

## How Jewish Socialists Fought to Stop the Pogroms of the Russian Civil War

The Civil War of 1917–21 brought the third wave of pogroms in the former Russian Empire, mostly perpetrated by the counterrevolutionary forces. But even some Red Army units committed antisemitic atrocities — and independent Jewish socialists played a decisive role in forcing the Soviet state to stop them.



A demonstration in Petrograd during the Russian Revolution, June 18, 1917.  
(Keystone / Getty Images)

The anti-Jewish violence that spread during the Russian Civil War was unprecedented in scale — even conservative estimates put the number of dead at over 50,000. Most of this violence was perpetrated by the nationalist armies which emerged amidst the breakdown of the old tsarist regime, who also painted the postrevolutionary Bolshevik government as “cosmopolitan” and foreign.

Yet as historian Brendan McGeever’s new book *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* shows, antisemitism was not limited to monarchist or nationalist circles — or just a hangover of tsarism. Rather, antisemitic vitriol against “outsiders” was also rife among parts of the peasantry and working class, including in a certain populist

discourse that blurred the lines between “the speculator” and “the Jew.”

Long having identified pogroms only with the tsarist regime, the Soviet state did in summer 1918 launch its own focused campaign against antisemitism. But as McGeever shows, the move to confront this problem decisively relied on the intervention of non-Bolshevik, Jewish socialists, who demanded a state response to the pogroms being perpetrated even by some Red Army units.

David Broder spoke to McGeever about the Russian Social Democrats’ historic opposition to antisemitism, the role of Jewish socialists in combatting Civil War–era pogroms, and what the violence of this period says about the relationship between socialist politics and anti-racism.

David Broder

Why did you want to write a book about antisemitism in the Russian Revolution?

Brendan McGeever

The project first emerged out of a set of conversations on race and class with the historical sociologist Satnam Virdee (at the University of Glasgow), at that time my PhD supervisor. In the most general sense, I wanted to write a dissertation on how Marxist political formations have grappled with questions of race and racialization, and it was Satnam who first suggested that I consider looking at antisemitism in the Russian Revolution as a “case study.” The book grew out of that project. It tries to do two things.

First, it examines the at times explosive articulation between antisemitism and the revolutionary process. As we know, when the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, they announced the overthrow of a world scarred by exploitation and domination. Yet in the very moment of revolution, these sentiments were put to the test as antisemitic pogroms swept the former Pale of Settlement. The pogroms posed fundamental questions of the Bolshevik project, revealing the depth of antisemitism within sections of the working class, peasantry, and Red Army. To the dismay of Lenin and the Party leadership, the Red Army participated in this violence in various regions of the western borderlands. The book looks closely at these Red Army pogroms, and in doing so, tries to say something about the capacity for class to become racialized in a moment of crisis.

Second, it also explores how the Bolsheviks responded to this crisis. When the Soviet government confronted antisemitism, it confronted an antisemitism that had found traction within the revolutionary movement itself. So, it asks a question: how was the question of antisemitism within the working class and Red Army handled, theoretically and politically? I argue, contrary to existing understandings, that the Soviet response was led not by the Party leadership, as is often assumed, but by a loosely connected group of radicals who mobilized around a Jewish political subjectivity within the apparatuses of the Soviet state. So, the book also tries to uncover a story about anti-racist praxis within Marxist history.

David Broder

Strikingly, you describe this period as witnessing “the most violent assault on Jewish

life in pre-Holocaust modern history.” Can you give us some sense of the scale of the antisemitic violence in the Civil War period and how it compared to the two waves of pogroms of the late tsarist era? Was this mainly driven by counterrevolutionary forces?

Brendan McGeever

Without question, the majority of the Civil War pogroms were carried out by anti-Bolshevik, counterrevolutionary forces. In his classic 1928 study, the Yiddish scholar Nahum Gergel calculated that responsibility for the bulk of the atrocities lay with the Petliura (Ukrainian, anti-Bolshevik) and Denikin (“White”) armies (who perpetrated 40 percent and 17.2 percent of all pogroms respectively). So, there is a reason why many equate the pogroms with “counterrevolution.” But this is not the full story. Gergel also estimated around one in ten pogroms were carried out by the Red Army. My book examines why antisemitism manifested within the revolutionary movement, and the fundamental questions it posed of Bolshevik anti-racist strategy.

It is important to add that the Civil War pogroms of 1917–1921 marked not the first, but the third wave of anti-Jewish violence in modern Russian history. The first followed the assassination of tsar Alexander II and took place over a two-year period between 1881 and 1883. This was a real turning point in modern East European Jewish history, one that would pave the way for the eventual formation of a range of Jewish socialist projects, from the Yiddish-inflected Bundism to Marxist-Zionism. The second pogrom wave commenced in Kishinev in 1903 and continued through to the culmination of the 1905 revolution. Each wave of violence was unprecedented, not just in scale, but in its transformative impact on Russian-Jewish life.

The anti-Jewish violence in the Civil War, however, was of a different order.

Beginning in the early weeks of 1918, the pogroms continued throughout the Civil War years — reaching a devastating peak in 1919 but lasting well into the 1920s. Ukraine was the fulcrum of the atrocities, but they extended across the former Pale of Settlement. This was the most violent assault on Jewish life in pre-Holocaust modern history. Conservative estimates put the number of fatalities at 50,000–60,000, but the true figure most likely exceeded 100,000; some Soviet officials speculated that as many as 200,000 may have perished. What is certain is that at least 2,000 pogroms took place during the revolutionary period. Amidst the carnage, hundreds of thousands of Jews fled westward, over half a million were displaced, and many more were left injured and bereaved. The Russian Revolution, a moment of emancipation and liberation, was for many Jews accompanied by racialized violence on an unprecedented scale.

David Broder

What role had Bolsheviks played before 1917, for instance in the period of the 1905 revolution, in combatting popular antisemitism?

Brendan McGeever

When the Bolsheviks responded to antisemitism in 1917, they drew on three decades of revolutionary confrontation with pogromist violence. This presented a complicated legacy. In 1881, some Russian “populists” (the Narodniks) embraced the pogroms as an “awakening” of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. The populists’

agrarian-inflected class analysis — which posited the peasant masses as the bearers of essential values such as moral purity, integrity, and truth — proved contentious in the face of mass antisemitic violence from below. Although rarely seen as a desired end-goal, the pogroms were nevertheless welcomed by some populists as a necessary *means* to the formation of a more “developed” mass social movement. The pogroms, they hoped, would help sweep away all “exploiters,” not just “the Jews.”

By the turn of the century, Russian social democrats made a decisive break with populist acquiescence to pogromist violence. The social-democratic turn towards the proletariat necessitated, in part, a shift away from the antisemitic valorizations of the peasantry. This was underlined at the infamous Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) in 1903. Amid bitter divisions that led to the Bund’s withdrawal and the splitting of the party into its Menshevik and Bolshevik fractions, the Congress unanimously passed a motion to condemn the Kishinev pogrom that had taken place just weeks before. As I mentioned earlier, this marked the beginning of the second, explosive pogrom wave, lasting through to 1906.

In these formative years, the Bolsheviks, like all Russian social democrats, practiced the politics of the “united front” in their confrontations with antisemitism. In the borderlands of the Pale of Settlement and key cities of the Russian “interior.”

Bolsheviks forged strategic alliances with other revolutionaries (Jewish and non-Jewish) to confront the threat and actuality of anti-Jewish violence.

However, the social-democratic response to antisemitism in 1905 also had its own discontents. While Bolsheviks regularly pointed to the complicity of the tsarist regime in the 1905 pogrom wave, they were sometimes silent about the participation of workers in the violence. This led to a bitter dispute between Lenin and the Bund leadership. The presence of antisemitism within sections of the working class threw up a whole set of difficult questions for anti-racist praxis.

As [Charters Wynn has shown](#), in the towns and cities of the Donets Basin, social democrats repeatedly called off May Day and other such demonstrations (often despite weeks of agitating and leafleting) for fear that working-class politicization would result in violence against Jews. This was principally due to the fact that the same workers striking for improved working conditions could, a mere twenty-four hours later, engage in pogromist violence. Fully aware of this, social democrats repeatedly found themselves in the position of having to curb the labor movement for the fear of provoking a pogrom.

That workers could move from striking for improved working conditions in one moment, to taking part in anti-Jewish violence in the next, points to the need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between antisemitism and class formation. In my book I take on this challenge and try to outline the specific ways in which antisemitism could articulate with oppositional forms of political action in revolutionary Russia, sometimes with devastating consequences.

David Broder

Both during and after the October Revolution, Bolshevik propaganda often identified antisemitic attacks as simply a form of anti-Soviet “counterrevolution,” yet as you noted earlier, even Red Army forces carried out pogroms and imposed collective

financial punishments on Jews. How much can this simply be blamed on a lack of central control — or were Bolshevik leaders aware that this was going on and failing to clamp down on it?

Brendan McGeever

The lack of central control was a key factor in both the emergence of antisemitic violence within the Red Army but also the state's difficulty in responding to it. Those Red Army units that attacked Jews rarely submitted themselves to centralized Bolshevik authority.

The pogroms were a product of a deadly combination: the disintegration of political power amidst the chaos of Civil War, and a deeply sedimented antisemitism within the political culture at large. This was an antisemitism that traversed the political divide.

In the spring and summer of Ukraine in 1919, many within the Bolsheviks' social base desired a popular leftist government that represented "true Bolshevism" or true "Soviet power"; a power of "the people" (*narod*), of the "laboring people" (*trudiashchiisia*). These were standard categories of revolutionary Bolshevism, and for the Party leadership, they were precisely the kinds of concepts that were best equipped to cut through antisemitic discourse and point the way towards class consciousness.

However, in the Ukrainian revolutionary conjuncture, the categories of class and ethnicity could not be so easily separated. Indeed, the very terms "Ukrainian" and "Jew" simultaneously bore both class *and* ethnic overdeterminations. The "Ukrainian" was a "true" and "honest" "toiler" who put their hands to "productive" labour. "The Jew," in addition to being a "Communist," was also "non-laborer," a "speculator." Thus, the categories Bolshevik leaders deployed in their class analysis — "bourgeois," "toiler," "people," "exploiter," and "exploited" — were, on the ground, understood in profoundly complex and racialized dimensions. The revolutionary visions conjured up by radicalized peasants in Ukraine overlapped and combined with antisemitism.

Put differently, revolutionary class discourse was taken up in social struggles that were shaped not only by class antagonisms, but also by the politicization of ethnicity, and antisemitism especially. It was in this context that slogans such as "Smash the Yids, long live Soviet rule!" gained such traction within the Red Army. Although antisemitism within the Red Army culminated in just a fraction of the Civil War pogroms, it posed the most serious challenge to the Bolshevik promise to build a world free of exploitation and domination.

David Broder

You highlight the pogroms carried out by Red Army troops in Hlukhiv and then the reaction that this stirred in spring 1918 — noting that it was non-Bolshevik socialists who ultimately forced a response from the Soviet government and its July 1918 decree. Can you tell us a bit about who these socialists were, and how they made themselves heard?

Brendan McGeever

There is an assertion in the literature on the Russian Revolution that the campaign against antisemitism emanated from above and was led by Lenin, Trotsky, and the

Party leadership. My book gives a different assessment.

What we have come to know as the “Bolshevik” response to antisemitism was in fact largely the work of a group of non-Bolshevik Jewish revolutionaries who gravitated towards the Soviet state after the October Revolution. Bolshevism unquestionably had an inbuilt opposition to antisemitism stretching back to the late-imperial period.

But when it came to “actualizing” — putting into practice — such sentiments after October 1917 and through the Civil War, the process significantly relied on the agency of a small grouping of Jewish revolutionaries who staffed the Jewish Commissariat and Jewish Sections of the Party. This was a remarkably small assemblage, consisting, at times, of a mere handful of individuals. Whether Marxist-Zionist, territorialist, or Communist Bundist, these revolutionaries helped instill, in practice, a Soviet response to antisemitism where often there was none. In 1918 they appealed repeatedly to the Party center for a dedicated state campaign against antisemitism to be initiated to halt Red Army pogroms.

In the face of inactivity from the Party leadership, they established their own campaigns; writing pamphlets, running a broad program of educational workshops within the Red Army and adult education groups. There *was* a Soviet response to antisemitism, but it was not Bolshevik in origin.

I think there is something significant in this for how we make sense of anti-racist praxis. Early Soviet opposition to racism and antisemitism is widely understood to have flowed from the internationalist and assimilatory currents of Bolshevism, that is, from the Party leadership, for whom attachments to ethnicity were weak, even nonexistent. Yet once disaggregated to the level of agency, we discover that the Soviet confrontation with antisemitism had rather different origins. My book suggests it was profoundly overdetermined by the inclusion into the state apparatus of a group of loosely connected Jewish revolutionaries, whose politics were as “particular” as they were universal.

The key players — Moishe Rafes, Abram Kheifets, and David Lipets — each received a Jewish education (*kheder*) as children, and by their teens were immersed in revolutionary organizations. Born amid the tumult of the 1881–82 pogrom wave, this was a generation that entered adolescence in the slipstream of one of the most decisive turning points in east European modern Jewish history. By the time they were young adults in 1905, they found themselves in the throes of revolution and antisemitic violence. Their route to Bolshevism was neatly captured by the leader of the Jewish Section of the Russian Community Party, Avrom Merezhin, in 1921: “the Jewish question was the door through which they came to us.”

This was a socialism that was at once revolutionary, proletarian and Yiddish. And it was profoundly inflected by the actuality of antisemitism. The Soviet response to antisemitism that emerged in the Civil War had its moorings in these biographies and in the Jewish politics through which they were lived out. Marxist Zionism and Bundism may have been peripheral in Bolshevik power in Russia and Ukraine, but they were central to the Soviet confrontation with antisemitism.

The story of how the world’s first successful Marxist revolution dealt with antisemitism, then, is intimately bound up with the development of Jewish cultural

and national projects involving diasporic Jewish socialists and even Marxist Zionists, who temporarily displaced their aspirations for a Zionist homeland in order to instead contribute to the profound cultural and political revolution in Jewish social life in Soviet Russia. I argue, perhaps provocatively, that the closer one stood politically to a Jewish socialist-national project in the Russian Revolutionary context, the more likely one was to elevate and take seriously the question of antisemitism in one's own political practice. That is to say, proximity to a Jewish socialist-national project seems to have facilitated a more urgent form of anti-racist praxis.

These dynamics were not peculiar to Jewish politics. [Work by Eric Blanc](#), for example, shows that in the formative late imperial period (1897 to 1914), an effective anti-colonial struggle was articulated not by the Bolshevik leadership, but by what Blanc refers to as the "borderland Marxists" of Ukrainian, Georgian, and Finnish origin. Similarly, [research on the Comintern](#) has shown that the development of an anti-racist and anti-colonial communism came from the margins, from the colonized themselves, not the Russian center. It was M.N. Roy, Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, and others who pushed Bolshevism into a theoretical and political space that was more attentive to questions of race and coloniality. And beyond the Russian context, Satnam Virdee has drawn our attention to what he calls the catalytic role of "[racialized outsiders](#)" in refashioning English socialism through the last century. Taken together, these works and others point to the need for us to rethink our assumptions about the history of Marxist movement and anti-racist politics.

David Broder

You tell us that the social formation of the Pale of Settlement was particularly vulnerable to the imposition of antisemitic discourse over categories like "the people." It is striking that even Bolsheviks who noted this danger, like Rakovskii and even Lenin, nonetheless used language referring to a personified idea of the "class enemy," for instance in the form of "speculators." Were there Bolsheviks critical of this reading?

Brendan McGeever

This is a theme that is taken up at some length in [Andrew Sloin's terrific work](#). One thing that strikes you when you read Bolshevik agitation from the revolutionary period is just how personified the anti-capitalist message is. There were some within the revolutionary milieu who sounded the alarm bell that such discourse was vulnerable to antisemitic interpretation. A couple of examples stand out. In late March 1919, a Party member by the name "Kagorovskaia" wrote directly to Nikolai Podvoiskii, the Commissar for Military Affairs, to warn that if the Soviet state was seen to be attacking the "petit-bourgeoisie" *in general*, then a green light would be given for the masses to attack Jews *specifically*. This was because Jews, he said, were so closely associated with trade in the popular imaginary. You mention Rakovskii. In mid-February 1919, he addressed the antisemitic potential of the category "speculation," noting that while the Soviet government "takes a firm hand to eliminate [the speculators], we do not need pogroms to do so." This was a seeming recognition that Bolshevik policy on speculation could translate, on the ground, as a call for pogromist violence. There was an awareness within the Bolshevik camp, then, that the

mobilization of class resentment, could, and sometimes did, translate into antisemitic violence.

David Broder

Many Jewish communists internationally cite the idea of the Soviet Union representing a break with past antisemitic traditions. What explains the disconnect between the reality of antisemitic violence and the perception abroad?

Brendan McGeever

This is an important question and I think there are three things to say here. First, the Bolshevik revolution did mark a break from the state-sponsored antisemitism of the tsarist government. The Soviet government outlawed pogromist violence, and Bolshevik leaders were known for their opposition to antisemitism. What my book tries to uncover is the messiness of that confrontation, its unevenness, the difficulties the leadership faced in coming to terms with an antisemitism that had found traction within the Party's own social base, and in turn, the difficulties some Jewish revolutionaries faced in getting the question of antisemitism placed on the political agenda.

When Claude McKay wrote in September 1919: "Every Negro ... should make a study of Bolshevism and explain its meaning to the coloured masses. It is the greatest and most scientific idea afloat in the world today ... Bolshevism has made Russia safe for the Jew ... it might make these United States safe for the Negro ..." he was responding to the Bolshevik promise of a world free of racism and class domination, a promise that resonated far and wide, reaching a truly multiethnic global audience. But just as McKay put pen to paper, pogroms stormed through the former Pale of Settlement. The actuality ran counter to the promise.

Second, there is a degree to which some of this was simply unknown. While the Bolsheviks issued a great deal of information about the pogroms, they suppressed all publication of Red Army complicity in pogromist violence. The Soviet press was largely silent about the issue. For example, a Soviet state publisher redacted each and every mention of Red Army complicity in Sergei Gusev-Orenburgskii's 1921 study on the pogroms, shortening the original manuscript by some 100 pages before publication.

Yet third, Red Army pogroms were not completely unknown. Some years later, Isaac Babel's seminal short stories began to appear in the Soviet Union, and were later assembled in *Red Cavalry*, a book read far beyond Russia and translated into multiple languages. This raises a question: why has the depth of antisemitism within the Red Army and sections of the working class not been the subject of more scrutiny in Marxist scholarship? The inattentiveness is partly explained by a failure to move beyond a narrow conceptualization of antisemitism as counterrevolutionary, as if it were the preserve of the political right. But I would say it remains the case that many Marxists have yet to come to terms with their own history on questions of antisemitism and racism more generally. Hopefully, my book is read as an invitation to face that history, or a chapter of it.

Today, the revolution is rightly understood as a moment of radical social transformation, when a new world seemed possible. The revolution, however, should



also be remembered in all its complications. I hope the book provides a reminder that anti-racism needs to be cultivated and renewed, continually. A century on, as we grapple with the damage done by racism to class politics, 1917 can tell us much about how reactionary ideas can take hold, but also how they can be taken on and confronted.