

# Trotsky and the Jews

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## Leon Trotsky and the Jews

By Arthur Rosen

*(The purpose of this article is not to describe Trotsky's accomplishments and failures and subsequent assassination, but to describe his relationship with his fellow Jews and Judaism).*

One of the most influential people in the Russian revolution was Leon Trotsky. He was born on November 7, 1879, in the Ukraine with the name Lev Davidovich Bronstein but changed his name to avoid being known as a Jew. Briefly speaking, Trotsky was a great intellectual and political thinker. He rose to the second top position under Lenin and was responsible (amongst other credits) for the development of the Red Army.

He had a basic disagreement with Stalin as to the nature of Communism. Simply speaking, Stalin's view was that securing the Russian Communist state was of chief importance whereas Trotsky, who considered himself an ***Internationalist*** and did not like the concept of individual and nationalistic states, felt that Communist revolution must unite all workers and abolish territorial borders – to Trotsky, it was the small nationalistic states that were the causes of wars.

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His father David Leontievich Bronstein was a farmer and although quite clever and prosperous as a farmer, he was illiterate. However it did not stop him from hiring local peasants to work his lands benefiting greatly from their labor. This usage of poor peasants to become wealthy bothered the young Trotsky, who felt deeply the pain of the poor.

At the age of seven, young Bronstein was sent to *cheder* (Jewish religious school) in a nearby village where he learned Torah in Hebrew in the old traditional manner by reciting the verse in Hebrew with a translation into Yiddish. He was quite aware of the restrictions placed on Jews at the time and he too was subjected to the anti-Semitic prejudices which were accepted by the local Christians and prevalent at the time, such as not being welcome in the homes of his Christian neighbors.

His parents were not strictly observant but on the holy days would travel to the synagogue in the nearby village. His mother would refrain from menial work on the Shabbat.

Trotsky was born and raised during the period which saw many of the ghastly pogroms that swept the Ukraine area. To Trotsky, like many of the Jews, a solution must be found that would prevent such deliberate pillaging and wanton killings. He developed an intense dislike of injustice and tyranny. The existing concept of national inequality was one of the great underlying causes of his dissatisfaction with the existing order.



### Young Trotsky

Later he rationalized that the pogroms were a result of the degenerate social structure of serfdom. Only by the Tsar's overthrow and the establishment of a new justice ruling system would the brutal massacres stop. He attributed the pogroms to a need of a governmental scapegoat to allay the complaints of the masses. Only by fighting against the bankers and speculators would the confidence of the poor working classes be changed. Trotsky put his trust in his concept of Internationalism to solve all of mankind's problems, including the Jewish problems.

When Trotsky was nine he traveled to Odessa to continue studies at St. Paul's *realschule*, and at the same time, continuing his attendance at Jewish religious classes. It was during those years that Trotsky became an atheist totally rebelling against religion which he considered pure superstition.

Trotsky fought with his father and his way of life. Against his father's desires he married a Jewish girl, Alexandra Lvovna Sokolovskaya, who was six years his senior, while his was imprisoned for his activist activities. She bore him two daughters but later on he abandoned her and their children. He later took Natalia Sedova as his common-law wife in 1903. She gave him two sons who used her last name so they not be identified with him.

Trotsky's relations with his parents remained hostile, but during his years of exile they would go to visit him. His mother died in 1910 at the age of sixty. When the October Revolution came, Trotsky's father was a relatively wealthy man, only to be ruined by the revolution. Yet his son would not come to his aid, commenting that "my father has no shoes and with so many people around who have no shoes, how could I possibly request shoes for my father?" Deserted by his son, he was forced to fend for himself in his old age. When his father died and requested to be buried with a Jewish burial, Trotsky

refused to bury him in the Jewish cemetery, instead had him buried in the garden of his house. This has been widely regarded as a clear action by Trotsky to openly exhibit his disdain for his Jewish heritage.

The Mendel Beilis trial in 1917 shocked the world. Trotsky also protested the miscarriage of justice and in an open letter to A. S. Zarudny, the minister of justice, he protested against the "deliberate attempt at moral assassination." Instead of identifying with the Jew, Beilis, he used the trial to denounce the Tsarist government and its despicable methodology to garner popular support for the Tsar.

In his years in exile in Vienna he became a correspondent for one of Russia's great newspapers. He reported on the active anti-Semitism in Rumanian, stating that in Rumania "anti-Semitism has established itself as a state religion..." Some three hundred thousand Rumanian Jews were not recognized as Rumanian citizens even though their fathers and grandfathers were born in Rumania. Trotsky was intimately knowledgeable of the plight of Rumanian Jews, but instead of identifying with the Jews as his own people, he used them as a piece of propaganda to further his idea of internationalist communistic solutions to achieve social equality.

During the early period of revolutionary polemics, the General Jewish Workers' Union, better known as the '**Bund**', offered the Jewish workers its answer to exploitation and pogroms. The Bund dealt only with the Jewish workers who shared a common cultural background. The Bund was essentially anti-religious but pro-Yiddish which had emerged at that time as a popular culture. The Bund claimed to be the sole representative of the Jewish working class and exerted a great secularizing influence on the Jewish masses, but it did not try to take away the distinct Jewish-Yiddish character of the Jewish workers. They repudiated Jewish national holidays as phantasies which are useless for human society, believing that they will soon vanish together with the old social systems.

Both Lenin and Trotsky criticized the Bund for its separatist and chauvinistic approach to workers' liberation. Trotsky was an assimilationist, the Bundist were a nationalist-Yiddishist anti-religious movement within the Jewish people. Trotsky resented them since nationalistic movements were the opposite of his own internationalist philosophy. Trotsky refused to see the Jewish problem as the Jews saw it, but rather as a problem that arises due to nationalistic tendencies amongst peoples.

Trotsky felt as Marx that "religion is the opium of the people. Whoever fails to struggle against religion is unworthy of bearing the name of a revolutionary." In a letter written less than six months before his assassination he stated that "for forty-three years of my life I have remained a revolutionary. I shall die a proletarian revolutionary, a Marxist, a dialectical materialist, and consequently an irreconcilable atheist." Nevertheless in the first Soviet government following the October Revolutions, Trotsky was the only Jew included in the ruling elite. Incidentally, in the second government another Jew was appointed as commissar of justice, a Jew by the name of Steinberg who was a strictly

religious Jew who when he was arrested prior to the revolution would wear *tephilin* in his cell and even celebrate the Passover Seder there. Needless to say, Trotsky and Steinberg disagreed on several issues.

The *Evsektza* was the 'Jewish Section' of the Communist party and was charged with dealing with the large Jewish population of three million non-assimilated people. Unlike other nationals living in the Soviet Union, the Jews were viewed as a separate national group, but they lacked a territory of their own. The Soviet Union had to modify its stance toward the Jews and 'grant' them a fictional nationality.

The *Evseksia* had a definite task, to eliminate the Jewish private trader and to bring the cultural Yiddish life in line with the Communist party line. The *Evseksia* was basically staffed by Jews who "had to be more Catholic than the Pope". Many of the members of the *Evseksia* were former members of the Bund. Their work wrought havoc on the Jews, especially the observant Jews. The *Evseksia* fought the Jewish religion with great fury trying to eradicate any practice.

Trotsky was completely indifferent to the actions of the *Evseksia*. He would not intercede on behalf of his Jewish brethren and they were forced to look for help in other less powerful quarters.

Trotsky referred to himself not as a Jew, but as an Internationalist. His name change from Bronstein would mean that he would be forever identified as a Jew to which he was opposed. He took the name of Trotsky from his non-Jewish jailer, but everyone knew that Trotsky was a Jew - Stalin would never let him forget it and he used it to his advantage. Trotsky often expressed his disdain for Jews in the Communist Party; this was partly credited because of his dealings with the Bund. How could a person be a Jew, meaning exposing a national class and still be a Communist, believing in the fraternity of men? To Trotsky, the Jew always reverted back to being a Jew.

Yet later in life as he lived his exile from Stalin, he tried working with them instead of against them. He began to exhort the Jewish Communists to abandon Yiddish and learn the local languages. He hoped that the Jewish worker would act as a catalyst to convert the local workers. Yet he failed to realize that most Soviet Jews were ruined financially by the revolution, lived in poverty and misery for many years and were skeptical that Communism could revolutionize the world. Even though many Jews reached high ranks in the Communist Party after the revolution, it was only a small minority. In his own locale where he was born, he was hated intensely and accused of robbing and plundering the Jews

It is related that the chief Rabbi of Moscow, Rabbi Jacob Maze, once appeared before Trotsky to plead on the behalf of the Russian Jews. Trotsky answered him, as he had done on various occasions, that he was a Communist and did not consider himself a Jew. To this Rabbi Maze replied: "*Trotsky makes the revolutions, and the Bronsteins pay the bills.*"

Churchill was quoted as saying that so great was the contribution that Trotsky made to the Red Army, that he deserved to be made Dictator of Russia, save but one obstacle: He was a Jew. He was still a Jew and nothing could get him passed it. It is difficult when you have deserted your family, repudiated your race, spat upon the religion of your fathers, only to be denied the great prize of being considered a non-Jew.

Stalin never publicly admitted his hatred for Jews. Officially anti-Semitism was illegal in the Soviet Union. Yet Stalin was wary of Jews in high places and could not trust them always believing that perhaps there was a conspiracy brewing. His daughter, Svetlana, said that she believes Stalin's excesses against the Jews stem from his years of power struggle with Trotsky gradually transferring itself from a political power struggle to a racial hatred of all Jews.

In regards to Zionism, Trotsky showed only the smallest interest. He understood the movement to be a reactionary utopian unrealizable dream. Since Trotsky believed that the proletariat has no fatherland, the concept of a Jewish nation seemed antiquated since according to Marx, the state is bound to wither away heralding the classless society. The Bund also was opposed to Zionism which viewed Zionism as a distraction that took the Jewish worker's mind away from social action at home. Yet to Trotsky, the only difference between the Bund and the Zionists were the choice of territory or as one writer of the period commented, "The only difference between the Zionists and the Bundists is that the Bundists are Zionists who are afraid of sea sickness." (Attributed to Plekhanov in a conversation with Jabotinsky)

Dr. Chaim Weitzmann related in his autobiography that: "My resentment of Lenin and Plekhanov and the arrogant Trotsky was provoked by the contempt with which they treated any Jew who was moved by the fate of his people and animated by a love of its history and its tradition." It was only much later in life, in the late 1930's when Trotsky was visited by an Israeli Communist who described the socialist way of life and the kibbutz experience that he began to show any interest in Zionism.

He explained that he had felt that with the spread of Communism with its inherent integration of equality amongst workers that the Jewish workers would lose their Jewishness as the gentiles lost their need for anti-Semitism. However, he acknowledged that with the danger of Hitler and his revival of anti-Semitism, the possibility of the assimilation of the Jewish worker into the Communist work force was diminished. It seemed that he was willing to concede the need for a Jewish territorial nationality. Had he lived to see the horrors of World War II, perhaps he would concede more of his philosophy. He was assassinated on August 20, 1940 by an agent of Stalin.

Today Trotsky's name is hardly remembered. His ideas have been discarded and discredited. All of his energies to transform the world into a paradise have been laid waste. Yet the heritage that he rebelled against and denied, the heritage that he felt certain would fade into a worker's paradise, is blossoming and is once again vibrant.

Perhaps this can be a lesson for all who think that Judaism and its belief in God is a mere cultural passing, like opium. We are witnesses that in spite of all opposition, the Jewish people continue to grow and develop.

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