

On the Jewish Problem

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“**M**ARXISM TODAY” is doing a good service to the progressive forces by offering the possibility for a discussion in its columns of “An old problem”—the Jewish problem.

Whether we like it or not, problems associated with the Jews receive considerable attention and succeed in influencing, for better or for worse, wide sections of people. Thus, anti-Semitic propaganda has affected from time to time enormous masses of people and resulted not only in the annihilation of vast numbers of Jews (as occurred during the last world war), but also in diverting social and political discontent into wrong channels at the expense of the democratic development of peoples. More recently, both Zionism and the cold-war anti-Soviet propagandists have used the concern aroused by problems affecting Jews to divert large masses of Jews towards sterile and harmful policies and to stimulate generally considerable anti-Soviet feeling and activities.

In such conditions it is therefore essential for Communists to define as clearly and simply as possible both our estimation of the problem, and what we believe are the lines along which to achieve a favourable solution to it.

I believe that Comrade Ramelson has given a satisfactory outline both of the problem and the lines along which it will resolve itself in the future.

What is the essence of the Jewish problem? It is the problem of any small group of people in class society which can be utilised by reactionary forces to divert from themselves prevailing social and political discontent. Jews are not and were not the only group to suffer from this consequence of class society. In fact, Israel itself evidences a policy of discrimination against its Arab minority.

The task of progressive people in the present conditions of class society is to facilitate both the favourable development of the struggle against capitalism, and the victory of socialism, which will finally end the basis of both anti-Semitism and race-hatred.

At the present moment, the greatest danger to resolving this task among Jews comes from the protagonists of Zionist ideas—i.e. the protagonists of Jewish nationhood—irrespective of the cloak under which they present their views.

Equating Israel, the Jewish State in the Middle East, with Zionism, and using the establishment of it as evidence of the correctness of the Zionist views, the Zionists are responsible for bringing about those consequences tabulated by Comrade Ramelson in his article:

“(a) Making aliens of the overwhelming majority of Jews in the countries where they were born and brought up, and towards whose culture they have made a considerable contribution.

“(b) The withdrawal of many Jews from the political struggle of the working class, not only leading to self-imposed isolation, but depriving the working class of valuable help in the fight for socialism.

“(c) Weakening the class sense of Jews by preaching a non-existent ‘common national interest’ involving class collaboration within Jewry; and seeking support for imperialism on the ground of ‘national interests’.”

Unfortunately too many people allow themselves to be carried away by spurious arguments. To too many Jews and non-Jews the existence of the State of Israel is the significant fact, and the ideas and conditions which brought it into existence, are irrelevant. The fact that Zionism has served as the disruptive tool of British imperialism in the Middle East, or that it is now the outpost of American vested interests, is of no consequence to them. The fact that 900,000 Arabs, who have resided in the areas of present-day Israel for centuries, are now hankering after their former homelands, is ignored and frowned upon by a people which itself has suffered exile as part of the policy of disruption, persecution and race-hatred.

The indifference and disregard shown to what has been done and is happening to the former inhabitants of Israel—and to those residing there now—is a shameful episode in the history of the Jews of Israel and outside. It might be hoped that with better information, larger numbers of Jews, particularly working class Jews, will decide on a different policy regarding Zionism.

But just as confusing and harmful as Zionist ideas are for the Jews—and non-Jews—are the views of some of those critical of the conditions of the Jews in the U.S.S.R.

It is an undeniable fact that with the 1917 October Revolution—and with every such overthrow of reactionary capitalist regimes in the countries of People’s Democracy—the Jews emerged as a free section of the people, enjoying

their gains and making themselves part of the new pattern of life which the ending of capitalism made way for.

Once the Ghetto walls were demolished, Jews lost no time in entering occupations and places formerly forbidden to them; they took the fullest advantage of developing educational and cultural activities formerly unavailable to them. The result was the emergence of new Jewish people. Of course, it would be an illusion to believe that this process went on evenly everywhere—but there can be no doubt that considerable sections of Jews in the Soviet Union were affected by these positive developments.

It is in this context that the question of Yiddish is to be considered. In Tsarist Russia, prior to 1917, Jews, herded forcibly into the Ghettos, spoke Yiddish because, by force of circumstance, this was the only means of communication they knew and had in common. Even my own mother, brought up in Rumania, where Jews were not subjected to the Ghetto conditions of the Tsarist regime enforced on the Russian Jews, used only Yiddish as her means of communication. When I returned in 1912 to Barlad, a small Rumanian town with some 1,000 Jewish families, I had to learn to speak Yiddish because this was their main spoken tongue. Is it therefore any surprise that “segregation in the Ghettos . . . created a specific Yiddish culture depicting Ghetto life”?—a view which Alec Waterman frowns on in his contribution to the discussion. Of course, this “specific Yiddish culture depicting Ghetto life” was the life of the working class and poor Jews—who constituted the overwhelming mass of the population of the Ghettos.

Of course, “the rich and educated spoke Hebrew or the country’s language”, as Alec Waterman writes. For them, the Ghetto walls were flexible. They could live in the big towns etc. These facts still more justify the view that Ghetto life conditioned the emergence of Yiddish as the tongue of the Ghetto Jews—and it was the Ghetto life which conditioned the themes of the Yiddish culture of that day.

But where and when the Ghetto walls break down—and when opportunities present themselves for enriching one’s cultural background—Yiddish is replaced by the languages of the new environment. This is the fact—and no amount of denials or pointing at today’s “flourishing” Yiddish centres can alter the facts. Alec Waterman, a very great Yiddish enthusiast himself, a prolific reader and speaker of Yiddish, will admit that in his own circle he has little success, as generally Yiddish has little success in Britain.

In noting these facts one has to take good

care not to be subjective and to pass judgment in accordance with one’s likes and dislikes. There is no denying that in its time Yiddish served as a great avenue of expression for large numbers of people. Hemmed in by the Ghetto walls, living in untold misery, deprived of liberty and freedom of development, subjected to the vilest forms of discrimination and persecution, many Jewish writers and many progressive fighters found, and gave expression to through Yiddish, their progressive ideas and dreams for a better world. But this is a feature not only for those using Yiddish. All peoples find in their spoken word the inspiration for a better world, hatred of oppressors and encouragement in their struggles for liberation.

If the factors making for the decline of Yiddish in the world at large are true, they are stronger yet in the case of the U.S.S.R. Before the Second World War, the process of integration of Jews into the framework of Soviet society was very advanced. The problem of ensuring the continued existence of the Jews of the Soviet Union as an entity was apparent very early after the October Revolution, and Kalinin in a book published in 1935 draws attention to the subject, as follows:

“Moscow, for example, cannot preserve any specific national characteristics. It represents a city collective of all nationalities within the U.S.S.R. . . . How much does the average Jewish worker who has worked in Moscow for ten years preserve of his Jewish nationality? Very little. Life in Moscow is multi-national in character, and specific national characteristics tend to become slowly obliterated.”

It is argued however that Yiddish has suffered severely as a result of the abuses which took place during the latter period of Stalin’s life. No one can deny that Yiddish and many closely associated with things Yiddish suffered severely during that period, nor that this policy has left lasting marks upon the use of Yiddish.

From reports one knows that considerable efforts are being made to reinvigorate Yiddish, by those still imbued with a love of and a desire and need to express themselves in Yiddish. Concerts and readings in Yiddish are a feature of Soviet cultural life.

Mikoyan, when interviewed on this question during his recent visit to the United States, pointed out the following:

“In my country all peoples enjoy freedom for the development of their culture. They can have their theatres, their literature, and that includes the Jews. However, the Jewish population has merged with the Russians in Russian culture so fully that Jews participate in general culture and literature, in the Russian stage and Russian

literature. There are many Jewish writers who consider themselves Russian and who prefer to write Russian. We cannot interfere in that matter. This is a matter for the Jewish intelligentsia. We do create all conditions in which Jewish and Russian literatures and the literatures of all other Soviet peoples should have full opportunities for their development, writing and creation."

Personally I am of the opinion that the matter of Yiddish is not yet resolved one way or the other. I am sure that greater facilities than those available at present for the use and extension of Yiddish cultural activities in the U.S.S.R. would be forthcoming to the degree that increased interest in and use of the Yiddish language becomes apparent.

The issue of Yiddish in the Soviet Union has been used as a stick to beat the Soviet Union and to besmirch the tremendous record of achievements and advances gained by the Soviet peoples, including its Jewish citizens. Insufficient objectivity was shown by some in our own Party. These comrades were not helped either when the case about Yiddish was hinged on to the question as to whether the Jews were a nation. The fact remains that though the Jews do not enjoy the prerequisites of a nation in the Marxist sense, they have spoken Yiddish as their mother tongue in large numbers in a number of countries over a long period. Many of them still do—and some may still so desire. If sufficient so desire, then Yiddish will continue as one of the many languages used by the Socialist family of nations.

Reuben Falber

COMRADE Waterman attempts to contest Ramelson's claim that the Yiddish language has ceased to develop by cataloguing Yiddish activities in America. Unfortunately for him, in the *Jewish Chronicle* of April 17th, an American correspondent describes the decline of Yiddish speaking and reading:

"Most of the Yiddish playhouses have been replaced by English-speaking off-Broadway theatres. Yiddish newspapers began to merge with one another several years ago, and a large number have disappeared. The old-timers deplore the passing of the language; are constantly nostalgic about the 'good old days' and perpetuate the fiction that Yiddishkeit is only temporarily eclipsed. They dutifully buy their Yiddish publications, listen to their much curtailed Yiddish language radio programme, and quietly but futilely make propaganda for the Cause."

Comrade Waterman could indeed pass for one of these old-timers except that he wraps his nostalgic laments up in "Marxist" language and tries to blind us with science.

Britain is not included among the countries where Yiddish flourishes. How does Yiddish fare in Britain? A few small groups struggle manfully to keep it going, publishing papers read only by a tiny handful, maintaining a sparsely attended theatre, but making no impact on the life of the Jewish people.

The most prominent Jewish writers write their books, plays and poetry in English, not Yiddish; indeed, it is doubtful whether more than a few can write Yiddish. What is more, they are ceasing to write about Jewish themes or draw inspiration from Jewish life.

Not very long ago a prominent Jewish writer who, since the war, has made a reputation as a successful novelist, wrote in a left paper attacking the Soviet Union for "suppressing" the language of his parents, and then had the brass nerve to admit that he could neither speak nor read Yiddish.

Comrade Ramelson's description of Yiddish (a description which Comrade Waterman distorts) is neither ignorant nor offensive to Yiddish. Did Yiddish exist before the Jews were forced into the Ghettoes of Central and Eastern Europe? And does not Comrade Ramelson say of Yiddish culture that its "essence was the depicting of Ghetto life and a yearning for revolt against such intolerable conditions"?

Of course the rich Jews hated Yiddish. They tried to solve the problem by licking the boots of the local bourgeoisie, buying their way into their ranks, and sometimes in the process echoing their cruder anti-Semitic expressions. Always they have cried that they were "different" from the great mass of Jewry, and had freed themselves from the characteristics which, exaggerated and distorted out of all proportion, form the shot and shell of much of the filthiest anti-Semitic propaganda. So the Yiddish spoken by the poorer Jews was hated by rich Jews, and so were the poor Jews themselves. Alas, that's a way the rich have.

But Waterman goes on to say that Yiddish became "a weapon of the working class and poor Jews". What nonsense! As well describe German as a weapon of proletarian revolution because *Das Kapital* was written in that tongue.

Sholem Aleichem wasn't the only one who could write Yiddish. Hasn't Comrade Waterman ever met the reactionary who could speak Yiddish? Surely the history of the international socialist movement for the past sixty or more