

Brendan McGeever's *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution*: Distorting history in the service of identity politics

Part two

By Clara Weiss
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Brendan McGeever, Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution, Cambridge University Press 2019. Unless otherwise indicated, all page numbers refer to this book.

This is the second part of a two-part review. Part one was posted on April 11.

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Marxism and the fight against anti-Semitism

McGeever's constant evocation of anti-Semitism as pervading the "social base of Bolshevism" is meant to discredit the central orientation of Marxism toward the class struggle and the working class, in particular, as the basis for fighting racism and anti-Semitism. After he has conditioned his readers through harrowing descriptions of pogroms, he devotes much of his political and theoretical argumentation in the second half of the book to explicit attacks on Marxism and Bolshevism. He denounces, in particular, Lenin, claiming that he sought to downplay the participation of workers and peasants in anti-Semitic violence and that his emphasis on the link between anti-Semitism and the interests of the bourgeoisie was "narrow and reductive."

He writes:

"... class concepts such as 'bourgeoisie' frequently bore ethnic (and sometimes specifically anti-Semitic) overdeterminations. In the popular imagery, 'the Jew' was often positioned in an antagonistic class relation to the 'working people' (the *trudiaschchiesia* or *trudovoi narod*)... the categories of class struggle were vulnerable to anti-Semitic appropriations and interpretations, especially in the former Pale... [H]ow could the Bolshevik leadership be certain that a category so porous and malleable as 'speculator' would be understood in its Marxist, and not anti-Semitic, sense? Similarly, when Red Army posters were put up around central Kyiv in 1919 with the words 'beat the bourgeoisie!' ('burzhuev bit!'), could the Bolsheviks be sure that the message would not evoke the most long-standing and notorious of all anti-Semitic slogans in Russia: 'beat the Yids!'" (pp. 183, 184)

According to this logic, the mere fact that people with anti-Semitic prejudices can misunderstand class terminology in anti-Semitic terms means that anyone who argues as a Marxist is "reinforcing" anti-Semitism. Such an argument is untenable, unserious and can easily serve as the basis for denouncing everyone whose politics are misunderstood by racists and anti-Semites as racist and anti-Semitic. It is, indeed, the argument that is being leveled now to discredit—as catering to anti-Semitism—any Marxist criticism of capitalism and insistence on the mobilization of the working class to overthrow the rule of the bourgeoisie.

In reality, only the Marxist insistence on class could undercut the pernicious notion of a united national people or race, which was opposed to the Jews and other nationalities and ethnicities. It was all the more important precisely because of the anti-Semitic argumentation that claimed "rich Jews" were opposed to the "poor" "Ukrainians" or "Russians." In his famous speech on anti-Semitism in 1919—the only open attack on anti-Semitism by any head of state in the world back then, and for many decades to come—Lenin forcefully denounced it:

"Hatred towards the Jews persists only in those countries where slavery to the landowners and capitalists has created abysmal ignorance among the workers and peasants... It is not the Jews who are the enemies of the working people. The enemies of the workers are the capitalists of all countries. Among the Jews there are working people, and they form the majority. They are our brothers, who, like us, are oppressed by capital; they are our comrades in the struggle for socialism. Among the Jews there are kulaks, exploiters and capitalists, just as there are among the Russians, and among people of all nations. The capitalists strive to sow and foment hatred between workers of different faiths, different nations and different races. Those who do not work are kept in power by the power and strength of capital. Rich Jews, like rich Russians, and the rich in all countries, are in alliance to oppress, crush, rob and disunite the workers. Shame on accursed Tsarism, which tortured and persecuted the Jews. Shame on those who foment hatred towards the Jews, who foment hatred towards other nations. Long live the fraternal trust and fighting alliance of the workers of all nations in the struggle to overthrow capital."

McGeever rejects this class approach to the fight against anti-Semitism and vehemently insists that to the extent there was a "Soviet response to anti-Semitism," it was not rooted in the "assimilationist and internationalist currents" in Marxism (8). Rather, only Jewish socialists who had "proximity to a Jewish socialist-national project" (182) were consistent fighters against anti-Semitism because they had the "ethical imperative" to do so (p. 171).

McGeever claims that this argument is proven by the critical role of the *Evsekciia* (Jewish section) and the *Evkomb* (Jewish committee) in the fight against anti-Semitism. Both institutions were composed mostly of socialist Zionists from the Left Poalei Zion (LPZ) and members of the Jewish social democratic labor Bund, which adhered to a specific form of Jewish cultural nationalism. Their politics, he writes, "acted as a buffer to the pitfalls of a race-blind class reductionism."

The major role that these institutions played in the fight against anti-Semitism is, in fact, well-known and McGeever's argument makes, historically speaking, no sense. These institutions were established by the

Bolshevik government and explicitly tasked with focusing their attention on the conditions of the Jewish masses and the struggle to win them for the revolution. If they were leading the fight against anti-Semitism, they were doing precisely what they had been tasked to do.

But the state and political power necessary for institutionalizing the fight anti-Semitism and elevating it to the level of state policy were created by the Bolsheviks' seizure of power and the establishment of a workers' state.

Contrary to his endeavor to prove the allegedly "non-Bolshevik" origins of the Soviet fight against anti-Semitism, his references to the critical role that the Soviets (councils) of workers' and soldiers' deputies as "the hub of the socialist response to anti-Semitism in 1917" only further support this assessment.

The Soviets formed throughout the Empire in 1917 created armed detachments to protect their Jewish population, and established commissions dedicated to the fight against anti-Semitism. Just days after its formation, the Petrograd Soviet created a commission headed by the Bundist Moishe Rafes on March 3, 1917, tasked with stopping "Black Hundreds" from sowing "national hatred among the population" (p. 22). The Moscow Soviet began monitoring instances of anti-Semitism days after its establishment. "In the former Pale of Settlement," McGeever writes, "local soviets were instrumental in preventing anti-Semitic pogroms." (p. 26)

Even McGeever has to acknowledge that the main documents were authored by leading Bolsheviks. Thus, the First Congress of Soviets in June 1917 tasked Evgeny Preobrazhensky, one of the closest comrades of Trotsky, with authoring a resolution on anti-Semitism that was passed unanimously and that McGeever himself calls "without question, the most authoritative statement on anti-Semitism by the socialist movement yet." (p. 25) Another resolution against anti-Semitism was passed by the historic Second Congress of Soviets on November 7-9, 1917, which proclaimed the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the establishment of Soviet power.

The role assumed by the Soviets in the fight against anti-Semitism in 1917 only underscores the correctness of the call by the Bolsheviks for "all power to the Soviets." This demand was rejected by the Mensheviks and the Bundists alike, who were adapting to bourgeois forces and were convinced that the establishment of workers' power without a prolonged period of bourgeois democratic development would be "premature."

Whatever the intention of these political organizations and however sincere their desire to fight against anti-Semitism, if the opportunist line of the Mensheviks and Bundists had carried the day, state power would have fallen to the counterrevolution, and virulently anti-Semitic and fascist figures like General Kornilov would have dominated the resulting government. History provides sufficient examples of what counterrevolutionary horror would have followed, including the violence that these forces perpetrated against the Jews and the civilian population in the Civil War in Russia and the barbarism of the Nazis, who successfully mobilized many veterans of the Ukrainian nationalist and White armies in their war of annihilation against the Soviet Union and genocide of the Jews.

McGeever's argument has not only no historical foundation, it constitutes a racist slander against all the Marxists who, whatever their personal background, were committed to the revolutionary struggle against anti-Semitism and all forms of nationalism and racism. In rejecting the Marxist class argument, McGeever effectively adapts to the reactionary logic of racialism and nationalism—namely, the notion that only Jews could genuinely care about the interests and survival of Jews.

No historical event refutes this argument more powerfully than the actual record of the October Revolution and the struggle of the Bolsheviks against anti-Semitism. McGeever's interpretation also begs the question of how he would account for the politics of a right-wing Zionist like

Vladimir Jabotinsky, who in 1925 praised one of the worst pogromists of the Russian Civil War, the Ukrainian nationalist Symon Petliura? Or the role of anti-Bolshevik Russian Jewish politicians like Maxim Venaver, who lobbied for imperialist support for the Kolchak and Denikin governments, portraying them as bearers of democracy and tolerance, even as they were perpetrating horrific pogroms. [11]

Ultimately, the fight against anti-Semitism was a class issue, and the emphasis the Soviet government and Bolshevik Party placed on it was inseparable from their orientation toward an international socialist revolution by the working class. In an article written on the very eve of the seizure of power, Trotsky insisted that the fight against anti-Semitism depended upon a revolutionary change in social relations and improvement in the social lot of the working population as a whole:

"What does the pogromist agitation rest on? The ignorance, and, above all, the misery, the hunger, the despair of the most oppressed layers of the working masses... Of course, one must fight against the pogromist agitation with the spoken and written word and conviction. But this alone is extremely little. It is necessary that the revolution directly face the poor, instead of turning its back on them. It is necessary that the most ignorant, the most oppressed and the most confused working man feels in practice that the revolutionary power defends him, and not the rich man... The only serious way to fight against the influence of the Black Hundred ideology [chernosotenstvo] among the oppressed is the transfer of power into the hands of the Soviets. The longer this transition lasts, the more dangerous the development of the pogromist movement." [12]

As Trotsky had established in his theory of permanent revolution, a socialist transformation of society in Russia was inconceivable without an extension of the revolution internationally, and above all in Europe. Ultimately, the fate of the Jews as one of the most oppressed sections of the population was inseparable from the development of the international socialist revolution. This is something that the Jewish socialists on whom McGeever focuses understood. Their participation in the Soviet government was the outcome of a turn to the left by significant sections of the Jewish workers' movement, which split in 1918-1919 over the assessment of the October revolution.

Their rapprochement with the Bolsheviks was accelerated by the outbreak of the revolution in Germany in 1918, which was seen as a confirmation of the Bolshevik seizure of power and orientation toward a world revolution. Members of the LPZ and the Bund went on to play important roles in the Civil War and later the early Soviet state.

The resurgence of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union was not, as McGeever claims at the end, the result of some kind of "Soviet anti-Semitism" that was never overcome and "survived Stalinism" (p. 215). It was rooted in and inseparable from the Stalinist reaction against the program of world socialist revolution that had formed the basis for the October seizure of power.

In its struggle to defend the counterrevolutionary program of "socialism in one country" against the Left Opposition of Leon Trotsky, the Soviet bureaucracy resorted to evoking the old counterrevolutionary bogeyman of the "Jewish" and "international revolutionary" to mobilize anti-Semitic sentiments in sections of the peasantry and intelligentsia against the genuine Marxists and defenders of the principles of Bolshevism.

McGeever's account, resting as it does on the explicit denial of the counterrevolutionary character of anti-Semitism, makes it impossible to understand the actual role of anti-Semitism in the socialist revolution in Russia. In so doing, it also undermines any understanding of how it can be fought today.

It is an account driven not by the historical record, but by a political and ideological agenda—that of bolstering the perspective of anti-Marxist identity politics. Ultimately, his book serves as a pseudo-historical cover for the fraudulent "anti-Semitism" campaigns of capitalist governments in

Britain (the anti-Corbyn witch hunt), Germany (the campaign against “left-wing extremism”) and elsewhere. These governments, while fostering far-right forces, seek to discredit as anti-Semitic any left-wing criticism of the political establishment.

Concluded

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Endnotes

[11] See Budnitskii, *Russian Jews Between the Reds and the Whites*, pp. 296-332.

[12] Lev Trotskii, “Pogromnaia agitatsiia” [Pogromist agitation], in *Rabochii i soldat*, (p. 31), 18 October 1917. Online available under: <http://www.1917.com/Marxism/Trotsky/CW/Trotsky-1917-II/6-0-D.html>. Translation by this author.

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