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SYMPOSIUM: BRENDAN MCGEEVER'S
*ANTISEMITISM AND THE RUSSIAN
REVOLUTION*

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How to fight antisemitism? Lessons from the Russian Revolution

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ABSTRACT

Brendan McGeever's book on Antisemitism in the Russian Revolution provides an analysis of Soviet response to "Red Antisemitism" – the involvement of some Bolsheviks in the pogroms of the Civil War. McGeever's analysis provides insights that are relevant to contemporary anti-racist praxis, and particularly to response antisemitism on the left. Antisemitism, in 2021, takes place radically different set of material entanglements than in 1919, and it offers significantly different challenges. Antisemitism is not only a potential lynchpin between left wing and right-wing populism; the struggle against antisemitism is a contested terrain which is claimed by both the left and the right, as antisemitism is set apart from, and sometimes against, other conversations of racism and anti-racism. Even in these very different circumstances, McGeever's insights appear valid: understanding antisemitism as a threat to the left is crucial; as is the role of Jewish activists in leading the struggle against it.

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When Brandan McGeever's book was published in 2019, it seems that its timing could not be more relevant. The book, examining the Bolsheviks' response to antisemitism within their ranks during the Russian Revolution, appeared exactly a century after the pogroms in Russia and Ukraine which are its backdrop. But 2019 was also a moment in which contemporary discussions on antisemitism on the left were attracting unprecedented attention in the UK, Europe and North America.

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Meticulously researched and anchored in wealth of archival evidence, the book follows key individuals and party organs from 1917 to the early 1920s. This is social and organizational history at its best. McGeever's references to Claude McKay, W. E. B. Du Bois, bell hooks, Stuart Hall, and Raymond Williams, point to his theoretical horizons and commitment to the comparative study of racism. McGeever's work on contemporary racism – around Brexit (Virdee and McGeever 2018) and antisemitism in the Labour Party (Gidley, McGeever, and Feldman 2020) – used empirical data to offer illuminating conceptual reinterpretations of racism, its sources and meanings. In this book, however, conceptual analysis remains in the backstage, as the book's main preoccupation is to substantiate in rich detail the book's historical argument: that Bolshevik response to antisemitism during the Revolution and the Civil War relied crucially on the initiative of non-Bolshevik Jewish socialists.

What is, therefore, the contribution of this book to the contemporary discussion on left wing antisemitism? This is the question that I would like to focus on in my response. *Antisemitism in the Russian Revolution* offers a clear argument on *how* the Bolsheviks confronted antisemitism within their own ranks – and on the limitations and shortcomings of their approach. This argument has contemporary relevance and significance, as long as we are aware of the radically different circumstances. Bolshevik antisemitism must be understood in its historical and material context. Nevertheless, elucidating the guiding principles of Bolshevik response to antisemitism may provide relevant lessons.

It is useful to start by outlining the social backdrop to the pogroms of 1918–1919. Before the war, more than five million Jews (about half of the world's Jews) lived in Czarist Russia. Jews constituted around 4% of Russia's population, but in the Pale of Settlement they constituted around a tenth of the population, and in the urban centres, their share of the population was much higher, between 25% and 90% (Gitelman 2015, 18). An overwhelming majority spoke Yiddish and lived in communities much dominated by religious schools and institutions. They were understood as a distinct national group, alongside numerous other ethno-national groups in the Empire. This kind of Jewish geographical concentration, and unique ethno-national-linguistic identity, do not have a parallel today outside Israel. For example, New York City is likely the only major city outside Israel in which Jews constitute more than a tenth of the population. The "Jewish Question" in Russia was about the predicament of a very large Jewish population, with unique ethno-national features, heavily concentrated in some areas, in search for liberation: equality, safety from persecution, social mobility, and political rights (whether as citizens, workers or as a national group).

The February 1917 revolution emancipated Jews, who no longer were subject to the Czarist political restrictions and persecution. But they found themselves targets of a new wave of antisemitic violence. Antisemitism

found expression in discourse, e.g. in references to Jews as “exploiters” or “speculators” or the racist insult “Yids”. However, the main threat was not discursive, but rather actual violence. Pogromist violence, which has shaped Jewish existence in Russia since the 1880s, erupted with a new vengeance. It is estimated that during the Civil War 100,000 Jews were killed, and many more were injured in at least 2,000 pogroms. Half a million Jews were displaced. These were the worst antisemitic violent assaults in Jewish history up to that point, but they were later overshadowed by the much larger devastation of the Holocaust.

The vast majority of pogroms were carried out by enemies of the Revolution, but close to a tenth of pogroms were perpetrated by Red Army troops or affiliated forces. In some cases, pogroms were carried out by allies of the Bolsheviks – such as the Grigor’ev army in the Ukraine, which in 1918 aligned itself with the Red Army, only to turn against the Bolsheviks in 1919. But antisemitism was also widespread among some units of the Red Army itself. In the most extreme case, the Ukrainian city of Hlukhiv, Bolshevik power was secured and solidified by and through anti-Jewish violence which left at least 100 Jews dead and the synagogue destroyed (48-51).

Before discussing Bolshevik response, it is perhaps necessary to ask why the Bolsheviks were immune to the political advantage of antisemitism. Already in 1917, it became clear that antisemitism was present among key sections of the widening social base of support for Bolshevism. Given the military weaknesses of the Bolsheviks in key moments, would it have not made sense to use antisemitism to achieve and defend power – by condoning or turning a blind eye to Pogroms? After all, as McGreever indicates, the party did employ antisemitic sentiments in its campaign against Trotsky in the later 1920s. The Stalinist antisemitic campaign of the 1950 is widely familiar. Why was this not the case during the Revolution?

The Bolsheviks’ starting point was firm ideological position against antisemitism, rooted in internationalism. But as the book demonstrates clearly, such a starting point was far from sufficient. Principles mean nothing if they are not translated into actions and priorities. After all, some of the enemies of the Revolution also declared their opposition to pogroms. The commitment against antisemitism may have owed to strong Jewish involvement in revolutionary cadres, where Jews were well represented (although, far less than the antisemitic propaganda suggested). And many Jews aligned themselves with the Bolsheviks exactly because of the Party’s fight against antisemitism. That is to say, Jewish identification with the Revolution may have been an effect of Bolshevik policies – rather than their cause.

The primary reason that prevented the Party from turning against Jews was that it understood antisemitism as a danger to the Revolution. It represented an external threat, from enemies whose attacks on Jews were often coterminous with attacks on Bolshevik state power. But it was also an

internal threat, as antisemitic discourse and praxis proved a conduit through which some factions shifted sides: "antisemitism had become the current through which many peasants, workers, Red partisan soldiers and local Bolsheviks moved back and forth between 'revolution' and 'counter-revolution'" (138). Especially in Ukraine of 1919, eliminating antisemitism was key to the survival of the Soviet state.

So, the starting point for Bolshevik action against antisemitism in their ranks was that they understood antisemitism as not only as morally repugnant, but also as a threat to their political project. Not just the protection of Jews was at stake, but also the protection of the Revolution. And this is the first lesson that the book offers: understanding the threat of antisemitism to the left can concentrate minds and inject vital urgency to campaigns against it.

The second point is the core of McGeever's argument, and it is that Bolshevik response crucially depended on non-Bolshevik Jewish activists. These activists came from Jewish socialist parties such as the Bund, Poaley Zion, the Fareynikte, and other groups, who combined class politics with various strands of Jewish nationalism. With the Revolution, these activists put aside their differences with Bolsheviks, and joined new institutions, and in some cases established and led them. For some, this originated from enthusiasm about new political horizons, but for many, it was the stark realization that the Revolution offered the best chance of survival. The willingness of these activists to join the Bolsheviks, and Bolshevik (qualified) willingness to work with them, was the basis of the campaign against antisemitism.

McGeever characterises the Jewish activists' response as coming not from tactical or strategic concerns, but out of an "ethical imperative" (139, 171). What propelled them were not grand designs for class or Jewish national liberation, but the dismay of the horrendous violence against their communities. But "ethical" appears insufficient here: 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.

Bolshevik response to these initiatives was not uniform. On the one hand, there was a striking willingness to open the doors to former socialist rivals and place them in positions of authority over official campaigns. The fluid nature of Soviet institutions during the war no doubt necessitated such quick-paced mobilizations. But that willingness came with clear limits and a stop-and-start pattern. In 1918, activists in the Russian Jewish department (the Moscow Evcom) led the fight on antisemitism, only to be disbanded a few months later. In 1919, it was the "The Committee for the Struggle against Antisemitism", which, again, only operated for a few months.

According to McGeever, the closing down of these departments was tied to Soviet shift towards centralization. Yet it is clear that the Soviet ability to confront antisemitism crucially depended on the involvement of non-Bolshevik Jewish cadres, who provided knowledge, updated information, tactics, campaigning, and urgency.

What also emerges is a split between internal open debate and a far more restricted public discussion. Bolshevik warnings of severe punishment against soldiers participating in pogroms, amounted to admission that these did come also from within their ranks. But explicit discussion of this was almost entirely absent from Bolshevik printed media and agitprop, which continued to present antisemitism as a problem of the anti-Bolshevik right. The absence of such an open discussion dampened the effectiveness of the campaign (131). But it did not amount to a suppression of the internal debate on antisemitism. This is a point which has to be highlighted. It is perfectly easy to imagine a situation in which the outcry over Red Army antisemitism is met with dismissal, disbelief and denial – especially when coming from Bundists and Zionists. After all, such complaints could have been “weaponised” by the enemies of the Revolution – as indeed was the case with the Ukrainian anarchist Makhno (134). However, this is not the picture here. Reports and warnings about antisemitism from Jewish activists received attention, that ultimately led to the party’s leadership intervention. These activists found positions within the emerging Soviet state, established working groups and campaigns, and had access to budgets, although these were intermittent and far from stable.

Trying to translate these insights into the contemporary discussion on Antisemitism on the left, the relevant questions are: does the left see antisemitism as a priority, and as a threat to progressive agendas? Is it capable to identify it within, among its supporters, and not only among its political rivals? And what is the position of left-wing Jewish activists in the fight against antisemitism? These questions deserve a longer reflection, and I will offer some brief comments to conclude this review.

Jewish social reality in the early twenty-first century is radically different from that in 1917. Jewish life revolves around two centres – North America (7.5m Jews in 2020), and Israel (6.9m), with much smaller Jewish communities, mostly in Western developed countries. Following the Holocaust, the rejection of antisemitism has become one of the bedrocks of the liberal consensus. Jews do not face the material deprivation, or the state discrimination and persecution associated with Jewish existence in Czarist Russia. The state sponsored pogromist violence of the Civil War has no equivalence today.

However, Jews continue to encounter prejudice, harassment, discrimination and violence. With the resurgence of global right-wing populism, White supremacist violence against Jews has escalated, with attacks on synagogues in Pittsburgh (2018) and San Diego (2019) in the US, as well as in

Halle, Germany (2019); and right wing rhetoric assumes familiar antisemitic contours in references to “globalist” conspiracies. Antisemitism is visible among ascending right-wing forces. It also remains what McGeever, together with Ben Gidley and David Feldman, called a “reservoir” of motifs and ideas that are present across the political spectrum, including on the left – such as the equation of Jews with capitalism (the “Socialism of fools”), and “Elders of Zion” conspiracy theories (Gidley, McGeever, and Feldman 2020).

What greatly complicates the discussion on contemporary antisemitism is its intersection with the politics around Palestine/Israel. While it is widely agreed that discourse around Israel can assume antisemitic form and be used to harass and attack diaspora Jews, there is considerable contention on when this is the case. This is evidenced in the existence of competing definitions of antisemitism – on the one hand “working definition” of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which receives considerable state and institutional backing, and on the other hand, the “Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism” and the “Nexus Document”, developed by Jewish academics. These documents vary considerably and indicate a real disagreement within Jewish communities on the place of Israel in discussions of antisemitism.

The last few decades saw the emergence of the “New Antisemitism” approach according to which, the primary form of contemporary antisemitism is directed against Israel, the Jewish state, or the “Jew among nations”. This can and does lead to a widened scope of the meaning of “antisemitism” that includes many forms of pro-Palestinian mobilization and advocacy, and even the display of Palestinian flag or opposing Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Centring the question of antisemitism around Israel, and equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism, has led to a right wing “anti-Antisemitic” alliance which includes Islamophobic and indeed antisemitic elements – who are hostile to liberal diaspora Jews but supportive of Israel. Antisemitism may still act as a conduit between the left and the right; but the “fight against antisemitism” is also a conduit from left wing politics to the right wing. This is exemplified in the case of the “Anti-Germans”, who, growing out of the anti-fascist movement in Germany, adopted outspoken support for Israel accompanied with hostility to Islam. This is a confusing terrain, in which, in the words of Alana Lentin, “[t]o be against antisemitism today is variably to uphold racial rule and to undermine it” (Lentin 2020, 136).

At the same time, for some on the left, the widespread Jewish identification with Zionism and Israel seems to place Jews on the side of the oppressors rather than the victims, due to Israel’s structural exclusion and dispossession of the Palestinians. This is connected to a difficulty of recognizing antisemitism. Racism is widely understood in relation to structural disadvantage and state discrimination, which are tightly connected to the politics of Whiteness and to the legacies of colonialism and Imperialism (Feldman and

McGeever 2018). This approach provides a clear account for anti-blackness and Islamophobia, but it is far more challenging to fit antisemitism into this framework. As a result, some on the left struggle to understand Jews as a racialized minority, particularly given that Jewish communities in the US and the UK are overwhelmingly racialized as white. This could even lead to a perverse notion that vandalism of a synagogue, in solidarity with Palestinians, is an “anti-racist” praxis rather than an antisemitic act.

Perhaps the biggest contribution of McGeever’s book, in this sense, is his framing of Bolshevik campaigns against antisemitism as a form of “anti-racism”. Is the term valid here? The book leaves it for the facts to speak for themselves, and they do: it is impossible to read the Civil War pogroms as anything but genocidal racist violence. The terms of justification of this genocidal violence – e.g. in the presentation of Jews as parasitic speculators – continue to be employed today by various actors. As such, the book provides a clear rationale why antisemitism must be included in the discussion on racism – and it offers lessons against other forms of racism.

The question of Jewish leftist response to antisemitism is an open debate. The editors of the magazine *Jewish Currents* recently argued against an over-emphasis on discursive manifestations of antisemitism, and against the centring white Jews in the discussion of racism, at a time when the brunt of state and societal racist violence is borne by people of colour, migrants, and Muslims (*Jewish Currents* Editors 2021). In response, Jewish anti-racist activists stressed that the Jewish left’s articulation of antisemitism is crucial for building coalitions against the right; and that abdicating this role would only help the right’s hijacking of the debate on antisemitism in the service of Islamophobic and anti-Palestinian agendas (Rosenbaum 2021). This rhymes with McGeever’s emphasis on the vital and irreplaceable role of Jewish activists. Without their ongoing involvement, the left is unlikely to evaluate correctly the risks associated with antisemitism or identify it within.

The obvious tendency within any political movement is to turn a blind eye to problems within its own ranks, often in the name of the bigger scheme of things. For the left to overcome this tendency when it comes to antisemitism requires not only conceptual clarity and ethical consistency but also political determination. The right-wing equation of critiques of Israel with antisemitism makes it perhaps tempting for the left to dismiss all concerns about antisemitism as a smear, and to retreat into pervasive denialism. While the Bolsheviks avoided public acknowledgement of “Red Antisemitism”, they still had a frank internal discussion of this problem. This (deeply problematic) separation between internal and public debate is impossible to uphold in the diffuse, social media dominated politics of the twenty-first century. A culture of denialism inevitably creates an environment in which antisemitism is effectively excused and even sanctioned. This discredits and undermines the left – as we’ve seen with the UK Labour party in the late 2010s. It is also possible to

suggest, following McGeever's insights, that the Labour party's failure to respond to the crisis effectively owed much to its failure to allow a central role for its Jewish activists in this respect.

Antisemitism, in 2021, takes place in radically different set of material entanglements than in 1919, and it offers significantly different challenges. Antisemitism remains a potential lynchpin between left wing and right-wing populism; but the struggle against antisemitism is a contested terrain which is claimed by both the left and the right, as antisemitism is set apart from, and sometimes against, other conversations on racism and anti-racism. Even in these very different circumstances, McGeever's insights appear valid: understanding antisemitism as a threat to the left is crucial; as is the role of Jewish activists in leading the struggle against it.

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