

REVIEW ESSAY

Rethinking Political Agency in the Russian Revolution: A View from the Russian Empire's Borderlands

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Wiktor Marzec, *Rising Subjects: The 1905 Revolution and the Origins of Modern Polish Politics* (Pittsburgh, 2020).

Eric Blanc, *Revolutionary Social Democracy: Working-Class Politics across the Russian Empire (1882–1917)* (Leiden, 2021).

Brendan McGeever, *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge, 2019).

Frank Wolff, *Yiddish Revolutionaries in Migration: The Transnational History of the Jewish Labour Bund* (Chicago, 2021).

Abstract

The four books under review challenge the revolutionary leadership-centered view of the Russian Revolution from various perspectives. Specifically, they highlight the influence on revolutionary politics of seemingly peripheral groups such as workers and Jewish revolutionary activists. Each of the authors claims that the agendas of these groups were considerably more important than the agendas of the revolutionary leadership in ensuring the success or the failure of revolutionary policies.

The four books under review represent new approaches to the Russian revolutionary movement as directed by the people rather than by revolutionary leaders. Although earlier studies acknowledged the political agency of workers and persecuted ethnic minorities such as the Jews, they attributed all major political decisions to the political parties and their leadership.¹ In contrast, the authors of these four books maintain that workers and persecuted Jews were the driving force behind revolutionary decisions. In shifting the locus of political decision-making from the elites to the downtrodden, the authors introduce innovative approaches to a topic that until recently appeared exhausted.

In *Rising Subjects: The 1905 Revolution and the Origins of Modern Polish Politics*, Wiktor Marzec analyzes how socialist workers introduced mass politics to early twentieth-century Russian Poland. He claims that by transforming the streets and

factories into an alternative political arena, workers were able to exercise sufficient influence over the public sphere to ensure their voices were heard. Through the application of socialist principles, workers in Russian Poland redefined who could be a political actor and what constituted political expression. This new politics, based on social and economic equality, initially appeared to have the support of the progressive intelligentsia, which had been unable to advance its political agenda due to governmental repression. However, this support proved short-lived. The working classes' attempt to expand Poland's limited public sphere frightened the intelligentsia, which had never overcome its deep-seated distrust of the working classes.

This distrust of the working classes, Marzec explains, stemmed from the belief that only those who had received a formal education were qualified to make political decisions. When the workers transformed their factories and the streets into spaces for political debate, it fundamentally challenged the rationale that underpinned Polish elites' privileged access to political decision-making. Perceiving the working class as a threat, the intelligentsia unilaterally labeled working-class politics as irrational and violent and threw their support behind a new political force that had entered Polish mass politics—the extreme Right.

Yet the nationalist and racist political agenda advanced by the extreme Right did not align with that of the progressive intelligentsia. In fact, workers' political positions more closely approximated those of the progressive intelligentsia. However, the extreme Right and the progressive intelligentsia shared a similar social background and agreed that uneducated workers should be excluded from political debate and the decision-making process. When progressives allied with the extreme Right and rejected working-class politics, it undermined the legitimacy of the alternative public sphere created by workers and legitimized right-wing extremism. Although this development did not eliminate workers' alternative public sphere, it seriously weakened it, and this led some workers to embrace extreme Right, nationalist ideology rather than socialism.

Marzec offers a well-researched and nuanced account of the emergence of working-class political activism in Russian Poland. However, some aspects of his narrative receive insufficient attention. For example, the author leaves largely unexplained why workers moved from the extreme Left to the extreme Right. Marzec rightly notes that such workers rarely wrote memoirs or other texts in which they explained their motives. Still, the incorporation of a few individual case studies would have strengthened his analysis of this phenomenon. Similarly, the author claims that the increasing masculinization of the workers' alternative public sphere alienated working-class women who were reluctant to participate in street violence. However, he includes no examples that would demonstrate this reluctance. These minor criticisms aside, the book provides invaluable insights into how the 1905 revolution reconfigured modern Polish political culture.

Like Marzec, Eric Blanc's *Revolutionary Social Democracy: Working-Class Politics across the Russian Empire (1882–1917)* offers a new interpretation of the Russian Revolution by presenting workers as key political decision-makers. Specifically, Blanc argues that politicized Russian workers supported the Bolsheviks' rise to power because unlike other Russian revolutionary organizations of the time, the Bolsheviks were willing to represent the workers' political agenda, rather than

imposing their own. Blanc utilizes documentation from various provincial branches of the Bolshevik party to demonstrate that at the local level the party demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness—a feature that Blanc notes is not apparent if one focuses exclusively on documentation at the level of party leadership. This responsiveness was expressed by the party's willingness to give voice to the workers' belligerence toward authorities as well as toward their employers. The party showed flexibility by overlooking the workers' resistance to embracing the party's animosity toward its revolutionary antagonists and their insistence on working with non-Bolshevik revolutionaries. Thus, Blanc advances a view of Bolshevism that centers on the working classes' early positive perceptions of the party; this emphasis on Bolshevik responsiveness to working-class demands offers a more satisfactory explanation of why the Bolsheviks emerged victorious in October 1917 than the traditional narrative of Bolshevik authoritarianism, which emerged in the postrevolutionary era and which many historians later accepted.

In claiming that the Bolshevik party was unique because of its flexibility, Blanc does not deny that the Bolsheviks insisted on centralism or that it was a party of vanguard activists. However, these features, Blanc contends, were common to all underground political organizations in autocratic Russia. Thus, the workers, who were less capable of holding leadership positions due to time constraints and insufficient education, did not necessarily perceive these features as discriminatory or as increasing the power of the intelligentsia. Blanc insists that the numerous documented complaints made by Bolshevik workers against the dominance of the party intelligentsia have been misunderstood. In his view, these complaints did not reflect, as historians such as Allan Wildman claimed,² workers' feelings of exclusion from the party leadership, but rather Bolshevik workers' certainty that their party was committed to their empowerment. This commitment was reflected in the steady increase in workers who held leadership positions at the local level. Blanc also claims that local organizations were particularly sensitive to workers' political moods and did not hesitate to ignore the views of the top leadership if those views contradicted the views of their worker members. In presenting evidence for this argument, Blanc's main example is the ongoing collaboration that occurs between local Bolshevik groups and other revolutionary organizations, despite the disapproval of the Bolshevik party's top leadership.

The Bolsheviks popularity in 1917 thus was the result of their faithfully expressing the views of the workers. However, according to Blanc, the Bolsheviks were unable to sustain this popularity because the agenda of workers in central Russia, which the Bolsheviks expressed, did not correspond with the agenda of workers living in peripheral regions of the empire, such as the Baltics, Poland, Georgia, and Ukraine. In these regions, revolutionary fervor was accompanied by a nationalist revival. Consequently, workers in these regions perceived the expansionist agenda of the Bolsheviks as a threat to their nationalist aspirations. To advance the nationalist cause, they entered coalitions with local nationalist liberals and moderate socialist organizations. In some cases, they even took up arms to stop Bolshevik expansionism. This resistance to the Bolshevik revolution, Blanc contends, extended the Russian Civil War and prevented the Bolsheviks from expanding the revolution to wealthier nations in Western Europe. Without the resources of these wealthier nations, the new Soviet state entered

a period of extreme economic hardship, and the Bolsheviks lost popularity among the workers, who had assumed that the end of the civil war would usher in an era of greater prosperity. Having lost the workers' support, the Bolsheviks imposed a dictatorial regime to maintain their rule.

Blanc's refutation of historical arguments that attribute the Bolshevik victory in 1917 to dictatorial methods and sophisticated propaganda is convincing. Blanc rightly criticizes earlier histories that depicted the Bolsheviks as a centralized vanguard without considering that many other social democratic organizations in the empire, such as the Polish Social Democratic Party, shared the same characteristic. Similarly, his assertion that earlier histories largely ignored the subtleties of Bolshevik authoritarian rhetoric prior to 1917, as well as the autonomous and democratic practices of local Bolshevik organizations, rings true. That said, occasionally Blanc, like the historians he criticizes, fails to consider all the relevant information. For example, the author focuses on the social democrats and ignores the rest of the vibrant revolutionary milieu. The struggle between revolutionaries who chose collaboration with the liberals and those who rejected it occurred among socialist revolutionaries as well as among their affiliated ethnic minority parties. Unfortunately, this dimension goes unaddressed.

In addition, I am skeptical about the validity of Blanc's claim that people withdrew en masse from revolutionary parties because of repression following the defeat of the First Russian Revolution in 1905, given that many members of extreme right parties that had the government's support also withdrew at this time. Finally, the book includes one minor historical error. Contrary to the author's claim that the Jewish Labor Bund was the only revolutionary organization that adopted the *birzhe* (an informal meeting place on a given street or city block where revolutionary organizations met weekly to gather or pass on information), this method of gathering was used by all revolutionary organizations in the Russian empire in the early twentieth century. These criticisms, however, do not detract from the author's central thesis that the Bolsheviks had the popular support of the workers in 1917. By looking beyond Petrograd and Moscow, Blanc deprovincializes the Russian Revolution and offers a fresh interpretation of worker politics and the Bolshevik party that undoubtedly will affect future histories of the era.

In contrast to Blanc and Marzec's monographs, which address the mass struggles of workers, Brendan McGeever's *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* focuses on small groups of pro-Soviet Jewish socialists who succeeded in convincing a reluctant Bolshevik party to initiate public campaigns against the Red Army's anti-Jewish pogroms of 1918–1919. The Bolsheviks had resisted confronting antisemitism, despite their official disavowal of it, because they feared doing so would jeopardize their chances of winning the Russian Civil War. In Ukraine and other areas, Red Army soldiers, with the support of local peasants and workers, advanced a revolutionary discourse in which antisemitism figured prominently. Pogroms, they asserted, would free the local working people from their alleged Jewish exploiters. Although most pogroms during the Civil War were carried out by the anti-Bolshevik White movement and Ukrainian nationalist forces, anti-Jewish violence played a significant role in the Bolshevik's seizure of power in Ukrainian cities such as Hlukhiv. This on-the-ground reality placed the Bolshevik leadership in an uncomfortable position,

since ideologically they had embraced a unilateral rejection of antisemitism and racism.

Although the Bolshevik government would have preferred to ignore such incidents to avoid a conflict with its soldiers that might push them to join the other side, pro-Soviet Jewish organizations demanded that the Soviet government adhere to the principles it espoused. Pro-Soviet organizations, such as the Moscow Jewish Commissariat and the Evseksiia, the Jewish section of the Bolshevik party, repeatedly called out the Soviet government for its lackluster and sporadic responses to Red Army pogroms in Ukraine. Even in 1918–1919, when Red Army pogroms reached their peak and the enemy was utilizing these pogroms to undermine Bolshevik authority, the Soviet government, McGeever notes, was slow to respond. Despite having no institutional base for their activities, the aforementioned Jewish groups applied consistent pressure on the Soviet government, forcing it to act. For example, the Soviet government introduced educational programs against antisemitism and instituted harsh punishments, including execution, for Red Army soldiers who took part in pogroms. Despite these measures, Red Army soldiers continued to participate in pogroms. What's more, they often went unpunished owing to military considerations.

The originality of the McGeever's argument is in his focus on the institutional sources of Soviet policies against antisemitism. Jewish activists, rather than Soviet policy makers, took the lead in translating the Bolsheviks' theoretical disavowal of antisemitism into practice. The Bolshevik party recognized that antisemitic discourse and praxis posed a threat to the revolution because it became a conduit through which "many peasants, workers, Red partisan soldiers and local Bolsheviks moved back and forth between 'revolution' and 'counter-revolution'" (138). However, the Soviet government's response to antisemitism was uneven. Jewish activists, who came from Jewish socialist parties, such as the Bund, the Poaley Zion, and the Fareynikte, allied with the Bolsheviks during the revolution and joined new organizations to fight the antisemitism that was destroying their communities. Although these organizations often only survived for a few months before falling victim to Bolshevik centralization, Jewish activists forced the government to recognize the urgency of the issue and implement a principled campaign against antisemitism, despite the political inconvenience of doing so.

As with McGeever's book, Jewish socialists sit at the center of Frank Wolff's *Yiddish Revolutionaries in Migration: The Transnational History of the Jewish Labour Bund*, published in German in 2014, with an English translation in 2021. But while McGeever focuses on Jewish socialist activism within the Russian Empire, Wolff examines how the General Jewish Labor Bund transformed itself from a Jewish class party in early twentieth-century Russia into a socialist institution of secular Jewish life in the United States and Argentina. He argues that the General Jewish Labor Bund was sufficiently flexible and internationally powerful enough to survive its members' mass migration from Russia to the Americas in the early twentieth century. The Bund's international networks connected Jewish immigrants to Bundists on the other side of the Atlantic and provided Jewish immigrant workers in the Americas with an institutional base for organizing politically.

Wolff emphasizes that the General Jewish Labor Bund was more than a political organization in the Americas; it initiated its members into a transnational Yiddish

socialist lifeworld that had its own modes of organization, behavioral expectations, and emotional expressions. Participation in this lifeworld entailed a commitment to a political and cultural identity that celebrated and romanticized the Bundist revolutionary past and required its members to strive for a better future—that is, one in which democratic structures would replace all forms of hierarchical organization. This secular collective identity provided immigrant members with a familial community that replaced the one that they had left behind when they crossed the Atlantic.

Moreover, the educational opportunities provided by the Bund instilled in its members, who in their homelands had been denigrated because of their lack of education, a new sense of confidence, accomplishment, and pride. Through educational circles, demonstrations, meetings, and other political and nonpolitical actions, this collective cultural identity was renewed and legitimized. Although some Bundist political ideas did not survive the migration from the Russian empire to the Americas because of different political realities, the lifeworld of the Bund was easily transferable to immigrant working-class cultures in the United States and Argentina, where a sense of mutual solidarity and a commitment to a better future provided immigrants with the ideological, cultural, and institutional support needed to fight for equality. This culture survived until most second-generation Jewish immigrants transitioned from the working classes to the middle classes.

Wolff's groundbreaking conceptualization of the Bund as a transnational socialist movement with "sufficient flexibility to inspire foreign organizations and institutions of secondary Bundism," (411) on which increasingly the Eastern European party depended for financial support, is convincing. However, I am concerned that the author's emphasis on continuities between Bundism in the Old World and the New World prevented him from exploring how certain features of Bundism did *not* translate to the New World. For example, in the Russian empire, Jews were the primary targets of racist government policies; thus, battling these suppressive measures became a primary occupation of the Bundist party. In contrast, Jews enjoyed a relatively privileged status in early twentieth-century Argentina and the United States because they were generally believed to be a distinct race within a broader category of whiteness. Although their whiteness was subject to challenge, Jewish immigrants from the Old World did not face the same level of systemic discrimination and popular prejudice as indigenous populations and African Americans. Thus, Bundist party's vehement antiracism did not resonate in the new setting. Another minor concern is the author's assumption that the paucity of references to female workers in Bundist publications indicated their lack of importance within the organization. While this assumption may be true, the author failed to explain how he reached this conclusion.

Each of the four books under review utilizes newly discovered documentation to highlight the political decision-making of workers or ethnic minorities, thereby introducing a new interpretation of the Russian revolutionary movement. Wiktor Marzec traces the bottom-up democratization of Polish political culture during the 1905 Revolution. By transforming the streets and factories into a proletarian public sphere, workers in Russian Poland successfully contested the limitations of the mainstream public sphere, forcing other social strata to take their class-based arguments seriously. However, their presence in the public sphere triggered a conservative backlash in

which antisemitism was weaponized to exclude socialist workers from political participation. While Polish workers in Marzec's narrative are depicted as tragic heroes, Eric Blanc portrays Russian workers as kingmakers, noting that they were responsible for the Bolshevik's victory in October 1917. Workers supported the Bolshevik party's rise to power because it advanced workers' own political agenda; the party did not simply impose its agenda on workers. Like Marzec and Blanc, Brendan McGeever also downplays the role of revolutionary leaders in determining revolutionary policy. Focusing on Bolshevik antisemitic violence during the Russian Civil War, he shows how a small group of pro-Soviet Jewish activists forced a reluctant Bolshevik government to institute educational campaigns against antisemitism and impose harsh punishments for participation in pogroms. Finally, Frank Wolff explores how and why Bundists remained Bundists when they migrated from the Russian empire to the Americas. As with Blanc's portrayal of the Bolshevik party in 1917, Wolff claims it was the flexibility of the General Jewish Labor Bund that made possible its transformation from a class party in the Russian Empire into a Jewish socialist lifeworld.

Taken together, these four books focus on aspects of the Russian revolutionary movement that earlier historians ignored or downplayed. In doing so, they suggest that the Russian revolutionary tradition was significantly more democratic than it has often been portrayed.

Notes

1. See for example, Oleg Budnitskii, *Russian Jews between the Reds and the Whites, 1917–1920* (Philadelphia, 2012); Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862–1917* (Cambridge, 1981); and Laura Engelstein, *Russia in Flames: War, Revolution, Civil War, 1914–1921* (Oxford, 2017). Although some of these works emphasize the political agency of workers, Jews, and Jewish workers, this agency is always expressed as a product of interaction with the revolutionary leadership.

2. Allan K. Wildman, *The Making of the Workers' Revolution: Russian Social Democracy, 1891–1903* (Chicago, 1967).