

COMMUNISM AND ZIONISM

THE DIALECTICS OF ATTRACTION AND REPULSION

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DISPUTES about the Soviet Union were for many years the cause of political and intellectual dissensions in the international leftist movements. There were groups and individuals who at the outset wanted only to take an independent position on the communist project in the Soviet Union. But after some time this issue was no longer acute and they developed a comprehensive ideology which went beyond opposition to communism-Soviet style. Initially concerned with events in the homeland of communism, their real underlying motives now became clear. Though probably unaware of it, the leftists of the 1950's had an inner compulsion to assuage their consciences on the issue of internationalism before they could apply themselves to a critique of their own society and its reformation—which was the essential goal of their political involvement.

There were a number of obvious indications of the upheaval that occurred in reaction to the reports of the dimensions and the character of Stalinist terror. One was, undoubtedly, the group of writers

who expressed their disillusion with the Soviet Union in *The God that Failed*.¹ The other was the noisy and dramatic debates among the French intellectuals. Less famous, though not less interesting and important, was the group called "The New York Intellectuals" among whose outstanding spokesmen were Harold Rosenberg and Sidney Hook. In the late 30's they had demonstrated in their journal "Partisan Review" that an uncompromising attitude towards the outrages perpetrated by the autocratic Soviet regime did not necessarily imply a withdrawal from the leftist camp in general. This group is of particular interest not only because of its role in the history of the American left, but also on account of their Jewishness. Most of this group's members were the sons of Jewish immigrants and although they never admitted it openly, one cannot ignore their distinctive Jewish background.

THE SOVIET INVASION of Hungary and Khrushchev's sensational revelations at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party (1956) about the dimensions of the

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¹ R.H.S. Crossman (ed.), *The God that Failed: Six Studies in Communism*. Contributors: Arthur Koestler, Richard Wright, Louis Fisher, Ignazio Silone, André Gide, Stephen Spender (New York, 1949).

Stalinist excesses caused a renewed wave of disenchantment among veteran communists in the west. As a result, they severed their organizational ties with the communist world. There is, however, a substantial difference between the consequences of Khrushchev's speech and the dissensions in the leftist camp after the Second World War. In 1956 only the communist parties suffered from the crisis, whilst the socialist parties profited from it, because the revelations provided further and decisive proof justifying the morality of their opposition to Moscow. But the earlier post-war revulsion against "The God that Failed" harmed the leftist camp in general. In this sense, the results of the dissension at the end of the 40's and the early 50's were similar to the schism in the leftist camp immediately following the Bolshevik revolution and the establishment of the Third International (the Comintern).

The fathers of the Russian revolution, disappointed by the conduct of the Socialist International during the First World War, sought to establish an international organization which would be completely under their control. The conditions for acceptance into the Comintern were difficult and agonizing and compelled the socialist parties in the west—with their long tradition and firmly established status—to surrender to the dictates of Moscow. That western socialists were willing to sacrifice their honor and tradition and surrender to Soviet Bolshevism, was due to their fervent belief in the imminence of world revolution and their conviction that it was necessary to forge the instruments for the advancement of the revolution. The Comintern leaders, however, were more realistic. They wanted to set up an international institution with

the aim of serving the interests of the new Soviet state.

Faith of the Leftists

Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and their comrades were immensely popular among the socialists in the west, mainly among the idealistic youths whose experience in the trenches of the First World War had taught them that every effort must be made to change the world. However, historians of the leftist movements are continually puzzled by the life-span and vitality of this credibility. Why did the disenchantment not set in sooner? Why did they not turn against Moscow when the agreement with Nazi Germany was signed? Why were they not disillusioned with the Comintern's destructive policy on the issue of Hitler and the rise of fascism at the beginning of the 30's? The excuse that they lacked information about the Soviet Union is not only simplistic; it ignores the historic facts.² As early as the second half of the 30's, Menshevik immigrants published fairly accurate details about the Moscow show trials and reported on the atmosphere of fear and terror which Stalin had imposed on the communist society. Brilliant philoso-

² In a very incisive essay which appeared in "Encounter", December 1975, *Were They Duped?*, Ian Watson showed how easy it was for the Soviet leaders to convince leading western intellectuals that the Bolshevik policy was just and that the paradise being built in the Soviet Union was real. Men like Bernard Shaw, while visiting the Soviet Union, allowed their hosts to put on a show which hid the real facts. Watson's essay, written in a provocative tone and showing blatant contempt of those intellectuals, not surprisingly provoked numerous reactions.

phers and critics who perceived the diseases of western bourgeois society and who displayed great profundity in diagnosing the sources of evil in the capitalist regime, behaved with astonishing naiveté when it came to judging the Soviet Union.

The key to the explanation of this phenomenon is the profound faith of the leftists in the revolutionary experiment carried out in the Soviet Union. They felt that the old dream of creating a new society was in the process of realization and they obstinately refused to apprehend the bitter reality. Even people who did not share the communist ideology and did not regard the Soviet experiment as an object for imitation, were chary in evaluating the new Soviet regime. Interestingly enough, precisely those who were close to the Bolshevik ideology were first to voice reservations and criticism about the Soviet regime and to express doubts about the new society.³ But the western socialists who were disappointed with the Soviet Union found it difficult to digest the idea that

³ Vladimir Medem, one of the leaders of the *Bund*, the Jewish Social Democratic Party, wrote something very similar in an essay which appeared in the *Bund* party organ in Warsaw, 1918:

"The guns of the conscripted Bolshevik soldiers are directed not only against the bourgeoisie. They are turned against the socialist working class. The day is not far when revolutionary tribunals of the more *kosher* Bolsheviks will be set up to shoot the more suspect of their own comrades... And if today Lenin yearns to shoot Abramovitch (a Menshevik leader), may he not wish to shoot Trotsky tomorrow?... A socialist government that turns to the methods of terror signs its own death warrant." Quoted from I. Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York and London, 1976), p. 329.

they had supported the atrocities and had brought a blow not only to communism but also to the morality of socialism in general. It was more comfortable to pin the blame on the madness of one man. Even when denouncing the communist regime, they preferred to present the Soviet regime's corruption as the creation of one man, power-hungry and blood-thirsty, who unscrupulously manipulated the good intentions of the socialist movement. To this very day it is unfashionable among leftists to blame the Bolshevik ideology and Lenin's share in the defilement of the regime—which was in fact no less considerable than Stalin's guilt.⁴

Encounter with Bolshevism

The encounter between Jewish socialism and Bolshevism had an additional dimension. Each socialist party which sought to join the Comintern was forced to obey the dictates of Moscow and to ignore its specific national problems and traditions, but its right to exist as a national party was never doubted. The glaring exception was the Comintern's attitude to Jewish nationality. The Jews who wanted to maintain their conviction that the renaissance of

⁴ Alexander Solzhenitsyn recently published the missing chapter from his novel *August 1914*, which is actually only the first part of a trilogy dealing with the First World War and the revolution. The chapter, published in the form of a book called "Lenin in Zurich," was severely criticized. No doubt, some of the reservations are due to the conservative political attitude which Solzhenitsyn has voiced militantly ever since his escape to the west. However, is not this criticism also due to the fact that even today people resent having Lenin portrayed as a corrupt, immoral and unscrupulous person?

Jewish independence was an historical imperative, were prevented from joining the international communist movement.

At the end of the 19th century thousands of young Jews were faced with the dilemma whether to rescue the Jewish people or to struggle for a better world. Many chose to ignore the Jewish people's distress, for they hoped that by working towards a better world they would also advance the solution of the Jewish problem. Others decided to devote themselves to the Jewish people and joined the Zionist movement. However, many tried to combine both objectives, working towards a better world and struggling for the liberation of the Jewish people. Ber Borochov's historical eminence is not due to brilliant analytic talent nor to his ability to forecast world historical developments. Rather he stood out because he presented the vision of renewed Jewish independence as an imperative imposed by a historical process beyond man's ability to change. The sense of power that characterized the Marxists, and which sprung from the conviction that they were working with the aid of historical powers, was shared by many Zionists in Borochov's movement. From their point of view, the renewal of Jewish independence in Eretz Yisrael was merely a step on the inevitable road to the victory of socialism and the destruction of capitalism.

The success of the Bolshevik revolution was taken as proof of its justice and of the imminence of ultimate victory. But it soon became apparent that the Bolshevik victory would not allow the co-existence of socialism and Zionism. The Zionist socialist parties that sought to join the Comintern were faced with the bitter choice

of choosing between Zionism and socialism.

Pragmatism and Utopian Dreams

The blow was staggering. The Zionist socialists refused to submit to the decision that excluded them from the organization which planned the world revolution. Zionist socialist parties tried time and again to make their way into the Comintern, but Moscow's conditions were tough and unyielding. Bolshevik leaders fully exploited their immense prestige among the socialist organizations the world over. Irving Howe has pointed out the remarkable fact that for about four years following the establishment of the Bolshevik regime in Russia, not a whisper of criticism against the Soviet Union was heard among Jewish socialists in America. The revolution was seen as a messianic act and exultation gripped even the most pragmatic socialists who rejected the Bolshevik ideology. Organizations which for many years strenuously maintained a unity of ideas, enabling them to strike roots in their countries and to aspire to carry out changes, suddenly forgot their pragmatism and sunk into utopian dreams. Many Jewish radicals even considered emigrating to Russia; others made their way into the Jewish trade unions. When the Jewish leaders of the trade unions awoke from the Bolshevik dream, they discovered to their dismay that many communist elements had infiltrated their ranks. These people were not prepared to participate in the traditional methods of the trade unions—the slow and sure improvement of workers' conditions. The resulting rifts in the trade unions impaired their power and prestige and also alienated the majority of

trade unionists from socialism, as an ideology or a vision.

Tragic Story

The story of those Jews, for whom the revolution was the final cause of their severance from the Jewish people was sad and tragic. But those who did not give up easily and sought to preserve the synthesis of Jewish nationality and universal socialism, did not fare much better. The *halutzim* (pioneers) who arrived in Eretz Yisrael after the October Revolution discovered that "constructive Zionism" was the leading trend in the labor movement in the country. The leaders of Ahdut Ha'avoda, Hapoel Hatzair and the Histadrut had adopted a remarkable attitude towards the Bolshevik enterprise in the Soviet Union. Although they stubbornly fought against any concessions to be made to the Comintern, they nevertheless admired the Communist undertaking in the Soviet Union. Ben Gurion did not even hesitate to call himself a Bolshevik. But they were convinced that their program of creating an independent and pragmatic socialism, which was attuned to the needs of the new Jewish society in Eretz Yisrael and at the same time rejected Moscow's demand for self-denial, really conformed with the Bolshevik idea. Just as the leaders of the Russian revolution exploited every factor in order to strengthen the new revolutionary state, so every Zionist socialist had to invest all his energy and vision towards one goal—the revolutionary enterprise of the Jewish people reborn, to build the land of Israel. The ideology which placed the building of Eretz Yisrael at the heart of Zionist socialism, was mainly set out by the pioneers of the second

aliyah who left Russia after the failure of the 1905 revolution in Russia and the disappointment with the non-Marxist socialist populist movement. But the *halutzim* of the third aliyah who arrived in Eretz Yisrael after World War I had an entirely different experience. Their attitude to the Bolshevik revolution was complex. Though they actively joined the constructive Zionist movement, they did not for a moment forget the greater vision of a world-embracing revolution. The majority of the third aliyah *halutzim* found satisfaction in the actual work and the building; but some of them lost faith during the crisis which affected the Zionist enterprise at the end of the 1920's.

The intricate relationship between communism and Zionism is explored in Elkana Margalit's recent study of the *Poale Zion Smol* (left) party in Eretz Yisrael⁵ Ostensibly this was a marginal Zionist socialist group which never became a central and influential factor in the history of Zionism. But this study offers instructive answers to some important questions: What were the consequences of the ties with Moscow? How did the Comintern illusion succeed in harming Jewish socialism? Elkana Margalit raises another interesting question which deserves our attention. Why did the crisis affect precisely those groups which adhered to constructive Zionism—Gdud Ha'avoda and Hashomer Hatzair—and left untouched the Left Poale Zion socialists, whose ideology was much closer to the Bolshevik view?

⁵ Elkana Margalit, *Anatomy of the Left: Poale Zion Smol (Left) in Eretz Yisrael 1919-1946* (Hebrew). The Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Y. L. Peretz Publications, 1976.

Historical Processes

The Hashomer Hatzair and Gdud Ha'avoda socialists, for whom the swing to the left was very painful and sometimes even bore tragic consequences, were the sons and grandsons of the Jewish bourgeoisie. They embraced socialism and Zionism with a burning and impatient idealistic urge. As soon as they were disappointed with the tempo of the materialization of the Zionist dream, they jumped off the wagon and went to look for a shorter and quicker way to make the dream of their youth come true. On the other hand, as Elkana Margalit shows, the young Jews who joined the Left Poale Zion had adopted Borochovism as a result of their experiences of the hard facts of life, of proletarianization and "marginalization." And when they arrived in Eretz Yisrael they brought with them a clear and crystallized prognosis. Their historical determinism was solid and cohesive. The two elements of their ideology, Zionism and socialism, were closely intertwined, and in their doctrine they took into account the possibility of temporary crises. From their point of view, the crises of Zionism during the 1920's were evidence of their theory's accuracy. They refuted the idealistic illusion of constructive Zionism and believed that the building of Eretz Yisrael will proceed by historical processes which were beyond the narrow world of Judaism.

The differences are succinctly summarized by Elkana Margalit:

In two central groups of the third aliyah (Hashomer Hatzair and Gdud Ha'avoda) the turn to the left grew pragmatically out of the cruel encounter with the reality of road construction, the public works, and the harsh crisis of 1926 and 1927. This turn to the left was not im-

ported from abroad. On the contrary, both of these groups had arrived as pioneer Zionists deeply attached to Jewish nationalism. Only the Left Poale Zion brought from abroad a crystallized and formulated theory of leftism, including a critique of constructivism and the Zionist organization. But paradoxically, it was precisely this leftist ideology that made the Left Poale Zion *a priori* more immune to the disappointment with Zionism, than Hashomer Hatzair and Gdud Ha'avoda. The Left Poale Zion had their well-prepared and formulated perspective and analysis, which anticipated the establishment of a Jewish workers' territorial center in Eretz Yisrael that was not to be based on constructive pioneering. These formulae, and especially their views on the class struggle and the future revolution, enabled them to avoid the disappointment at the helplessness of the Zionist Organization and the social and economic crisis (p. 407).

Marxist Doctrine

However, their attachment to Marxist doctrine prevented them from becoming an important and influential factor in Zionist socialism. They refused to acknowledge the centrality of the work in Eretz Yisrael because they feared they would become estranged from the distress of the Jewish masses in the diaspora. As a result they did not have the attitude and mentality to form a party culture suited to the local conditions. Although Moscow rejected them and refused to regard them as a legitimate branch of the world socialist movement, they never ceased to mold their ideology and their vision of the future on the belief that the world revolution will come forth from Moscow and liberate the world of the last remnants of exploiting capitalism. Until 1937 they refused to join the Zionist organization

because they regarded it as a bourgeois institution; joining it would have altogether put an end to their chances for acceptance into the Comintern. Their heroic stubbornness in preserving the Yiddish language alienated them from the new generation which grew up in Eretz Yisrael and for whom the diaspora was a past to be avoided.

The main consideration in shaping their policy on the Arab question and the British Mandate was their view of Moscow and the communist world movement as the center of their concerns. England was to them the representative of international imperialism and they therefore refused to co-operate with the Mandate authorities in the development of the Jewish enterprise in Eretz Yisrael. Stubbornly and persistently they refused to recognize the national aspects of the Arab question and even when it became increasingly obvious that the Arabs formed a militant national movement, they insisted on their view that the Jewish-Arab conflict was a product of class struggle and an outcome of the Effendi regime in the villages. For many years, the Left Poale Zion opposed the idea of a bi-national state, which was espoused by Hashomer Hatzair; they saw even in this policy a concession to nationalistic chauvinism.

By the time the Left Poale Zion had become disillusioned and had learned that the leaders of the Soviet Union had for many years exploited their revolutionary

naiveté—it was too late. In 1946 the Left Poale Zion united with a faction which had broken away from Mapai in 1944 and together they formed the Ahdut Ha'avoda-Poale Zion Party. The united party, as well as the future Mapam Party which included Hashomer Hatzair, never succeeded in becoming a leading force in Zionism. The Left Poale Zion will always be remembered in the annals of the Zionist left as one of the most tragic victims of the Bolshevik dream. They continually wrestled with their socialist conscience, but always managed to guard heroically and unerringly the thin lines between the Zionist movement and the Bolshevik revolution.

One does not have to be a voracious "Bolshevik-hater" or a "cold war crusader" in order to perceive the Comintern's destructive role in the development of the world socialist movement. The Comintern succeeded in attracting thousands of intellectuals and even whole parties and then used them as pawns in a cold and ruthless game. For more than two generations thousands of socialists all over the world were cut off from the reality in which they lived and acted. They were paralyzed by the expectation of the prophetic vision to be revealed from Moscow. The disenchantment came too late; and when these socialists sought once again to become involved in the politics of their countries, they discovered that they now faced a complex and arduous task.