

THE HIRSH LEKERT AFFAIR

BUNDISM AND TERRORISM

by LEIZER JANKLEWICZ

One of the major theoretical differences between Marxism and other radical currents popular in the late 19th century was their respective positions on the use of terror as a political means. Whereas some anarchist and populist theoreticians believed that individual acts of terror could spark a revolution, Marxists have always insisted that a socialist revolution could only occur when the proletariat is sufficiently class-conscious and organized. The execution of key government officials, Marxists have maintained, may rid the workers of some of their class enemies — but it will not lift the burden of capitalism from their shoulders. A revolutionary struggle waged along Marxian lines is always a revolution against a system, against an economic structure and all that has been built upon it. It is not an attack on specific individuals, however nefarious they may be.

As a movement originally based on Marxian principles, the Bund from its inception adopted an anti-terrorist ideology. There was no point at which the Bund officially retreated from this stance. In the spring of 1902, however, the Central Committee of the Bund did see fit to praise the attempt by a member of the Bund to assassinate the Governor of the province of Vilna. In fact the would-be assassin, Hirsh Lekert, has remained to this day a hero in the Bundist "Hall of Fame". The Bund has, on the one hand, consistently condemned the use of terror as a political means. It has, on the other hand, considered a member whose one claim to fame was an attempted political assassination of one of its greatest heroes and martyrs. On the 75th anniversary of the "Lekert Affair" this seeming anomaly is worthy of re-investigation.

The first few years of the 20th century were stormy ones in the Pale of Settlement. The socialist movement, while strong enough to conduct strikes and demonstrations, was not strong enough to bring down the government. The Czarist regime, meanwhile, was able to keep the revolutionary movement in check, but was not able to totally stamp it out. The situation differed from province to province, the westernmost provinces being in the greatest turmoil.

In 1901 a new governor was sent to Vilna. This new governor, a certain von Wahl, had already established his reputation as a brutal and repressive administrator — and proceeded, upon his arrival in Vilna to reinforce this unsavory reputation. Among other measures, he let it be known that the penalty for participation in May Day demonstrations would be none other than whipping.

The use of whipping as a punishment had a number of connotations. It evoked in many minds images of the days before the liberation of the serfs, images of bondage. Chattel are whipped in order to entice them to work harder. Von Wahl's threat implied that he



thought of militant workers in such terms: as somewhat less than human, as beings unworthy of respect.

The Bund, the strongest revolutionary movement in Vilna, was faced with an obvious challenge. It could proceed to plan a May Day demonstration, thus underlining its solidarity with workers everywhere and its determination to continue the struggle — but thereby risk exposing its members to a cruel and humiliating punishment — or it could forego a demonstration, admit its weakness, allow the Czarist government to win another round. Some members of the Bund apparently considered this latter alternative. The Bund, however, had stressed over and over again that dignity and respect must be accorded to the worker. In fact one of the major accomplishments of the Bund had been to raise the self-image of Jewish workers to the point where they considered themselves worthy of respect from others. How could the Bund call upon others to stand up for their rights if it did not itself stand up for

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what it believed in? The Bund went ahead with its plans for a demonstration.

On the first of May, 1902, a number of workers and artisans, mostly Jewish, gathered in Vilna around 7 or 8 o'clock. The police, however, soon moved in, broke up the meeting, and arrested a large number of participants. In the morning 26 men, 20 of whom were Jewish, were whipped in von Wahl's presence. In order to emphasize his disdain, von Wahl had each prisoner given a flyer reading "May Day Greetings!" immediately after the lashes had been doled out.

Again, the Bund was faced with an important choice. All Bundists were outraged. All Bundists knew that von Wahl's action could not go unanswered. The question, however, was: just how and in what form should the Bund answer von Wahl?

In the Vilna Committee of the Bund there were voices raised in favor of a violent answer. Blood must be answered with blood, these comrades argued. Von Wahl and others like him must be dealt with in the only way they appear to understand: in like kind. But even in the heat of the moment, the Social Democratic traditions of the Bund prevailed in the Vilna Committee. A majority of the Vilna Committee rejected a formal resolution endorsing an organized assassination attempt. The strength of the emotions brought to the fore by Von Wahl's barbaric punishment of the workers, however, may be measured by the fact that the Vilna Committee did not formally prohibit Bundists from participating in an act of revenge. Committee member M. Gurevich, expressing what appears to have been the feelings of a majority of the Vilna Committee declared: "As a body the Committee cannot assist . . . (in the preparations for a revenge act) . . . but individual members who feel the necessity of such an act, can lend such assistance — on their own."

The Central Committee of the Bund itself went so far as to issue a proclamation justifying an act of revenge. In its proclamation the Central Committee expressed its confidence that a "revenge-taker" would arise from amidst the ranks of the Jewish proletariat, and that this revenge-taker would "avenge the humiliation of his brothers."

Acting without the official endorsement of their own local organization — but with its tacit consent — a group of Bundists living in Vilna, seething with rage over the treatment of the arrested workers, proceeded with a plan to assassinate von Wahl. On May 18th, 1902, Hirsh Lekert, a member of the Bund, shot von Wahl twice as the latter was leaving the circus, and wounded him in the hand and foot.

Who was Lekert? An uneducated man, Lekert made his living as a shoe-maker. He was no theoretician, was not one to be concerned with the finer points of social-

ist ideology, but as a Bundist he had come to recognize that Jewish workers must no longer allow themselves to be trod underfoot. The attempt on von Wahl's life touched a nerve in the Jewish community. Lekert — who was captured, tried, and executed in rapid succession — became a martyr in the Jewish community. A number of songs, plays and poems were written about him. In fact Hirsh Lekert, a hiterto altogether unknown figure soon became a household name among the Jewish working class.

It was in this atmosphere that the Bund convened its Fifth Conference, held in Berdichev in 1902. Underlining the fact that it remained opposed to the use of terror as a political means, the Fifth Conference resolved that the Bund could not allow acts which tended to strike at the dignity and human rights of Jewish workers to go unanswered. Mere protests, moreover, "do not provide a sufficient means against such Asiatic murderism. The honor of a revolutionary party demands that revenge be taken for the humiliation of its members." The Fifth Conference of the Bund therefore endorsed acts of revenge where such acts are necessary in order "to wash away the stain on the party, to take vengeance for a shameful insult."

To those not caught up in the stormy atmosphere which then prevailed within the Pale of Settlement this distinction between acts of revenge and organized terror seemed unrealistic. The members of the Bund's Foreign Committee, at that time based in London, took the extremely unusual step of criticizing the home organization. In an article published in *Posledniia izvestiia*, the Foreign Committee claimed that resolutions of Conferences as opposed to Congresses were not binding on all sections of the Bund. Vladimir Kosovsky, one of the foremost of the Bundist theoreticians, published a powerful and convincing article in *Der Yidisher Arbeiter*, the Yiddish-language organ of the Foreign Committee. In his article Kosovsky declared that making such a distinction between revenge and terror was "altogether without sense." "Organized revenge," Kosovsky argued, "is a specific form of organized terror." The former has historically led to the latter. Political parties which begin by endorsing acts of revenge on a case by case basis ultimately end up adopting political terror as one of their major means of struggle. Let us learn from the history of other revolutionary movements, Kosovsky pleaded. To avoid sliding down the slippery slope into the morass of terrorism the Bund must renounce even acts of revenge.

In the months following the publication of Kosovsky's article, tempers in the Pale cooled off to some extent. Reassessing their position, the leadership of the Bund became increasingly convinced that Kosovsky's arguments were in fact valid. At the Fifth Con-

GRANDMA: *continued*

enough to recover her strength before moving on again. This time he did not think she would be moving.

My mother and I visited my grandmother together. She was expecting us. "Remember," my mother warned just before we reached my grandmother's room, "don't let her get started on the gangsters."

By this time my grandmother was a very old woman, and considerably changed. She seemed very tired as she roused herself to greet us; the slightest movement an effort for her. Still, she seemed genuinely gladdened to see us.

"Maggie," she said first things, arms outstretched, "How pretty you look. And how is your darling son and handsome husband?"

"I have no husband anymore, Grandma," I said. "We were divorced years ago. But my son is well, and so is my daughter."

"Oy, so you have now a daughter, too," she said. "Maggie, how can you live without a husband. It's no good; a woman living alone. You need a man to take care of you and the children."

"But Grandma," I said, "you didn't."

"Ah, but that was different. With me it was bad luck. If you are pretty, you have good luck. You marry again, Maggie, while you're still young. You find a nice man, he'll take

care of you."

"No, Grandma, I said. "I'm not going to marry again. Ever. I don't need a man to protect me."

"Oy, what to do with such a stubborn girl. I didn't know you were such a stubborn girl, Maggie," she said. "Where did you learn such stubbornness?" My grandmother then turned to my mother. "Rose," she said, "Please would you leave Maggie and me for a few minutes to talk?"

My mother reluctantly left the room, glancing at me meaningfully on her way out. As soon as she was gone, my grandmother turned to me and whispered, "Maggie, go look out the window. Tell me, do you see anyone out there? In the Courtyard?"

"No, Grandma," I said, "I don't see anyone out there right now."

"But they're there, you know. They're there," she said. "The gangsters are out there. They're everywhere, everywhere. Even in here. I do not escape them. She looked at me. "Do you know about the gangsters, Maggie? Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

"Yes, Grandma," I answered, moving closer to her. "I do know about the gangsters. I know that they're out there. I know they are everywhere."

"Thank God," she said, staring intently at me for several seconds. "Thank God. Now call your mother back in."

My grandmother's name was Bessie. She died this morning. I hardly knew her.

THE CHOSEN: *continued*

delete male references to God in their liturgy. There is an active and growing Jewish feminist movement in the United States. The general feminist movement has raised consciousness about sexism so that progressives now understand, or should, that most women do not wish to be restricted to the occupational title "housewife" for their entire lives. Nor do women want to be depicted in films and literature in the limited balabosta/temptress role (analogous to the "madonna/whore" dichotomy of the general feminist movement).

The Jewish feminist movement helped bring feminists like myself back to the Jewish community, to struggle there against sexism as we work against anti-Semitism in the women's movement. So while acknowledging the limitations and omissions of women characters in *The Chosen*, I enjoyed the film for its Jewish warmth, exuberance, conflict, intensity, and history. For the future, Jews can work toward creating new films — and new lives — that reflect equal representation and power of women and men while retaining our positive Jewish values.

CORRECTION

Apologies to Andrea Behr, Steven Levy, and our readers for errors in Issue #3. Paragraph 2, column 2, page 13 should read, ". . . 'No more genocide in our name.' The Marxist-Leninist Party, USA, refers to a 'blitzkrieg', to 'zionist storm troopers'. . ." Column 1 at the top of page 7 should read: *My brother's trade is bookbinding/ Are you a joiner?/ No, Sir, I am a cloakmaker/ Can you operate a sewing machine?/ To be sure, I can/ This man is a common laborer/ How much do you earn a week?/ I earn six dollars a week.*

Newspapers are unable, seemingly, to discriminate between a bicycle accident and the collapse of civilization.

G. B. Shaw

BUND: *continued*

gress of the bund, held in June, 1903, the resolution adopted at Berdichev was annulled without debate.

The Lekert affair, however, was not forgotten. On the contrary, Lekert was often praised by the bund as the prototype of the new Jewish worker; proud of his Jewishness, unwilling to tolerate the exploitation of his people and his class. In some ways, Lekert may be said to have provided the model for those who were to take part in the Bundist self-defense groups, organized to fight against "pogromchiks", and even for the Jewish resistance fighters of the Second World War. There is a direct spiritual thread extending from the Vilna of 1902 to the United Jewish Resistance Organization of 1942.

The reaction of the Bund to the Lekert affair may even provide guidelines for socialists asked to take a position on terrorism in our own day. Socialists must always defend human rights and the dignity of the worker. While violence against our fellow humans may in exceptional circumstances prove to be necessary as a last resort, Socialists must not use terrorism as a general political means.