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Antisemitism, racism, revolution

Brendan McGeever

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In this essay, I respond to Alana Lentin, Yair Wallach, David Renton and Andrew Sloin, who have each written reviews of my book *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* for this symposium. Taken together, I suggest that their contributions raise important issues in the study of antisemitism past and present. In particular, their commentaries draw attention to the ever-pressing issue of the relationship between antisemitism and other forms of racism. Further, they touch on the importance of understanding the role of identity (in this case, Jewish identity) in political confrontations with antisemitism and in anti-racism more broadly. Finally, through a discussion of the work of Moishe Postone, I discuss the limits and possibilities of deploying theories of antisemitism across time and space in empirically driven historical sociology.

KEYWORDS Antisemitism; racism; anti-racism; revolution; class; Russia

It has been a genuine pleasure to read the reviews of *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* solicited by the journal. That four colleagues whose work I so greatly admire took time to engage with the book is an immense privilege. Each reviewer raises substantive issues for thinking about antisemitism past and present and in doing so they push the argument I tried to develop in the book in suggestive and important ways. I shall try to respond to their comments in this essay.

Though very much a work of history, the writing of this book was animated by contemporary questions. Indeed, the very decision to undertake this study in its original form, as a PhD in sociology at the University of Glasgow, emerged, in part, from the ongoing entanglement of left-wing projects with questions of race and empire. I was so pleased, therefore, that the reviewers drew out something that was implicit in the text but never developed: that this work of historical sociology was written for a readership grappling with these issues in the here and now. In particular, David Renton, Yair Wallach and Alana Lentin take up the themes of the book and read them against the present. As they do so, they draw connections to histories of diaspora confrontations with antisemitism in England, Ireland and Australia. Such a geographical spread reflects the choices many Jews made following the catastrophic events of the Russian Civil War, which saw them uproot and go in search of liveable lives in nearly every corner of the globe. Some may question whether the history of the Russian Revolution contains “lessons” (as Wallach puts it) for the confrontation with antisemitism today, but I am immensely grateful to the reviews for undertaking this difficult and (to my mind) necessary task.

A contested issue in contemporary debate about antisemitism is whether it should be understood as a form of racism. While the book did not address this question at any length, it begins from the premise that modern antisemitism can be placed in conceptual and historical dialogue with other forms of racialization. Some scholars of the former Soviet Union and the Russian Empire find this framing unacceptable. Antisemitism, they insist, bears no relation to, say, anti-Black racism in other colonial and post-colonial contexts. Evidently, the reviewers in this symposium take a different view. Taken together, I think their comments demonstrate how the study of antisemitism past and present can benefit from an engagement with the divergences as well as the convergences that it shares with other forms of racialization. As Wallach writes, antisemitism is too often set apart from and often placed against other conversations of racism and anti-racism (8). This was precisely why I chose to open the book with Claude McKay’s startling

statement, written amid the peak of the pogrom wave in September 1919: Every Negro...should make a study of Bolshevism and explain its meaning to the coloured masses. It is the greatest and most scientific idea afloat in the world today...Bolshevism has made Russia safe for the Jew. It has liberated the Slav peasant from priest and bureaucrat who can no longer egg him on to murder Jews to bolster up their rotten institutions. It might make these United States safe for the Negro ... If the Russian idea should take hold of the white masses of the western world...then the black toilers would automatically be free!¹

This extraordinary comment not only underlines the confluence between the Black Atlantic and Jewish worlds, so brilliantly captured by Paul Gilroy thirty years ago (1993); it also suggests the possibilities that existed for a different kind of anti-racism that could identify shared histories as well as specificities. The resources for a multidirectional (Rothberg 2009) anti-racism of this sort are in short supply today. In her comments, Lentin points to the depth of the challenges facing those committed to “joining up the dots and resisting the retreat into hermeticism” (3).

David Renton’s reflections on the Bolshevik confrontation with antisemitism in the Russian Revolution take him to late-1970s south London, and to struggles against the National Front. Some readers may find this unusual: after all, what does a group of Poalei Zion radicals in Kherson in 1919 have to do with the Indian Workers Association in 1970s Southall? But I was thrilled Renton drew this connection. The idea for *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* first arose while taking Satnam Virdee’s MA in the Sociology of Racism and Modernity at the University of Glasgow. In that course, we read closely the works of Stuart Hall, Robert Miles, Paul Gilroy and many others. When I went to the Soviet archives soon after, what immediately struck me was that these classic debates from 1970s Britain were, in curious ways, prefigured in the Russian Revolution. Should racialised minorities organize themselves autonomously against racism, or should they locate themselves within broader movements for class struggle? How do we respond to the depth of racism within sections of the working class, including the labour movement itself? Can the struggle against class adequately address such racism, or does their need to be a dedicated and independent campaign against such hostility? The Soviet archives were brimming with such questions. In the book I shied away from saying anything substantial about these unexpected confluences, so I am delighted David Renton and Alana Lentin managed to do so in their reviews in this symposium.

My book grappled with two questions: what was the nature and extent of antisemitism within the revolutionary movement and the Red Army, and how did the Bolsheviks respond to such antisemitism? This second question inevitably led me to go in search of what we today call “anti-racist agency”, or more awkwardly, “anti-antisemitism”. Bolshevism had a longstanding stated opposition to antisemitism stretching back to the late-imperial period, but in the crucible of war and revolution, who actualized that standpoint; who rendered it into a sustained form of political action? I found the answer in the archives of non-Bolshevik Jewish socialism; in particular, the Bund and Poalei Zion. As Renton notes, activists in these organizations occupied an intermediary space between Zionism and internationalism. On the one hand, they were more embedded in the Jewish world than those non-Jewish Jews in the mould of Trotsky or Sverdlov, who were further traversed along the path of assimilation. On the other, they either temporarily set to one side (in the case of Poalei Zion) or rejected outright (in the case of the Bund) aspirations for Zion in favour of a diasporic fight for civil rights in the here and now. It was from this particular location that the activists in this study pressed the Soviet state to take more seriously the question of antisemitism. As Sloin puts it in his review, this “prodding was necessary because, left to their own devices, the Bolsheviks showed little inclination to transform pre-revolutionary, theoretical opposition to anti-Semitism into the actual revolutionary praxis of fighting antisemitism and pogroms” (3). In the book, I tried to argue that the opposition to antisemitism conjured

by these activists bore a different quality from that offered by the Bolshevik leadership. Drawing on Satnam Virdee's pioneering work on racialized outsiders (2014), I suggested that it sprung from an "ethical imperative" that elevated the politics of ethnicity to a status equal to class. Wallach is correct, I think, to point to the weakness of this framing of the "ethical imperative". In reaching for "ethics" I was trying to capture the urgency of an anti-racism whose foundations were not determined by instrumentalism or tactics but instead, by something quite specific and particular. Wallach does a better job than I do by suggesting it was

their subject position which triggered this "ethical" response, their embeddedness within the affected communities, and perhaps what some would call their "identity politics". Well placed within Jewish life and society, these Jewish activists were able to bring real time information to alert the Bolsheviks to the gravity of the situation. (4)

This embeddedness in culture and ethnicity often came into conflict with a Bolshevism that gravitated to the politics of the universal. In her review, Lentin recognizes in this a tendency of the "white left" to misread antiracism as an "identity struggle". The left, she argues, too often sees race and class as opposing poles. In her conclusion, she suggests "neither narrow politics of identity" nor a relinquishing of those forms in favour of a blindly universalist politics "is viable" (6). Similarly, Renton goes in search of the "in-between nationalism and internationalism" quality that was carried by the historical actors in my book, and finds it across time and space, including in post-war Britain.

This discussion on anti-racist agency inevitably has implications for how we understand the role of the state. The Bolshevik approach to what was then understood as the "national question" took the form of state recognition for ethnic minorities. The formation of the Jewish Commissariat and the Jewish Sections of the Party – organizations which led the campaign against antisemitism – were emblematic in this respect. For Lentin, "appealing to the state to provide avenues for minority representation can only further thwart the fight against racism". I can see how the story I tell in the book can give weight to this conclusion. After all, the activists of the Jewish Commissariat and Jewish Sections had to struggle to get the question of antisemitism addressed at the state level. However, I think the question of anti-racism and the state remains historically contingent. As I read Lentin's review, I found myself comparing the fortunes of the Jewish Commissariat with those of the Bund, which rejected the October Revolution and refused outright to work with the Soviet state. In May 1918, as pogroms raged in the Ukrainian north east, the Bund tried to form a socialist initiative against antisemitism outside of Soviet state structures. Yet the endeavour came to nothing. By contrast, those Jewish socialists who joined the Soviet state and established the Jewish Commissariat succeeded in developing a quite extensive programme of education on antisemitism. Hundreds of thousands of pamphlets were published and distributed in factories, among workers' circles and in Red Army battalions where antisemitism was rife. This was possible because of a two-way movement in which (i) the Bolshevik state opened itself up to ethnic minority political action, and (ii) those activists in turn gravitated towards the Soviet state. Through this exchange, Bolshevism inherited a generation of radicals who would play a critically important role in elevating the politics of liberation within the class struggle. They sought to "stretch" Bolshevism, to paraphrase Franz Fanon (2001), by making it more attentive to questions of race. Yet the Soviet state would eventually snap back. By the late 1920s, as Stalinist hostility to "particularism" began to take hold, the organizations discussed in my book were all closed down. Worse was to follow. As the nightmare of High Stalinism descended in the middle of the decade, an entire layer of Soviet Jewish activists, including nearly all the key figures encountered in the book, were murdered in the Great Terror that scarred Soviet society for the rest of the century and beyond. So where does this leave our understanding of the relationship between anti-racism and the state? In the conclusion to the book, I wrote:

anti-racism does not flow automatically from socialist politics. Within the Soviet government of the Civil War period, opposition to antisemitism had to be cultivated and renewed, continually – and often by those at the margins of the Party. The Bolshevik response to antisemitism was most effective when the voices of those racialized internal “others” were amplified and listened to. (emphasis added)

There was nothing inevitable about the nightmare of Stalinism. The Jewish socialists I encountered in the archives attempted to build one of the world’s first-ever anti-racist states. And they did so in Russia, the land of the pogrom. I think there is much to admire in this overlooked chapter of Jewish and revolutionary history.

In this way, Sloin is right to point to the fact, perhaps underplayed in my book, that “for the first time in the entire sweep of ‘Russian’ history, the state – rather than tolerate, promote, or fan the flames of pogroms – directed its coercive power towards the suppression of antisemitism”. The book chronicles the difficulties and inadequacies of that response, but the fact that there was a response at all marked a significant shift in Russian state politics. In his essay, Sloin correctly notes that I effectively side-step the definitional question on antisemitism. Were I to write the book again, I would provide a more substantial theoretical statement on my understanding of antisemitism in revolutionary Russia. This would try to show that antisemitism was increasingly taking on a modern form from the late imperial period onwards (Johnson 2009). At the same time, traditional and religiously inflected elements, far from being abandoned, were in fact carried forward into this new epoch. In other words, what I and colleagues have elsewhere called the “reservoir” (Gidley, McGeever, and Feldman 2020) of antisemitism was replenished with new qualities as Russia entered a sustained period of crisis. Such an approach, I think, offers an alternative to the “longest hatred” (Wistrich 1992) or what Sloin calls a “quasi-eternalist conception” of antisemitism (6). Instead, the “reservoir” idea points to the vagrant and often discontinuous manifestations of antisemitism across space and time. Sloin develops a fascinating discussion of the place of Moishe Postone in *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution*. In the book, I was taken by Postone’s insight that modern antisemitism carries an “anti-hegemonic” quality, and that its danger for socialists lies in its unique configuration as a “fetishized form of oppositional consciousness, [as] the expression of a movement of the little people against intangible, global forms of domination” (Postone 2006, 99). The Bolsheviks, I argued, remained vulnerable to this dynamic as the Party’s ranks swelled with anti-bourgeois mass sentiment in 1919. Sloin perceptively notes that in taking up Postone, I excised these insights from his wider theoretical framework which is grounded in a more specific analysis of relations of capital and the commodity form. Sloin’s observation made me reflect on why I did not take up a fully Postonian analysis in the book. I have reservations about the extent to which antisemitism in revolutionary Russia can be fully captured through an analysis of capital. There are elements in the reservoir of antisemitism that predate the historically specific relations of capital that Postone had in mind in his classic essay (Postone 1980). Similarly, there are elements in the political culture of revolutionary Russia that had relatively autonomous qualities that cannot be collapsed into the “structural logics of the commodity form”. Despite these reservations, Sloin’s own work (Sloin 2017) shows, compellingly and brilliantly, how a Postonian analysis that centres political economy can be harnessed for the study of east European Jewish history in this period.

Elsewhere in his commentary, Sloin asks whether the atrocities discussed in *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* “prefigured, coincided with, and mirrored the logics of fascism, across post-WWI Europe, which announced its emergence with the localized slaughter of Jews as confluences of both Bolshevism and capitalism?”. This highly suggestive comment strikes me as an important invitation for future scholarships. My book is a narrow study that sticks rather tightly to the period of the Civil War. Thankfully, others, including Sloin himself (2017), have taken the story further and into the Stalin years.

Recent works by Jeffrey Veidlinger (2021) and Elissa Bemporad (2019) have also drawn connections between the pogroms of the Civil War and the Shoah two decades later.

When I started work on *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution*, I set out to understand how the Bolsheviks grappled with an antisemitism that had found traction within the working class and revolutionary movement. I could never have envisaged that the publication of the book in 2019 would coincide with an international debate about antisemitism and the left. Today, this history is once again clashing in unexpected ways with our present. I write this rejoinder in late February 2022, just days after the launching of Putin's imperialist invasion of Ukraine, as bombs are falling on Ukrainian towns and cities. The place names that we hear in the news – Kyiv, Cherkasy, Chernihiv, Zhytomyr, Odesa, Uman – were all sites of major acts of anti-Jewish violence a century ago, atrocities that I discuss in *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution*. The pogroms of 1919 were the most violent chapter in pre-Holocaust modern Jewish history. At least 100,000 Jews were murdered, perhaps many more. For many Jews, Ukraine became synonymous with antisemitism. Yet today, as Russia invades, that association no longer holds in the way it once did. While antisemitism remains, Ukraine and Russia have long been free of the anti-Jewish pogrom that I discussed in *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution*. But the same cannot be said for all minoritized communities in the region. I am thinking, for example, of the pogrom that occurred in 2018 in Holiivskyi Park in Kyiv; not against Jews, but against Roma people; a pogrom that occurred just miles from a site of anti-Jewish violence in 1919. Further, we have all been witness to the spectacle of the way refugees feeling the war in Ukraine have been hierarchically organised at east European borders, with Black migrants last in line. And though it has been chronically under-researched, we know enough about anti-black and anti-brown racisms in Russia to know the problem is serious.

Inspired by reading the four reviewers in this symposium, I want to suggest that recent events allow us to place the history of antisemitism in Russia and Ukraine in conversation with the structuring impact of racisms past and present. The disappearance of the anti-Jewish pogrom in Russia and Ukraine has not been accompanied by the disappearance of racialised hostility, including antisemitism. The forces that made Jewish life unliveable in the past have not gone away. I want to thank the reviewers for the invitation to think anew about a set of questions I thought I was familiar with. In these volatile times, thinking again is the least we can do.

Note

1. James (1999, 165–166).

Disclosure statement

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