Editorial titled ‘The Soviet of the Russian Republic’

<sup>78</sup> *Evreiskaia Nedelia*, no. 42, 22 October 1917, 1. Editorial titled ‘Without Panic’

<sup>79</sup> Nikolai Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution, 1917: A Personal Record*, trans. from the Russian by Joel Carmichael (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1984).

<sup>80</sup> I would like to thank Professor Christopher Read, who helped develop this point in a private correspondence.

<sup>81</sup> Cherikover, *Antisemitizm i pogromy na Ukraine, 1917–1918*, 287–97; McGeever, ‘The Bolshevik Confrontation with Antisemitism in the Russian Revolution’, 103–14; L. B. Miliakova, *Kniga Pogromov: Pogromy na Ukraine, v Belorussii i evropeiskoi chasti Rossii v periode Grazhdanskoi voiny 1918 – 1922 gg. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow: ROSSPEN 2010), 6–8.

<sup>82</sup> See K. M. Anderson, V. V. Shelokhaev and Iu. N. Amiantov (eds), *Bund: Dokumenty i Materialy, 1894–1921* (Moscow: ROSSPEN 2010), 1124–5. An edited version of this conference resolution – with the passage quoted above removed – was published in the Bund’s newspaper *Evreiskii Rabochii* (The Jewish Worker), Issue. 3, May 30 1917, 6.

The events of 1917 prefigured in embryonic form the parameters of the so-called ‘Jewish question’ in the Russian Civil War of 1918 and 1919. From June and July 1917 onwards, it became increasingly apparent that antisemitism was a problem within sections of the now enlarged Bolshevik support base. The challenge facing the Bolsheviks, then, was to not only combat the antisemitism of the radical right, but to disentangle the overlap between Bolshevik radicalism and antisemitism within the movement itself. These problems would heighten dramatically in 1918 and 1919 when the Civil War extended into parts of the former Pale of Settlement, where the bulk of the Jewish population resided. Here, when the Red Army fought for ‘Soviet power’, the lines of demarcation between ‘antisemite’ and ‘internationalist’ and ‘revolutionary’ and ‘counter-revolutionary’ often collapsed along an axis of antisemitic violence.<sup>83</sup> This article has shown that these shocking events did not come from nowhere: the articulation between antisemitism and revolutionary Bolshevism had been prefigured in 1917.

Yet this article has also demonstrated that the Bolsheviks responded to such antisemitism, and they did so by helping to build a broad socialist cross-party alliance comprising all progressive social forces. The political expression of this united front was the soviets of workers’ and soldiers’ deputies. Throughout mid- to late 1917, the soviets took a number of concrete measures, both locally and nationally, to confront rising antisemitism across Russian society. Despite the increasingly acute political differences and inter-party tensions that engulfed the soviets in the latter part of 1917, the Bolsheviks, like all socialists, continued to stress the importance of the strategy of the united front in combatting antisemitism. 1917 therefore produced a historic bloc of subalternity that offered a real challenge not just to class exploitation, but to forms of oppression such as antisemitism.

However, if February 1917 produced such alliances, October pulled them apart. Disagreeing profoundly on the Bolshevik acquisition of power, social democrats were pushed into opposing camps on the question of whether to support the new Soviet government. The trajectory of the main Jewish socialist party, the Bund, illustrates well the dilemmas thrown up by the actuality of revolution in October. On the evening of 25 October 1917, at an emergency meeting to discuss the Bolshevik insurrection, the Central Committee of the Bund called on ‘all revolutionary democratic forces’ to ‘form a coalition to fight against the coalition of counterrevolution’.<sup>84</sup> The writing, however, was already on the wall: the ‘democratic forces’ of the soviets no longer stood on the same platform. The strategy of the united front to defend the gains of the February Revolution had now been superseded by the actuality of the October, socialist, revolution. Later, in 1918, the Bund would split into left (pro-Soviet) and right (anti-Soviet) factions. The *fact* of Soviet power had pushed the party into ‘revolutionary’ and ‘reformist’ camps, and eventually this would bring about a formal split in the party with the establishment of the Communist Bund. In the radically changed conjuncture of post-October

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<sup>83</sup> For a full discussion, see McGeever, ‘The Bolshevik Confrontation with Antisemitism in the Russian Revolution’, 99–115, 149–75.

<sup>84</sup> Anderson, Shelokhaev and Amiantov (eds), *Bund*, 1104.

1917, new alliances and new collective forms of anti-racist agency had to be forged to confront the ferocious pogroms of 1918 and 1919. That story, however, remains out-with the scope of this article.<sup>85</sup>

The Bolshevik encounter with antisemitism in 1917 serves as a vivid illustration that anti-racism does not flow automatically from socialist politics. On the contrary, anti-racism needs to be renewed and cultivated, continually. A century on, as we grapple with the damage done by racism to class politics, 1917 can tell us much about how reactionary ideas can take hold, but also how they can be challenged and confronted.

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<sup>85</sup> Though see Brendan McGeever, *The Bolsheviks and Antisemitism in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017) for a detailed discussion. See also McGeever ‘The Bolshevik Confrontation’ and McGeever, ‘Bolshevik Responses to Antisemitism during the Civil War’.